# Oral History: Jack Wong

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| Title | Title of Document | Rebeca\_Salas\_With\_ Jack\_Wong\_10-30-17 Complete |
| Accession Number | Catalogue Number of the File | (Administrator Only) |
| Interviewee | Name of Interviewee (SURNAME, given name(s), middle initial) | WONG, Jack |
| Interviewer | Name of Interviewer (Surname, given name(s), middle initial) | Salas, Rebeca |
| Interview Date | YYYY/MM/DD | 2017/10/30 |
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| Summary | Brief summary of the interview session (Copy and paste from Form 13 – Session Summary) | Jack Wong begins the interview explaining how and why his grandfather came to Vancouver in the mid-1800s, which was to send remittances back to his hometown village in China. Jack’s father followed the same path as his grandfather. However, his parents fled to Hong Kong and then to Vancouver because of the Chinese Communist Revolution and then the Japanese invasion during the Second World War. He then talks about volunteering and the importance of giving back to the Richmond Community that welcomed his family when they migrated to the city. Jack reflects on who his parents were as individuals and describes their personalities and values in vivid detail. He remembers his grandparents’ and parents’ first impressions of Canada when they arrived in the country. What stood out most to them were the educational opportunities available to citizens. Jack highlights Chinatown as an important tool that helped his parents and grandparents adjust to a foreign country. Near the interview’s end, he points out that the ability to vote was what made his parents feel most Canadian. Finally, Jack thinks about the special memories he has of Richmond. |
| Keywords | Keywords indicating interview subjects (Copy and Paste from “Keyword” section of Form 12 Interview Summary.) | China, West End, Chinese Head Tax, King George Elementary School, Chinese Communist Revolution, Hong Kong, Second World War, Japanese Invasion, Racism, Vancouver, Opportunity, Chinatown, Language, Volunteerism, UBC, First Impressions, Education, Adjustment, Food, Banking, Hong Wu General Store, Voting, Operation Oblivion, MI6, Soldier, Citizenship, Aboriginal Peoples, Champlain Heights |
| Subject | Subject headings applicable to the Interview. The OHC uses Library of Congress Subject Headings. | Chinese Head Tax, Chinese Communist Revolution, Second World War, Japanese Invasion, Racism, Opportunity, Chinatown, Language, Volunteerism, First Impressions, Education, Adjustment, Food, Banking, Hong Wu General Store, Voting, Operation Oblivion, MI6, Soldier, Citizenship, Aboriginal Peoples, Champlain Heights |
| Duration | Length of Interview Session (if applicable) hh:mm:ss | 01:25:49 |
| Interview # | Number of the interview (interviewees according to date) | 1 |
| Session # | Session # of the recording (X of all interviews in the session) | 1 |
| Location | Where the interview was conducted | Richmond City Hall |
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| Restrictions | Details regarding any restrictions on the file’s use (as outlined in Form 6 – Consent) | N/A |
| Rights | Release Information regarding copyright and access through the repository (as outlined in the Release Agreement) | All rights given to the interviewer (Rebeca Salas) and the Oral History Centre |
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## Transcription Legend:

… = Ellipses used to indicate where an interviewee does not complete a thought.

[?] = Used to indicate indecipherable words or unknown spelling of words.

### START OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE [00:00:16]

REBECA

So, as we discussed, you have a long family history that you’d like to talk about.

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

So, I think that’s a good place to start and you go ahead and start where you feel is best.

JACK

Well, let’s see. I guess, my family started with my grandfather, I guess. He and my grandmother came from a very small village in mainland China, was very poor, and it was a very poor village. They needed some way to, kind of, sustain the villagers. So what they did was, back in those days, was they selected some individuals in the village, men, usually, young men, and they pooled their resources and they paid their way to come overseas to get work. The idea is they would come and find work, make their money, and send money back to the village. Not very different from many of the things that you hear about a lot of immigrant families is that they came looking for work and to send money back home. So, my grandfather was one of those that was selected out of the village. I guess they had put a lot of faith in these people because, you know, they send a young man across the way and you may never see them again. They thought that was the way out, but I think the whole point was my grandfather felt that this was his duty to come across and fulfill the wishes of the village. So my grandfather landed in Vancouver, probably in the mid-1800s, found work as a labourer working on the docks in Vancouver, and he spent, I guess, most of his young time going back and forth. So what he would do is he’d work for a couple years, save all that money, then voyage back to China and give the money back to the village so the villagers could actually survive. My grandfather did that for many, many years. He eventually got married to my grandmother, had my dad in China, and, so, there came a time when my grandfather was getting, just, too old to do this back and forth. So the villagers said, “Well, you’ve got a young son now. You can send him in your place.” So my dad, when he was twelve years old, I guess, thirteen years old … That’s the picture that you saw, the head tax certificate. My grandfather and the villagers, I guess, paid that $500 head tax just to have my dad land in Vancouver. $500 back in the early 1900s was quite a bit of money, I suppose, for the village but they did that. So, my father ended up here. I guess he was probably just a teenager, and he ended up in West End. He ended up being a houseboy for a lawyer in the West End. He went to high school. He went to King George, I think, Elementary School in West End. He didn’t finish high school. He ended up, I guess, doing the same thing. He would work and then he’d find enough money to go back. So he did the same thing back and forth between Vancouver and China. He did that for many, many years and, I think, he just finished grade nine. He didn’t graduate high school but I think he got to grade nine, um, went back to China and got married, married my mother in China, and stayed there. That was just about the time the revolution was happening in China. They fled and it was just my mother and my father and my oldest sister, at that time. So they fled to Hong Kong and my grandfather and grandmother, I guess, stayed in China and they never left so they passed away in China under communist rule. My mother and my father and my oldest sister ended up in Hong Kong. They were there for a couple years and, um, then the war happened, the Second World War, and the Japanese invasion happened in Hong Kong.

### [00:05:20]

So, they fled that. The only place that my father knew was Vancouver. So that’s where they decided to pack up and they left Hong Kong for Vancouver. So that was, probably, in the early-mid 1950s. So myself and my brothers were born here, in Vancouver, after that. So, you know, when you hear about the recent, you know, refugees and immigration of … the influx of refugees fleeing their homelands, um, in a way, if it wasn’t for my parents, as refugees, coming to Vancouver I don’t know where I’d be. I’d be in Hong Kong or in China right now, but they, if you think about it, they not only started over. When they fled the village, they packed up only whatever they could carry to Hong Kong, and then, again, they did the same thing, you know, they fled that with only what they could carry. So, I have a lot of, I guess, um, sympathy or I can understand the emotions as the most recent refugees, when they flee from countries, they’re expecting to be going to a place that’s better off than the place that they’re fleeing. Vancouver or North America, I guess, is a place where my parents decided this is as good a place as any to start over. So, in their lifetime, my mother and my father, they started over not once but twice in their lifetime. You think about it and I can’t imagine myself, you know, if somebody was telling me, you know, tomorrow, “You’ve got to pack up whatever you can and go” to a place like Afghanistan where you can’t understand the language and whatever, a place so different from here. Could I do that not only once but can I do that twice in my lifetime? So, the journey to where my father came here was because this place, this community, this, you know, this was going to be their home that they can start over again. I mean, if it wasn’t for the war, probably, they could have started over in Hong Kong but, again, they started here. It’s kind of interesting. The story I’ve told was when they boarded out of Hong Kong there was, back then there was no air travel, you know, it was not as convenient as it is now. They boarded on these, you know, ocean liners or ships and there were these three routes out of Hong Kong. You either ended up in Peru, or you’d go to San Francisco in the U.S., or you’d come up North to Vancouver. So my mom and dad thought “Well, we know what Vancouver’s like so we’re going to get on that boat to come to Vancouver.” I think it all depends on … The luckiest, for me, is that my dad was here when he was a young boy and he knew what this place was about, what the opportunities were, and, um, you know, welcoming. I guess there was … There was still a lot of racism, I guess, in his lifetime. Even in my lifetime, I guess. When I was a little boy, I experienced that too in a place like Vancouver. To them, it was just an opportunity to start over again and this place was the place that can give them that opportunity to start over again and a place that they won’t be persecuted or treated less than a human being. You know, like, sometimes you kind of hear these horror stories especially in war or in revolutions. If you weren’t with the occupying forces, you were against them and you were imprisoned for a number of reasons. I guess, it’s a credit to the society that we live in in North America because that’s how other parts of the world see you. So that’s my journey here. That’s my family’s journey here. For me, I was born and raised in Vancouver, lived here all my life, worked here all my life. We ended up, my mom and dad ended up in a place in the west side. We had a house in Kitsilano. We grew up in Kitsilano. We went to high school there, Kitsilano High School was my high school.

### [00:10:31]

From there, I went to university, got my B.Com degree there, and graduated in ’79. Um, an interesting part that my dad and mom decided … Even though it didn’t matter where we ended up living because having grown up in a community, or neighbourhood like Kitsilano, back then there was probably only one or two other Asian families in the neighbourhood. A lot of my parents’ peers who had children, um, no matter where they had settled in the city, after English school they would send their sons and daughters to Chinatown for Chinese classes to keep the Chinese language. My mom and dad didn’t do that and they had the attitude that, for us to succeed in this society, they wanted us to not only learn or understand the English language, they wanted us to master it. So, master reading, writing, and speaking English. They decided not to send us after, you know, regular English school to go to Chinatown which were holding Chinese schools for children from the other families. I guess that’s, to me, is another philosophy from my mom and dad was, you know, “We’re in this new place. We’re in this new society and if you were going to survive, not only survive, but succeed, you’re going to master this language.” I guess, I feel that I have, to a certain degree. That has been part of the success that I have achieved in my work life and in my personal life, I guess. Another part of what my mom and dad, whether they actually did it very consciously or not, because of the, whether it’s starting with my grandfather and my father, just seeing how fortunate we are to be where we are, that, don’t forget to give back. That’s why I volunteer to the community. I’ve done that since I got out of school. I’ve always been finding organizations in the community to do volunteer work. That’s one way of, I guess, saying, thanking, or doing, or giving back to the community that we now are in. Anyway, I guess that’s kind of getting me to where I am today. So, for me, I do volunteer other than with the … I’ve been volunteering as a … I first started being a city appointee to the Richmond Museum Society. I’m still on the board, now as a member at large. Currently, I’ve been volunteering for the Vancouver Police Foundation. I volunteer as a mentor to the Sauder Business faculty. I’ve done that over the years, again, giving back to my old alma mater. Also, I sit on a couple advisory councils with the School of Regional Planning at UBC and also to the [Pathway?] Environment at SFU. I also have sat as the chapter chair for my professional association which is the Certified Management Accountants because I have a management accountant designation. So I’ve chaired their Vancouver chapter over the years. I was the president of the Sun Yat Sen Garden Society in Chinatown, years ago. I can’t even remember how many boards I’ve sat on now in my time but it’s, again, this need, I don’t know if you’d call it that, a need, but I think the need to make sure that the community that I live in stays as the community that welcomed my grandfather and my father years and years ago.

### [00:15:32]

REBECA

So I’ve been sneaky and taking some notes.

JACK

I know you have [laughs].

REBECA

As you’ve been telling your story [laughs].

JACK

I know.

REBECA

So is it okay if I come back and ask you these questions?

JACK

Sure, go, yeah.

REBECA

Okay.

JACK

I’ve reached the end of my time, I think [laughs].

REBECA

Oh, you’ll be surprised. When you start talking it comes up.

JACK

Oh, okay. Alright.

REBECA

So, the first thing I was interested in was if you’d like to share the name of the village and also the name of your grandparents and your mother and father.

JACK

Okay.

REBECA

Um, if you wanted to make that a part of the story as well.

JACK

Yeah. Well, my father’s name is Wong Yentoy. So, Yentoy Wong. I guess that’s how it goes. Yen, Y-E-N-T-O-Y Wong. My mother’s name was Faylin, F-A-Y-L-I-N. She used her maiden name as her middle name so, Chan, C-H-A-N, and it’s Wong, W-O-N-G. Yeah, my grandfather and grandmother’s name, it’s going to be a bit difficult because I probably have them in Chinese characters and, maybe, if I can go and hunt that down maybe I can supply that at a later date. I know what they were called. His name was in Chinese but that doesn’t help you.

REBECA

Well, people may listen and know, right?

JACK

His name was Wong [Niamoon?], but I don’t know how that translates or you’d anglicise that but I’m pretty sure there is that. It’s written down somewhere. My grandmother, I probably don’t know that off by heart. My mother’s mother and father, I don’t know much about because, again, same thing as my father’s village, it was very poor and the story goes is that my mother’s father and mother didn’t survive long in their life because they were just so poor. It was starvation that was happening in their village. I don’t know anything about my mother’s mother and father. I don’t even have pictures of them. I have pictures of my grandfather and grandmother but not much from my mother’s side.

REBECA

Right.

JACK

So, yeah, I don’t … I can probably dig up my grandfather’s name, English name.

REBECA

Sure.

JACK

And possibly my grandmother’s name but I never met my grandfather and grandmother. They had long passed before I was born.

REBECA

Okay.

JACK

Yeah, yeah.

REBECA

So, maybe, then, um, we can get a sense of who your parents are. If you could, sort of, talk about their personalities and what kinds of people they are.

JACK

Oh, that’s interesting. Okay, well, my parents, because of the timeline between them being married in China and going from China to Hong Kong, and then making their way over to North America, um, my … I was born very late in my mother’s … She was probably in her late thirties, maybe, possibly even early forties when I was born. So my two brothers were born two years apart so my youngest brother, the last one, probably, my mother was well into her mid-forties when she had my youngest brother. My parents were very traditional parents. Even though they understood that we have to grow up in a new place, in an English speaking society, they didn’t see language as being something that we needed to keep as a tradition. I think the more important part of us keeping our culture and tradition was learning the values. So, they were very hard on values, either family values or individual values. My mother was all about keeping the family unit together because, I guess, my mother was no different from a lot of, maybe, strong females in the family. She was, kind of, the glue. She kept everybody in line, even my dad [laughs].

### [00:20:44]

So, I think, my mother didn’t work when I was young. So my dad was the breadwinner. He was the one that … He ran a small coffee shop when we came here, by himself, with others. My mother was a stay at home mom. She’s the one that made sure we got up, got dressed, went to school, came home, had something to eat, and made sure we’d done our homework. So that was her job and made sure that, you know, she did all the household chores and, also, buying the groceries, cleaning, washing, and that sort. My dad was the one that instilled in all of us to do the right thing, not to cheat. When I mean cheat, not to cheat on doing things. So, don’t be lazy. I think one of the very … One of the things that I can always remember him telling us when we used to wash windows, he would say, “People, when they see you wash your window, they’ll see how clean it is by looking at the corners and not the big part. So don’t cheat on the corners because if you make sure the corners are clean, people will say, “Well, you’ve done a good job.”” So, that was something that he would tell us, kind of, remind us. That became the metaphor. “Don’t cheat and do the right thing.” In a way, um, the tradition for us was about values and how we’d grow up as individuals. So all of us, all the siblings, we did it through our upbringing as being, you know, whatever’s right, and what’s right for the family and how the most important part is make sure you support and be there for your family, whether it’s immediate family, your brothers and sisters, or now as we all grow up and we got married and we have families of our own. I think that’s what we, kind of, make sure that happens.

REBECA

Right. I imagine that comes a lot from your father’s own experiences.

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

One thing I was curious about, and it’s always interesting to ask, is sort of the first … So I understand he worked as a houseboy, right?

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

I was curious about where he stayed during those years, if it was in the house he worked at, um …

JACK

Yeah, he did.

REBECA

Okay, and then the other, sort of, thing I was curious about was what, and I don’t know if he shared this story with you but, what first impressions he had of Canada. This would have been when he first started coming here, right?

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

Or any sort of surprises and even if there were any stories passed down from your grandfather.

JACK

Well, um, let me see if I can answer that first part.

REBECA

Sure.

JACK

His experiences, I think, he didn’t talk about that directly but, you know, there was something that happened years later that, maybe, kind of, gives me a kind of a window of how he felt because years and years later, when I got married, at my wedding there were these individuals that I’d never met before but they were invited to my wedding. Even though we had, you know, I mean, Chinese weddings, in my time anyway, this is going back thirty somewhat years now, we had 300 people at our wedding and a lot of them were, a third were some people that my wife and I knew but the rest were my family, my mom’s, and their friends. There was this couple that I’d never really met before and we got this really nice gift from these people, too. What it turned out was that when my dad was a houseboy, he was a houseboy for some lawyer in the West End, and it turns out, and he never said this to me, and, again, this is one of the things you find out later on, that who came to our wedding was the son of this lawyer that he must’ve either got to know when they were in the house together.

### [00:25:52]

He was at our wedding. It was funny because the last name was [Pantagious?], an unusual name. So, years after we got married we said “Who are these [Pantagious?]?” Apparently, this [Pantagious?] individual is also a lawyer, too, and his father was a lawyer in Vancouver. So he’s the second generation of lawyers. I think that’s … So, my dad, after all these years, you know, again, and knowing my dad, it’s out of respect to invite him to his son’s wedding. If there was a lot of animosity or if he was mistreated, he would not have felt that way. Obviously, something good happened while he was here as a young person, as a young boy. Obviously, he was treated well. He was respected. This was now coming back to say that, you know … I’m guessing, but that would not have happened, I don’t think. Why he would do that, why he would invite these people to a wedding which I have never met, I have never heard anything about them before. They just showed up and, obviously, my dad knew them well enough to do that. My grandfather, as I said, I’ve never met my grandfather but in the conversations and in my memory of what my dad used to say about … It was hard, it was a hard life that my grandfather had. I mean, he worked and he knew how hard he worked. The same thing is with my dad. When he came as a little boy and he did, you know, over those years that he went back and forth, how hard he worked. So, I guess, that made him look to us as his children, you know, he’s come and started his family in a new place and he’s doing it because he does not want his children, or the next generation, to work as hard as they did. So that’s why he probably forced us to make sure that, you know, education was a big part and to do the right thing, don’t cheat, do it the hard way, do it the right way, and to make sure that we are good citizens. That was his hope. We’ve got, now, this great opportunity. He’s come from some real bad places and this is what we should do. We’ve given such a big, I mean, he’s given us such a big platform, a very high platform to jump off from. So, now, I feel obligated to now make sure that happens.

REBECA

Right. Was there anything very different about Canada, about Vancouver that your father ever talked about? Like, “When I first came to Vancouver this shocked me or this really surprised me.”

JACK

Um, you know, probably, it was about, uh, boy, I know we’ve talked about that, about how … I think it’s the, I was going to say, the opportunities for learning because he never, and my mother never, I mean, I don’t know how much education my mother got back in China.

### [00:30:26]

I mean formal education. I think they both felt that the opportunity for education, to learn, is there for you to take. I always think that … They always say, you know, the stupidity of people, some, that don’t take advantage of the education, you know, the drop outs. My mom and dad used to say, you know, “Why don’t they …” especially when they see some of the friends, sometimes they hear stories of me telling them so and so skipped out of school. We all skipped out in one point in time. I never told my mom that. “We never did that.” She would have my hide [laughs], because it was one of those things that, you know, you’re being so stupid if you don’t take that opportunity. So I think that was it. They experienced, as I said earlier, I think both my mom and dad experienced racism back then. They never were resentful for it though. That’s why I think they decided about, you know, it’s almost like ‘if you can’t fight them, join them,’ you know, or, you know, ‘in Rome, do as Romans do.’ They, kind of, accepted that. I think if they were surprised at something, they would be surprised at “Well, we’re trying and you’re still being racist against, you know. We’re trying. It’s not as if we’re not.” I think that would be surprising to them. You know, having said that, I mean, maybe it wasn’t that surprising because one of the reasons why they left, the village where they left Hong Kong, was they were fleeing something that people didn’t like who they were. This, Vancouver, was supposed to be a better place than somebody coming in and occupying your community. So, I’m trying to think of anything else that would have surprised them. They lived a good life, both my mom and dad, when they were here. As I said, seeing them start from zero, I can imagine just landing in here with hardly anything. All you’ve got is what you have in your suitcases, and then having … When they both passed away they had a great family. I was married. All the siblings were married. They’re well. They have good jobs. They have a home. So, you know, I think they just did an incredible job of starting from scratch again, very late in their lives. They were probably in their forties when they got to Vancouver and started over again. Within fifty years, forty, not even that. My dad was seventy-two and my mom was seventy-two but they both were in their seventies when they passed away. Within thirty some odd years, they managed to establish a foundation here and instil in their children how to flourish in this community, in this kind of society. I don’t think they were, to get back to your first question, Rebeca, I don’t think they were surprised. I think they just accepted, I think they were more accepting. I remember there were times I would hear certain things said to my mom and dad from other people, you know, very derogatory words or phrases, and they just took it. They just accepted it. They didn’t, kind of, fight it.

REBECA

Was there anything, I don’t use the word superficial, but anything, um, in terms of landscape, or food, or customs that were just very different that, perhaps, would have taken some adjustment or, maybe some enthusiasm, even [laughs]. Something different that might have been exciting.

### [00:35:18]

JACK

Well, you know, um, a big part of their adjustment and, not only for my mom and dad but, I think, for a lot of my mom and dad’s peers who immigrated or, actually, ended up here in the late ‘50s and ‘60s, was Chinatown. You know, Chinatown, Vancouver. That, I guess, became the place where it was a kind of a buffer zone for them and still. I still remember when I was a little boy my mom and dad, well, my mom, actually, would take the bus from Kits, would take it down, take the bus down to Chinatown on a Saturday morning to go buy groceries. She would start there and buy whatever the local produce would be, you know, cabbages or whatever, carrots, something that they probably never seen in China. Maybe carrots, but back then, I guess, you know, like eating pineapples or something like that, something that they wouldn’t have seen. They would find it in Chinatown and they would, I think, mom would bring some back and say “Hey, I’ve never seen this before. Let’s try this out.” That helped them then go to, you know … Then sooner, over time, my mom would go to Safeway. You know, there would be a Safeway at the store so she would feel comfortable going to Safeway. So, I think Chinatown became a very critical, important part of them adjusting to this place which is different. I don’t know what they would have done if it wasn’t there. I mean, um, my dad knew, you know, he could speak some English because he went to school here. My mom learned on the fly. My mom, as we got older, she would converse, well, she would understand, at least, what people say in English and then she would converse back. That was all, it was all her own. She learned that on her own. She didn’t go to school. So, anyway, I guess that would be the thing that they would have found different. Obviously, the food. I think they would find the food different. Language, not so much. My dad would have had workable, functional English. Banking, probably, is something that would be strange to them. I think even as they got older and even as I, you know … I can still remember, you know, I was old enough to remember them, you know, would go to the bank and, say, if she wants to go buy groceries, she would just take a whole wad of cash out [laughs] from the bank, right. Cheques, you know, things like that but back then people still wrote cheques. Not so much now. There were no such thing as debit cards. My mom and dad didn’t have a credit card. They didn’t use credit cards. We’re talking about the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. They never had a credit card. If anything, they would write a cheque. So, credit would not be something my mom and dad would have found that they would …

REBECA

Interesting.

JACK

Because, again, it’s “Don’t get into debt.” Right? So, a credit card is you give me that now and I’ll pay you later, or pay somebody later [laughs]. Not something they would … It was always, “If you don’t have it in your pocket, if you don’t have it to take it out of the bank you don’t buy it.” It was really funny. You didn’t buy major stuff like, you know, appliances. You’d always go to the bank and take out a wad of cash to pay for it. Things weren’t that expensive. Well, back then I guess all things are relative.

REBECA

Right, right.

JACK

You could buy a cup of coffee for a dime back then.

REBECA

So, I’m thinking about your commentary about Chinatown as a tool and talking a little bit about new foods and new experiences and that sort of transition. On the flip side of that, was there anything that your parents ever talked about missing from China? Did they miss anything that they couldn’t access, or practice, or see in Vancouver?

### [00:40:18]

JACK

Well, my parents weren’t religious. So they didn’t go to church. They didn’t, never went to church. They didn’t pray or have any rituals like that. What did they miss, would they have missed? I think, if anything, it was missing family that was left behind, if anything. It’d be very deep like that because my father had a sister that did not get out of communist China, that was still there. So, even over the years until he passed away he was sending letters back and forth with his sister. I think that’s what they missed most was the people and families and relatives that were left behind. I think that was what they, kind of, missed. Other than that, you know, things about foods … No, see, again, this is where, I think, Chinatown and what it represented and what it gave to new immigrants, it gave them a piece of back home. I mean, my mom would still go and buy herbs or, you know, Chinese stuff like mushrooms or things that she knew was still part of her cuisine. She would make that. Like, there’s soups that she would make from scratch. So she’d buy the ingredients from scratch in Chinatown, she’d come home, and she’d make the soups. So, there was that part of them bringing it to Canada. That was something that she knew about and she was used to. Boy, not so much my dad. I don’t think … He kind of … See, I think he was more already, not the word indoctrinated, but he was more used to what it’s like here. My mom was a bit different. She still had held on to the more stuff that she would consider to be traditional from home [laughs]. Oh, boy. I can think of one kind of silly thing. I don’t know if this fits into what you’re doing.

REBECA

Go ahead [laughs].

JACK

It’s about marriage. It’s a story of my marriage and the fact that my mom and dad always thought that it was their duty to make sure, and maybe this is a custom that’s brought back from their homeland, that it was their duty, still, to make sure that Jack has the right mate. So, um, they went about, you know, when I finished school, university, and I started my first job, I was ready, you know. I’m now an adult and now I’m ready to find a mate. So they would go out and try to find friends or friends of friends who had an eligible young woman and I can still remember coming home, you know, one day after work and there’d be a, you know, a row of people I’d never met before sitting with my mom and dad in the living room. There’s a young lady there sitting there with them. “Jack, come on in here. We’ve got to introduce you to” blah blah blah. Unbeknownst to them, in my last year of university I met my wife. She’s Asian, grown up in Vancouver just like me. Her family was here just like the same time as my dad. They never knew each other but, um, so, I met Alanna, my wife, in university. She’s a teacher. She was in education. I met her at this, back then, in those days, the faculty of commerce and the faculty of education had these joint dances because the majority of young men are in commerce and the majority of females are in education. So they just had these, kind of, joint dances. So I met her at this dance and we started dating and we were dating for about a year when we were in school. I didn’t bother to tell my mother about all this [laughs], because I knew what they were going to say, you know. Anyway, my mom and dad said “No. Here’s these eligible young women we’d like you to know and go out with them.” I mentioned that, you know, “Sorry, mom and dad. I have a girlfriend.” [laughs].

### [00:45:58]

REBECA

By the way [laughs].

JACK

By the way. “Who is she? What do her parents do?” I guess, in India, there’s this caste system. Well, I’m not sure if this is the same thing, but it’s the same idea. They have, you know, parents have to go and check each other out and make sure they’re on the same level, whatever, and it’s the duty of the parents to make sure that their children mate up with the right mate. Anyway, so my mom and dad gave me grief for that and I was torn. I was, kind of, really torn. On one hand, I wanted to be this, you know, the dutiful son and this is what my mom and dad really wanted me to do, and this is the proper thing. So, I said to Alanna, “I’m sorry, but I’m going to break it off.” [laughs]. So I broke it off. We broke it off. She still gives me heck for it [laughs].

REBECA

I’d imagine so [laughs].

JACK

So we broke it off. We broke it off for about a year and, during that time, I did my dutiful son stuff. I went, you know, one after another. You know, there’s, I guess, to make a long story short, the heart wins over, you know, whatever, even your duty to your parents. So, it really came down to be, you know, “I’m moving out, mom and dad, because I can’t live under this roof because this is the way you want to do this. I’m going my way. I think I found the perfect person that I want to spend the rest of my life with and if you can’t accept that, you know, I’m out of here.” So, I did. I had to move out but, you know, my mom, I think, came to her senses [laughs]. That’s how we got married. I got married, after that. A little epilogue to that story was, having known all this, she would say, every time we’d have to go to mom and dad’s for dinner she says “Geez, I really don’t want to do this.” You know, knowing that I’m not, you know, quote, unquote, ‘welcomed’ being this person that’s being forced upon them. So she always had that tinge of fear, you know, not living up to the expectations. Years later, after my dad passed away, my mom had cancer. She had liver cancer, liver and stomach cancer together but she didn’t, her cancer didn’t last long. It was about six months. Near the end of the treatment, or near the end, she was at home and, you know, she gathered the family together to say her last goodbyes. So we were there and then she said to, you know, my brothers all and my sisters all took their turn one at a time to go and talk to my mom. Then, she said to me, “Can you ask Alanna to come over?” I said, “Okay. She wants to see you.” It just freaked Alanna out [laughs]. To mom’s credit, I give her all … I can’t say enough about what she did. What she just said to Alanna, privately, Alanna told me this after, she says “You know, Alanna, I know that Jack made the right choice.” I think that just, kind of, boy, having to say that to her before she passed on, I think, just, would have, if she didn’t, I don’t know. Alanna would have had this thing with her all the rest of her life. I give mom credit for actually knowing that she had to say that and to, kind of, let Alanna hear that. Again, it gets back to, you know, doing the right thing. I think my mom did the right thing, again.

### [00:50:58]

REBECA

Right, yeah. It sounds like you had a couple of very strong women in your life [laughs].

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

Actually, it just reminded me. Now that you’ve, that was a beautiful story by the way, you’ve introduced your wife. I hear that she has her own, sort of, special ties to the community through relatives. Is that correct?

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

There’s a store involved, right?

JACK

There is a story there because, um, again, we just found this out within the last five, six years. So, Alanna’s father’s cousin is a daughter, one of the daughters of [Hong Min?] …

REBECA

Hong Wo General Store.

JACK

Hong Wo. Yeah, general store, because there was a picture that we just, kind of, stumbled upon when we were going through the museum one day. They had a picture of the general store and there was this lady we called Aunt Jessie. Aunt Jessie’s always been at our family gatherings years and years ago. “Aunt Jessie’s there. That’s a picture of Aunt Jessie.” Aunt Jessie was married to this fellow but she was one of the, I guess, daughters of Hong Wo.

REBECA

The owner of the store.

JACK

The owner of the store. It’s amazing. There is a farm on Steveston Island, called [The Lam Farm?] and, I think, one of the owners of that farm, the original owners of that farm, was related to Alanna’s dad. I think it’s a very close relationship, but, anyway, that’s … So, Alanna was saying “I’m probably one of the pioneer families of Steveston, related to one of the pioneer families of Steveston.”

REBECA

And when about was she finding this all out?

JACK

She just found this out because she saw this picture when they were doing the Hong Wo exhibit in the museum. We were just going through the exhibit and there was this photo. “Hey, that’s Aunt Jessie.” [laughs]. And then she, kind of, worked back that way. Alanna’s dad is not here anymore. He’s passed on. Alanna’s mom didn’t know too much about this because it was Alanna’s dad’s side of the family. So I think she’s just, kind of, now, slowly, kind of, asking some of her older aunts and uncles about the connection to [Hong Wu?].

REBECA

Interesting. So piecing it together, actually, much later in life.

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

Yeah. I had one question related to your family’s story. Was the … So the head tax certificate that you’ve lent to the Richmond Museum, it’s up hanging right now in the exhibit, when about did you see that for the first time? Did you know what it was or that it existed growing up?

JACK

I knew it existed growing up.

REBECA

Okay.

JACK

So, when my dad passed away, this is back in ’82, he passed away in 1982, in his papers he had this certificate but we knew that our grandfather had paid this head tax, and it was there. Years later, this is when there was this movement among some of the descendants of these individuals who paid the head tax, wanted some redress or wanted some compensation because it was discriminatory and that sort of thing. My younger brother decided to take that certificate and he was going to work with this group that were made up of some descendants and, actually, there were still some original people that paid the head tax. I said, “Okay, take it but, you know …” We all got some copies of it so we all have our own, but he’s got the original right now. I know at the time, my brother told me, he says “You know, Jack, we should press this. This is something that our grandfather paid. It was very discriminatory. It was almost like blackmail. We should get … There’s this movement, there’s this group out there to get some redress out of it.”

### [00:55:59]

You know, I don’t agree with that. I said, “Tony, go ahead and do it. Really, I don’t want to spend effort and time because, you know what, you have to think about what was going on at the time that, you know, my grandfather wanted to get my dad here, you know, he wanted to get him out and establish another place to start over again. It’s no different from these people who paid, you know, blackmail to put people on boats in the Adrian Sea and painted their noses just to get them out. This is what our grandfather did, whatever it was, $500, could have been $1000, could have been $2000. They would have done it, whatever … It was the times that this was happening.” I don’t fault anybody. I don’t fault the government. I don’t fault anybody for, um, you know, putting conditions on if you want to land here, this is how much it’s going to cost. Yeah, is it blackmail? Is it discriminatory? Yeah, but that’s, you know, I think that’s just the times. As I said, when I hear about how refugees get here, I mean, you want to hear some of their stories. Boy, they probably, whatever they did to pay to get themselves out to land here, they just did what they had to. So to go back and say, well, fifty years from now and say “Hey, you know, that was unfair. Can we have that?” I don’t know. I look at that as, the head tax, it’s the past. I don’t want to go back in and … It’s very similar to what we talked about, you know, Indigenous reconciliation. That’s happened, okay, but I’d rather move on than try to go back and make things right or fix things. I don’t know. I just don’t know.

REBECA

Do you think that your father had the same sense of that?

JACK

I think so. I think if he was alive and he had the opportunity, he might have said “Nah, it’s not worth it.” I think my mom and dad, again, when I was saying earlier, I think they just accepted certain things that were happening, or being said, or being done. They knew they had to accept it. I mean, to them, you know, what’s the options? They made the decision to do this. Whatever you had to do, you pay whatever you had to pay. You go and do it. You made that decision and you make it happen. I don’t know. There’s no such thing as a deal [laughs]. I don’t think they looked at it that way. I think it’s moving … My mom and dad were always ones who, kind of, move forward. Yeah, just go and move forward.

REBECA

So, thinking about their, sort of, journey and settling in Vancouver, did you ever get a sense from your parents regarding if anything made them feel especially Canadian?

JACK

Oh.

REBECA

Kind of an interesting question but, um …

JACK

Well, I could tell you one thing that made them very, very proud was to vote, the ability to vote. You know the story about, you know, the ability to vote for Chinese Canadians. Maybe this might be a segue to my uncle.

### [00:59:59]

REBECA

Sure.

JACK

My uncle, who is probably about ten years younger than my dad, so, he came to Vancouver after the war but he was here during the war. He settled in Vancouver during the war but he was part of this group in Vancouver that had a lot of Chinese Canadians. His English was a lot better than my dad’s so, I think, he was in Vancouver, he landed in Vancouver separately from my dad. He stayed in Vancouver much, much longer. He was part of this group out of Vancouver, Chinese Canadians, that wanted to fight, wanted to join the army because, at that time, the Chinese did not have a vote. They weren’t considered to be Chinese Canadian, or Canadian. So they formed a unit and the unit was placed under British command because, I guess, out of Hong Kong, they were Hong Kong citizens. They would still be considered British. So they were a British unit and my uncle was part of this unit that was the origin of the MI6 out of Britain.

REBECA

Really?

JACK

They were this suicide squad. They were spies. So, the British put them … They were supposed to … They were getting training as resistance fighters behind enemy lines in the South Pacific. So my uncle was part of this group called Operation Oblivion. He was a demolitions expert [laughs]. This is where, probably, he saw some stuff he, probably, could never, ever talk about and that’s why, you know, I was saying earlier, he never talked about it. He never talked about the war when we were growing up and he was hanging around us. You know, “Uncle [Wing?], what were you doing in the war?” He would never talk about it because … So they were on this one way mission, basically. If they ever were caught, they were given cyanide and they would just, you know, disappear. They weren’t recognized by the British or the Canadians. Yeah, they were the first, kind of, spy group for the British. So, this came out a lot after my uncle passed away and I did not know that until the CBC did this documentary on this group of Chinese Canadians and this operation called Operation Oblivion. Again, there was this photo. My uncle, he’s in there. I did not know that, did not know that.

REBECA

What was that like to see your uncle there?

JACK

Amazing. You know, I was always proud to be, you know, to have my Canadian citizenship, to be a Canadian, to be in this place. My mom and dad, as I was saying earlier, the greatest thing that they’ve ever felt to be a Canadian was to be able to vote. My dad, I think, the second biggest thrill in his life was getting his Canada pension cheque [laughs], because he thought “Hey, I don’t have to work and I get a cheque from the government” [laughs]. Yeah, he used to call my … What did he say? Was it my uncle? “My uncle in Ottawa is now sending me a cheque” [laughs]. But, it was to vote. To this day, that’s passed on to me. Again, I can’t believe people do not vote in this place municipally, federally, provincially. I push my children, my daughters, you know, who are twenty-eight, and twenty-five. They say, “Dad, I don’t know anything about voting. I don’t know the issues.” Well, get to know the issues. Go find out because you’ve got to vote. Anyway, so voting was a big thing for them to feel Canadian and then my dad getting that pension cheque. I can still remember him saying “I’m getting paid” [laughs]. Anything else that would have made them feel really to be a Canadian, oh, dear. No. You know, I think, as I said, they feel very, very fortunate to live in a place where you do have the freedom to do what you want, to be what you want, and you feel safe. You know, I mean, they accepted, in their lifetime, they accepted the racism. They took that as being, probably, a good, you know, something that they can … They’ll take that as the bad part but I think the good part, you know, outweighed the bad. I think that’s where they hoped that their children, myself, we don’t experience that. I hope we don’t experience that as well as we don’t, um, make somebody else feel that way, too.

### [01:06:26]

REBECA

Right, right, yeah.

JACK

And when you say what makes them feel proud to be Canadian, I think the voting. To me, there’s something that I feel that I’m ashamed of, to be frank, about being Canadian in this day, and I know that there’s things being worked on to fix that, is our treatment for our Aboriginals. Again, it goes back to what I was saying earlier, I think my parents would not want me to make anybody else feel that they’re second class or they’re discriminated against because, you know, they’ve had that done to them. They accepted it, so we should not … They know how it feels and we should never make others feel that way, too. I’m, kind of, ashamed that we are still treating a part of our population in this country as a different class of citizen. You know, the Aboriginal People. In my work life and in what I do as a volunteer, I try to do my part in trying to say “Hey, as a Canadian, I feel ashamed. Let’s fix it.” We’re not treating others, again, to be second class citizens or another class of citizen in this country.

REBECA

Mhm.

JACK

We give Americans grief about, you know, their way of treating their blacks and their immigrants. Boy, we should not be smug. Canadians should not be smug. We have an act. We have a piece of legislation that actually dictates that. Why can’t we get rid of it? I don’t understand why we can’t get rid of it.

REBECA

There’s the hope that, you know, through listening to each other, through projects like this, and learning about other Canadians that we can, hopefully, try to learn from that. I hope that some of those come through in this project but, yeah, you’re right to say that. I think it’s important to say. So, thank you for saying that.

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

There was one thing that’s, sort of, separate from what we’re talking about that has come to my mind and I haven’t addressed it yet, was just any sort of special memories or experiences related directly to Richmond. So, forgive me if I’ve missed it but when you came to Richmond and started to actually live here and what that was like for you.

JACK

Okay, that story is an interesting story, too, for me because having grown up in the west side of Vancouver in the ‘70s … Yeah that would be in the ‘70s, 60’s, 70’s. Kitsilano, it’s a lot different than what it is now [laughs]. Kitsilano, back then, boy, it was this middle class, I was going to say waspish neighbourhood, so there was not many, many, well, there were some immigrant families. There were some Greek families, some German, not much. You know, as I said, there was probably, in my neighbourhood, in my high school, the high school which had, maybe, 700 students, there would probably be ten, fifteen Asian students. I think, though, the neighbourhood, Kitsilano, Fourth Avenue, West Broadway, Fourth Avenue, was still a … You could go and buy groceries. You can shop at local merchants. There’d be butcher shops, hardware stores, Safeways. You had everything as a neighbourhood. You had neighbours, when I was growing up, the kids on the block all knew where each other lived, the parents knew who all the kids were, and the neighbours knew each other across the street, up and down the street. It was what I think is a neighbourhood.

### [01:11:33]

You didn’t have to drive anywhere to get stuff. If you needed sugar, you know, mom would, she could actually go and ask across the street or something like that. When I got married and Alanna and I decided to … First of all, when we first got married, we rented this apartment out in Central Park in Burnaby there by Metrotown. When our first daughter came, we decided, well, we needed to find a place, a bigger place than just a one bedroom apartment. We bought a townhouse in Champlain Heights and, no, no, actually no. We moved from our apartment, we bought a place in Champlain Heights, and then when our daughter came we said “We’ve got to find a bigger place. We want to buy a house.” So, back then, I said “I want to go back and live in Kits” [laughs]. Even then, there was no way. We couldn’t afford any place, or find a house in Kits, or find a house that, you know, was liveable and that we can afford in Kits. We hunted all around. We went from Kitsilano, we went to North Shore, we went to Burnaby, you know, we went all over the place trying to find neighbourhoods that I thought would resemble something like Kits. At that time, I was working for a house construction and development company and they were just opening up Steveston. They were building these townhouses by Westwater and Dyke Road, and I remember in the office they had a document called the Steveston Neighbourhood Five Year Plan. So I just, one day at work, I decided to flip through it and said “Geez, I never heard of Steveston before” because Steveston was just so way down there. Nobody would ever go to Steveston. I said, “Boy, this looks like a great community. This looks like a great neighbourhood.” You had Moncton Street, you had the wharf, you had the park. It was all there. Well, that’s great. Maybe that’s where we should go. Yeah, so we’ve been there, this is now our twenty-eighth year. We came down to Steveston and, you know, talking about how things have changed, I remember driving home, you can go from Westminster Highway to Steveston Highway on Number One Road and there would be only four stop lights. Now, I mean, you can’t drive that stretch. It will take you half an hour. Before, you can just do it in five minutes.

REBECA

Right.

JACK

And it was the neighbourhood. I guess, we were looking for the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood feel.

REBECA

Okay.

JACK

I think, to this day, Steveston still retains that whole neighbourhood feeling. The neighbours know each other. The neighbours, they’re all still around. We help each other out. When the snow comes, we help shovel each other’s walkways and driveways out. I don’t know. That’s missing a little bit in the bigger city of Richmond.

REBECA

Right. You have two daughters.

JACK

Yup.

REBECA

I mean, I don’t know if they told you this directly but what would you say it’s been like for them to grow up here?

JACK

Oh [laughs]. I think, boy, they miss Steveston or they miss … So, my oldest daughter she … They both went to Lord Byng Elementary and then they went to McMath. So, yeah, they’re what I would call Steveston rats [laughs]. That’s part of the, I guess, the charm, is that because we know everybody in the neighbourhood. We know their kids, we know their friends. They’d be hanging around our house or they’d go out to their house. Halloween, you know, we know … If somebody wrecks somebody’s jack-o-lantern we know exactly who’s done it and we would actually go to the parent and actually tell them that that’s what they did. It’s a close-knit community. For them, they’ve got friends that they probably will have lifelong friends in Steveston. My oldest daughter went to … When she graduated she decided to go to university back east.

### [01:16:31]

She went to Waterloo. She went to the University of Waterloo. She graduated out there. She wanted to be on her own and wanted to live in the big city of Toronto. So she spent a couple of years in Toronto, three or four years in Toronto after graduation but, she said, “You know, dad, I miss the west coast. I miss Steveston.” She wanted to come back, eventually packed up her belongings and, you know, came back to Steveston and now half of my garage has got her furniture. She’s gone [laughs]. I’m hoping that she can take it when she comes back from Japan. She can now take all that stuff out and I can have my garage back. She brought back furniture and a cat. So we got to babysit the cat for a little bit. I think they felt this affinity of being here. This is home to them. My younger daughter, she’s the one that likes to be adventurous. So she went, also, back east after graduation. She went to Ottawa. She went to Carleton. So, got her journalism degree there and she worked about a year in Ottawa doing some writing and, again, I think it was the weather. I think it was the weather in Ottawa that got to her. She could not take that winter. She said, “Oh, I’ve got to come back.” So she heard that Katy’s come back. So, “Oh, I want to go back, too.” So she came back. So we were empty nesters for many, many years, for about seven years, and then all of a sudden they’re both back. Katy, you know, decided to take off to Japan for a year so she’s out, but the other one, she came back and she didn’t bring any furniture because she didn’t have furniture when she was in Ottawa, but she brought back a boyfriend [laughs]. So, because, you know, the boyfriend’s not a cat, we can house a cat but I don’t know about boyfriends, so they had to find a place. So they rented a place out in Vancouver now. So they’re staying out there together.

REBECA

There we go [laughs]. You have a rich family history and network that’s now tied to Vancouver and Richmond.

JACK

Oh, is there?

REBECA

It sounds like, from the stories that you’ve told me. Some of those themes passed down through generations for sure [laughs]. Well, I’ve exhausted the questions that I have been sneaking in and writing down as you’ve been chatting, but is there anything about your family story or your own life story, especially related to this migration to Vancouver and Richmond, that I haven’t asked you, that you haven’t had a chance to share?

JACK

You know, I guess, when you think about my family’s migration to Richmond, well, okay, you know, to North America or to Vancouver, you know, and me from Vancouver to Richmond, it wasn’t because, and I think this might be … Our story’s a little bit different from, maybe, some recent migration stories that you might have heard. It wasn’t because it was chosen. It was because, again, I consider my mom and dad were refugees. It just so happens that the place that they decided to come was a place my dad knew, had some experience with. That, kind of, helped him, or helped us, decide how we want to start over again. I think it wasn’t just like a … Here’s a place we’re all going to start over again, brand new, know nothing about it, and we still hanker for going back home.

### [01:20:59]

I don’t know if my mom and dad, if you asked them today, you know, if they were alive, if you want to go back to China or you want to go back to Hong Kong. They would say no. There’s nothing that they would say, other than, maybe, some relatives that they miss. So that’s why I was saying earlier that, would there be something they miss, I don’t know, I don’t think they would miss anything because they were leaving some pretty bad stuff. There’s nothing for them. There’s no desire to go back home. Even now, I’d like to go back and visit and see my ancestral village in China. A lot of my uncles and relatives that are still alive, you know, that are my mom’s and dad’s age would be, they would say “No, don’t go. Why would you want to go?” Again, it’s this, I guess, the village was very poor, they were starving, they had to do something so they sent their young ones off and hopefully they would send some money back so they can survive. If they had the choice, they would leave. So, the migration meant, I mean, the migration means, in my family, is it’s, I don’t know. I’m trying to think of something. It is probably … Maybe you can tell me the difference between immigration and migration. I think my family might be considered migration rather than immigration.

REBECA

Okay, right, right. Now, listening to your entire family’s story and learning about the people and their personalities and also their values and hopes, you have the luxury now to be curious about it, right?

JACK

Yeah.

REBECA

You have, sort of, a life situation which you can be curious about it and that’s not coming from, sort of, a necessity, it sounds like it’s coming from the efforts over generations of your family’s migration.

JACK

You know, Rebeca, I know how hard my grandfather and, in fact, my father had to work and endure to get to this place and to give me and my siblings this opportunity to do what we want to do or are able to do at whatever we want to do. So I, again, used the word duty in my words earlier. I think it’s my duty to make sure that I’m not just out here having a good time, fooling around [laughs]. It’s my duty to, kind of, make sure that I do give back, which they would have done if they were young, if they were still here, if they were still able. If they could live to 200, they would still be giving back somehow. So I’m probably doing that. Migration doesn’t just stop. For me, the family migrated and then for us to carry forward the story of migration is for us to make sure that we provide some value back to the community for the ones that came before us to put us here. I don’t know, that’s just kind of a big philosophical picture.

REBECA

That’s right. I think that’s a great way to, sort of, finish off the oral history. There were a lot of very important lessons and, also, themes that anyone listening to this story can pull out and learn from some of those challenges and some of those mentalities. So, thank you for being open and frank about those things. I think that’s … And also, some of the candid memories, too, were really great to hear.

JACK

Well, thank you for allowing me to ramble on. Sometimes I … I do have a tendency to go off on tangents.

REBECA

We all do [laughs]. That’s how the brain works [laughs]. You know what, in that rambling we find our way and there’s reflection, right? That’s when we can …

JACK

Well, I enjoyed this actually.

REBECA

Great.

JACK

This reminds me of a therapy session [laughs]. No, I’m just kidding. I’ve never done a therapy session [laughs].

REBECA

Well, thank you. I’m going to turn the recorder off here.

JACK

Okay.

### END OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE [01:25:49]

1. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)