Walter James: Reminiscences of My Younger Days

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Editors' Note: The following is an edited version of the transcription of an oral interview with the late Walter James, conducted by Him Mark Lai, Laura Lai, and Philip Choy when Mr. James was visiting San Francisco in August 16, 1970. Mr. James's recollection of the Chinese-American experience in the Pacific Northwest and Chicago reveals an adventurous life that shatters the stereotypes of Asian Americans as meek and complacent. Walter James died in 1976.

THE CHINESE OLYMPIANS

I don't know the year exactly; maybe around 1885 when there was a big fire in Seattle. There was quite a number of Chinese then. The fire burned up Chinatown and a lot of them moved to Olympia. Of course, that's before I was born. I was born in 1891 in Olympia.

Yes, Olympia, in the southern part of Puget Sound. The Chinese had a very hard time there because there was hardly any work. The Olympia oysters—that's the only industry available to Chinese workers, practically to all the Chinese back in the 1890s. The white Americans owned the business. The Chinese worked for these companies.

Oyster Bay was about twenty-five miles out in the Puget Sound. There must have been ten groups of workers, about thirty Chinese, working for oyster bed owners. See, if you owned some oyster beds, you'd hire me and I'd take care of it for you. It wasn't a big monopoly, not a big scale thing. You didn't need a middleman to find work. When a fellow worked there, he would usually stay there all the time, maybe for twenty years, until he got old.

In Olympia, practically all the *hoi ho* [open the oyster shell] work was done by Chinese workers. There were about thirty of them. That was the only work they could get. In smaller shops, there might be three or four workers.

Chinese oyster workers lived in little houseboats. Our family moved to a houseboat in Oyster Bay because we couldn't afford to pay any rent. The houseboat was built right on top of maybe four big logs by the shoreline. Those who worked in the oyster beds floated the boat out to where they worked. Sometimes when the tide was low, the houseboat was almost down on the bay flat. The oyster beds were not too deep and the workers could rake up the oysters when the tide went out. They gathered oysters into a barge, took it back to a boathouse, and cleaned them all up so that each oyster was free of barnacles and things like that. They worked at midnight or whenever the tide was low. When the tide came in, the houseboat would float itself back to the shore. They shipped the oysters to Olympia in the barge.

Oyster work was seasonal, better in the fall, but not so good during the summer months. In the summertime, they went to work in salmon canneries. Not in Olympia. The canneries were in Bellingham and Astoria. A lot of workers went by boat to Alaska. They went up in June and only worked for a few months during the summertime.

In those days, the cannery workers were practically all Chinese except for a few white girls who did the canning. Every cannery had a place known as the Chinese living quarters. All the cleaning and cutting of the fish was done by hand. Sometimes they worked ten, twelve, or fourteen hours a day when the fish came in. They *cham yu* [cut up the fish]. The *cham yu lo* [fish-cutters] got a little more money because of their skill. They worked fast, cutting the fish into pieces as the assembly line carried the cut fish to the canning girls. Then the cans were soldered and sealed; all done by the Chinese. Then the canned fish were steamed. A hole was punched into the can to let the steam out. Afterwards the cans were soldered and sealed back.

Practically everyone, including the native-born around my age at the time, would go to work in the canneries. I visited them all the time but I myself never worked there. I always went to see them because that was the one chance we got to go out with the girls who worked there. Well, in a small town, there's nobody around to find out. Probably even the parents didn't know about it. We went around different places to make dates.

GROWING UP CHINESE IN OLYMPIA

In the old days, there was a Chinatown in every city in the United States, in the tenderloin or the red-light district. If you were going to Chinatown, you would find that Chinatown next to a house of prostitution. Well, I don't remember on what street Chinatown was located in Olympia, but it was not big. When I was young, there were only three little stores, one of which was called Hang Yick. There was one laundry—all together on the same block.

When I was a kid, I don't think there were more than four families there. I remember going out with my mother once. She wore the Chinese dress she brought from China. It was such a curiosity. Everyone looked at her. I just looked around. I was only six, maybe seven. I remember distinctly that the reason we went out was because she had a toothache and we took her to a dentist. I was sitting outside the dentist office, hearing her screaming and yelling as the dentist yanked her tooth out.

I played with the few Chinese kids of my age so I didn't learn how to speak English until I went to the first grade. I was seven. I didn't like school. A white kid and I played hooky most of the time. We'd go play around the shingles in the lumber mills until we got caught. The white boy's father was a hauler. He drove a team of horses and went all over. One day, he saw us, grabbed us, and took us back to school. The principal put us in a little room and came in with a whip. We got a good beating for playing hooky. In those days, the teacher had authority; the principal had authority.

When you were a little boy, you would go on errands for the older Chinese. They would say, "Go and buy fifteen cents of opium." You would go and buy it. They used a card, an ordinary playing card, put a little dab on it, folded up the four corners and prepared to smoke. I would just sit there watching the elders smoking opium. There was nothing to it in those days; opium was legal. There was an import duty stamp on the opium. Good opium was called *Lai Yun* [Li Yuan, the name of a company in Hong Kong, specializing in the opium trade.—Editor]. Another good brand came from Victoria, B.C. The old-timers knew the difference.

Another thing was I couldn't tell the difference between American pork and Chinese pork. They sent me to buy some pork one day. I went

to an American market and bought fifteen cents of pork because they would give you a slice of baloney or a hot dog. I remember distinctly that when I returned, the folks asked, "Where did you buy it?"

"Mulligan Street," I said.

And they would slap me on the face because they said it was no good. "Why didn't you go to a Chinese store?" ***Loufan gee youk mh hou heck*** [White people's pork doesn't taste good]! I used to think pork was pork. But I finally realized the difference years later when I was in the restaurant business. Chinese farmers do not raise pigs like the Americans. Before garbage day, Chinese farmers would come to us to collect slop [i.e., restaurant throwaways or leftovers]. Then they boiled and fed it to their pigs. In those days, it was the feeding that made the pork tastier. Well, I must admit: The Chinese were right!

THE LITTLE TRAVELER

My Chinese name was Yum Cheun Wah. My father and mother came from China. They were from Toisaan [Taishan]; most of the Chinese people in Olympia were from Toisaan. My father was just a cook. Well, not a good cook because, later on, he had a restaurant here and there but none worked out for him. He was one of the few old-timers who could speak some English. A lot of Chinese couldn't speak a word; he ran a lot of errands for a lot of the local Chinese.

My father married my mother in America. She came over from China as, in finer language, an adopted daughter. The old-timers called it ***moi nui*** [maid-daughter]. She came over at thirteen or fourteen, maybe twelve. Father was at least fifteen years older than my mother. She was married at fifteen and I was born when she was sixteen. I had three younger brothers and sisters.

I remember I didn't have any family life. I was a wanderer. In 1900, when I was nine years old, I went to China—just a friend and myself. This man, Lao Diang, a native of Sunwui [Xinhui], was very good to our family. He worked in Oyster Bay for ten years. Father didn't get to work all the time. Often we didn't have enough to eat. This man would always bring us a couple loaves of bread and some doughnuts or something like that. I used to follow him around. Wouldn't you do that if someone gave you a nickel or a dime once in a while? I called him ***suk*** [uncle, i.e., a father's junior associate].

One day, he said, "I'll be going to China. ***Hui mh hui*** [wanna go]?" Well, a kid at that age? I thought it was just like riding a ferry across

Puget Sound. I was tickled to death. "I wanna go! I wanna go!" I was all happy to go.

I didn't think he meant it literally when he asked me to go to China. I went home and asked my mother. I was a pretty tough kid for her. Mother being Mother, said, "*Nei koi yai* [you're so naughty], it may do you some good! If you father lets you, it's all right with me."

I went to Olympia [where Father worked in a restaurant] and asked Father. He said, "*Hui du hui lo* [Go if you want to]!" Well, I was ready.

Uncle and I went to Seattle from Olympia. He brought me a new suit, new shoes, and some new clothes. I was in my glory. From Seattle we went to Vancouver [British Columbia]. Three days later we boarded the Empress of Japan of the Canadian Pacific Lines. After I was aboard for about an hour, I went to a corner and began to cry. "What am I doing here?" Everything came to my mind. "Gosh, when can I go home after this boat starts sailing?" It would take fifteen days, or at least two weeks, to get to Yokohama and turn around. And another fifteen days before I could get home! I don't want to sound like I was lonely or something; I was only 9 1/2 years old!

After a while, I got over it. I went in and had dinner. The boat started. Two hours later, we were out in the straits and I was seasick. For seven days and seven nights straight, I was very seasick. I was told to take liquid, but it came right out! I was almost dehydrated. I remember it well. It was during the fall and the weather was bad.

There were a lot of Chinese on board: the steerage class down the bottom was almost all taken up by the Chinese . Well, the fare was only something like thirty dollars to go back to China! There was a Chinese crew for the steerage-class passengers. the meals were pretty good. There were six passengers per dining table. At night, they came down to sell *jouk* [porridge], *lian dao* [sweet lotus seed soup], and other things. But they already served so many dishes during meals!

There were also *faantaan* [a counting game of chance.—Editor] and other games of chance for those who were not seasick. Well, I know of many cases where by the time the boat reached Hong Kong, they *do sei hui* [gambled it all away]. No money left. That was very common.

A "TOE JEE DOI" [NATIVE-BORN BOY] IN CHINA

We stopped over in Shanghai before reaching Hong Kong. I was fine until we got to the *cheun* [village]. What a change! I was not used to it. I think I had every disease there was. I didn't think I would pull through.

Anyway, as the old saying goes, "*Toe jee doi* who goes to China will never get the chance to come back!" You know, dysentery, eye trouble, malaria, fever, and all that. I got mosquito bites. I had sore legs. I got them from the time was in the *cheun* until I left for Hong Kong later.

We went to the *cheun* by boat, a Chinese junk. It was quite an experience. When there was no wind, they got off with a long rope and went ashore, pulling the junk forward. It was still quite a distance to the *cheun* when we got off the junk. Once there, the people gathered around, calling me *bak doi, bak doi* [white boy, white boy] because I didn't have queue. Little kids followed us from the river to the house, still calling me *bak doi, bak doi.* When I got to the house, all the women folks laughed at me. I must have look funny because when we were in Hong Kong, my head was shaved. It was like putting a bowl right on top of my head and then shaving around it. So my hair was pretty short, with a shaved forehead.

I was supposed to go to school back there. I did go to school off and on. In the first grade, I learned the *Chin jee mun* [*"Qian zi wen"* "Thousand-word Essay"], which was used in the lottery [i.e., "Chinese keno"] here [in the States].

I stayed in Sunwui with Uncle Diang. He took good care of me, just like a son. He had a son who died when he came to America. He must have liked children a lot because he wanted to have another son. He went back for that. He did have another son; but that son died too. He used to carry me around and take me to different places. Instead of staying for one year as originally planned, I was in the *cheun* for two years and eight months.

Meanwhile, he did not correspond with my folks or anything like that. They thought he kept me for good in China. My parents were a little worried. Somebody was returning to Sunning [Taishan]. He made a special trip to Sunwui, on my parents' behalf, to look me up and to see what had happened. Well, the older folks didn't write letters. Even if Diang Suk wrote, my parents couldn't read and write Chinese anyway.

We returned together. When I came back, I had forgotten all my English and couldn't speak it at all—just *gong Sunwui wa* [speak the Xinhui dialect].

A NEW NAME TO BEGIN ANOTHER CHAPTER OF LIFE

Three years had lapsed since I left for China. Everything had changed. People used to call my father James, from his Chinese name Yim Dune.

Well, back then everybody was a Jim or James or something. So, James became our surname—my sisters were Selma James and Tina James, and my brother was Joe James. My Chinese given name was Wah; so I became Walter James.

I went back to school but I didn't stay put in school. I quit after the fifth grade. So, I didn't even have a grammar school diploma. I am not the kind to be tied down to school; but I could pick up things really fast and learn by just looking at things and using good common sense. I am good at that. Lots of my friends think that I am a college graduate.

I left for Seattle and, for a while, did little chores for Chinese people. I worked for a store with a Singer sewing machine. I would get up at seven o'clock in the morning to clean their store and then I would go to school at eight. For this I got two dollars.

My first real job was as a houseboy for a white family. This woman for whom I worked said, "Well, you do the shopping; you do anything you want." I really didn't want to spend too much time working for her after school. A lot of times I just wanted to run around and play with friends instead of going to work for her. Oftentimes I didn't get to her place until an hour before the family got home, which was a little after six. Other times I would return just a bit earlier if I were to put a roast in the oven for that day's dinner. The lady was very good about it, as long as there was food on the table. Well, I didn't eat with them. She would say, "You can go now, I 'll take care of the rest." I got off before seven o'clock. She did the dishes afterwards. She paid me three dollars a week. So I got quite a bit of money for working besides going to school. I always had money to spend.

That was the way in those days. I used to just work around. When I was sixteen, my family moved to Yakima, Washington. I went over there to join the family and worked as a waiter for some French people in Ellensburg. It was thirty miles away from Yakima. I earned eighty dollars a month as a waiter. That was in 1906. I bought a house for my folks in Yakima for twelve hundred dollars to be paid by installments. I had to save thirty dollars for the house payment every month. Well, Father was still working as a cook, but he could never hold a job for long. He would always get into fights. Besides, he was a bad gambler. Whenever he lost, he would get mad and we would all get it from him at home. He took it out on the family.

Ellensburg was a small town. I worked there for six months and left for Seattle again. I was a barker at the Seattle World's Fair in 1909. I was quite young, but I was mature. During the summer, I was some kind of

a ballyhoo in the Chinese Village with my friend Ah King. After the fair, I went to Tacoma, Washington.

A TRADER AMONG STEAMSHIP CREWS

There were hardly any Chinese in Tacoma—a grocery store, a sewing shop, and two restaurants. The reason was that during a certain period—like in the 1880s—in the Tacoma area, white people put Chinese in cattle cars and sent them away. Unlike Tacoma, Seattle had two good judges who were friends of the Chinese. They were Judge Burke and Judge Sanford. This Judge Burke was an old-timer, well known in Seattle. He once stated in the paper that he would shoot anyone who tried to take things from the Chinese. With all that publicity, the Chinese were left alone in Seattle. But in Tacoma, they were driven out [Chinese in Seattle were driven out in 1886. —Editor].

While in Tacoma, I went back to Seattle quite often because the two places weren't that far apart. I was going to a business college and working at the same time. I was a temporary interpreter for the United States Immigration. That was about 1911 and 1912. I was called to work about twice a month, sometimes four times. They paid me whether I was called to work or not. Usually we would just go and check out the crew of steamers. There wasn't much interpreting. As long as you can speak a few words of Chinese and English, asking ***giu muot miang*** [What's your name], that was about it. They went through the crew's list, and I just looked around. We went from one boat to another. The Blue Funnel Lines used to come into Tacoma, its main port, before they went elsewhere to Seattle and Vancouver. I was usually the first one to get to these steamers before other Chinese could. Those ***hang syohn*** [Chinese sailors] liked me a lot. As the crew of a steamer, they would often smuggle little silk handkerchiefs and things like that for sale! Some would even have a room all piled with merchandise. They even had ***gim ngui*** [goldfish] and canary birds! And herbal stuff, of course. All from China and Japan. I made deals with these sailors, buying their stuff and reselling them in Seattle and San Francisco in large quantities. When I got down to their boat, I asked, ***ni yiu muot*** [What do you have]? So many hundred fantails [a goldfish variety]? How much do you want? I'll take five hundred!

But really, I wouldn't call them smugglers. It was legal for them to use their quarters to bring stuff over for themselves. They only made fifteen Hong Kong dollars a month. They had to make a little extra money for themselves. There was no custom, no duty on these items. So, if they said they had five hundred goldfish, three cents each, I would buy them all, and I would almost double my money back by selling them for twice the price I paid for them. People as far as San Francisco would also come to me for stuff from China acquired through these sailors. I got to know most of these ***hang syohn*** traders and for over two years I won their trust and trade with them regularly. Sometimes they brought so much that I would not have enough money to pay for everything. I would send the money to them afterwards.

BECOMING A RESTAURATEUR

After Tacoma, I went back to Seattle and worked as the manager of Peking Restaurant for a couple of years. It was a big restaurant, opened in 1910. There I met a restaurateur from Chicago. He was quite a talker, and he liked my adventurous spirit. He said, "I can use a man like you."

"Well," I said, "if you have any openings, let me know." That was it. That was in 1913. First to Minneapolis, then to Chicago. I was in Chicago for three months and I didn't like it. So I left for Minneapolis. It was more like Seattle. I looked around to see what possibilities there were. I got an option on a place and needed to raise some funds to open for business. If I couldn't find enough funds, I would just forget the fifty-dollar deposit and return to the West Coast. Well, I started a restaurant in Minneapolis in 1914. This was the beginning of my business in Minneapolis and Chicago, and the rest is history. Later, I had restaurants in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Winnipeg. The Winnipeg one didn't last.

My first restaurant was called the Canton; the second one was Nankin, opened in 1919. Nankin in Minneapolis was the best known. I am not bragging, but in all those years, Nankin was known all over the country. I don't use the "g," as in Nanking. I don't want to name my restaurants with more than six letters. It's hard for the Americans to remember. You got to have a name that everybody can say so that they don't mix it up with others.

A lot of people said to me, "Chop suey is not Chinese dish. It's an American concoction."

"Well," I said, "whether it is American or not, it is the Chinese way of cooking." Let's put it this way: You can put in anything; that's chop suey. But it is not like stew. When you order chop suey, you gotta designate what you want. The dish is cooked in a Chinese way in a wok. How can you say that chop suey is not a Chinese dish? Same goes for chow mein. A lot of people say chow mein is not Chinese. Of course you can make any kind of chow mein, but to cook chop suey or chow mein right, it all depends on the cook. In chop suey, there are three main ingredients: slice pork, celery, and onion. Then you cook up a good sauce, kind of sweet, and it would be excellent with a bowl of rice! We used a lot of bok choy and celery in my restaurant. Everyday we had a standing order of 30 crates of celery, 350 pounds of pork shoulder, and 300 pounds of noodles.

A lot of people, particularly the Jews, used to come in and asked, "Don't you have egg roll and barbecued pork?" Sure we did. I had numbers on the menu and we did a lot of business with those combination orders: a little chow mein, a little fried rice, and egg foo yung. But they would again ask: "Why don't you have barbecued ribs? And egg rolls?"

I would say, "Why go for that? You see all these people waiting? For my stuff!" Most Chinese restaurant have too many items on the menu. You pick up a menu and you are confused, don't know what to order. They should cut it down to some good combinations. You'll get good business.

Speaking of the Nankin Restaurant, a lot of people didn't know that I was partner of the Nankin because I always stayed in the background. I didn't really care. Who cares about Walter James as long as he gives them food, right? But they did know they'd get good food at the Nankin. I never threw my name around people.

When Nankin was opened in 1919, people were talking about the Depression around the corner. The restaurant was a grand operation during the twenties. I used to have a checkroom for girls, an orchestra, and many high expenses. We did a thousand-dollar business a day just to break even. When the Depression hit in 1930, it got down to three hundred dollars a day! I didn't sell out. I kept the restaurant but I changed the management system. Before that, I had a huge staff. I paid these people fifty dollars a week. I took the loss and carried them for about six months; then I told them I could only pay them twenty dollars. I asked them to go out and see if they could find something better. They looked around and couldn't find anything. Some stayed for twenty

dollars. So I dug it out and kept a good set of books. I did about three hundred dollars a day and still made a little money. It was tough. I changed my system, cut down expenses, and pulled through.

Well, I started another restaurant in Chicago during the Depression in 1932. In 1929, that same restaurant was sold for $200,000. In 1930–31, they went broke and were paying $3,000 for rent. I got the whole thing for only $800! I came up with a new system, charging forty or forty-five cents a dish on the average. No advertising or anything. I opened and more than a thousand people showed up. I could only sit 150! So the business went well.

When I retired in 1958, I sold both the business and the building, not to Chinese, but to Jews. They owned it, but hired Chinese help. In the East Coast, Jews owned many Chinese restaurants because the Chinese didn't have enough money to capitalize on the business. From what I heard, the Minneapolis restaurant is now doing terrific business—seven, eight thousand dollars a day.

CIVIC PERSPECTIVE

When I was in Chicago, I also tried to start a Chinese-American civic council. It was during the [Sino-Japanese] war. There were many fund-raising activities in support of China and the United States against Japanese aggression. There was a Chung Wah Wui Gwoon in Chicago but that was my sore spot. I said all the time that Chung Wah Wui Gwoon was the supreme court among us Chinese, just like the United States Supreme Court. They played that role and did a good job. But they lacked public relations; they had no modern ideas. If you called up Chung Wah and asked for information, no savvy, nothing. Nobody answered.

My idea was to have a Pacific Council, using an office in the Chung Wah Wui Gwoon. Call it the community center and have a secretary there to just answer the phone. We would then get a place for social functions, a place where people could meet, or even for a wedding reception. We would not interfere with the Chung Wah group. But there was a clique against this idea. They were very jealous.

I pushed for a building for the council. Of course, I became the biggest contributor, close to 25 percent of the cost. But everything was fouled up after it was built, so I said the heck with it. The place has dete-

riorated—nobody answered the phone, nobody could raise any funds because no one contributed. Nobody wanted to pay for an executive secretary to take care of the association. So, the building stands empty now. And I don't want to have anything to do with it anymore. Like I said, it's one of my sore spots in Chicago.

What I feel is most important is that you have to be ethical in whatever business you are undertaking. And you must be civic-minded. There will always be petty jealousy, but a person must be broad-minded, not small. Take Minneapolis. There were over a hundred professional men and families in Minneapolis, all Chinese [Chinese Americans], not foreign students. When I was there, we organized among ourselves; we had a civic council among ourselves. I remember well that it was I who organized the Chinese American City Council when I was in Minneapolis. We had fund-raising activities. St. Mary's Drum Corps from San Francisco came to support us. We were able to raise twenty thousand dollars. They had never been treated as good anywhere else and we always invited them to return every year for the festivity.

—1970