

FAY WONG INTERVIEW

Narrator: Fay Wong

Interviewer: Mark Pickus

Interview Date: February 21, 2016

Location: Oakland, California

FAY: My name is Fay Wong and I am sixty-six years old.

MARK: *Today is February 21, 2016. My name is Mark Pickus and I'm the interviewer and this interview is taking place in Oakland, California. Tell me a little bit about your background, I know you were born in China. Can you tell me exactly where you were born?*

FAY: Yes, I was born in Kwangtung Guangdong, China and Kwangtung is just about 40 miles from Hong Kong. And I was born just at the time of Liberation in China in 1949, October of 1949. And I was there in China until I was three years old.

MARK: *Tell me a little about your father's experience because it seemed like it had been very interesting, you mentioned he had been a paper son and that he had actually been in the US before you were born.*

FAY: Yes, what happened was my great-grandfather came to the United States about the 1890s and he worked in the laundries and during the San Francisco earthquake, in 1906, the court house burned down and all records and papers, birth certificates were gone and they allowed people to go to reregister to register their most current birth certificates. So my great-grandfather—being the clever, thoughtful man that he is—he registered that he had six sons and so he was able to bring several men from our village to the United States, we were a part of the Lee Village and my father used one of the papers and my great-grandfather just

thought that this would be a great future—better future—for the people in the village and my dad, when he first came to this country, worked in the restaurants, he didn't understand English and he just got work delivering food. And in those days, in San Francisco, when a person delivers food they carry all the stacks of food on the tops of their heads and he would just walk the streets and deliver place to place and my dad told me that years later what a difficult experience it was not understanding English, not understanding the culture, and my great-grandfather was so busy—you know—he kind of left my father on his own and my father was only about sixteen years old at that time.

MARK: And so then he went back to China for an arranged marriage, is that right?

FAY: Right. Before that happened, World War II happened and my dad joined the army and he got his citizenship that way and my dad had interesting experiences. He, fortunately, did not have to be put in combat. He picked up English skills really quickly so he did translating services, he worked in the offices mainly but while he was in service he also learned mechanical skills—how to repair aircrafts and so forth—so that came in handy later on for him. And so in terms of the arranged marriage my father, at age 27, went back to China, my great-grandfather sent him there, and the little interesting story about my father is that my father since he was a child always loved to play dice and when he was a little boy they would send him with a pocketful of money and he would take it to go to the barbershop to get his haircut and my father would on the way find a dice game and usually lost his money so my father never came home with a haircut and so my grandparents, the way they dealt with it, is they just shaved his head and said 'Now we don't have to deal with your haircuts anymore.' Now what happened with him at age 27, going back to China, again my great-grandfather gave him some money to go back to find a wife and my dad lost his money on board the ship—lost all his money—and he had to wire back and he was like 'Boy things never change,' but so he eventually got back to China and the arranged marriage he was introduced to my mother and she lived in the village next door to the Lee

Village, my mom comes from the Chang Family and they were introduced through a matchmaker and the matchmaker would just briefly describe each person and then the family would agree and then when my father and mother first met, my mother wasn't too impressed with my father she just looked at him and said 'My god you look so old.' He's 27 years old whereas my mom, at age seventeen, was young and beautiful and my father fell for her right away. Since then they went on a couple of dates that were chaperoned and they soon got married. And what happened was the first time my dad was back in China my mom did become pregnant but she lost the child. And then it was the second time he went back the following year that I think I was conceived but by the time I was born my father had returned to the United States to work and sent money home. And back then the custom was for husbands to work and save money and send it back to China because the hope was one day they might go back to China and families rarely came to this country but in my families case my mother was very forward looking in terms of her perspective and she didn't want to just be stuck in China and she wanted to come to the States and join my father and she was going to bring me along and in that time it was quite unusual to bring a daughter because the whole tradition is centered around sons so other villagers would bring a son but never a young daughter but my mom was determined to come to the United States, bringing herself and me along and so at about age two and a half my mother made some excuse about being sick or I being sick and I could only get treatment in Hong Kong and so we were able to go to Hong Kong and once we were in Hong Kong it wasn't too hard to come to the United States. So at age three we went aboard ship and we came to this country.

MARK: You know, you talked about how your father learned English and adjusted—seemed fairly well but your mom, even though she really wanted to come to this country, it seemed like it was more of a struggle for her once she arrived. Can you talk a little bit about that? Your, you know life, you lived in Emeryville right?

FAY: Yes. What happened, when we first came to this country, it was really difficult

because once we landed here, they found out that my mother had TB and because TB is such a serious illness she had to be quarantined and that meant she could stay with my dad but I had to be moved immediately to another household and my father found a babysitter in West Oakland and I was living in this boarding house with complete strangers, at that point and my mother was really hoping things would go well but being sick with TB and when we were living in Emeryville she was so disappointed she was hoping that—she heard all the dreams about—had all these dreams of living in a beautiful house and that people would be well to do and when we moved into the house in Emeryville, first of all, it was only 100 feet from a train track so the train would roar by the house every single day and also it was a very dark and dreary house because it belonged to my father's boss, the restaurant owner, and he used most of the house to store his restaurant furniture, so many rooms in the house weren't even usable and so my mother, I remember, was so upset she was saying 'Why did you bring me out to this country in the first place? Look at this dump.' And she was so angry she took one of the chairs, restaurant chairs, and threw it out the window and that made a deep impression on me—by that time I was living back with my parents and I was about four years old then and I was thinking 'You know this is horrible even my mother is so upset, this is not what life should be like.'

MARK: Right, and if you feel comfortable talking about it, but she actually had some kind of a breakdown didn't she, your mother?

FAY: I believe she did. I mean, it was never like she had to be institutionalized or whatever but she was just in such a deep rage for so many years and she was so angry with many of our relatives—not that they could have helped us—but just felt like they were doing so much better than us that why do we have to live in such a shabby house, you know, with trains running in front of it and she was just very very upset.

MARK: And then at some point you moved to East Oakland, and can you tell us a little

about that? I think your dad worked as a mechanic and your mom did she—she work for Del Monte?

FAY: Yes. What happened was later on, especially after my father, because of his mechanical skills, knowing how to fix aircrafts, got a job at the Alameda Naval Air Station. And at that point we were able to save up some money and move to a house in East Oakland and, at that point, my mother also got a job working for the Del Monte Tomato Cannery and she worked on the assembly line peeling tomatoes and helping them, you know, get ready for canning.

MARK: *Tell me a bit about your life in that East Oakland community cause it sounded like it was a very diverse neighborhood, and even though, you know, your parents maybe weren't always so welcoming of your neighbors, or whatever—I don't know—can you tell me a little bit about you. Did you have friends in the neighborhood, in this very diverse neighborhood?*

FAY: Yeah that happened a little bit later, the initial life that we had living in our neighborhood was kind of really isolating because my parents were a little nervous because with both of them working I had to be a latchkey kid and I was only about seven years old and I would just go home, well after school I would go to Chinese school, you know, one of our friends would drive myself and other children to Chinese school and that would last about a couple hours so I would get home about six o'clock every night but then to just let myself in the house and eat dinner and then put myself to bed and do my homework if I had any homework. And so I felt like 'gosh this is kind of scary coming home just by myself' and my parents were just so proud because so many of our friends would offer to babysit me or to feed me or to give me dinner or spend the evening with them but my parents said 'no, no, no we have it all taken care of, she can just go home and take care of herself.' And I just thought 'oh this is the most lonely time ever' but then when I was about nine years old, my mom had bad health so she thought she was never going to have any more children but suddenly when I was

about nine years old my mother became pregnant again and she had my sister and then the year later she had my brother and with two young children coming back to back my mom couldn't work anymore. And that became the happiest time of my life, began to, because my mom stayed home but also because I was so much older, nine and ten years older, than my brother and sister that I just got to take care of them and it was just wonderful to have a house full of kids and at that point I was also allowed to go outside and play and it was a very great neighborhood to grow up in because it was just so diverse, there was a Japanese family who lived across the street, a couple black families who lived at the corner and a Mexican American family who also lived up the street, and so all of this, and several white friends too, and we all became really good friends and we played from morning to night, in the streets, playing baseball or there was a hill across the street that was an empty lot and we would just slide down in refrigerator boxes, do all sorts of wild games in our neighborhood and one of our friends, black friends, had a huge backyard—in fact she had two backyards—and her uncle was a junk collector so us kids would often climb up, he would have, like, used cars as part of his junk and some of us would climb on to these cars and one time we took the brick off the wheel of one of the cars and the car started rolling away—

MARK: *Oh no!*

FAY: —we just hopped off but luckily the car hit a rock and stopped.

MARK: *You mentioned that your parents let you play but then didn't necessarily let your friends come to your house, or I mean was there some—you had a very diverse group of friends—did that open up your parents or how did they react to that?*

FAY: My parents were racist, you know, they did not like me playing with black children, white children were okay, Asian children okay but not black children but one of my best friends is black and I would have to sneak around. I would go

to her house and play or I would get invited to her birthday party and, you know, just pretend I was going to somebody else's house, so we kind of got around it that way.

MARK: So then you went to Fremont High School, right? In Oakland, and is that when you first sort of started having inklings of political awareness? I know you mentioned some speakers were brought into the school and various others things in Fremont High. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

FAY: Yeah well you know during the early 60s, mid-60s, there was a lot happening in this world, the Vietnam War, the Black Panthers were starting to really become popular in Oakland, lot of movements were happening except I was a little bit out of the loop, myself, my parents didn't have any newspapers at home, not English, they would have Chinese newspapers, and my Chinese was not quite good enough to read a Chinese newspaper so I would really, and we would never watch TV news, so I never knew what was going on except I was aware and I would hear other people talking, see occasional pictures, one of my tenth grade teachers wore a peace button, so, you know, kind of talked a little bit, so I kind of knew and at one point one of our black student body presidents asked Robert Scheer to come to our school and speak and I was really aghast that he was able to get away with it but he did!

MARK: Tell me who Robert Scheer was or, he was pretty radical at the time, was he the editor of Ramparts Magazine?

FAY: You know I'm not 100% sure but I think he was and also spoke out strongly against the Vietnam War so it was really a great experience because that was the first time I heard someone like that speak, especially right there at high school, so it was a good experience.

MARK: So then you were one of the few students from Fremont to go on to UC Berkeley,

right? Is that right? Fremont was a public inner city high school, not that many kids went on but you were one and tell us a little bit about, I mean, that was quite a time to be at UC Berkeley.

FAY: Yeah it was, we had a class of about 435 seniors, and out of the class I think less than ten of us end up going to UC Berkeley, and just to preface what happened before about going to college was my mother was totally opposed to a girl going to college, her idea is a girl should maybe get a career, maybe like a secretary, but her main job is to get married and have kids, get married, find myself a good husband and that's my job and I just, growing up the way I did, I really felt I had to expand my world, I had to go beyond that. I really wanted to see more in life, I was very proud of my parents they worked so hard and struggled so hard but I just felt like I didn't just want to repeat that, and it wasn't like changing a job but just knowing more about the world. I lived such a sheltered life up until high school I really wanted to see a lot more and I just knew if I followed my mother's wishes, especially of just going through an arranged marriage my life would be very limited.

MARK: *So how did you get around that if your mother was so opposed?*

FAY: Well luckily my father really doted on me and he really—and my sister too—he really doted on his daughters, and his attitude was 'well she wanted to go, why not let her go? You know? What's the problem? It's not gonna hurt' but my father did say to me 'if you do go to college you're gonna have go to UC Berkeley, you're not gonna go Cal State Hayward or San Francisco State' or, cause at that point I was kind of nervous about going to college I was thinking 'uhh I'm just such a little fish in big pond, I better just not set my heights too high' even though I had the grades at that point to go to UC Berkeley but my dad said 'no if you want me to pay your tuition and to go college you're going to have to go to UC Berkley' so I did, that was the only school I signed up for and I got admitted.

MARK: *That's great and did you live on campus?*

FAY: No I didn't not live on campus for the first two years, I worked part time and then I commuted to school on the bus.

MARK: *Okay and say a little bit about what was going on at UC Berkeley at that time, cause we're talking—you started in fall of 67?*

FAY: Yes.

MARK: *So that was quite a time to be at UC Berkeley.*

FAY: Oh it was incredible, soon as I went on campus there was the Anti-War Movement, there was the Third World Strike, there was People's Park. There was just so much that was happening and it was the first time that I really felt that I could be empowered in some way, just to step back a little, ever since I was a little kid I really felt that something was not right in this country, you know just not only being brought up poor but kind of like the tough kind of situations that we had to live, to struggle so much, that it was just not right and I just really felt that I should one day do something about it. And then when I went to Berkeley and I saw all this demonstrations I saw students demanding that we change our curriculum on college to be much more inclusive to have things like Chicano Studies, Black Studies, you know, Asian Studies, it was just really life changing.

MARK: *And that's what the third world strike was really about, right? Ethnic Studies and open admission? Admitting more minority students? And actually as a result of that some classes did get established and you said you took some Asian Studies classes?*

FAY: Yes I ended up taking one Asian Studies class cause, this is 1971, and they were

just beginning to start these programs and really excited that they won the strike and was able to make some of these demands and have some changes made. And what happened was I took this one class I got very excited about it, to learn about my peoples history, not only just about Chinese but about other Asians as well and in the class they started talking about socialism and revolution, they even introduced those concepts, so I was getting really excited and I went one day after class, I went up to one of the teachers and said ‘you know I’m really interested in what you’re doing can I join a group of some kind or study some more?’ and he looked me straight in the eye, my teacher did, I knew he was a political activist, I didn’t know what group he belonged to at the time, but he looked straight at me and said ‘well what’s your line on Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong thought?’

[interviewer laughs]

FAY: And my jaw just dropped. I was thinking ‘you know I don’t have a line and that’s why I want to study with you’ but I was just kind of dismissed and never got asked to join or you know do anything after that. So I became kind of pretty upset by that incident and I was thinking ‘you know maybe college is not where I’m going to find all the answers. I—beginning to be exposed to all these ideas already—maybe I just have to broaden my world a little bit more’ so what I did was I dropped out of college. It was my fourth year, last term, you know, almost on the verge of graduation but I just felt disillusioned and not quite satisfied so I dropped out of school and a couple of my friends said—couple of my Chinese friends—were saying ‘let’s, you know, go to Europe’ and I said ‘yeah let’s go to Europe’ but it turned out my friends had different ideas of going to Europe, you know, one of them wanted a hookup with her boyfriend and one of them wanted to do something else and I said ‘no I’ll just do it on my own’ so I went by myself to Europe and I hitchhiked around and I went to France, Italy, Germany, Greece and England and Wales.

MARK: *Did that feel—seem kind of daring—when you think about it now, when you look*

back on it, was that kind of daring for a woman to go off on her own, in those days, or was it just something you just wanted to do?

FAY: It was daring and I had the advantage because at that point in Europe, in the early 70s, there were a lot of Japanese students who just went in mass to Europe so a lot of Europeans were used to seeing Japanese students from Japan. And they assume automatically that if they see an Asian person I must be Japanese so in that way I didn't get harassed quite as much as other women who would be traveling by themselves, they would say 'are you Japanese?' and I just nod and said yes and I usually didn't get hassled that much but in terms of politically it was a great experience for me because the Europeans, especially in England and Italy, were quite vocal about their politics. Oh and I went to Spain too and at that time under Franco with fascism so I got to see that side of the political spectrum but what happened with talking to a lot of the people in Europe, especially young students, they really educated me about US imperialism and the US being a super power because I really didn't quite get the concepts before even though I heard about them a little bit in my Asian Studies class and some of my other classes it really made sense and just hearing them talk and having discussions with them really helped me. And I, at that point, was debating [laughs] whether I should come back to the United States or not or should I continue trying to live in Europe but I really felt that my home was really here in the United States and if, with all the extra political knowledge that I've gained, I could make the biggest difference by coming back and you know I really wanted to make some kind of changes. Especially, change the way not only when I was growing up, now my own experiences was a rough time but my parents took me to visit different relatives and I saw these were my aunts and namely women relatives living in single room type situations in San Francisco. They were like garment workers, they just worked like night and day, and they could barely scrape by and they would just live in this tiny little room with all their belongings were there and my aunt, I know, worked so hard in the garment factory she began to lose her sight so after watching all these experiences I had in the back of my mind 'you know one

day I'm going to try to do, to change those types of situations so people don't have to work and slave like that' and you know the same kind of experiences that my mom went through having that breakdown and working at that Del Monte plant and really struggling so much.

MARK: So then you did come back to the US and I guess you got a job—

FAY: Yeah.

MARK: —and you worked for a while in San Francisco, is that right?

FAY: Yes I worked when I first came back to the US. I thought 'okay maybe I should get back to school' and I didn't want to go back to Berkeley. At that point I was trying to complete college by going to San Francisco State and majoring in history but San Francisco State lost my application so I just gave up on the school idea so I thought temporarily I'll go back to work. And before, when I was in college, I worked as a bank teller so I got another bank teller job in San Francisco Financial District and at that time one of my friends, a Latina woman, who was developing her awareness as a woman and feminist issues. So one day she goes out during her lunchtime down to Market Street and she comes back with this brochure and she shows it to me and this brochure is from this school called Liberation School and it's a socialist school and it was one of those pamphlets that was in red and black and with people with fists in the air and I saw that and I said 'wow what is this? This is really heavy duty political literature' so it had a woman's class that my friend was interested in but it also had a Marxism class—Introduction to Marxism—and I was thinking 'my gosh this is what I've been waiting for all this time' you know 'what's my line on Marxism Leninism?' well here's my chance I can begin. So I took the Marxist class and the teacher was just so good at explaining the concepts. She was very enthusiastic and, by the way, the Liberation School was located in the Castro District, at that point, and it was a little store front, and that school offered a variety of different kinds of classes that

related to socialism or changing society, and some were labor history classes, some were urban development and how you could change urban development in a more social context—those kinds of classes. So I was really excited about the liberation school so when my Marxist teacher said 'well do you want to become more involved? you could join the collective, perhaps teach a class' and I was really into it because this was the first time it was so inclusive someone asked me before I tried to join in and was rejected but so someone tried to include me in. So I immediately said I would and then I met some other people on the collective and it turned out one of the women had the same kind of passion that I had in studying about China and during those days there were only about six or seven books written that were worthwhile to read about China and some of them are like Edgar Snow, Felix Greene, or like Joshua Horn, different books like that so I read them all. I just did that as fun on my spare time. I read all those books, so given that, I felt like I was somewhat of a China expert so my friend and I taught a Women and China class and it was a really popular class. We had a lot of women coming each week you know always like fifteen women or so and really lively discussions and so I really got into the liberation school and it was through liberation school that I met my future husband, he was teaching a labor history class, at that point.

MARK: Right, and then at least, maybe one or two other people who ended up joining the League were also in that—came by way of—the Liberation School?

FAY: Yes.

MARK: So it was kind of an interesting experience being a part of that school?

FAY: Yeah and the Liberation School helped us link up with I Wor Kuen and the League later on and I could explain that kind of situation a little bit. What happened, the Liberation School was doing really well it wasn't like a revolutionary organization it was mainly to do socialist education, you know, to

provide people with social awareness about socialism, so it was like building the steps towards party building or revolution but not think of ourselves as party building but mainly a collective, because at that point in the early 70s there were various collectives that sprung up to do socialist education especially in Berkeley but now we were the one in San Francisco. So what happened was there started to be a little shift that was happening in the San Francisco left movement and there was this organization called the Mass Intermediate Socialist Organization, MISO for short, and this organization later became Line of March and this group wanted to start gathering all these loose collectives—like the Liberation School—and put them under their umbrella as a pre-party socialist organization and, unbeknownst to us, when the Liberation School was doing really well, we really expanded the collective, we doubled in size practically, we started out with about eight or nine people and we just, you know, got over fifteen, sixteen people and at that point one of the people in the collective was part of this Mass Intermediate Socialist Organization and he started talking to various collective members on the side and he was able to convince a lot of the people on the collective to join his organization and the rest of us were kind of—especially the older crew, the veteran crew—was a little bit skeptical, you know, we weren't sophisticated enough at that point to know exactly what line differences we had with this group we just kind of knew couple things that made us uncomfortable about them. One, we felt that they had a hidden agenda because the way they operated was to talk to people on the side and to split up the groups and not come out and say 'we're socialists.' They even admit it 'we're not gonna scare people off by saying we're socialists but through getting people organized and involved then we can introduce, and once they get enthused about us, then we can do socialism' and we felt that that was really underhanded and that's not the way you politicize people. But then the other thing was we didn't feel comfortable with their decision on the Black Nation. We didn't understand what the Black Nation was about but we knew that that was not something that you could just liquidate that you could say that black people were not entitled to. And the Black Nation, all I knew from studying the history, was during Reconstruction, after slavery, former black

slaves were promised land in this country and that potentially a nation could have been formed and so to me just—even my little brief understanding—why would you not say that black people would be entitled to this, to have self-determination for themselves and they were pushing their agenda they were using really abstract arguments from Stalin’s arguments on nationalism to justify that black people were not entitled to this. So we just did not feel very comfortable with their arguments without having a clear, sharper understating as to why. So a couple of the people on the collective and I think including myself said 'we got to really get some help, get some more understanding' and for a number of years I was well aware of groups in Chinatown, you know, even though I was busy with Liberation School I was aware of these groups in Chinatown. In fact, from my work in Asian Studies, I had heard briefly about these groups so we said 'look there's this group call I Wor Kuen in Chinatown, let's talk to some of them, you know, we've met them at these different events, they seem to be pretty up with things, why don't we just check it out, just run these ideas by them?' And sure enough a couple people from I Wor Kuen came to our collective meeting, this is the small group that was against the Line of March people and we did a little mini studying. We talked about the National Question and about the Black Nation, and it really made sense to us it, really really made sense. And then what happened when the collective did split, literally in half, half went with the MISO people, or the Line of March people, and the other half decided 'well let's see how we'll work with I Wor Kuen,' at that point because the League was not yet formed it was just I Wor Kuen and some of us ended up working for Getting Together publications and I end up working in Chinese Progressivism Association because, you know, I was the best fit—speaking Chinese, part of the Chinese community and so forth.

MARK: Right so you did quite a lot of work with the Chinese Progressive Association so I would really like to hear more about what the organization was and your role in it.

FAY: Okay the Chinese Progressive Association was a mass organization, the I Wor Kuen you know helped start the organization because, it's like not only are you just a revolutionary organization, but you have to really have ways to work with people in the communities beyond just serve the people. Really helping people to, not only, improve their lives and deal with different issues whether it be housing, whether it be jobs where the bosses were taking full advantage of the employees, different ways people's lives had to be helped and what I liked in terms of working in Chinese Progressivism Association was that no matter what issue we took up we tried to empower people because not only do—let's say if there was a labor struggle, the garment workers were not being paid their overtime pay they were being paid piecemeal, they were really working under these horrible working conditions—I remember at Jung Sai plant they weren't even allowed toilet paper. They were saying 'this is the one roll of toilet paper you're allowed.' It was treating people in a totally unhuman way and what the I Wor Kuen would do, in terms of leadership, in working in Chinese Progressivism Association, would help by setting up press conferences you know to get the press to come out so more people would learn about the issue. It would set up rallies and demonstrations, to really mobilize resistance towards these issues but what happens as we're doing all this, is that more and more people—the workers or people involved in the different issues—would get trained, they would learn 'yeah I can do this too' and if we have a press conference it would be the workers themselves who would speak at the press conference and pretty soon a lot of the people that became organized and active would be able to lead these struggles themselves. So it was really a great way of empowering people so when I first worked for Chinese Progressivism Association I was just blown away, when I went to their dinners especially—those dinners were just incredible—every Sunday we would have a Sunday dinner at the basement of the International Hotel and it would just be literally a hundred so people would come some nights. And it was a way for young and old Chinese speaking, a lot of American born too, English speaking and we would have these really delicious meals and then after the meals there would like a talent show and whoever wanted to could come

up and perform and it was wonderful because lots of different people, there would be children, a little boy playing the piano or someone singing a Chinese song, someone doing a dance or whatever. So it was like a way of just bringing people together and I think the best thing was all these people from different backgrounds and generations coming together.

MARK: Right, you had mentioned some of the other struggles that CPA, the Chinese Progressive Association, got involved in like supporting Local 2, the hotel workers union, and then there were also some things around a Simpson-Mazzoli Immigration Bill, just tell a little bit more about some of other things that CPA got involved in in terms of fighting.

FAY: One of the things—I'll address those too—but one of the big things was the International Hotel, and I mean the eviction happened in 1977, but before then in terms of, it was able in the International Hotel struggle, many people from many different communities and from many different political groups, came together and we were able to form an I-Hotel support committee because the tenants who lived at the hotel were pretty agitated. They were ready to take some kind of action because what was happening was as the Financial District was expanding, and into not only the downtown area, it was moving on to Manilatown and Chinatown and the I-Hotel was in the way and it was according to the capitalist is like it would better serve as a parking lot, you know, for the business rather than for low income tenants.

MARK: And can you just tell us little bit more about who the tenants were. Weren't a lot of them single men, in single room occupancy, who had been workers, is that...?

FAY: Yes, yes many of them were single men, some Chinese, many Filipino, who were either seamen or worked as workers and that's the standard type of housing people had, were these single room occupancy units and it was affordable and that's the only way that they could still live and in a centrally located place where

they can speak their language, they could shop they could have public transportation. So they didn't want to be moved to the outskirts of the city, so it was really important for these tenants to be able to stay there and the support committee had lot of people from all sorts of different backgrounds and lot of, including lot of white activists, as well as many minority activists got involved.

MARK: Right and then I know that CPA also interestingly got involved in supporting Japantown, you know, didn't they get involved in supporting the Committee Against Nihonmachi evictions, C.A.N.E., and also you yourself got involved in redress and reparations issues so as a Chinese American you were also involved in the struggles of Japanese Americans, as well. Right?

FAY: Yes that's the one thing that CPA was really good about, that we really had broad support because we felt that we just could not just be in power just by fighting for our own struggles, that our struggle was connected with so many other communities too and so we were able to work with Committee Against Nihonmanchi Evictions and also it was not always an easy issue to raise because in the Chinatown community there were some anti-Japanese feelings you know especially, when I remember one of our activists, there was a Chinese/Japanese couple who were very active in CPA and there was initially—among the older generation—some criticism and the good thing in CPA was we could have those differences but then we could talk it out and try to educate each other on these types of issues. [Historically, there has been hostility in the Chinese community against the Japanese because in the 1930s and '40s Japan attacked and plundered China. Many CPA members were able to work through these conflicts and were supportive of C.A.N.E when eviction and redevelopment happened in Japantown. CPA later mobilized the members to attend the San Francisco hearings for Redress and Reparations. The Japanese community sought an official apology and monetary reparations for those who were interned in the camps in WWII.] And the other thing I wanted to raise in terms of CPA and how the I Wor Kuen, and later the League, could work with organizations like CPA

and not only provide the tools to empower people but also to help transform people's ideas and work with people. And a concrete example is we always have CPA elections, where we have a steering committee and quite often in the steering committee if you just allow people to just choose or vote for whoever they want, the tendency would be to vote for the young leftist activist who were very verbal, who were very out there or the most bilingual person but it was usually an educated bilingual activist would be the main people, that people would ask to be in the steering committee but that's just not the makeup. We didn't want it to be run by just young revolutionaries but no that's not what a mass organization is about we wanted people from all the older folks who had good ideas and wanted to participate, not educated, you know, could be just a person who very humble who would just cook a lot of the Sunday dinners at CPA but still had some really good ideas and wanted to participate, we wanted to have those people too, or women to have some of the older women, you know, to be spokespersons in the steering committee. So part of the way things had to work, like in the steering committee, is to not just let people just choose but for the cadre to have a discussion and said 'look this is what we would like to have in our steering committee, this combination of people' and we would try to vote different people in. At first I thought 'that's not democracy. You're not allowing democracy to happen if you're just having a discussion beforehand and figuring out who the steering committee is' but actually after I saw it in practice I felt, yes it was a good way of really getting more people involved because a lot of us have older ideas too and among the people in the community they do and you can't just have elitist ideas, that we're just going to have the most educated bilingual people running the show.

MARK: So it's interesting because, I assume by now you're a member of IWK, so can you talk a little bit about your process of recruitment and then also what it was like to be inside a revolutionary organization, working in a mass organization—IWK in this case.

FAY: Well, in terms of recruitment, like I said we were in Liberation School and then became part of I Wor Kuen and then we went through a series of study groups together. In my situation, it was in Chinatown working with the Chinatown units.

MARK: *So tell me what exactly is a unit then and how did it work in your case?*

FAY: Okay so in each area of work it's broken down like a district. So let's say San Francisco would be one district, Oakland would be another district, LA would be another district and within each district there are different areas of work, so you could have mass work, you could have newspaper work, you could have labor work or whatever it is and in San Francisco let's say if there's Japantown, they might have a Japanese community area of work and for Chinatown, CPA, so we would have different units that would address those particular issues for those areas of work.

MARK: *And so then you discussed in the units things, like what you were just talking about, what type of leadership would best serve CPA that would be a place you'd have those kinds of discussions?*

FAY: Yes.

MARK: *And did you find those helpful?*

FAY: I did. Learned a lot, in terms of how to really work in a mass organization, because I think most of us are not born organizers or just born—even though you might have the right ideas, the right attitude—you don't know how to do things in a day-to-day way and I think within the units, it allowed our chance to struggle with each other, not in a harsh way, but if something did not go quite right in the work or if you said something that was incorrect then we could talk about it, it's something that things get worked out within the units, not only to guide our work but in our own idea, our own personal ideas, that we might have.

MARK: So did you, when you talked about struggling, and of course some people will feel like that always is harsh and negative, but you saw it as sometimes quite helpful in pushing the work forward by resolving differences, or by pointing out short comings, so do you see that as part of democratic centralism?

FAY: Yes I do because quite often what would happen, in terms of democratic centralism, the centralism of course is from our bureau above, the Central Committee, would always have their discussions of what our line or view on different things and then the line would be passed down to the various districts and units and we would discuss them and not everyone would say 'oh yeah that's something we'll just put a rubber stamp on!' No, there would a lot of back and forth discussions that said 'you know this particular line or this particular issue—we should refine it. We should think about this more.' And all that information, from the unit, would be brought back to the central committee and then there would be more discussion from there. So I think this back and forth really helped peoples understanding.

MARK: Now in addition to the mass work, CPA also had the reputation of a pro-China group is that true? And how did that fit into the work of CPA?

FAY: Well you know back in the early 70s pro-China work was really important to the Chinatown community and China was an inspiration to us, many of us were from China and those us who were not just found what China was able to accomplish, with the revolution, was very inspiring for many of us and lot of our work was in Chinatown and CPA was doing pro-China work in terms of October 1st events—anniversary of Chinas liberation—and also to work toward normalization of relations between the US and China was a really important demand that came up.

MARK: So at a certain point IWK, I Wor Kuen, merges with other organizations, how did that affect you, or come into your awareness and how did it affect your work?

Can you describe that a little bit?

FAY: Well, you know, you need to refresh me about what year it was....

MARK: *Well, you know, the mergers took place over a period of time but I think in '77, '78 was the actual formation of the League and then later on the Revolutionary Communist League also joined in but I think the first two organizations were the August 29th Movement joining with IWK and so then the League of Revolutionary Struggle was formed and there's a new newspaper, Unity Newspaper. Did that impact your work? Did it impact you in terms of your sense of enthusiasm, seeing that the organization you were a part of is now merging with others and growing? Can you just describe that a little bit?*

FAY: Yeah I felt that at that point it was a really big changing point too because before working in CPA, in Chinatown, it was very exciting, very enriching type work but then to see the whole concept of expanding, especially, with other national nationalities and working with other groups, not only was it a great learning experience to even know about these other movements but to see the potential, the potential of—we weren't saying we were a party, you know, early on we were talking about party-building but to just see the potential of all these different groups working together in a common struggle was amazing, you know, to see that in many ways we had a lot in common but a lot that each group had their own history and their own struggles that they needed to be able to deal with and I felt that at that time that it was the biggest chance that we could have at that time to really build a party or potential party building.

MARK: *And then at a certain point around here you are called upon to work on Unity Newspaper right? Can you talk a little bit about that experience?*

FAY: Yeah it was after the I-Hotel evictions that soon work began to change in Chinatown and I was asked to become the Chinese editor—the Chinese side

editor—of Unity Newspaper.

MARK: So Unity was published in three languages it was English, Spanish and then...

FAY: English Chinese too.

MARK: Yeah and then English Chinese and you were the Chinese editor or the editor of the Chinese side.

FAY: Just like on the Spanish side the Chinese side would take the main key articles in the English edition of Unity but also add a lot of articles that were particular to like the Chinese community or in the Spanish side the Latino Spanish community, so I had a chance to really talk to lots of the community cadre in other districts whether it's in Boston, New York, LA and find out all the different issues that were happening. Whether it's fighting against cuts in the public schools, fighting for Chinese workers in different work places, especially, at like the restaurants, or housing, you know, stopping housing development in Chinatown so I had a chance to really work in all those different areas.

MARK: So it sounds like that was like a very exciting but very challenging responsibility for you. How did it affect your personal development to take that on?

FAY: Well, I think one of the toughest things for me was not so much, well, it was also the idea of leadership because lot of us are not born leaders and then it was one thing to maybe lead a unit but it was a different thing to lead the paper because I for one thing I wasn't that confident at that point, coming from my background I really felt that I'm a doer but not a leader and so that was hard but the other part that was really hard was I've always struggled with writing and when I was in Berkeley I took Subject A, not being fluent in English—

MARK: Subject A, where they used to call that bonehead English, where you had to take

that—pass the test, the subject A test...

FAY: —if you couldn't pass well on your writing test, you know, entering Berkeley you have to take bonehead English and I had to take it and very embarrassed by it. But given that writing something was like pulling teeth so even as editor I had to write some of the articles myself and I had to edit the articles and it drove me to tears sometimes because it was so hard but I have to say after doing it for a couple years I became halfway decent, pretty good at it, and I felt that I could do it but I had to work through it.

MARK: *So it was a struggle but you grew a lot in the course of doing that work.*

FAY: I felt that and it was also working with people who I thought had better skills than me was a kind of hard idea, you know, when I worked with a staff who I thought was more politically sophisticated or whatever and I knew that different people got chosen for different jobs for particular reasons, you know, it was not because I was the best educated or the best writer but that I would be willing to, if I saw something that was not politically correct, that I would raise it, you know, not in a confident way but I would raise it and I did, I really did. So we had a lot of pretty deep political discussions in the paper.

MARK: *So at a certain point the organization starts to fall apart and there's a dissolution of the League. Can you talk about how that affected you. When you became aware of it, were you involved in discussions? Or how it affected your morale.*

FAY: Well, you know, it came as a surprise to me and I think it came a surprise to a lot of people. It's not that things—not in a surprise in the sense that things were just going so well and suddenly one day it happened. No I knew there were a lot of people who were pretty demoralized and I also saw for a while a lot of the groups just gone! You know? Starting with October League then later on all these other left groups were gone and I think for, I don't know a lot of people, but I know for

myself what happened with Tiananmen's Square in China was a pretty demoralizing experience because even our big support to China at that point, you know, seemed like for what? Look at what China's doing now—they're turning against the people. So I knew that things were kind of shifting in that way but I didn't think it was inside the League itself, that we were going to end up following that route. I thought that maybe, you know, we might have to have deeper discussions to work a lot of these things out in demoralization but then when it came—when the announcement came—it was like a shock. And yes there were discussions in each of the units, we each heard or read the dissolution statement and we had discussions but I really felt personally by that time the decisions already been made by the Central Committee because yeah, there were different meetings where people could raise questions but raising questions you didn't have answers to and there were—I didn't feel—were exchanges and I really felt that when something that big is about to happen, you need more than just to pass it down to the units to have discussion. You need a lot over a longer time frame so people can process it and talk among themselves, in terms of coming up with ideas and what else can we do. Because the way it got left was 'okay we're gonna dissolve. You can form something else if you want' but people can't just come up with something like that. You would really need much more time and discussion among the people to really—among the cadre—to really come up with something.

MARK: One area that we didn't kind of touch on—that I wanted to go back to—it was... somewhere along here you got married and had children and either before that or during that you were involved with the child care process of the organization, either doing child care or other people taking care of your children and also just being so active and so involved how did you balance your family life and, you know, with all the work you were doing, your children, other people's children. Can you talk a little bit about that?

FAY: Yeah it took a bit in terms of balancing our lives because we had slots of time.

We had to fill out a schedule for our slots of time and sometimes it felt there weren't enough slots in the day to really fill because many of us, not only worked a full time job—did our political work—but we had our kids and what I did personally to deal with the balances I just brought my kids everywhere and it was such a positive experience too. I mean my older son was not a person who just enjoyed just taking off to do something, you know, he was not a spontaneous person and he wanted a set and regular schedule so it was not an easy thing but I brought him to each rally, I brought him to CPA, I brought him to the picket lines and he ended up loving it. The workers on the picket line just treated him so well, you know, they would give him snacks, they would just talk to him, play with him, you know, so after a point it was not a big deal to bring my kids to anywhere. And then the child care system was what really saved our lives, especially, on the East Bay childcare, you know, there were so many people. I think there were more people than the even in the San Francisco childcare system. And each weekend and each weeknight there were childcare shifts and people from all over—it wasn't just parents—see a lot of people think parents do childcare. Well parents are busy doing their political work so everyone gets pulled in. All the different cadre, lots of students, lot of workers, you know, people work in the labor unit, people from all sorts of other areas of work got pulled in, especially, I knew that like many of the young students had never even had experience. Especially, if they don't have a younger brother or sister doing childcare but people got trained they got—they usually worked with somebody else with a little bit more experience it would be like two or three people doing a childcare shift together and then they would come up with different ideas whether it's like taking the kids to the park going bowling or doing something fun or just hanging around the house playing games or whatever. And then the evening weeknight childcare persons would deal with getting the kids to bed or doing homework and that kind of thing and I know my children, especially, my younger son just loved childcare and to this day his closest friends—that he still sees—are from childcare. So it was a good experience that really worked well for parents to do their work.

MARK: Okay so I mean obviously you had a life after the League I mean a lot of things happened. You actually went back to CPA and weren't you executive director for a while?

FAY: Oh, well, that was actually before—

MARK: Oh, that was before the dissolution?

FAY: Yeah, right.

MARK: So I mean you—

FAY: Yeah, after...in '84—after my second son was born—I did work as executive director of CPA and I got to just run the day to day work of CPA including cooking the lunches, the weekly lunches, and then I did that for a couple years and then in the late 80s I worked in the Agitation Propaganda unit in the Bay Area. [I also helped to run some of the programs and help mobilized for many mass struggles. Many issues came up in the 80s especially during the anti-immigrant and anti-union era under Ronald Reagan. In 1984, San Francisco hotel and restaurant developers/owners began a wave of anti-union activity. Some of the League cadre became workers in the industry or became organizers in Local 2, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. CPA became active as well. CPA mobilized the community to conduct picket lines to boycott nonunion hotels and restaurants. CPA was also active against the Simpson/Mazzoli bill. This was a repressive immigration bill aimed particularly at illegal immigrants and would make it more difficult for certain minority communities, such as the Chinese community from sponsoring relatives to the U.S. CPA organized petition drives, conducted educational workshops and assisted community people on how to deal with some of the restrictions of the bill. CPA also provided English and Citizenship classes in Chinatown. I helped to organize the classes and became

one of the many teachers. CPA saw these classes as another way of empowering the Chinese community. Learning English would help immigrants to better deal with daily life, and attaining Citizenship would entitle them to the right to vote.]

MARK: *Wow.*

FAY: And all the skills I learned in the CPA like putting on these giant picnics or fundraisers for two to three hundred people came in really handy in working for, well we called it the AP unit for Agitation Propaganda, and there we did a lot of fundraisers for like Unity Newspaper—

MARK: *So you were an event planner...*

FAY: Event planner, yeah, I even had a chance to do garage sales, tupperware parties, all sort of things but paying attention to all the details and paying attention to what would be good for the people who come to the event.

MARK: *And then eventually you did go back to school. You got your degree and you became a Special Ed teacher is that right?*

FAY: Yes in '91 I went back to Berkeley and finished my degree and I was... I went into education and in the middle of doing my education degree we moved up to Portland, Oregon and then I finished my Special Ed degree in Oregon and taught there for 15 years.

MARK: *Wow well so now here we are years later, reflecting back on this life of activism so if you have to look back on it what do you think were sort of the strengths of the work that you did and the strengths of the League and then where were we wrong or where did we fall short. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.*

FAY: Well, in terms of the strength of the League, it was really for being multinational

and having so many different nationalities able to work and respect and do political work together and really having a strong decision on the National Question because so many different groups I've known in the left have always denied the National Question because they'll say 'yes you're part of the working class and okay minority people might have slightly different experiences but you're just part of the working class' and totally deny that minorities could have the situation where they're oppressed even more exploited and taken advantaged of and you see it popping up now with Black Lives Matter all those kind of things where yeah people face crimes, people face violence with the police or whatever but certain minorities get targeted—a lot more—and it's not just racism its built into the system. It's not just an attitude. It's so part of our society and so rooted and so all those lessons we learned then you can understand better what's going on now.

MARK: Now the League did also...not only were the leadership from different nationalities but also a lot of women were in leadership. Did that impact you or were you aware of it. Did that make a difference you think in the League compared to other organizations?

FAY: I think it made a huge difference...

MARK: Okay.

FAY: ...it really made a huge difference because so many of the organizations were just so male dominated and because women were in leadership it impacted us in so many things we did, including like the childcare system and also having the women's issues dealt with a lot more thoroughly so I think it makes a big difference having that.

MARK: So when you look back do you think we were wrong about some things? I mean you seem proud of the role you played as a revolutionary—as an activist—but did

we get some things wrong and if so, any that stand out?

FAY: Yeah like all organizations there are things that could be improved and things that did not go as well as they should and one aspect is really getting down what democratic centralism is, you know, like what happened with the dissolution, you know, I just felt there was a breakdown there, that what we did was more centrist than democratic. The whole thing about political leadership I think—unfortunately—many left groups, including the League, there's this thing about depending too much on 'the' leader it becomes like a cult almost where 'the' leader, while they were actively involved, we did not have more give and take in terms of telling that leader 'there's some things we don't agree with you. We need to change this.' To have that, more exchange...more...maybe it happened in the Central Committee but between the people in the lower level we didn't see it and so...I don't know how to remedy that, whether we need to change leadership, you know, the head of the League more, that type of thing, or shared leadership versus one main person I know like a Central Committee supposed to be that shared but to really not have that one person...and yeah...that's my thing.

MARK: *Well I know, you also—*

FAY: Oh one more thing! Is the whole thing about secrecy—

MARK: *Right exactly and you had mentioned that beforehand.*

FAY: Yes our position has always been that there would be some open members but overall most people would not be openly identified as a member of the League and I just felt, personally, that if we were less secret, and most of us could just say we belonged to the League, we believe in this and this and this whether its working with our family, or with coworkers. People were trying to organize it would make it so much easier, I think, even from an organizing standpoint we could make so much more headway if we weren't so secretive.

MARK: And now there's a whole new generation of activists out there and things going on. You mentioned the Black Lives Matter movement, there was the Occupy Movement and then there's electoral politics, Bernie Sanders campaign or other things. What do you think young people today could learn from your experience as a member of the League or what advice do you have? Anything along those lines.

FAY: Well, one of the things that I am kind of concerned about is to not just depend on social media to do your organizing because right now it's so easy and so available where you can just, on Facebook or whatever, just notify people that this is happening. And a lot of people come to an event whether it's Black Lives Matter or Bernie Sanders rally or whatever some people see that as organizing but it's not. Nothing beats people getting people to come together face to face to have discussions to talk out your differences because it's not just bringing people together you really have to have these discussions. Even I find web meetings, you know, limited because sometimes the technology doesn't work or you can't get yourself in there. I really find the face to face meetings and struggles much more effective.

MARK: And just in terms of organization, in terms of the movements that are existing now, you mentioned relying too much on media or social media, but what about the need to actually form ongoing organizations, is that something that you think the League provided some example for...that how to actually—you really need organization to conduct a struggle?

FAY: Yes that shows more than—with the void that's been in the past period—it really shows that you really have to...like you mentioned the Occupy Movement, I think that was one of the main problems is they were able to get people to come but an ongoing organization to lead to provide some leadership is not going to sustain itself, you really have to have...if you really seriously want to make a

revolution, to change the society—transform the society—you really have to have an organization that's preparing the groundwork—for party building.

MARK: Well do you think I've missed anything in asking you or anything else you'd like to share that got left out?

FAY: I think we covered mostly everything.

MARK: Well it's been wonderful talking to you and thank you very much.

FAY: Thank you.