

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Stephen Wong
Interviewers: Rachel Wong (daughter)
Date/ Time of Interview: March 24th, 2014
Transcribed by: Rachel Wong
Edited by: Chris Johnson, Sara Davis, and Patricia Wong (6/28/16)
Audio Track Time: 1:24:30

Background:

Stephen Bryan Wong was born and raised in Oberlin, Ohio, where his father was a mathematics professor at Oberlin University. The son of a Chinese father and Japanese mother, Stephen discusses how traditions in his family pulled from both cultures. His father came to the United States for political reasons during the Cultural Revolution. His mother grew up in Hawai'i amongst a large extended family. Stephen received his BA in physics with minors in digital electronics and physical chemistry and went on to earn a PhD in physics at MIT. At the time of this interview, he works as a computer science professor at Rice University.

Setting:

The interview focuses on Stephen's childhood. He describes the divide he felt between his house and the surrounding town as one of the only Asian Americans in Oberlin at the time. Additionally, he discusses family traditions, particularly with respect to language. He talks at length about his mother's side of the family who live in Hawai'i.

The interview was occasionally interrupted by loud background noises. Stephen's daughter, Rachel Wong was the interviewer.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

SW	Stephen Wong
RW	Rachel Wong
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

RW: Okay. This is an interview with Stephen Wong by Rachel Wong. Um, let's start with your name, and your ethnicity, your nationality, and where you were born and grew up.

SW: Stephen Bryan Wong. Ethnicities: Chinese and Japanese. Nationality: American. Born and raised in Oberlin, Ohio.

RW: Given all of that, how do you identify?

SW: What does that mean? What are my choices?

RW: How do you self-identify?

SW: My father always raised us to be Chinese. But arguably, most of the things we did were probably closer to Japanese. But the name is Chinese, so it's self-consistent.

RW: What about "hapa"?

SW: No, 'cause we were brought up that hapa is—is half-Caucasian.

RW: Really? Um, what was it like to grow up in Oberlin?

SW: As an Asian? Or just what was it like—or in general to grow up in Oberlin? Two very different things.

RW: Your experience. Both.

SW: Oberlin's a great place to grow up. It has all the benefits of a small town and all the benefits of a large cultural center. [clears throat] On the other hand, we were the—the—essentially, the only Asians in town growing up. So that was ... very isolated. It was ... the world inside the house and then there was the world outside the house, and they were very, very different worlds.

RW: Hmm. Um, were there places important to you in your childhood community?

SW: I'm not sure what that means.

RW: Things you remember as being significant, playing a role in ...

SW: Places?

RW: Yeah. Places or smaller subsets of the community.

SW: There was no other Asian community, so there was not—there was not this notion of "community" other than us. [laughs] I mean, we were the—when I was growing up, we were the first Asians in town. Ebiharas came next, uh, shortly after we did, and people tended to know the Ebiharas more because he was, uh, *the* eye doctor in town, the optometrist. But, uh, I mean I was—their kids were younger than us, so ... you know, in our grades, we were the only ones. And we were probably the only Asians that any of the people around us had ever seen. Okay? So there's no—there was no such thing as "Asian community"... it was us! [laughs]

RW: Um, what was life at home like?

SW: Completely different, um, than outside the door. [laughs] But stricter than—than outside. I mean I was—my—my parents, you know, they're, you know, relatively speaking, old-school. Traditional values, um, certainly, you know, have traditional Asian values, but also—what do you call? Amplified by, uh, the—the samurai, um, and temple background. I mean, we were told—we were brought up, “You are different. Therefore, you must be better. Period.” Average is not acceptable. I had to be better, and, you know, my grandmother would underscore that with the issues of being samurai, about being temple—or the temple—of—of the temple.

[0:5:43]

RW: Your grandmother?

SW: Yeah, I only had one grandmother. I mean, the isolation's further ampl—put out by the fact that, had no uncles, no aunts, no cousins, no—you know, no nephews, no nieces, okay? We had one—only one grandmother. So ... and she lived in Hawai'i, so we didn't see her very often.

RW: I thought she lived at home.

SW: She lived in Hawai'i! [laughs] And so it was—we were very much isolated. And, you know, my grandmother made it very clear. “You are samurai. You cannot act like other people. You must act better. You must be better. You are temple. You are—you are Takeda. You are ... you must act better. You cannot ...” What you do reflects on the family, as my father would say. Every action you do reflects on the family. It's not about what *you* wanna do. It was never brought up. All these things—all our friends are, “Well what do *they* wanna do?” We were never given that choice. It was not an issue, not a question, never what *we* wanted. You upheld the family name, family honor. Period. You know?

RW: Were there traditions that you were brought up with?

SW: I mean, basic Asian traditions, household traditions. I mean, uh ... [laughs] take your shoes off. Whatever. Take your shoes off. Get As! [laughs] The usual.

RW: Um, what was school like? Did you enjoy it?

SW: School's easy, very easy. [laughs] Um, did I enjoy it? Sometimes. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Third grade was not grand, so, I have—I have great sympathy for Calvin. Don't tell him this, but [laughs] ...

RW: What made 3rd grade so bad?

SW: Oh because they wanted you to do things certain ways. That was the year that I came home and I

showed my father how they should—how we did division, which was this ridiculous d—ridiculous way. And my father, being a mathematician said, “What?!” He said, “Do it this way!” And I—which I immediately recognized was much easier, much faster, and much more accurate. So I went to school on my now newfound knowledge, straight from the mathematics professor and was marked wrong on *every single problem* for doing it that way. So, [laughing] I was not too happy in third grade. [laughs]

So, fourth grade got better. Fourth grade I had Mrs. Ebihara. The very first thing—and which I had to endure for the—probably the first half of the semester was, “Is that your mother? Is that your mother? That your mother?” Yeah, that’s why her name is Ebihara and my name is Wong. That’s the sort of thing that you had to grow up with, okay? [laughs] The looks of people on the buses who were, “You bombed Pearl Harbor,” being asked for my green card, being told how good my English was. It’s only died down just recently. [laughs]

[0:9:53]

RW: Um, did both parents work?

SW: Uh, mother worked on and off. Um, she taught school when Ken was in She taught second grade when Ken was in first and second grade. But that was after me. And then she stopped working for a while, and then ... basically, when it came close to going—for us going to college, [laughs] she went back to work, so that she afford to send us to college. Um, so ... but, for the sort of inter—intermediate years, which were probably—it’s about there—10—so it’s probably about six years in the middle there where she did—she stayed at home. It wasn’t till I was like much older that I learned that other mothers didn’t grow all their own vegetables, and didn’t make all the clothes, and didn’t make furniture, and didn’t do all these things! [laughs] So, I remember thinking, “What do all these others’ mothers do when they—they’re at home? I know what my mother does! I don’t know what these other mothers are doing if they’re not doing all this other stuff—do all the stuff that my mother does!”

RW: Um, what education have you had and where?

SW: What education Well, I did graduate high school. Did manage that. I mean, I was valedictorian in high school.

RW: Really?

SW: Yes! [laughs] It wasn’t that competitive. [laughs] Most high schools are battling for thousandths of a point, okay? I was half a point—half a point ahead of the salutarian [sic], and in that—those days, uh, advanced courses were not—were counted the same as non-advanced. So the salutarian [sic] only took shop and things like that. And I was still half a point a head of him, okay? So, [laughs] it wasn’t like the most credi—I—I did luck out because the two—three main people that would have been competition all graduated early. Actually, two—two people, uh, both of whom were friends of mine So, but they both—three people—three people? Three people, who would have been any sort of contention all graduated early or moved away. And that was the one year between the Yukiches, who had five kids and five valedictorians. And I happened to hit the year that was no Yukiche! [laughs] So,

I lucked out on that one.

RW: Was David valedictorian?

SW: No. Not even close. I think he—I think he was in top 10%. I'm not sure. But top 10% was like 10 people, you understand? [laughs]

RW: Yeah.

SW: Um, Swarthmore College. B.A. in honors—with honors, physics, minors in digital electronics and physical chemistry. Um, so that was ... uh ... MIT, PhD in Physics. Pretty much, that was enough. [both laugh]

RW: And, what do you do for a living now?

SW: What I do living? I teach computer science at Rice.

RW: I liked this question. How do you feel about education?

SW: How do I feel about education? It's pretty important! [laughs] Somehow, you know. [laughs] Um ... anyway, certainly growing up, it was one of those things that it wasn't—it was never a question about going to college. Um, there was never a question about going to a good college. I mean, we were lucky in the sense that, um, uh, my father had tuition remission for anywhere in the world up to Oberlin's, uh, tuition, which was pretty hi—which was pretty high. So, uh, I mean, not that room and board didn't practically, you know—supporting room and board didn't practically kill my parents, especially when all three of us were in college. But, um, it meant that we could go to wherever we wanted and, um, you know, that these—the assumption was that we would go to the—the best of the schools. You know, so David went to William and Mary. Ken went to Colby. And I went to Swarthmore. And I mean, I turned down Dartmouth, and I turned down MIT for undergraduate.

[0:15:39]

RW: Why?

SW: Dartmouth? Beautiful place, awesome campus, great location, great facilities, awfully preppy people. I mean, we're talking serious, you know, pullover, knotted—you know, corded pullover knotted around the neck kind of thing, with, uh—with Dockers.

RW: Was it still all men at the time?

SW: No. Uh, I believe the, uh, Yale underground guide to colleges at the time put the cat-to-chick ratio at, say 20:1 or something like that, um, at—at uh, Dartmouth, at the time, but it was technically co-ed. And I just remember the, uh, uh, tour guide, who was a g—who was a—a girl, taking us around. And I remember her, she turned to the parents at one point when she was taking us to the dorm. And she said,

“No, it is not true that outside of every girl’s room in Dartmouth there’s a line of guys. But there is always one.” [laughs; voice in background]

Uh, MIT? Um, MIT’s a big institution. It’s a—it’s an institution. Not a whole lot of grass, things like that around MIT. Um, critical mass, no doubt about it, okay? I stayed—I remember staying in a, uh, frat house. I was—I stayed in a frat house. Uh, both at—at—at, uh, Dartmouth. Here’s the difference between Dartmouth and MIT. I stayed in frat house in both of them when I went to visit. Dartmouth, I walked in the frat house. I kind of, like, wandering, looking around a little lost. Some guy comes down the stairs, asks me my name. And the very next thing he asks me is, he says, “You going to ‘Yoke with us?’” “Huh?” “You going to ‘Yoke with us tonight?’” “What is ‘going to yoke’ with us?” [sighs] “Are you going down to Mount Holyoke with us tonight?” I gave my mother, who graduated from Mount Holyoke, a really hard time about that one. She pointed out, yes, they’d been doing that for decades and decades and decades. When she was in college they were doing that. Um, but that was the thing. So my first impression at—at Dartmouth would have been to—to go down to see Mount Holyoke. I—actually—I turned the offer down, but, that was the idea.

At, uh, MIT, with, uh, exams nowhere in sight, all the frat boys were busy doing their econ homework, um, [laughs] at 2 o’clock in the morning. So, um, you know, in any case, I went to a calculus course, realized that it was being taught by a—a TA. At that point, I was taking course—calculus at Oberlin College from somebody, a professor that’d been teaching it for 30-something years. And, you know, the quality difference was obvious. So I wanted to stay at a small school.

So when I got to Swarthmore, as soon as I stepped on campus, I felt at home. I felt—I felt the intensity. I felt the—you feel the intensity right as you step off that train. You feel the intensity. I felt at home in that intensity. I felt comfortable in that intensity. So that’s where I went, and I’ve ... to this day, I know that it was absolutely the right decision. Yeah, it’s important. I went to this—that’s—that’s why I went to MIT for graduate school. After I’d gotten MIT after Swarthmore? Piece of cake. All my friends were struggling ‘cause it was the hardest thing they had ever seen. I was just loafing along. It was a piece of cake. [laughs]

[0:20:02]

RW: Where have you lived?

SW: Where have I lived? I have lived in—well it depends, I mean, what’s—what’s length of time? Um, I mean, obviously in Oberlin. Uh, we spent a year in Japan, Kyoto, that was 19, uh, 64, oh, the—the year that Kennedy was shot. I remember being there. I don’t remember anything about Kennedy, but I do remember being in Japan. 1964, ‘63, ‘64, I think it was. Um, uh, [laughing] many, many years later, my mother took me back to the same market that I remember going to, but I didn’t reco—I didn’t recognize anything. And she asked, “Why not?” ‘Cause I remember being at the market. And I told her because I wasn’t tall enough to see the tables. I could never—I never knew what was on the tables ‘cause I wasn’t tall enough to see what was on the table. [overlapping] I was still ...

RW: [overlapping] You would have been five?

SW: Four.

RW: [overlapping] Four?

SW: [overlapping] Three or four. [laughs] Um, we lived for a year in Taiwan, at Donghai, uh, University. Donghai Daxue, outside of Taichung. Spent a year there. That was in, hmm, was that, uh ... '73, '74, I think. Um, then obviously I lived at Swarthmore. I lived in ... Plainsville, New Jersey 'cause I was working at Bell Labs in Murray Hill for a year. Worked with, uh, Steven Chu, before he was famous. Um, then lived in Boston, for six and a half years. Then moved to Newbury Park, California, where some little munchkin was born. Um, and then what? Then moved back to Oberlin. So we moved to—we moved to California in '89, January of '89, after I finished my PhD. And then I moved—I moved back to Oberlin ... '96, something like that. Can't remember exactly. Was that over for 5—'96? Yeah, must have been '96. You know, '95, '96, I can't remember. So I was back in Oberlin for—until 2001. In 2001, came down to Houston.

RW: Uh, do you think of yourself as a Texan?

SW: No. [creaking sound] Trying to ... wrestle with the notion of Calvin considering himself a Texan. [laughs] I suppose he is.

RW: Do you think you'll stay in Texas for much longer?

SW: I don't see Thuy as ever wanting to move. [laughs] I'm not saying that this is the ideal place that I would want to spend a li—the rest of my—if I had my druthers. It's a little hot here for me.

RW: Um—

SW: I do like the food around here though. [laughs]

RW: What food?

SW: Just the variety. You can get anything here. You can get good seafood. And you can get, you know, Tex-Mex. You can get all sorts of ethnic food. Cajun food.

RW: [overlapping] How—

SW: [overlapping] Houston's got a very good food scene.

RW: How do you compare being an Asian American here versus California? Do you see any differences in the community, and ...?

[0:25:17]

SW: Well it wasn't really relev—I've never been part of an "Asian" community. I just, you know—

I've never experienced that. I mean, the closest sort of thing—in both—the thing is in both California and here, I'm not living in an Asian community. I'm not living—I mean, there are a lot of Vietnamese folks around. But I don't speak Vietnamese, so I'm not really part of the Vietnamese community other than by marriage. Um, so, you know, while certainly Thuy feels part of this big Vietnamese community, I don't. You know, and so I don't, but I don't really spend any time with the, um, um—the rest of the—the Asian communities around here, and, uh, less so in California are—were—I mean sort of more immigrant communities. And in California, I was also hanging out with Dung. So once again, I was hanging around in the—in the Vietnamese communities, which were mostly immigrant communities. Okay. Um, the place that is really markedly different is Hawai'i. You go to Hawai'i and there you meet people that grew up exactly like you. And that was something. That was really something to go to Hawai'i and to—to meet people. Certainly—and also 'cause they were people I was related to were living there. Um, and, you know, these are people who grew up exactly the same way, except for the fact that their—they didn't have the boundary at the doorway, that their—their—their Asian part extended outwards. [clicking sounds] So that's the big difference [clicking sounds], uh, you know, in California, living basically in a Caucasian bedroom community. So ...

RW: Did you ever think that you would move to Hawai'i?

SW: I don't know that I could take being bounded on an island [laughing] for that long! I mean, it's a very—I understand why Grandma moved back. I mean, not that—ignoring the fact she grew up there—but it's—it is just—in, yeah—Hawai'i is probably, um—for an Asian American, is probably the most comfortable place to be. Because it's—it's—it's—everything you relate to is all around you. You know, people in stores, in restaurants, everything. And there's some of that in California, but not anywhere near as much.

RW: Would it have been meaningful for you to grow up near other family members, extended family members?

SW: Uh, yeah, I guess it would be nice. I mean to me, this sort of thing of, you know, hanging out with cousins was a thing that you read about in the storybooks.

RW: Um ... what do you know about your family names and their histories or origins?

SW: Well, it's—Wong is the “Wong” of Huangdi, the emperor that unified China. Now, does that mean any thing [indistinguishable several words]? Maybe, maybe not, I mean all Chinese with that name are gonna associate themselves with the emperor because this is what Asians do is if you—[laughs] if you have any sort of marginal link to the emperor, you take it. [laughs] Um, the, uh, uh—there is some question about whether it is actually the—the—the family name. As far as we can tell, it is. There is lots of questions that were completely unanswered about what happened to my father and how—and how he got to the US and things like that, which he just never told anybody about. And, things like, you know, is it his—what is his name, his real name? He definitely lied about his age ... so he could get over, uh, younger than he would have otherwise. But so there're just lots of questions there. I mean, the whole side of the family were—were out of contact 'cause they were still in China. I

didn't know until the '70—well I knew that my father had a brother, but I didn't know that he was *alive* until the late '70s. And *I'm* the only one in our family that actually ever met him. So I'm the only one in the family that's ever met, uh, you know, someone as close as an uncle.

[0:30:42]

RW: In '83?

SW: '88. '80-something. Yeah, [laughs] something, '80-something. Uh ...

RW: Your mother's side?

SW: My mother's an only child. So, no uncles, no aunts—for us, no un—no uncles, no aunts, no cousins. But my grandmother was one of *11* brothers and sisters. So my *mother* had a zillion aunts and uncles and trillions of cousins, and—and we've got, you know, as far as I can tell, half the island of Hawai'i is—is—is related to us somehow, um, you know. I don't know that I've ever been to Hawai'i on a pure sightseeing trip. When—when I was little it was just you know, from one relative's house to another. That was the trip to Hawai'i was just one relative's to another. People that we had never seen before, effectively. [creaking sounds]

RW: Um, what do you know about the history on that side?

SW: Um, I know that my grandmother and my grandfather were related. [laughs] I think they were s—they were cousins. [background noises] Second cousins, I think. Uh, but they're—they're related somehow. Um, but, you know, so my grandfather was born and raised in Japan, while my grandmother was born and raised in Hawai'i. Um, but he was being groomed to take over the temple in Hiroshima. And—but then, part of his training, he was in Hawai'i, uh, running the temple out in Ewa, which is on the other side of, uh, Pearl Harbor from Honolulu.

Uh, that's where my—that's where my mother was born. She was born on Ewa. When my grandfather—[several words drowned out by background noise]. But he died when my mother was three. So my mother grew up with just my grandmother. And my grandmother didn't want to go back to Hawai'i—to Japan—didn't want to go to Japan. Um, even though as a highly educated woman, she was a hot commodity at the time, but she refused to [laughs]—to go along with that. But it's the sort of thing where, you—you know, they—so, we said we're temple family. So we're expected to behave like that.

Um, my grandmother always said that we're related to Takeda Shingen. The—the family name is Takeda on that side. Um, so—so Takeda Shingen, very famous warrior, um, known for his honesty and, um, there's a—there was a movie. What was it called? *Shadow—Shadow Warrior?* Something like that. That Takeda Shingen's prowess was so feared, and—and respected that the movie—it's a true story I think—that after he died they put someone in his place and didn't tell anyone he died and they basically inspired the—the troops into battle even though he was dead! [laughs] But anyways, so it's this sort of thing. So, it's—right, well the point there is is my grandmother would point out, “Well you're a descendant of, uh, Takeda Shingen and—and you have to live up to this.”

[0:35:05]

You know, the—the family scroll goes back to the year 800. And so it is absolutely true that when you're told in Japan if you do something wrong you shame your family for a thousand years is absolutely correct because, uh, you know, here's a scroll. And that scroll, uh, is consulted like if you get married to somebody, you (?) understand (?). They're a samurai (?) family, they consult the scroll and they look back a thousand years! More than a thousand years to see if there's anybody bad in the—in the line. Okay? So the answer's yes. You will shame your family for a thousand years. And, you know, this is—is drilled into you [laughing] and it means that what you're doing is far beyond the bounds of—of what you think you're doing.

RW: Thanks. [SW laughs]

SW: Yeah, you had it easy!

RW: Um, so there's question as to whether your father's name was changed or not still.

SW: I don't think so because it's still consistent with the people that are in China. Sov... and the Mois [crashing sounds] who live in New York who knew my father while he was in China seem to corroborate some things.

RW: Um.

SW: Definitely lied about his age though. He's not—his birthday is not July 4th. And he was five years younger than.

RW: Do you know his actual birthday?

SW: The one that we always used was December 21st, 1928. But there's some question there about whether or not he was older than that or not. Official records put him—I think he was five years older than that.

RW: Mm-hmm

SW: Because otherwise he wouldn't have been able to get on the boat—he wouldn't have been able to come—get off the boat in the U.S.

RW: Um, are there any traditional names or naming rituals that you know of?

SW: No.

RW: Other than how you name your children?

[pause]

SW: No. I mean, for whatever reason, my parents didn't give us Asian names. I don't—that's—that could partially be historical. I mean my mother is one of the few of her generation that would—that still use—that uses a Japanese name because they were told, um, uh, after the, um—after the camps—after the concentration camps, to not use it, not to speak Japanese and not to use Japanese names. But my mother still did. So my mother is one of the few that does not have an English name and does not use a Jap—an English name. So it was always confusing to go to Hawaii because half the time they would call people by their English name and half the time by their Japanese name. So I got really confused [laughing] at times. I didn't know who they were talking about, um, because my mother always called them by their Japanese name.

RW: Do you think that was partly because she was able to stay, uh, during the war?

SW: [deep breath] Uh, probably had a lot more to do with my grandmother's stubbornness. The Iwasakis, pretty stubborn bunch. They don't bend to nobody! [laughs] They do what they wanna do. [laughs] Um, so, uh, I don't know, but it's certainly—I mean the, uh—the whole, uh, internment is a—for—certainly of—of people of my mother's generation is—is *the* defining, um, event of their generation. And it is—the Japanese-American community, when I was involved with the—the JACL, Japanese American Citizen League, in—in Cleveland when I was—when I was living back in Oberlin, um, and this big struggle right now is tran—is transitioning out of that generation to the younger generation where internment does not mark the defining, unifying notion.

[0:40:24]

RW: Um.

SW: But it does—it does change how you—your—what you understand about the world when you realize that you are living in a country that did not hesitate to, you know, put you into a concentration camp based on the color of your skin.

RW: Did either of your parents tell you any stories about how they grew up? Or your grandmother or their lives?

SW: Not really, I mean ... I mean, my—you know, I'd—I would hear stories about my mother doing things when she was growing up in Hawaii, but it was never other than something fairly normal. I mean she's just describing this—sort of this normal growing up as a kid in—in Japan—in—in Hawaii. And ... I guess we never really thought about it as this is somehow special or unique or anything like that.

RW: Do you remember any of them?

SW: [quietly] Any of what? The stories [indistinguishable]? [normal volume] She told us that she

would go down to—you know, for as long as she always had grown up, they would go down to, um, Alo—Ala Moana beach, the one behind the mall. Uh, that’s where the locals always went. The locals never went to Waikiki. Too many rocks and stuff like that were around Waikiki. Who’d go to Waikiki? Ala Moana’s a better beach. Still is a better beach. [laughs] And, um, they would go there and they would, you know, have their picnic, their luau. And she would—and those were the days she grew up and with—if they had a luau, it was a real luau! With the hole dug in the ground, with the rocks, and the pig put in there and everything like that. You can’t get that anymore. Okay? You can’t get that anymore. I mean you—maybe some—there—there probably is some [indistinguishable] native Hawaiians who live here that won’t (?) still do it. But it’s almost impossible to find them anymore.

Um, but that’s what she grew up with. And, oh, it’s—there was no notion there because they were—because the Japanese were—were, you know, a majority population. So, you know, my mother didn’t grow up with this notion of being isolated. So I don’t know that my—how well my mother really—you know, my parents really understood that because my father grew up in a—in a Chinese community. And, so I don’t know how well they understood the—what it meant to be *completely different* than *everybody* around you.

[pause]

RW: Um, did you grow up with multiple languages or phrases, [overlapping] terms?

SW: [overlapping] No, because—only—the—the—the common language of my mother and father is, uh, English. My father would say, “I can speak Japanese!” At which point my mother would burst out laughing. Um, but my mother didn’t really speak Japanese per se. I mean she spoke it when she was little, but when the war came out they were told they were not allowed to speak Japanese anymore. So that stopped. Um, according to my grandmother, when my mother little, she spoke—that’s all she spoke was Japanese. Um, uh, high-class Japanese, as my grandmother would point out, because it was the high-class people that came to Hawaii, not the low-class people. Translation: “You are not just anybody. You cannot act like anybody.” [laughs]

The, uh—and my father never really talked—all I knew is he played ping-pong with his brother. That’s all I ever knew. He was born in Sydney, Australia, but I—he went to—

RW: [overlapping] What?

SW: [overlapping]—boarding school in Ja—in Hong Kong, I think. He was born in Sydney, Australia because his parents were professors. And apparently (?) that’s (?) where (?) his (?) parents were teaching in Sydney or something like that. So he was actually born in Sydney, Australia. But he went—the family home is in Guangzhou. And I’ve been to the family home in Guangzhou.

[0:45:33]

RW: Is there a birth certificate in Sydney?

SW: Doubt it. So, uh, and it—it wasn’t until I went to visit the family home in—in Guangzhou,

because my uncle was still living there, that I realized that my father's family was not just an ordinary family, but they were, uh, you know, the cultural elite at the time. Okay? These—these are houses that are dating from probably the 20—1920s and they're still grand houses. They're not huge. I wouldn't call it huge house, but it was clearly a grand house at the time. Much better made than anything around it, the new houses. And, you know, got in there at the time, just like *Doctor Zhivago*, with the big mansion that's divvied up. You ever watched *Doctor Zhivago*?

RW: Maybe.

SW: Russian, winters, Bolsheviks. One of the things is that they have a big family mansion and after the Bolshevik revolution they come back to the family mansion, and it's been divvied up because it's all been equalized. And—and so one family in this big mansion is now, one—you know, a whole bunch of families different floors. And it's *exactly* what it was at their (?) family house. They've since gotten it back, but when I was there, that's what it was.

RW: Do you have any relatives that you know of?

SW: Well, my uncle was there at the time. He was still alive at the time. Um, and there was a very interesting, uh, feeling 'cause I went—I went with my father—just me and my father went back to Guangzhou. And we, uh, went to the house. And we went up there, and there was a—there's a—there's a wall up, a stone wall. And initially my father knocked on the door—on the gate, you know. And, from my perspective, my father opened it from the other side. I mean, it was clearly his brother. There's no doubt about it, except his hair was much whiter, and he obviously had a much harder life than my father had. But it was this sort of stunning thing where it was no doubt about it that this was a relative.

Um, but my uncle had no natural children their own. Lily, whose house you probably don't remember going to in Los Angeles, is actually an adopted daughter. She's not technically a blood relative. So on my un—my father's side—I don't—I don't have—I mean, I had one uncle, which I met for one afternoon, and no one else in my family has met 'cause he died before—before [buzzing in background] anyone else met him.

And, uh—but I did go—get to go see—um, the—the—the—the family owned a lychee farm, which is now a commune. And so, my father took me there, and, uh, I think David and my mother have been to that—to the lychee farm. But, it was interesting going there with my father and we were walking into the—into the—the commune. And I remember this old lady came out. And I couldn't understand what she was saying. She was babbling along in Cantonese, but I could tell she was pointing at my father and then she'd make this sort of motion of—of—of a small child. So she'd point to my father, small child, my father, small child—that her memory of my father was of a little kid! [laughs] And my father pointed out, you know, the room that used to be his room, and the building is still there, and the creek that he would swim in, and the lychee trees that he would climb in. And so that was—that's—I'm the only one that got that.

[0:49:45]

RW: Um ... what do you know about the time between that childhood and when he came here?

SW: Not much. I know that he was in a boarding school in, um, Hong Kong when the war broke out. Uh, it would be very typical of the cultural elite to have their kids in a boarding school, um, at the time. So that was, you know, not uncommon I think. But then he got—the problem was he got separated from his parents. And he never found them. Apparently his—they said the parents—parents died during the Cultural Revolution. But he had never—he hadn't really gotten—had any contact with them. He didn't know where they were. Um, but I mean we visited their ashes in the “Hall of Heroes” who all died in the Cultural Revolution. Uh, the, uh—but, uh, so I guess, he got separated and, you know ...

Oddly enough because this is the sort of thing where there—it was—you know, the Chinese were fighting the Japanese at the time. And, um, so, Chinese and Japanese don't get along, too well. You've got to understand that, you know. Your grandma was wild and crazy kids at one point 'cause you gotta remember what my mother—grandmother's thinking. You're talking—I mean my mother has the genealogy traced back for 2800 years right now, okay? So, you back that up, temple, samurai, and you look at my father. Number one, he's Chinese. Number two, he's a—he's in graduate school, so he's got like, [laughing] no money, no nothing. Number three, he's a mathematician, which means he has no hope of getting any money! Strike three. Grandma never approved. Okay?

Um, uh, Grandma has an uncle, Uncle—um ... Auntie Louise's husband, uh, um, I can't think of his name. But, uh, he was always the favorite uncle. And I never knew why—why was he the favorite uncle? I mean we didn't see him any—any—other than—I mean, uncle, he's technically my mother's uncle, okay? Um, never really understood that. Why—I mean, 'cause my mother has a zillion uncles—why him? And it wasn't until many years later—like, not that long ago—that I found out that he's the favorite uncle because he is the person who finally said, “If you kids—” to my parents—“If you kids want to get married, you should go ahead and get married.” Those wild and crazy kids that they were.

So [laughs] um ... uh, but there's this sort of thing—you know, so, it's very uncommon ... for Japanese—and particularly of that age—where Japanese would marry Chinese. And my father, during the war, was apparently—the—well, the story he told was he was captured. Now, you gotta understand, during the war he's, I believe, 14. Okay? Approximately. He was captured by Japanese, but as he pointed out, that was the only time during the war that he actually got, uh, regular meals. Because they—they—he's just a kid so they made him like a cook's helper or something like that. And so he got fed. So his level of animosity to the Japanese was obviously much lower because they're the ones that actually fed him during this time! [laughs]

And then, apparently—and here's where it gets a little hazy. He was in—after the war, he was in Hong Kong. And there's rumors ... that he was involved with ... various radical groups. And ... 'cause at that point it was controlled by the Nationalists, right? China was controlled by Nationalists still. This would have been 19—late '40s. And, apparently they raided his—the apartment that he and a bunch of other guys were living in because of “suspected subversive activities.” I don't know exactly what he was doing, [laughing] other than probably—other than perhaps just hanging out with these guys. I don't know. But apparently what he did is he escaped to, you know, a boat.

[0:55:00]

[coughs] And they arranged for him to take this boat to San Francisco under false papers. Because he was only 16 or so—I think he was only 16 at the time. And his papers said he was 21. So that he was old enough to be on it. But at sixteen he would not have been. And that enabled him—so he's coming over all by himself to come to San Francisco. And, you know, did the old the—you know, Chinatown-immigrant kind of thing, worked his way through college, took courses at Berkeley. Found (?) himself into University of Washington, Seattle. Put himself through college. Went and got his PhD at University of Rochester, where he met my mother who was working there after—after college. Did a post-doc at Yale, where Uncle David was born. And then moved to Oberlin.

RW: Uncle David wasn't born in Oberlin?

SW: No, he was born in—in New Hampshire [New Haven], at Yale. 'Cause my father was doing a post-doc there. And the Bryans, whom I'm named after, they were at Yale too.

RW: [indistinguishable several words] Okay. ... Do you know any other stories that your parents told you or stories of relatives?

SW: No 'cause there just weren't. I mean, my—my mother's—the way she grew up was—I mean they—they were all her uncles, in there—in that huge extended family all around. So it was always this huge group of people that was, you know, the Iwasaki clan. Um, and, uh, there were a lot of 'em! [laughs] So, you know, that's—that's how my mother grew up was, you know, is in—in—in—immersed in this large, extended family.

RW: Were all of her aunts and uncles in Hawaii?

SW: Yeah. 'Cause my grandmother's parents came in the 1890s, you know, to—for—what do you call? They were—brought 'em to—to work in the fields, the sugarcane fields.

RW: Oh.

SW: But something, I think they were doing—the family then did some sort of trucking thing, or something like that, I can't remember. Trucking, I think. So they were, you know, they were reasonably well-off. But, you know, the—the description my mother would have would be of this large, extended family and this sort of kids running around all over the place and whatnot. Except that she was alone with—in terms of—by herself—I mean she was just her and her mother. I mean, they didn't all live in one house when she was growing up. I mean they had—my mother and my grandma lived in their own house.

But, you know, my mother would always talk about the house on School Street which is, uh, School Street's over near—near Punchbowl. And, um, she'd talk about how that—that's where the—the family house was. So that would be my grandmother's parents. That's where that house was. And so that's where everybody's like, gathering around, things like that. It's over there. So I mean, I—it's this sort of thing. You know, I was, you know—we grew up, going (?), "That would be cool. [laughs] Could (?) be (?) nice."

RW: Um ... how much education did your family members have? Parents? siblings?

SW: My father has a PhD in mathematics. Mother's is a B.A. in biology. I don't think it was oh-so specialized in those days. I think it was just biology ... from Mount Holyoke. Um, she's—was one of the few—I mean education was important enough, uh, and the level which we were being raised—I mean my—my mother's level of education, and, you know, sort of quality-level education is, much higher than—than anyone else in her family. My grandmother was one of the few of her age that went to college. She went to a normal school 'cause she was a schoolteacher. So, relatively speaking, she was highly educated for women of her age—of her generation. And my mother was the only one in the fam—in her—in her generation, that left the island for education.

[1:00:43]

So she went over to, um, Mount Holyoke. And she's still—she's got pictures, someplace, of her and a ... uh, some other girl from New Zealand, stepping off the train in—in—at Mount Holyoke at South Hadley. And the caption reads, you know, "Welcome foreigners! To, you know—to people from faraway, foreign lands." Because at the time, remember, it's 1954. So, Hawaii's not a state. Hawaii's a territory.

RW: Mm. Mm-hmm.

SW: But it was—you know, so New Zealand, Hawaii, you know, same sort of thing, that's like way off in the yonder, foreign-land kind of thing. So I mean, my mother went to this—I mean, at that—you know, Mount Holyoke was and still is one of the top places in the world. It's one of the, um ...

RW: ... Seven Sisters.

SW: What?

RW: Seven Sisters.

SW: Yeah. So, um ... yeah, if I'd stayed another—uh, if I had stayed another night at, uh, Dartmouth, I could have gone down to Smith the next night, apparently. [laughs] So, uh, you know—so it was a big—you know, it's—it's—it was just sort of, expected ... you know. You know, when I would get an A—I remember my friends would get—they got like a dollar for an A. And I remember thinking, "I am going to be rich! I am gonna like rake this one in. This is gonna be like easy money." And then I discovered [laughs]—I came and I earned all As. Like, oh boy this is gonna be a big pay-off day. 'Cause all my friends, they got a dollar for an A, for their—for every A. All right? I got a bucket full of them here! You know, my father would look at us, read the report card and say, [makes sound effect] "That's what we expected," and just toss it—you know, toss it on the desk.

RW: Even after David?

SW: Mm-hmm. They let David and Ken slide away with more stuff. You know? I only got—in high school, in three years—‘cause, uh, the freshman year we were in Taiwan—in three years of—of high school—three years’ transcript (?) high school, I only had one B on the report card, ever, for anything, ever. Only one letter B in the entire three years of all semester—all quarters of all semester.

RW: In what?

SW: Health, because I turned in the paper a day late, so he gave me a B.

RW: Bummer. [SW laughs]

SW: Okay? I mean, those were days when—you gotta—the—the—the grade scales were different. It was a straight 4.0 grade—grading scale, okay? None of these other things. You know, we took—I had advanced math. I had advanced English. That didn’t count for anything more, okay? So there—in those days, a 4.0 average meant straight As. Okay? I had a 4.2 average. [hits table] In high school. [laughing] Okay? But ... my parents *never* said, “We’re proud of you” for that. That was expected.

RW: No wonder Grandma’s up in arms. [laughs] Uh ... um ... family—

SW: [overlapping] Of course, Ken’s mad at me. ‘Cause he said, “Yeah, you got an A in every—now I couldn’t do anything and they would yell at me ‘cause [grumbling noise].” ‘Course I had followed Uncle David. And I wasn’t allowed to move a muscle after what Uncle David put their teachers through!

[1:04:58]

RW: [laughs] Um, occupation of family members?

SW: Father, professor. Um, professor at a time when the emphasis was on teaching. He did research, but it was—but the emphasis was on teaching. My mother was a teacher. My grandmother was a teacher. My grandfather was a priest, a teacher. [laughs] My father’s parents were teachers. My brother is a teacher.

RW: And Ken just built a school.

SW: Ken builds schools. [RW laughs]

RW: Um, have there ever been family reunions?

SW: Define “family reunions.” [sighs] I mean, we would go see relatives, tons of relatives in Hawai’i when we’d go to Hawai’i, right? I mean, I’ve been to Hawai’i a dozen times, now. But when my grandma was still alive—you gotta understand, a big family like that, you start getting these feuds. And

all of a sudden, you know, you get this whole soap opera thing going on. And, I mean, I remember us literally, sort of sneaking out to go see, um, Stanley's son's side, and—to go see Stanley's side of the family. Stanley would be the brother of my grandmother. Older? I don't remember. I think older. Um, but there's a schism in the family. And so my grandmother would no—wouldn't go visit them 'cause they're, you know—they were so mad or mean or who knows what they had done 50-some years ago probably, at that time. And, um—but I—so I remember, you know, like with my mother, we would [laughs]—we'd literally be sort of like sneaking out. Like, "Don't tell anyone (?). We're gonna go—we're gonna go see uh—see Stanley and Stanley Jr. And we're gonna go see them. Don't tell anybody that we're gonna go over there and see them." Okay?

And right now, uh, Uncle David's been in Japan a number of times and—and he's reconnected with some of the people over there. And these are people which I really don't know, uh, because I may have met them like once in my life. And that's because we didn't see them very—they're—people on the other side of the family we would see much more often. Uh, I don't know who you remember. But, remember Cookie? She was a stewardess? Um ...

RW: When?

SW: In Hawai'i. I don't know. When's the last time you were in Hawai'i? I don't know.

RW: [overlapping] Uh, the last time I was in Hawaii, I was 2. For the funeral.

SW: So, um—so I mean, that's the closest—I mean, we don't—we don't do a reunion because they all live there. Right? We would just come to see 'em. So it was, uh—we do it now, after my father died, to keep together. And this is why we—we try to have everyone together for Christmas. This is why, a—after school lets out, most years, you know, I go fishing with Uncle Ken, Uncle David and Grandma. That's why we do that.

RW: Okay. Family traditions!

SW: Okay.

RW: Um, sayings, expressions?

SW: Ai-ya! [laughs] I don't know that's, you know—that's your basic Asian. [RW laughs]

RW: Uh, came from grandpa?

SW: That's Japanese.

RW: What?

SW: That's [clears throat] Japanese. It's Japanese—Hawaiian. [coughs] I mean, all Asians basically say "ai-ya." So ... uh, uh, I mean, we had Japanese words for a lot of things growing up. We had Chinese words for growing—for things growing up. [background noises]

RW: What about pidgin words?

SW: Not too much pidgin words.

RW: Is that just after—

SW: [overlapping] I mean my mother can speak—she—she can do pidgin. She understands it, um, but, um, that would be below them to be speaking that. My grandmother would never allow that.

RW: [overlapping] What Japanese did you use?

SW: [overlapping] Even though some of the people in the family would speak pidgin, but not my mother.

RW: What Japanese did you use?

SW: What do you mean? What Japanese?

RW: What words did you use?

[1:09:57]

SW: *Shoyu*. [laughs] Um, uh, uh, um, I'm trying to remember what. There's words for stuff. [laughing] We just, you know, you know—we, uh—a lot of the words we use would be Japanese like tofu, things like that. Those would be Japanese words for things. Um, uh ... a lot of—you know, a lot of food words certainly. Um ...

RW: Did you grow up saying *gyoza* or *jiaozi*?

SW: *Jiaozi*, but that's because we really didn't eat stuff. We didn't have much till we went to China—to—to Taiwan. [makes sounds while thinking] Um, my mother used to say “*yo-tokosho!*” when you do something heavy—pick up something heavy. Uh, and there are various other things, which I don't remember. My mother will say things now, and I—and I—and I can rec—I know. I recognize 'em.

RW: [overlapping] Um, before you eat? [saying “*itadakimasu*”]

SW: We didn't actually used to grow up saying that much.

RW: Really?

SW: I mean I knew what it was, but we didn't really—we didn't really say it that—

RW: [overlapping] She was like, really gung-ho about that when I was little.

SW: Yeah, but we, you know—we didn't really do that growing up.

RW: Hmm.

SW: Uh, uh ...

RW: Ooh! *Bachigataru*. Did you [laughing] forget that?

SW: Oh, my mother would say it. So I mean And there's another one, which I—who's—I can't remember, you can ask Grandma about this. I can't remember. There's another one which is about persevering. Uh, this is another sort of thing.

RW: Oh, she said that to me last week and I can't remember what it is.

SW: [overlapping] I can't remember what it is either. She says it. I know what—what it is, but I ... um, *ga—gam, gamba ... gambai*. I can't remember. Okay? But, there is this notion. And this is what we were also growing up with, okay? You know, doing something and lying down and crying about it [imitates crying]. No way. You did it. This is very Japanese. You do it. You're supposed to do it. You do it. Period. Doesn't matter how much it hurts. It does not matter how hard it is. It doesn't matter how long it takes, nothing. You're gonna do it. You do it, period. You don't stop until it's done. And you don't give in to anything. And you don't give up.

And, I—I noticed that—and—and I—and I—and I see myself relative to—even to my colleagues now, who are all, you know, obviously very talented and very capable people—and, um, one of the things that I—I notice that very much distinguishes me against—versus them is that they—they will give up on, uh—at, uh, a drop of a hat. Not worth it. They'll just punt it. Okay? Well, that's not how I was brought up. You do it. You make it work. And, um, I am much, much more persistent. But it's paid off over the years too. I've done many things in—in my career and otherwise that, well, they said—they just—couldn't be done, but just ... persisted and did it, you know.

Did the stuff I did at Hughes. I mean, I don't know how many times I'd see a report that said, "Can't be done. Can't be done. —"

RW: [overlapping] What did you do?

SW: "—Too hard, can't be done." Um, oh, we were looking at, um, oxygen movement in high-temperature superconductors. And the measurement—how to do the measurement was just very tough, but you just had—you had to keep r—doing it, keep trying at it. Um, the—the stuff—my PhD stuff, was, um, uh, you know, I just persisted. I tried (?). I figured out how to do it. Um, a lot of the, uh, um, you know, the stuff I do in computer science is that way too. The—even the stuff I'm doing right now is really hard. The reason is no one else has done it—it's not been done before, they don't—there's nothing alike it around us because it's so freaking hard. [laughs] Okay?

RW: Mm-hmm.

SW: Um, but, uh, it's about the persistence. It's about not giving up and that it's a—that is a very Japanese, particularly samurai, tradition. You do not—you endure. Yeah, it's gotten me in trouble at times too. That I probably should have said certain—there are times in my life that I shouldn't take it anymore. And on the other hand, every time I have said that, it's cost me dearly.

[1:15:39]

RW: Hmm. Do you see a difference between your international students and your Asian American students? Or across the spectrum, I should say, because some came here when they were kids.

SW: Um, [breaths out] well, it's hard to say. They—the international students have language problems, which it's always tough to deal with. Uh, the—the—the American—I mean, most of those are—are really about cultural and—and, uh, economic and educational differences, more than anything. Um, the—the way that the students—international students were brought up, I mean, the—the—the—the Asian way tends to be one of rote memorization. You see it in Japan. You see it in China. You see it in—all over, all over Asia. Okay? A lot of it has to do with conforming. Japan—there's a—there's—there's a saying about, “the nail that sticks up get pounded down.” You're not supposed to stick out. Okay? And, so, you know, if you watch the way the kids are brought up in Japan, they're brought up to—they're taught to conform. And, uh, um, so the students are brought up with more rote learning.

So, I mean, the students in the US aren't brought up that way. Um—I—the difference between the Asian American students and the non-Asian American students, you can still see that because, as I—as I always say to them, “I had Asian parents too.” [laughs] At which point, they all understand. [laughs] Because it's things like, “Why are they getting a B.S.?” Well, because their parents want them to get a B.S. “Why are they pre-med?” Because their parents want them to be pre-med. So I actually spend a fair amount of time with them to convince them that if they don't want to be pre-med, they should not be pre-med. If they don't wanna get a B.S., then they shouldn't get a B.S.

RW: Yeah there were some kids who were planning to do computer science and were somehow pre-med at the same time?

SW: Um, what's his name? Selanno, um, Seranno, uh, god, what's his name? Really nice guy—kid. He did that. He was pre-med and, uh, he went to med school, uh, and CS. Really nice kid. Um, so I mean, those differences are the ones you really see more than anything. Um, and, you know, it's—it is—it's—it is easy to relate to the American-born kids. You know, I mean, I understand them. I know where they're coming from, and, you know, the sort of—expectations and pressures that that they're under.

Did you know that of my generation—I think it's less so now—but in my generation, the, uh, teenage suicide rate for Asian American teenagers was 5 times the national average? And it had every—everything to do with expectation. I remember, where—where was I? Uh ... who was it I was talking with? Their friend of theirs who was Korean, and, um, she couldn't get into med school. So she had to go back to Korea because she couldn't get into med school. And their—their friend was a Caucasian-American was saying, “What's the big deal?” I mean she's like all upset, and she's crying

and all like that. And—and, “What’s the big deal? So you didn’t get into med school? Big deal. She’ll go home. Go—go back to Korea, do whatever, no big deal.” And she couldn’t understand that this girl had just shamed her entire family. It was like—you know, it was just the most shameful thing to—for her to go back to Korea, in defeat like that. Um, and, you know, I understood it. [laughs] You know, this is bad. This is really bad. You know? The girl had to go back and then face her parents with this—face her whole family.

[1:20:52]

RW: Um, really nice fun things here. Um, family holidays?

SW: I mean, we celebrate Christmas. There was ... no star on the tree, no crosses on things, okay? Very secular. Um, didn’t seem to bother us that—in that—in that sense, okay? Um, we, uh, uh, it was difficult ‘cause we not only not Asian, but, uh, you know, the—the family is—is Buddhist in tradition. Now, my—it wasn’t clear what tradition my father really was. There was some possibility that there was some Christian background in my father, but it wasn’t—there’s nothing he ever said anything about. Um, but certainly, in our—my mother’s side, there’s, you know, this very strong—I mean You don’t remember, but the big Hongwanji temple in—in Honolulu. I mean my grandmother viewed it as—as she owned that. She was one of the founding members that she built that thing. You know, she would walk in the office because, damn, she owned that place. [laughs] You know?

Um, so it’s—it’s—so that’s very strong about that. Um, but not in the sense of you’re supposed to do this or you’re supposed to do that. It wasn’t that sort of dogmatic notion. You just were. Um, that’s part of it what it is. And, uh, you know, certainly, you know, I feel much more comfortable, you know, if I go and I sit in, you know—in a Buddhist thing. The Vietnamese ones are a little—little weird, concerted, kind of elaborate. So many different things you gotta pray for and [grumbles]. The other thing, it’s much more superstitious. Japanese one is much simpler. So I wanna take—I wanna take Thuy. Say, “Okay, see? It doesn’t have to be so complicated. It can be really simple, you know?” [laughs]

Um, so, but there was nothing—there was—you know, we grew up, there—there was—there was—we were surrounded completely in this whole, you know, Christian. Uh, you know, around us there was nothing. Once again, there’s difference between inside the house and outside the house. We’d [indistinguishable 1 word] at the door. There was a difference. We’d walk from one world to another. And so, all day long, walking back and forth between two different worlds with two different expectations, two different traditions. Everything that’s going on is completely different as you walk in and out the door. Um, and I don’t think my parents really understood that. You know? Maybe on some intellectual level, but think they really understood what it meant.

Um, so, uh, you know, of course we had, you know, Thanksgiving and things like that. And we made Easter eggs at Easter, that sort of stuff. I don’t ... I skipped the line, the pledge of allegiance, which says, “One nation under God.” I do not say that line. [laughs] I think it’s un—that’s—I think that’s unconstitutional that the line is in there. [laughs]

[1:24:30]

End interview