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Fu, Wallace Oral History Interview (Chinese): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Wallace Fu
Chinese Resident

Conducted July 19, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: Like I said, I have a list of questions that I ask everyone that I interview. I need to start out with a few formal questions, and then we'll get on into the more substantial questions. So, this is Donna Rottier. The date is July 19, 1994. I am interviewing Wallace Fu in the lobby at Parke-Davis in Holland, Michigan.

Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

WF: My name is Wallace Fu.

DR: And your current address?

WF: My current address is 1115 Silverstone Road, Holland, Michigan.

DR: Your date and place of birth?

WF: The date is [date removed], 1943. The place is Macao, China.

DR: When did you first move to Holland, Michigan?

WF: I came to Holland in May of 1986.

DR: Was Holland the first place you lived in the United States?

WF: No, I have lived in over a dozen other towns in the States before I came here.

DR: Could you begin, then, by describing a bit about China and your life there?

WF: I was about six years old when I left China, so I do not have a very strong recollection of what happened, why we moved at that time. China was in turmoil at that time. There was civil war going on when I left.

DR: Why did your family leave China?

WF: Because of instability and the civil war. We left when the Communists and the Kuomintang were fighting.

DR: How did your family go about leaving the country?

WF: That came in a real circuitous way. We left China to go to Hong Kong in 1949. We lived in Hong Kong until 1963. Then I came to the States at that time.

DR: Could you describe your education in Hong Kong?

WF: I went through the elementary and secondary education in Hong Kong. The schooling is slightly different than the schooling in the United States. The emphasis in China was on pure memorization, very little bit of innovative thinking. You memorize and if you can regurgitate, you do well in school, while in the United States you have to be able to think and figure out the way to do things in order to achieve and excel in school. That's the big difference between the American system and the Chinese system.

DR: How many years did you study there?

WF: I finished high school in 1963 there, a total of about eleven years.

DR: Then did you go on to school while you were there?

WF: I came over to the States and started college.

DR: Why did you decide to move to the United States?

WF: The opportunities are better in the States than in China. Also, I selected a college where a lot of my high school classmates came

and studied here, too. People who were a few years ahead of me came to the same college.

DR: What college was that?

WF: That was a small school in central Minnesota called St. John's University.

DR: How much English had you studied before you moved to the United States?

WF: I studied quite a bit of English in elementary and high school. In fact, the school I went to is called the Anglo-Saxon School. That means you are taught everything in English except Chinese history and Chinese literature. That's done in Chinese. Everything else is done in English.

DR: What were your expectations of the United States before you moved here?

WF: My first perception of America was very different than what I actually saw. I thought it was a land of unlimited opportunities, which is still the case. Also, it is a land of abundance. There are a lot of natural resources available here. I also noticed there was a lot of waste in this country. I never could believe that people actually packaged their food in colorful packaging and so forth. And now we talk about this waste we have to get rid of. It seemed like thirty years ago when I came, I thought it was a very wasteful thing to package things like that. That's a cultural change.

DR: What were some of your experiences as a Chinese student at an American university?

WF: I went to a small school in Minnesota. The college had a very strict regulation for any foreign students to room with an American student. So my first three months I had to learn to think and speak without interpreting in my mind in Chinese first. The first three months were a big struggle, but after that, everything clicked. I had no problem communicating after that.

DR: What did you study in college?

WF: I studied Chemistry.

DR: How long did you live in Minnesota?

WF: I lived there for three-and-a-half years. I finished my undergraduate education.

DR: Then did you go directly on to graduate school?

WF: Not really. A friend of mine was going on sabbatical for one year and they needed a replacement in a small college in Wisconsin, at that time called LaCrosse State University. He asked me to be his replacement for one year. I went there and taught chemistry laboratories for a year.

DR: Where did you eventually go to graduate school?

WF: I went to graduate school at Marquette University in Milwaukee. I continued to study Chemistry.

DR: What was your first job out of graduate school?

WF: I did not take a job. When I graduated in 1973, there were no jobs for a PhD chemist. So I did a post-doctoral appointment at Cornell University for two years.

DR: How do you think the fact that you were Chinese, or you were a foreign student, affected your educational opportunities?

WF: I think I had a very good opportunity in college, just because my professors were very receptive to some of the things I could help them with. Since there were other foreign students who needed help, they wanted me to put the foreign students at ease and lay out curriculum for the graduate program. They asked me to help. So I knew I had a good education, but I also had the opportunity to take advantage of it.

DR: Were you the only member of your family to move to the United States?

WF: No. All members of the family emigrated out of Hong Kong eventually. I have a brother living in San Francisco and I have two sisters living in Canada.

DR: How did you eventually end up in Holland, Michigan?

WF: In a very roundabout way. After my post-doctoral appointment in New York for two years, I took a job in Charleston, West Virginia with Union Carbide. I was there about six years, then the company transferred the entire operation to Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. I was a chemist in the agricultural research division. We transferred to North Carolina in 1981. Three years

later there was the unfortunate accident in Bhopal, India involving the chemical that Union Carbide manufactured. That was also the compound used to make our products. After a year or two of the turmoil, we decided that the opportunities at Union Carbide had become extremely limited. I started looking around and found this job in Holland, Michigan. I joined Parke-Davis in 1986.

DR: How much did you know about Holland before you moved here?

WF: It was very interesting. My brother-in-law's older brother went to school here, and when I came over to college in 1963, I took a Greyhound bus from San Francisco up this way. There was another Chinese student on the bus and she was coming to Hope College. So I knew of Hope College, and I knew of Holland, Michigan. I knew there was a Tulip Time.

DR: How did you go about finding a house to live in and getting settled in Holland?

WF: It took very little time because the people at Parke-Davis were extremely helpful. They got me a realtor, they arranged for me to talk to people. We prefer the public schools. Those were important factors for me to decide where to go.

DR: You're married?

WF: Yes.

DR: Is your wife also Chinese?

WF: No, she is from Wisconsin.

DR: Do you have children?

WF: We have four children, yes.

DR: Your children have attended school in Holland?

WF: Yes. One graduated from high school and three are still in school.

DR: What are your impressions of the Holland school system?

WF: I can only comment on the West Ottawa school system because that's where my children went. I think it's an above average school. It's got some very good teachers, and some innovative ways of doing things. The new administration, Dr. Muncatchy, has made some progress too, bringing the school up to some levels of excellence.

DR: Are you a member of any community organizations?

WF: I do a little bit of volunteer work at the elementary schools. I have done some work with the Holland Arts Council. I am a member of my church choir.

DR: Which church do you go to?

WF: I go to Our Lady of the Lake.

DR: Was your family Catholic in China?

WF: No, my family is very diverse. My mother was a Buddhist. My dad was Anglican. My brother is an atheist. I have two sisters. One is, I believe, Baptist. The other one at one time was a Congregationalist, but I don't know what she's doing now. It's very mixed.

DR: How has that diversity contributed to your religious life?

WF: I'm very tolerant. I don't believe that you should impose your religious belief on other people. Even my children, if they don't want to go to church, when they're old enough to think for themselves, they don't have to. We do not force it on the children. Eventually they will have to form their own beliefs.

DR: Do you have a sense of how many Chinese people live in Holland?

WF: I do not have the actual number, but I have a feeling the population of Chinese is growing rapidly in Holland. I know of companies like Donnelly and Parke-Davis who are actively hiring a lot of people, and some of them are Chinese.

DR: Do you know if these people who are coming are coming directly from China to Holland?

WF: No, not all of them like that. Very few come directly from China. Many of them were part of the Tiananmen incident. They got political considerations for staying here. They were students, but when the Tiananmen event happened, they got the special asylums treatment. Those are the people who are now getting the jobs.

DR: Do you have much contact with other Chinese people living in Holland?

WF: I have several Chinese friends in town. I do not belong to a Chinese organization. My wife cannot speak Chinese. That makes it difficult for her to mix in.

DR: Are there such organizations?

WF: There is such an organization, yes. I think they have events like Chinese New Years and other Chinese festivals that they get together on.

DR: Do you and your family celebrate any special Chinese holidays or traditions?

WF: We have a Chinese New Year's party every year. We pretty much invite all our friends for that party. We don't limit it to just Asians or Chinese.

DR: What have you done to teach your children about your cultural background?

WF: I have not done much to teach my children their cultural background. It's not that my children don't seem to want to learn. One of my children, she would like to know more about the culture, so I helped her to learn because she cannot speak Chinese.

DR: If your children were to have an interest in speaking Chinese, would you actively teach them?

WF: Sure. In fact, I tried to encourage my daughter to take Chinese lessons. That's when she was in second grade and she somehow could not respond to the class at all, so she dropped out after about a month.

DR: Do you have much contact with people from other Asian countries who live in Holland?

WF: Yes. I go to the Oriental grocery stores occasionally to buy ingredients. Many of these are owned by Vietnamese families or Thai families.

DR: What do you think of the growing diversity in Holland?

WF: It is a very big change since 1986. There are many more various Asian ethnic groups in town compared to 1986. Some are good, some are not for the best interest of the community.

DR: What are some of the positive and negative aspects of that?

WF: Ethnic diversity is one aspect. Now you have more restaurants other than just Russ'. The bad part is that there is some occasional misunderstanding. Also, when immigration is loosening up, you sometimes have these undesirables coming in and they cause problems. They victimize the other Asians. They started alienating other ethnic groups, causing misunderstanding.

DR: Do you see that happening in Holland?

WF: I think there is something like that happening, but I'm not sure how bad it is.

DR: What sorts of indications have you seen of that?

WF: What I've seen of that is some Asian groups who confront other minority groups. I have not seen real bad news, but reading the newspaper, you see about the shooting and the gang problem in the downtown area.

DR: What do you think needs to be done about that to eliminate that sort of negative?

WF: I think we should have more stringent requirements for immigration. Criminals should never be allowed to immigrate.

DR: How do you think Holland as a community has responded to the growing Asian population and growing ethnic diversity?

WF: I think a lot of the Holland churches were very good at sponsoring these Asian families to come in. I don't know how well they have been responding to the consequences of all this. Because these families coming in need help more than just for a year or two. The sponsors have to constantly try to get them immersed more into the culture. Unfortunately that is not a complete job yet. The groups coming in do not socialize outside of their own ethnic group. I think that's very bad for their own community, and for Holland. We need to reach out and bring these people in and make sure they feel comfortable in the community, and get a better understanding about these problems.

DR: Do you think that's something that will happen naturally as these people are here longer?

WF: It will happen, but I don't know how naturally. I think these church groups will have done their job properly when they are really absorbed into the community. That would alleviate a lot of misunderstanding.

DR: What do you see in Holland's future in the next five or ten years?

WF: Holland's future in the next five or ten years? I don't know. I really don't know what it will be like. I have a feeling that the

ethnic diversity is very good for Holland. Somehow I feel that the Asians are the ones that excel in music programs. I go to my children's music programs, and I keep seeing Asian kids winning. I think they're going to contribute to the community. It will be good for them.

DR: What do you see as the major challenges facing the community?

WF: There will be social problems associated with minorities just coming here. All minority groups are going to have problems to deal with. I think it's best if we can solve the problem before it gets out of hand. Then we'll, in the long term, save the city money, before the problems become big.

DR: What do you think it is that is drawing so many Asian people to Holland?

WF: I would say this began because of their relatives. The Asians that first came here, the next thing you know, their uncles and aunts and cousins join them. That's how we start to grow.

DR: Why have you yourself stayed in Holland?

WF: Because of the job.

DR: Have you ever noticed or experienced yourself racial tension or discrimination because you are Asian?

WF: There are a couple occasions, yes.

DR: In what sorts of ways?

WF: I don't think my experience was really purposeful or nasty, except in one or two cases. One time we were at a fast-food restaurant.

There were a couple of teenagers in a car next to us. They started yelling things at us and throwing chewing gum on our car. Again, that's probably because they might have some misunderstanding in the past. Another time, a native came up to my wife and said, "Are your children adopted?" in front of my kids. I don't think they meant any harm. They were probably very blunt, not mischievous.

DR: How has that sort of thing affected your family?

WF: We've pretty much accepted the primary stuff. We face more of these problems as the towns become more diversified. Even now we face these kinds of problems.

DR: What one thing about yourself or your experience do you think should be shared with people who will be reading this interview in the future?

WF: I think it's important that any minority should try to reach out and be one of the natives. As the saying goes, "In Rome do as the Romans do." That applies in America, too. It's nice to preserve your ethnic heritage and preserve your culture, but we also should blend in with the culture. Otherwise, your children, and your grandchildren, will never mix or get into the mainstream.

DR: How do you think you can achieve that balance between preserving your culture and yet becoming a part of the culture of the mainstream?

WF: It's a very difficult thing to do. It's hard to preserve. You could be going maybe too far one way; you could go too far the other way. So one has to construct a careful balance. You have to preserve the good part of your culture and absorb what is the good part of the new culture you're trying to embrace. It's best to bring the two together. The hybridization will probably bring out the best of both cultures.

DR: I've asked all of my questions. Is there anything you think I should have asked, or that you'd like to add?

WF: I would like to know, what is your ethnic background?

DR: My ethnic background is very Dutch. I grew up in Fremont which is a small town north of here which is also a very traditionally Dutch community. Both of my parents' families came from the Netherlands.

WF: One thing I do like to point out, too, is that I have been to many towns in the U.S. I would say Holland is one of the few towns that you find, where the work ethic has not died. The people here are extremely industrious people. They do a good job.

DR: Why do you think that is, in Holland?

WF: I think that's probably because of the Dutch influence. The work ethic is very Dutch. It's an excellent community. I think we all should appreciate that. I don't have anymore to say.

DR: Okay. Thank you very much.