

Narrator: Mark Lee  
Interviewer: Sasha Gaylie  
Date: March 3, 2021  
Location: Richmond, BC  
Transcribed by: Sasha Gaylie

[00:00:00]

SASHA GAYLIE: Okay, hello! Today is March 3, 2021, and we are recording, on both ends, on the unceded and traditional territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Musqueam, Tsawwassen, Stó:lō, Stz'uminus, and Kwantlen First Nations. My name is Sasha Gaylie and this oral history interview is part of a project on food, identity, and the year 2020. So before we begin, Mark, could you state your full name and that you consent to the recording of this interview?

MARK LEE: Yes, my name is Mark Lee and I consent to the recording of this interview.

SG: Awesome, thank you. All right, so to start, I just wanted to ask—in whatever way feels right to you, could you give a little bit of an introduction—who you are, what you do?

ML: Cool, sure. My name is Mark. I am a mixed race, part Chinese, part British settler in Vancouver area. I grew up in East Van, near Chinatown, with pretty close connection to Chinatown and my grandparents, especially on my mother's side. And now I am a translator and interpreter for Chinese to English and English to Chinese as my profession.

SG: Thanks. Where are your grandparents on your mum's side from?

ML: My grandparents on my mom's side are both from Toisan in—it's a Cantonese-speaking area of mainland China. But from different villages in Toisan. So Toisan is a county and they are from different villages in Toisan county.

[00:01:56]

SG: And you mentioned spending time with them while you were growing up. Is that part of why you were so involved with Chinatown? Or you just lived close by and so it was natural that you were over there?

ML: Yeah, so a little bit of both. When I was—so before school age, basically up until I was about six, because I was the youngest of three children and my older siblings were in school but I wasn't, and both of my parents were working, my grandparents spent a lot of time taking care of me. And they were very involved in our Chin clan association. So Chin is the—*can* [phonetic; surname 陳] is the last name for my mother's father. And so, they were really involved in the clan association in Chinatown and so, often, when they were taking care of me, they would take me down there. I had a lot of childhood memories there. And then kind of drifted a little bit during school age and then afterwards, I found myself being drawn back to it.

SG: Can you talk a little bit more about what you remember from the *can* association or what other memories you have from early childhood in Chinatown?

ML: Sure. So early childhood in Chinatown. A lot of time spent in the—it's the can wing cyun association [Chan Wing Chun Society in Vancouver's Chinatown] and it's the tall building that used to have—it used to be where New Town Bakery was but then New Town got their own space. And lots of memories of being upstairs in a room where there's a ping pong table, and always having people bringing food because I was the grandkid.

[00:04:01]

Lots of random snacks and thinks like that. Lots of people playing mahjong. And then there were the occasional classes. I remember doing some kung fu and lion dancing classes when I was younger there, as well. [laughs]

SG: Do you remember what snacks? [laughs]

ML: Yes. But not super vividly. But it would be things like those cookies with the—they're like almond cookies? I guess? With the little—there's like one tiny shaved piece of almond on it [laughs]. Those. So mostly those are the ones I remember the most. But it would be things like that. So cookies, then those eggrolls that come in the tin with the circle pop-out thing. Yeah, that kind of thing. And then the rice krispies [laughs]. I don't think it's actually rice krispies but in my mind, I visualize it as a rice krispie. I don't actually know if it's rice that it's made of but it's similar in appearance to a rice krispie square. However, texture and taste, completely different. But I just don't even really know what it's made of.

SG: That sounds so great [laughs]. You mentioned before that, at this time, your siblings were in school but, I wonder, do you have memories with them in Chinatown as well?

[00:05:52]

ML: I have them with my brother because he was only two years older than me. I don't have a lot of memories with my older sister. She was five years, or she is five years older than me, so I don't have a ton. But I do remember, for example, the kung fu class was me and my brother there together. I vaguely—from childhood, I don't really remember being much in Chinatown with my sister. But my brother had been there, was around as well. And just, yeah, I don't know if he was as enthusiastic or as interested because he was a little bit older so maybe he was too cool or it didn't make sense to him or something, whereas I was younger so I just didn't really ask any questions.

SG: You talked, too, about kind of coming back to Chinatown later. So does that mean there was a time that you spent away from Chinatown?

ML: Yeah so, I mean, in terms of when I was a lot younger, it was more regular. It was almost any time that I was with my grandparents. Once I started going to school, it was more like we would only go to Chinatown for specific events. For example, every year, the Chin Society would have a banquet or something. So then we would go to the Floata [Seafood Restaurant] for dinner. Or there used to be a dim sum restaurant across the street from the Chin Society. Not Jade Dynasty, but there was one—it was up the stairs in that kind of gated area. So it would have been on the second or third level beside Fortune [Sound Club] but to the west a little bit. And I think it was something like "Villa"? Villa something? I don't know.

[00:08:03]

We used to go to dim sum there every once in a while, and then I would get buns and stuff from either New Town or—mostly went to New Town, which is interesting because now I don't go as much. But back then, it was like, Let's walk down to New Town and get buns from New Town. Yeah, so it was more special trips, or more like there was a purpose to going, versus just walking around, or just spending time there. It was more like, Oh, I'm hungry, therefore I'm going to go to a restaurant. I think that was the way it was for—I want to say probably until well after high school. Basically, all through school age, it was sort of like there was no specific reason to go down there in my spare time, just for fun or just for leisure. My grandparents didn't have to take care of me and so they were just—I'm sure they were down there, but I wasn't with them. For me, it became much more of a destination that was—go there every once in a while, but it wasn't really a regular thing.

SG: How would you describe your relationship with Chinatown now?

ML: Now. Now, it's a weird feeling [laughs]. It's interesting because now I don't live in—now I live in Richmond. I was doing a lot of work in Chinatown but COVID—2020 was a really challenging year for just like being in community and doing all kinds of things.

[00:10:01]

I haven't actually spent as much time in Chinatown as I have wanted to, especially this past year, because so much of what I did involved physically meeting up with seniors and spending time in large groups of seniors. That has been impossible. I would say it feels like a community that I am a part of and that I feel really strongly attached to and, in terms of things that are going on in the world right now, really defensive of. I feel really protective of Chinatown and I find that—I don't live there. I used to work there and I don't work there as much now, but I find myself getting very protective when I hear people—if I hear people say bad things about Chinatown, I get really upset and very heated. And it's a really interesting feeling because I think that if someone said to me, "Oh yeah, I don't really like East Van,"—which is where I grew up—I'd be like, "Well, whatever. Who cares?" But there's something about—if someone's like, "Oh, Chinatown's dirty," or whatever, it really upsets me. Versus if someone's like, "Oh, East Van's dirty," I'm like, "Yeah, but that's the charm of East Van." You know? Whatever. So it's an odd, odd feeling.

SG: I want to, um, circle back to what you said about COVID and Chinatown in a little bit, but before that, just to get a little bit more background, have you lived in BC for your whole life? Until now?

[00:11:55]

ML: Yup, so I was born in St. Paul's Hospital. And then I grew up in the same house just off of—just between Commercial Drive and Strathcona. I grew up there and I lived in that same house until I think I was twenty-one or something. Just the same place forever, and then I moved out to Richmond about—six years ago? Five, six years ago, I think? Maybe? I lose track of time.

SG: And how about any time spent abroad?

ML: I spent a year in China, in Shanghai, for an exchange through Go Global at UBC. That was when I was—that was in 2012. So I would have been—that's when I was twenty-one. So I guess it was the first time I had moved away from home. I went to Shanghai and it was a really interesting experience.

SG: Can you—

ML: Changed my life, I should say. It was a very fundamental, developmental time in my life.

SG: Can you expand a little bit more on that? What made it such a life-changing experience and what made you decide to go in the first place?

ML: The reason I decided to go was because I had kind of—well, my sister convinced me to go on exchange but for her, it was just sort of like, Go anywhere, just get away from home and just see the world. But I wanted to go to either—in my head, I had wanted to go somewhere, either Japan or China, and that’s because, at the time, I was taking language courses in both Japanese and Chinese. And then, things happened the couple months before having to register and whatnot, and so I changed my major just to Chinese. So then I thought, “Okay, I’ll just go to China for exchange.”

[00:14:20]

Choosing Shanghai was my grandmother’s decision because she gets to decide things about my life, I guess. It’s kind of an ongoing trend. But she—basically, I went to her and I said, “Hey, here’s the choices for exchange in China. These are the schools. I have no idea. I have no concept. I have never been to China, I don’t know anything.” And she, at least in my mind, I was like—she’s not from—she left China a long, long, long time ago and so, obviously she doesn’t know what it’s like right now but I figured I would ask her. And she essentially said, “Don’t go to Taiwan.” Because she has a very—she left in a time period where—she left right before the Nationalist Party went to Taiwan. So she grew up in sort of war time [sic]. So for her, she’s like, “Don’t go to Taiwan. It’s dangerous.” And I was like, “Okay. So then my only other option is Shanghai.” And she’s like, “No, that’s great. Go to Shanghai. Shanghai’s good city. Great stuff.” So I was like, “Okay, cool.” And so that was me choosing to go on exchange, it was like, “Hey Grandma,” and she was like, “Yeah, you have to go to this place.” I said, “Okay, cool.”

[00:15:57]

And then when I got there, it was kind of like (sighs). It was a weird feeling of—I almost wish I could articulate it better, but basically discovering that I wasn’t as Chinese as I thought I was? And really weird because, I think, in the lead-up to going, I figured I would start a blog. I started this blog being like, “I’m part Chinese and part White, what’s it going to be like when I go to China?” And then I got to China and I was like, Wow, I’m just really White [laughs]. This is so bizarre. I realized—it sort of put a little bit more perspective for me in terms of my ethnic identity. When I went to Shanghai, I kind of expected that the Chineseness that I was accustomed to back home would help me relate somehow. It didn’t, really, because it was completely different Chineseness. Which was kind of a hard lesson to learn because I think the first time, especially with food, actually, was super weird because I grew up eating Cantonese food. And when I got to China and I was in Shanghai, I was like, I’m excited to have Chinese food. And I actually struggled to find food that tasted or was familiar to me.

[00:17:52]

I found one Cantonese restaurant in the complex nearby where I was going to school and I was so excited and I remember because I went with a friend and I was like, “Oh, I’m so excited! I just want to have *gai laan* [leafy vegetable] with oyster sauce.” [laughs] And she was like, “You’re so bizarre. Why? That’s such a specific thing.” I was like, “No, no, no, you don’t understand. I just want something that tastes like the Chinese food that I eat at home.” It was so expensive, and I was so

shocked. It was so weird because it was—it just wasn't a popular type of food because I think, at that time, what I heard from some friends that I met was that Szechuan food was really, really popular, and that really spicy hotpot and stuff was becoming really, really popular in Shanghai. And so, I was like, Okay well, I guess that's just what I'm going to be eating. Which, I mean, I like it. It's delicious. But it doesn't have that same feeling of connection to my identity. It was really weird.

SG: I can really relate to you talking about the different types of “Chineseness” and the moment of realization when you figure out that that's a thing [laughs]. But I'm wondering, was food the primary example of how you realized you maybe “weren't as Chinese” as you thought you were? Or in, in changing your ethnic identity? Or were there some other reasons for that?

ML: Food was a big one. I would say it wasn't the biggest one. It was a pretty big deal for me because I spent that year kind of trying a lot of foods that I just didn't even know existed and realizing like, Actually, this is all delicious.

[00:20:01]

But for me, I think the identity piece was being in classes with students from all over the world and I was learning Mandarin. I was pretty proficient in Mandarin. And I guess, just the experience I had of interacting with people in Shanghai, like Shanghainese people and other Chinese people, and navigating this weird difference in the way that they were treating me, versus my local friends, versus my Swedish friends. And really seeing a very stark difference in the way that everyone was interacting with each other and realizing like—really finding where I fit in this bizarre gradient. That, I think, was the part that was really weird. I think one of the really specific moments for me was going to a nightclub, actually. I went to a nightclub and it was because one of my classmates had gotten a job as a promoter there. She had invited all of us to go there because I think she got paid more if more foreigners went to this nightclub. And so, we show up at the front. It's me, another friend from Sweden, and I can't remember—a friend from Sweden, a local friend from Shanghai who's also mixed, like American-Shanghainese, and then a friend who came from UBC with me who's White. And so, we show up there—and the Swedish friend is ethnically Chinese. Like she was from Shanghai, but she grew up in Sweden.

[00:22:05]

We get there and it was hilarious because they looked at us all and were like, “What are you all—this is not a place for you.” We were like, “What are you talking about?” We were speaking in English with each other. They were like, “We need your IDs.” And we all whip out our passports. We've got the Canadian passport, the Swedish passport, and the American passport. They just kind of looked at us like, What? They let us in but it was such a bizarre moment because when we finally got into the place, and we got a table and all that stuff, it was really clear that we were not really the type of foreigner that they were hoping for. And so, yeah. Exactly, like they wanted more White people in the club. Which I was like, Okay. And at that time, I think in 2012, I was much more—I think I was a little bit resentful of it. Because while I was in China, I felt more White and so I was like, Grr, they're being—I used to say something. I used to talk about the white dancing monkey, which is this weird—I'm sure there's a proper term for it but there's this phenomenon, especially during that time, where White people could get on TV no problem. A White person just has to say, “*ni hao*,” and then they would get on TV. It was because, for some reason, there was this really popular sentiment of wanting to see White people try to make it in China or just exist in China. I called them dancing monkeys because it was—it's for the weird exotic factor.

[00:24:00]

So, it was odd. Now, I'm kind of like, Whatever. If they want to see White people on TV, go for it, whatever. But at the time, I was very much like [grumbles]. You know, I was a little bit disgruntled. That moment of really realizing they wanted White people, and I was like, Oh and that's not me! Interesting, yes, interesting. That was a big moment where I was like, Ah ha, okay. Because I had kind of been existing thinking I'm too White. Or I was not "Chinese enough". And then I was like, I'm clearly not White enough either because they don't want me for their weird dancing monkey thing. Clubbing was weird. For sure.

SG: So—

ML: And I mean, it happened in other aspects.

SG: So when you say that this trip for you was a life-changing experience, was it primarily because of navigating ethnic identity stuff or was there another reason you described it that way?

ML: That was a big part of it. A lot—I feel like I packed a lot of experiences into that year. I also met my current partner while I was there on exchange, and he is a Chinese person who I've now been together with for—it's going to be nine years in October. Yeah so, since 2012. That was a huge thing for me. I think it was just so many firsts. It was the first time I was living on my own. I ended up moving out of the dorms and living in an apartment that I was renting nearby.

[00:26:03]

And then I was living with my partner, so it was like my first time having a roommate. What else? It was my first time going to the police station. Because I got—what is it? Scammed. It was just one after the other, just so many different experiences that year and I think it was really—yeah, it was just a lot of stuff. Overall, it really helped me to solidify my feeling of who I was and what I wanted and what I was kind of about, because it was like I was constantly being confronted with these questions that I hadn't really had to answer. It was really common for people to be like, "Where are you from? Because, you know, you obviously don't look like you're from here." And then, you know, giving them the answer and being like, "Oh, I'm from Canada." And then being like, "That's weird. You don't look like you're from Canada." And I'm like, "Okay, well—" [laughs], "I don't know what to tell you, that's where I'm from." But then I would tell them, "I'm part Chinese." And they'd be like, "Ah, no wonder your Chinese is so good!" And I'd be like, "That's not why my Chinese is like this, because my family doesn't speak Mandarin, even!" There was a lot of just push and pull and trying to figure out why—how do I answer—everyone's asking me these questions and I'm constantly having to explain something and so, I got a lot better at really understanding what it was that I wanted to explain. Right? It was kind of like that.

SG: So you talked a lot about coming to Shanghai and the realization of Cantonese food not necessarily being accessible there. I'm wondering, prior to going to China and since coming back, has food played a really big role in you forming your ethnic or cultural identity?

[00:28:14]

ML: Yeah, I would say I spend a lot more time now, and while I was there in Shanghai too, identifying more strongly with being Cantonese. Before I went, I didn't really have that much of a concept of—it wasn't as granular for me. I think before I went to China, I was kind of like, Well, I'm

Chinese and my family speaks Cantonese. And it was just kind of a flat statement. It's just what it is. I didn't really notice or necessarily understand the nuances between different things that maybe my family did that other Chinese families wouldn't necessarily do if they weren't Cantonese. Like that kind of thing, I had no concept. Then when I got to Shanghai and I realized, Oh, there's so much diversity in China, in terms of just different types of Han Chinese people, or even within different minority groups in China. There's just so much diversity that I started to kind of pick up on a lot easier or start to realize, like, Ah, this is something that I thought was a universal "Chinese" experience but actually, it's quite Cantonese. Or, you know, especially this type of food. There was one day I remember that our university was putting on a world fair of some kind.

[00:29:53]

It was really funny because I remember going—I saw a Hong Kong booth, or a Cantonese booth, or something like that. And I was like, Oh cool! I'm going to go over, see what that's about. And it was so funny because they had these different foods and then it was like a quiz. They were doing a game and it was if you could identify what the word was that they were saying in "[Cantonese]"—it was like, "We say this. What is it in [Cantonese]?" Then you got a prize. And so, I was like, I'm going to just go and totally win. [laughs] I remember going and it was so funny. It was stuff like "toast" and "strawberry" and basically words for food that in Cantonese are just the English word transliterated into Cantonese. And I remember being like, Yeah, this is my specialty! And I remember—and they were just so shocked. They were like, "Oh my gosh, have you been to Hong Kong or something?" I was like, "No. I've never been to Hong Kong but I speak Cantonese so that's—sorry." And it's that type of thing where I was like, Ah ha, okay. Noticing that other people treat it as its own distinct thing, kind of giving me almost license to be like, Okay, I can also understand this and experience this as a distinct identity, as opposed to just being part of this blob of Chineseness. Since I've come back, moving to Richmond has been super interesting too because I find that in Richmond, there's such a—there's a really strong Hong Kong history of immigration specifically in Richmond. But since I moved to Richmond, there's also been a really, really strong wave of mainland Chinese immigration.

[00:32:02]

With it, there's tons of Szechuan restaurants. Of course, I will eat that but I still often am like, I really just want some Cantonese food. I never used to even refer to it as Cantonese food. And so now, I'm like, No I want—people are like, "What do you want to eat for dinner?" And I'm like, "I want specifically Cantonese food." And they're like, "Like what?" And now I have to name restaurants that I'm like, This restaurant does Cantonese food and this restaurant doesn't do Cantonese food. Yeah—

SG: So, before, you were just calling it Chinese food?

ML: Exactly. Before, it was like, I just want Chinese food. Even restaurants like—I think it's partially because even back then, I would say before I went to China, most of the Chinese restaurants, even if they weren't specifically Cantonese food, were pretty much run by Cantonese people. I remember there's the Chongqing restaurants, chain or whatever. And I remembering just thinking—I didn't even know where Chongqing was. I just remember assuming that it was somewhere in Guangdong because I was like, This is Cantonese food. And then after I went to China and learned some geography, I was like, Oh it's Cantonese-style, Szechuan-style—obviously Chongqing is not in Sichuan [province] but it's kind of similar. It's one of those things where I had an epiphany and was

like, Oh! But even back then, I would've been like, This is the same as the Cantonese food that I usually eat. So yeah.

SG: When you think about Cantonese food specifically, are there dishes that first come to mind for you as being really important or something that you really cherish?

[00:33:59]

ML: For me, there's a lot of vegetable dishes. Which, I think—yeah, I don't—it's weird because I think there's some distinction between just “family-style”, like home-cooked meals, which are just really plain and what I would eat in terms of—what I think of when I think of Cantonese food, there's a lot of overlap. Pea shoots is a huge one for me. I only ever eat pea shoots at Cantonese restaurants. I don't think I've ever even had them at a restaurant that wasn't Cantonese. And then, what's the other one? What is it? Water spinach? I don't know what it's called in English, but the hollow one. It's not pea shoots, it's like *tong*, like *tong choy*—

SG: (voices overlapping) Feel free to use the Chinese name too, if you'd like.

ML: Okay, it's *ong choy* [water spinach], which is delicious. [laughs] Exactly, right? That type of stuff is what comes to mind when I'm like, Cantonese food. It's also the stuff that I crave when I really want something Cantonese. And most of my friends—most of my Chinese friends who are here tend to like the heavier, more spicy stuff. They sometimes make fun and say, “Cantonese food is really bland, or there's not really any taste to it.” And I'm kind of like, “No no no, that's just—I'm just craving it, I just need it.” Yeah, it's the vegetables and then I think of *dziu yeem dauh fu* or like *dziu yeem seen yau*. So the “salt and pepper squid”, “salt and pepper tofu”—that sort of deep fried, with peppers and stuff.

[00:36:11]

Those are just really—they just really hit the spot. Obviously dim sum is just a huge thing, like a huge category. But like, basically any dim sum. Yeah, it's its own giant category. What else?

SG: Can you talk a little bit more about dim sum and what that might look like to you or to your family?

ML: Sure. So dim sum has been—I feel like dim sum is almost the only thing that has stayed fully constant the entire time, from when I was a little kid until now. There has been very little change in how I treat it and how I experience it, what I expect out of it, what I get out of it, the places I go for it. Now, there is less of it but kind of—yeah, I feel like it's held to a certain standard that you can kind of generally expect it to be—you know, it's going to be—there will be these few types of dishes and that's—and if they don't, then it's not real dim sum. So when I was younger, we used to go to Pink Pearl [Chinese Restaurant], which is on Hastings, and then it was closed for a long time, so we started going to a place called Pelican [Seafood Restaurant], which is on Victoria and Hastings. We went there all the time. And then there was the other place on Kingsway which we went to, and it started becoming an every weekend thing because when my mom's dad—he started to get sick, so we—I didn't know it at the time and now I understand that this is what was going on but they were afraid he was going to die at any minute so we just had dim sum every single weekend with him. [laughs]

[00:38:22]



And then he ended up living for like eight more years, so we just had dim sum for so long. Every weekend. It was pretty wonderful. You know, as a child, or even as a teenager, because it's not like I'm paying. Just having dim sum every weekend is pretty much heaven. But basically, always hopping from restaurant to restaurant and I didn't realize it but I think it was also when chefs would change. If a chef would change at a dim sum restaurant, it was actually pretty apparent. Because you were going so regularly, you would order something that you normally ate and if it tasted a little bit different, you would be like, Did they change the chef? What's going on? And then if they did, you would be like, I don't like it anymore, I guess we are going to have to find a new dim sum restaurant to go to every week. Now as an adult, and living in Richmond, I have kind of—there's less choice but still, in the same way, kind of anchored to one restaurant and that's your go-to restaurant. It's become more of a special occasion thing or kind of like a treat. Because, I guess as you get older, you realize maybe it's not that healthy to eat dim sum every single week. So it's less frequent but now we go to the Empire Seafood Restaurant for dim sum because it's right beside where we live.

[00:40:08]

And, you know, you get to know the people who work there. And the whole experience just becomes a very—yeah, it's like a very family feel, even if you're just going with a couple of people or friends. Yeah, and you eat—but that's an interesting thing because we used to always get the same few dishes but now, because I'm going with people—like I go with my partner who obviously didn't grow up with me, there's variation in what we order and I kind of feel like I'm making—what's it called? Compromises. [laughs] I feel like you make compromises in what you order because you obviously want the same things that you always get. But not everybody likes that, so you are like, Okay well, I definitely need to have this today, but I'm willing to order this other thing that I never eat or I've never eaten. And you try it and you're like, Okay yeah, it's not terrible but I didn't eat it every week for months and months so doesn't really hit the spot.

SG: And so that feeling of needing to order the same thing is kind of from that ritual of going every week?

ML: I think so. I think that it becomes engrained in the—it becomes a full experience, as opposed to just going to a restaurant and being like, "What's on the menu? Let me pick something." It's like, no no no no no, the whole—from start to finish, it's a ritual. It's like one process and you have to do the process, otherwise you're not really experiencing it in the same way.

[00:42:00]

SG: Other than the period of eight years where you were having dim sum every week [laughs], are there any other traditional or ritual food practices that you and your family celebrate that are important to you or that you can think of?

ML: Yeah, so my grandmother, when she was more—when she had more energy and I guess when—yeah, when she had more energy, because it's very time consuming and very laborious, my grandmother used to make *zong* every year. And so we would just get giant—we would get plastic bags full of *zong* from my grandmother. I would say we did not appreciate it enough because now that I make—do the tally of the numbers in my head, I have so many cousins. Like my aunts and uncles, there's six of the siblings and they all have kids, and she would deliver these giant bags of *zong* to everybody. She's making hundreds of *zong* at a time. They were delicious, obviously, but she

doesn't do that anymore because it's extremely time-consuming and—but that was something that was kind of like every year, we would have *zong*. It actually wasn't until later on, when I was more—basically when I came back from China, I think. I want to say probably when I came back from China that I realized that it was for something. I just thought, "We randomly get a delivery of *zong* every year. That's nice." And then I was like, Oh, it's because it's *dyun ng zit* [Dragon Boat Festival, occurring on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month]. Okay, got it. Like, doy.

[00:44:00]

SG: Could you, sorry, briefly explain what *zong* is?

ML: Yeah sure. So *zong* is like a glutinous rice, um, package. Parcel. [laughs] It's like a tetrahedron of glutinous rice with various fillings, usually things like—so my grandmother would put things like pork belly, sausage, mung beans, and peanuts, and an egg yolk. Like a salted egg yolk. And then you wrap it in banana leaves? I don't think it's banana leaves. I think it's lotus leaves. Maybe. I think lotus leaves. Basically, some kind of leaf. And so then, it's just this packed thing and there is no appropriate English word. Some people might call them glutinous rice wraps or dumplings. It's not that. It's just—it's a parcel. Because it's wrapped in string and stuff. Often, you steam or boil them and then you eat them and they're delicious. They're just so good. What I learned afterwards was that different places in China have vastly different ways of making them. And so, it was another one of those things where I grew up eating the same type every year and I was like, I thought that's just what it was. And then, finding out later on in life that there are people who have sweet ones. And I'm like, Ew, that's gross, I'm not down for that. I like the salty ones. But even just realizing that there's that difference and being like, Oh. And that kind of tying back to, okay, Cantonese people typically eat this type of *zong*. And being like, Okay, so that's what that is. It's a process of really learning even just about myself. Because it's like, I've been doing this and I have this habit and I've been doing this for my whole life, and then later on realizing like, Oh, that's why. Yes, so *zong*. Every year.

[00:46:27]

SG: I think, uh, I think that's the first time I've heard *zong* described as a tetrahedron of rice [laughs]. So expanding out a little bit, at the beginning of the interview, you talked about currently identifying as part of the Chinatown community, having come back to that since childhood, and I'm wondering what role food might play into how you feel about community or ways that you know that the community interacts with food, what the food culture is like there.

ML: Yeah, definitely. I think specifically with the Chinatown community, food is a huge, huge thing that brings people together. Especially because of the people who live in Chinatown and around Chinatown. There's a lot of Chinese seniors who live there. And so, often, the— [long pause] Let's just say they're not going to Virtuous Pie for vegan pizza. They're just not. There's green grocers and things like that, where it's the types of vegetables and the types of produce that are commonly eaten. And the fact that you can go there and find all of those. A lot of people will say, "You can go to T&T [Supermarket] or any sort of like Asian supermarket and find those things too." But I think that the fact that, in the Chinatown community, you've got a lot of seniors and a lot of people, local residents, who are just—they'll go to Sunrise [Market] or they'll go to these local grocers because that's just what's there for them and that's what's familiar.

[00:48:27]

And then you have the meat shops and the fish shops and these wet markets where it's kind of like you have—it's more spaced out than a supermarket but it still feels more comfortable and more familiar to go to those places. Even for me, I'm super comfortable and feel really at home walking down the streets of Chinatown, even now, shopping for produce. Or I'll go pick up some meat. I won't drive all the way over there just to do that now, right now, but that's kind of where I was at when I was spending more time down there. Daily, I'd be like, Actually, it's really easy. I can just walk out the door and across the street, grab a piece of—*zyu zin*? *Zyu zin* [pork shank]. It's like a flank? Like, pig flank? Steak flank? I don't even know. It's like the muscley bit and it's really good for making soups. I have had trouble finding it in supermarkets before but it's a very common thing. You can almost always get it at a butcher in Chinatown. Or, at least, you can get a pretty decent cut of it. It's that flaky pork that is usually sitting in the bottom of a soup that is very sweet and delicious. I think, for Chinatown, it's kind of that type of thing where it's like—there's still certain pieces that you could find at a supermarket, but it becomes very much removed from the area. If you go to T&T and you're surrounded by this really—I don't know, the environment just feels different. If you could get that same thing at your family grocer or your friendly neighbourhood butcher, then why would you go all the way down to T&T to go to the supermarket, right?

[00.50:39]

Yeah. I think the Floata especially—there's certain establishments in Chinatown too, that—it's not just about the food necessarily but the connection to the community and the history. So, like, the Floata restaurant because of just these giant banquets. Then you have places like Goldstone, which unfortunately has closed down. These are places where people have been going for years and it's just part of the culture of the community. It's become—yeah, it's inseparable. You can't take those things away. It's almost like you can't have that community without these fixtures in the community. It just doesn't feel quite right. Or it feels really empty and weird. Then, on top of that, I know that there's—in the past few years, there's been these really cool initiatives to share cooking knowledge and things like that, like workshops to make *tong yuen* together, which is the glutinous rice balls in soup with sesame filling. It doesn't sound super—I'm not crazy about them. I don't particularly love them, and I didn't really grow up eating them but I know that there are people who enjoy them, obviously. [laughs]

[00:52:22]

And having people make them together and making dumplings together. There's been a lot of dumpling making. Dumpling making has turned into this really interesting trend. I mean, I say "trend", even though people do it at home all the time and it's not new. But I think the events, like the workshops, are becoming trendy because people are craving this connection, as well as just the skill. Right? We have all these seniors who have these skills because it's just subsistence for them, and connection to culture, and people realizing that that's really important and so they're like, "Yes, I'll pay exorbitant amounts to go to some workshop and learn how to make a dumpling." [laughs] Whereas, for some people who have been eating them all their lives, sometimes, and making them, they're just like, "I wouldn't pay money to go to this workshop because I can already make a dumpling! [I] make dumplings every year. What is this?" But yeah. That's what I think the community is at in terms of food and identity right now, is constantly finding these things that can be that anchor and really help people to feel that connection. Because I know that, for me, if I didn't have the other things tying me to Chinatown—if I think back to when I was just finishing high school and I wasn't super in Chinatown at that point, I think if I had seen an event to go and dry orange peels or something like that, I probably would have been like, "Oh, that's so interesting. I used to eat dried orange peels all the time as a kid. I'm going to go." I think that's the type of thing

that really does draw people in who may not have other reasons to go down to Chinatown. I think that's kind of where it's at, is really hooking people through that nostalgia but also that sort of longing for community and culture at the same time.

[00:54:48]

SG: Wow, thank you! That was really comprehensive [laughs]. I'm wondering now, switching gears a little bit to 2020 and COVID-19, how has—I mean, you mentioned Goldstone. But I'm wondering, how has 2020, the events of 2020, impacted access to food in the community or some of the events that you mentioned and people's connections to food and each other? What impact has 2020 had on that, that you've noticed?

ML: Yeah. I would say it had a huge impact on basically everything. It was pretty rough. Especially at the beginning, I think because the restrictions at the very beginning, or March, April 2020, were pretty—I would say back then, they came out pretty strong. They were like, "You cannot go out. Everybody stay home," is where we were at. And then what ended up happening was a lot of the restaurants that serve the Chinatown community also got hit really hard. A lot of them had to close temporarily and some of them had turned to permanently. Like Floata, their main moneymaker is banquets. Right? When you can't have a banquet, then how do you make money? So that was really rough for them, I know.

[00:56:28]

And then in the community, in particular—for example, with Yarrow [Intergenerational Society for Justice], we had bi-weekly Friday meetings and at those Friday meetings, it was cramming thirty to forty seniors into a little space to hang out. Couldn't do that anymore. And we used to give out buns and things, so that becomes kind of just a nonstarter. Yeah, so it was rough. And a lot of seniors were afraid to go out, even to get groceries and that kind of thing. Because that was really big at the beginning, was people really terrified of going to get groceries. And then, even at the beginning, when there was the rush on—or the run on toilet paper and that stuff, where people were clearing out supermarkets and so it was kind of like how do we get—how do people get food, even? I think it was a really tense time. There were people in the community who had this wonderful idea to do grocery deliveries. And so, there was kind of this "Chinatown care packages" which started up, where the idea was to kind of make sure that seniors who were potentially isolated or couldn't go out because they're so at-risk, make sure that they were able to have access to groceries. Not just like—I think the reason that it's kind of different is that I think of places like, say, the food bank or other low-income grocery or low-income food avenues, where often it's things like—if you think of non-perishables or things that people donate, it's like canned beans and breads and that kind of stuff, and it just isn't—or, you know, a lot of pasta. A lot of spaghetti, macaroni, these kinds of things. And it's not really the stuff that our seniors would eat or even necessarily know how to cook with.

[00:58:54]

And so, it became really focused on "culturally appropriate" groceries, or culturally appropriate food. And I feel like that's even just a word, or a term, that's only just recently become a thing. In the past couple of years, this idea of "culturally appropriate" anything. You know, like culturally appropriate food options, culturally appropriate blah blah blah. It kind of makes you think, what does that mean? And then you're like, Oh yeah, it's the stuff that you grow up with, the stuff that you know, the stuff that makes you feel comfortable and affirms that identity for you. And so, these care

packages is really just like vegetables—you know, “Asian” vegetables. Right? So things like *gai laan*, or like, you know, *choy sum* [Chinese flowering cabbage], or *choy* [vegetables], whatever, right? There was so much interest and so much appreciation from people too because they were just like, “Wow, we’re getting”—some of them were getting subsidized and some of them were paying but it was kind of like, “We’re getting groceries delivered to us and it’s the stuff that we would actually use.” Whereas, sometimes, there’s a one-size-fits-all approach with seniors and a lot of services in the area, and in Vancouver in general, that doesn’t quite work. Well, it doesn’t work for everybody. Because it’s not one-size-fits-all, because some people have these different cultural needs. And so, I think the food piece was really what people latched onto during 2020 especially, because it was like, Well, we need food. We need to eat to survive. And so, this very basic thing became a huge—one of the only ways that we could still help and feel connected was through food. Because we couldn’t gather anymore and we couldn’t do necessarily—we couldn’t play mahjong together in the streets, right. So there’s a limit to the type of activities you can do. But food, it was like, Well, we can deliver the food to you that is what you would eat. You know? Yeah, so it became a very important piece of 2020, in light of the fact that we couldn’t do anything else.

[01:01:33]

SG: And so that’s on food access for the seniors. But earlier, too, you mentioned that when you were in Chinatown every day, it became a really easy habit for you to visit the local grocers, butchers, markets. And now, to borrow your term, or the term you mentioned, how are you finding your access to “culturally appropriate” foods has changed because of the pandemic and 2020?

ML: Wow. I haven’t really thought about it but that’s a really great question. I mean, a lot of it, I have to—if I want it, I have to make it myself, which is fine. But I kind of liked—what is it? Patronizing local businesses. I like to pay people to make food for me because it’s like a win-win, basically [laughs]. But now, because I—right now, in terms of groceries, I have a T&T, which is fine. I can find—for example, if I want to make a soup, I can go to T&T and I can get the ingredients. It’s just a little bit more expensive and whatever. I can still find a way. But there’s certain foods where it’s like I am not necessarily very good at making it myself. Which is a bummer and frustrating because it’s like—yeah, either I make it myself or I don’t have it at all. And so, you know, those family-style, like home-cooked type things. Like steamed egg with ground pork in the bottom. Or, yeah, some of those vegetables.

[01:03:33]

I could order it from—if I ordered *dauh miuh*, “pea shoots”, from a restaurant on one of the various delivery apps, it could be twenty bucks for a plate of vegetables. I mean, I’m going to admit that I’ve done that multiple times throughout 2020 but I’m a little bit ashamed because it’s so expensive. But sometimes it’s like, Well, I just really want to eat this, like really badly. 2020 has been rough in terms of—there’s so many options, which is great. Like food delivery apps and things like that. I’m in a position where I can order a lot of food in, whether that’s financially responsible or not. But again, because I’m with my partner, I can’t have Cantonese food every day. It’s a lot more seldom. I would say I made more soup this year than I’ve ever made before. What other culturally appropriate—I mean, there is a dim sum place right beside me and so sometimes I can be like [gestures], “Let’s go. Let’s go get dim sum.” Because that, I think, is an easy sell for my partner [laughs].

[01:05:06]

SG: And so then I guess the natural next question is what are you looking forward to being able to have access to again? Or what are you most looking forward to?

ML: Wow. I really, really, really want to do a *zong* making workshop. I really, really want to. There's been the mooncake making ones, they've done dumplings, they've done *tong yuen*. I'm ready. *Zong* is kind of like the top-tier, the most difficult, just most laborious one. But I'm like, You know what? *Gam wai*, "Kam Wai Dim Sum", is reopened and they make hundreds of thousands of *zong* every year for T&T. I'm more involved in their business right now and so I'm like, You know what, when COVID is over, we're going to have this *zong* making workshop. Everyone's going to learn how to make *zong* and it's going to be the next thing, like the next trend. Everyone's going to be like, "Oh my god! We can pay fifty dollars to learn how to make *zong* and we're going to make like five hundred of them." Yeah, I don't know. I think that's where I'm at now, where I'm just like, That's the one. Because eating it during 2020, during COVID, was substantially more satisfying somehow. Receiving and being like [gasps]. Yeah, it was magical. I didn't even realize that it was a possibility this year to have something so wonderful and then it was there. So yeah, *zong*. I'm looking forward to *zong*.

[01:07:05]

SG: Sign me up for that workshop. Alright, being conscious of the time, I think before we wrap up, is there anything that you wanted to add on the topic of food, identity, 2020?

ML: Not really. I think—I don't want to say too much about delivery apps and stuff because it's kind of like—I'm sure that there's something there worth researching. But yeah, kind of meh. Actually maybe what I would say is, for example, DoorDash or SkipTheDishes or Uber Eats—what restaurants are available on which apps kind of really determines what you can get access to. For me, I have to use Fantuan [Delivery], which is the Chinese—really, mostly made for Chinese people to use, that app—if I want to get specific Chinese restaurants. Often, that's what I would have to use. I have four different apps on my phone because they all have different selection but it's very rare that the run-of-the-mill SkipTheDishes or DoorDash will have the Chinese restaurant down the street kind of thing. That's just something I noticed where I was like, Huh, that's interesting. It forces people to—it puts people in little boxes. If you don't have access to this Chinese app, then you just wouldn't have access to this whole world of delicious foods. But most of the Chinese people who would want that have Fantuan, so it's kind of like [shrugs].

SG: Yeah, that's a really good point and seeing the new services that are coming out in light of 2020 to kind of address that gap, or which ones aren't coming out to address that gap. Yeah, that's a great point. With that, then, I think I'm going to end by saying thank you so much for talking with me. Yeah!

ML: Yay. It was really fun. I hope that there was useful stuff in there. [laughs]

[01:09:45]