

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Kai Fung

Interviewer: (Sylvia) Ching Man Wong

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/kai-fung>

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(Sylvia) Ching Man Wong: This is Sylvia Wong for the Coney Island History Project. Today we are speaking with Kai Fung at Seaside Innovative Senior Center. We will conduct this interview in Cantonese. Hi Mr. Fung, I would like to know when and where you were born. Could you describe your childhood?

Kai Fung: Yes, sure. My name is Kai Fung. I was born in 1956 in Macau. I lived in Macau for 12 years, and my whole family immigrated to Hong Kong when I was 12. As my father is a Chinese kebab cook, I studied in an elementary school under his union. After I graduated from the school we all immigrated to Hong Kong.

CMW: Can you tell us how many siblings you have and your childhood experience?

KF: I have seven other siblings and I am the youngest among them. We lived on the second floor of 37A Travessa dos Anjos, Macau. It was a wooden house. We could see what the people downstairs were doing through the wooden gaps, like turning the lights on and off. When people were walking in the house, it would make noises. Our unit was very small for a family of ten. I remember that I shared a canvas bed with my sixth brother. The rest would sleep on the floor or find other space. We only had

one bed in our unit. When we had meals, there was only an eight or ten-inch fan which couldn't turn. If the weather got too hot, we would rather have our meals on the street. Every family member carried their bowls (and chopsticks) with the dishes on it to the street, where we would squat or walk, and eat it. I felt happy in those good old days.

CMW: Your childhood experience was so special. You immigrated to Hong Kong at the age of 12. Can you tell us why your family decided to immigrate there? And I understand that after your immigration, a policy change was made between Hong Kong and Macau. Can you share with us?

KF: Yes, we were lucky. We all moved to Hong Kong when I was 12. My family worked. Some of my siblings and I went to study. Later on, a new custom policy that only Hong Kong residents could visit Macau at certain times was implemented. Macau residents could no longer enter Hong Kong as they wished. We were so lucky we moved to Hong Kong before the policy was implemented. After we settled in Hong Kong, I went to a middle school.

CMW: Does the policy refer to Macau residents no longer being able to enter Hong Kong freely for the purpose of studying, working or travelling?

KF: Right, I think so. We took a big ship to Hong Kong. They are all gone. Now people take hydrofoils. I remembered the three old ships carrying passengers between Hong Kong and Macau were called Dong Shan, Tai Loy and Fok Shan.

CMW: OK. Which district did you live in Hong Kong? How about your secondary school life?

KF: I remembered we lived on the 3rd Floor, at 50 A Wing Hong Street in Shum Shui Po District. That was an old building. I studied at Tsung Tsin Middle School near So Uk Estate. I completed my secondary education there.

CMW: I believe that back then, secondary education in Hong

Kong was taught in English. When you went to elementary school in Macau, did you have a foreign language class such as Portuguese? And did you encounter any language learning difficulty or cultural shock when you went to middle school in Hong Kong?

KF: I was taught in Chinese when I was studying in Macau. My father's union school was a general school so they did not offer it [foreign language class]. I could choose the medium of instruction, either English or Chinese, in Hong Kong and I chose Chinese. The junior high curriculum was taught in Chinese as well.

CMW: Did you adapt well to the bilingual environment in Hong Kong?

KF: The great majority of Hong Kongers speak Cantonese as the medium of communication, except those who are superior, or who work for foreigners or in the tourist industry. Ordinary people don't need much English literacy in their life. Signage is bilingual too, but Chinese alone would be good enough for us.

CMW: Can you tell me where you studied after graduation from middle school? And I understand that you met your wife after that. Can you tell us about that?

KF: After my middle school graduation, I found my passion in the food catering industry since my fifth brother worked in a restaurant. I thought this job was interesting and I would not get bored, but working in a restaurant was mediocre to me so I wanted to pursue a job in the industry for a Western restaurant or a hotel. I joined a job training school and studied hotel management and services for a semester. After graduation I started to work at a hotel. The first hotel I worked for was called Hyatt Regency Hong Kong located on Han Hau Road, but it was demolished when I visited there last time.

CMW: Then where did you meet your wife?

KF: My work at Hyatt Regency Hong Kong was actually an

internship. After that I found a job at The Excelsior Hong Kong, Causeway Bay. I worked in the Room Service Department while my wife was in Room Management Department. When I delivered the meals to guests, I met my wife.

CMW: I remember you said your elder sister filed for permanent residence in US for her brothers. How did the opportunities change you and your family's life?

KF: My sister became a US citizen and filed for the whole family. As I was born in Macau, it only took two years for our cases to be approved. I was interested to start a new life here, just like my fifth brother. Other siblings did not show much interest in it so only two of us decided to immigrate here. So I told my then-girlfriend, now wife, that I am going to immigrate to the US soon. If you want to come with me, we got to get married. If not, I can go first and you stay until you make the decision. She said yes, so we got married in Hong Kong and came to the US together.

CMW: How long had you guys been dating each other when she made the decision?

KF: About two years, almost three years.

CMW: How old were you when you got married?

KF: I was 21 and she was 18. She was not even old enough to get married and needed somebody [parents] to sign for the marriage certificate.

CMW: Wow, ok. How old are you now?

KF: 62

CMW: So your marriage is already 41 years, which is awesome! You mentioned that owing to your Macau citizenship, you could get approved in two years, which was faster than Hong Kong or China residents. Can you tell us where are all your siblings now? Is anyone staying in Hong Kong?

KF: None of my siblings stayed in Hong Kong. My fourth brother is living in Montreal, Canada now. The other siblings all

immigrated to the US within five or six years after I came here. No one stayed in Hong Kong.

CMW: Did your parents immigrate too?

KF: My parents visited me after I came here but they did not adapt to the lifestyle so they went back to Hong Kong. Then my father passed away there and my mother felt bored being there alone. Therefore, she moved to US to live with us until she passed away.

CMW: You said they did not adapt to the US life. Can you give us some examples?

KF: They could neither speak English nor drive a car. If we all went to work, they had to stay at home like in a prison. The TV shows were in English, too. They could not communicate with other people in the community so they felt very bored. After half a year, they went back to Hong Kong.

CMW: They did not live in a Chinese community so they had socialization and life issues. Is that what you mean?

KF: Right. When I first came here I lived in my sister's affordable housing on Pike Street near FDR Drive in Chinatown for three to six months. Then I moved to a rented apartment near Church Avenue in Brooklyn. In terms of safety, it was mediocre but the rent was cheap. We were low-income, new immigrants so we lived there for two years.

CMW: Ok. How was your first impression of New York? How did you find your first job here?

KF: When I first came here, I found it looked like Sesame Street on TV: Graffiti everywhere. As I worked in the hotel industry in Hong Kong, I was interested in working in the same industry in the United States. When I first came here, one of the Hyatt Hotels had a grand opening, so I asked the old one to write me a reference letter to the new one here. Then I got a job here and worked for two years. After that, I used all my savings to open my own restaurant. Unfortunately, I lost my bet in the business after

one and a half years and had to start all over again. There was no chance for me to re-enter the hotel industry but there was a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown that was hiring (which was called "The First Restaurant"). I was lucky because I could speak better English than many workers in Chinatown. Therefore, even though I had no Chinese cuisine experience at all, I got the position as a captain. I remembered I was the youngest captain in all of Chinatown. It was such a pleasure.

CMW: Where was the restaurant located?

KF: it was on 202 Canal Street. It was torn down and rebuilt into the New Kam Man Supermarket building .

CMW: How long did you work there?

KF: I think I had been working there for over two or three years. Then in 1987, Vista (International) Hotel, New York City Hall had a grand opening so I applied for the job and reentered the industry. I worked there for..... I was just a waiter in a Western restaurant there. I remember in 1993, that was the first terrorist attack. The parking garage in our hotel was blown up by the terrorists. I wasn't there though because I always had night shifts. The hotel had to shut down for renovation. As I worked there for over a period of time I was a member of the hotel union. The union referred me to another position in Essex House on Central Park. After two years, the Vista Hotel reopened and invited me to go back to work. However, I was very satisfied with the pay and work at Essex House so I didn't go back. I was really lucky because after several years, the 9/11 terrorist attack took place. The entire Vista Hotel is gone. If I worked there I would still be in one piece as I worked at night, but the hotel was destroyed. After that, I kept my job working in Essex House. There was a bar inside the restaurant. I always attempted to practice bartending while the bartender was away from his bar. I think I was very smart as I observed what he did it and learned it. When he went to the restroom, I would practice. The manager knew that I was capable and he assigned me to work as a

substitute bartender when the real one was on vacation. So I substituted for a while until the bartender retired. He promoted me to bartender and I worked more than 20 years in that position until I retired recently.

CMW: What an amazing experience! Were the benefits of being a bartender better? And the duties were more interesting and satisfying?

KF: Yes I think so. The income [of a bartender] was much higher than a waiter. Perhaps I felt more proud of myself. If I tell someone I am a bartender, it sounds more high class than a waiter. So I chose to be a bartender. The other reason is that the duties are easier.

CMW: Did most of your income come from the tips of customers?

KF: The tips were higher than my basic salary. I can say the tips of a bartender are more or less the same as that of a waiter, but the income of the former is much higher.

CMW: So in terms of tips, both positions are more or less equal. But for the basic salary, a bartender makes much more than a waiter.

KF: Right. That is because bartending requires more skills so the income is higher.

CMW: Did you get a license?

KF: No, I didn't. That was an internal promotion. However, before I was promoted, I passed a test designed by the manager.

CMW: Did your wife work?

KF: Like most of the Chinese ladies in the United States, when she first came here she worked in a garment factory. But she hated it so much that she complained to me, like, "Why did we immigrate here? I have to work in such a factory." But we were lucky. After some time, there was a hotel opened in Manhattan so she went to apply for the same position, housekeeping, that she worked in Hong Kong before. She succeeded and works

there currently. Now I am already retired but she hasn't yet, so she feels unsatisfied.

CMW: It is almost time for her to retire, right? Now she is 59?

KF: Still a long way to go! I myself have not reached the age of retirement yet, but there was an opportunity in my old company which was acquired by another company. The new one provided us an earlier retirement plan that they had to pay me two years of salary, given that I worked here for over 20 years already. I thought, I'm going to retire after two years anyway so I accepted it. You see I always worked the night shifts and that's why I looked so skinny and unhealthy. It was a good opportunity that they paid me two years of basic salary. I don't mind the tips so I've decided to retire earlier [last year].

CMW: Can you tell me what was your work schedule as a bartender? How many shifts are there?

KF: There were three shifts in the bar: The morning shift is from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. But it is definitely served by the bartender with highest seniority. Even though I had worked there for more than 20 years, my seniority was the lowest. Both the two bartenders before me worked until retirement so I got the chance to win this position. The other two shifts are all night shifts: One is from 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. while the other is from 7 p.m. to 3 a.m. As I had the lowest seniority, I got no choice but the 7 p.m- 3 a.m. shift. I worked in Central Park so when I arrived home on Coney Island, everyone would say good morning to me.

CMW: You have been working too hard for 22 years. It's time to retire and let your body rests. Can you tell me how is your living environment on Coney Island? And what was your first impression of Coney Island?

KF: Frankly speaking, I bought a house here just for its price. Back then, the housing values were very expensive in New York City like no one can afford it. Unless you bought a house the second year you arrived in this land like my fifth brother,

otherwise you couldn't afford it. I lived at my siblings' house, which you could say was both a bane and a boon. His house was cozy so we lived there for a long time, until one day I wanted to have my own place then I found that I could not afford one anymore. Eventually we bought our house here with government subsidies which was due to the poor safety in the neighborhood. When we moved in it was 1989. Friends around me said they would never live here even if they got paid to do so. But I thought it is better to live in our own place than someone else's, so I bought this house. The lucky thing is, over the years I am still in one piece. It's "knock on the wood" Thank, god.

CMW: Is your house a two-family house?

KF: It is a one-family house with 3 bedrooms upstairs, a living room, a kitchen and a dining room downstairs. It was very spacious together with the front and back yard. It was very comfortable to live in and the safety level is much better now than in 1989. Many Chinese moved to our neighborhood. My neighbors are both Chinese. Safety is getting better and we live here happily.

CMW: How many Chinese families were there when you moved in in 1989? Would you mind telling us how much the house cost back then?

KF: When I first moved in, there was around five Chinese families. Now, one third of the families on the block are Chinese. When I bought this house in 1989, it cost \$123K. Now it is worth over \$500K. Even though the safety was no good before, real estate will appreciate eventually. The current market price of over \$500K is still much cheaper compared to houses in other neighborhoods. With the same price in other places, you cannot enjoy such a big space. The living environment is very comfortable and it is just two blocks away from the shore and beach.

CMW: In fact, the living environment is quite ideal if the safety

improved. You mentioned that both your neighbors are Chinese. Can you tell me what which part of China they come from?

KF: They are both Toisanese as they speak in such a dialect. Most of the families on my block come from Toisan, China. Only my family speak Cantonese. Not many residents here are from Hong Kong. Usually the Hong Kongers are rich people. Unfortunately, I am just small potatoes.

CMW: You are just too humble. So you live on W 35th St and which cross street?

KF: I live in a two-story attached house on W 35th St between Mermaid Avenue and Neptune Avenue.

CMW: Roger that. One third of the population in your block is Chinese. Do you think there are sufficient Chinese business and culture elements in the neighborhood?

KF: Despite the fact that it is a residential area for Chinese community, there are not many Chinese stores and businesses. Perhaps it is due to the safety issue. Chinese are afraid to get robbed so they don't open a business nearby. We would go to 86th Street in Bensonhurst to buy Chinese products.

CMW: Mr. Fung, I learned that you have seven other siblings and six of them are still alive. Can you tell me how many siblings reside in Coney Island?

KF: I was the first one to own a house here in 1989. After five or six years, my third sister immigrated and checked out our neighborhood. The price was really attractive to her so I helped her to apply for it. Her house is on West 29th Street, oh sorry, West 23rd Street. After one or two years, my seventh sister immigrated here and found out the housing was expensive everywhere in Brooklyn except Coney Island, so I suggested she buy a house on West 28th Street. So she was the third one to move in. Then after one or two years, my sixth brother came here as well. I looked around the neighborhood and found a house at the corner of West 23rd Street and Neptune Avenue

was on sale. He bought it. So right now, including me, we have four relatives and their families residing in Coney Island. We love it here!

CMW: So you are the leader in your big family. How did you apply for the housing? Did you apply for a government or private mortgage? And how about your siblings?

KF: The house was brand new when I bought it directly from the government in 1989. The government assisted citizens with the mortgage through Fannie Mae. The interest rate was lower than the market rate so I agreed. My third sister followed suit. As for my seventh sister and sixth brother, they were buying second-hand houses from the first owner, so they had to apply for mortgages from their banks privately.

CMW: You helped them to find these houses, right? Did you talk to a real estate broker or use other ways to find them?

KF: I was just walking around the neighborhood and see if any house were for sale. We did not contact any real estate agents.

CMW: So it was all buyer-seller deals.

KF: Right.

CMW: Oh I see.

KF: When I and my third sister bought the houses, we had to go through the NC Housing Partnership, which was an organization finding underdeveloped land for residential buildings for low-income families. They aim to encourage more people to move into the neighborhood.

CMW: So what you did was submit an application form then wait for the lottery, right?

KF: Yes, both me and my third sister did that. Our incomes were above their floor and below their ceiling, then we filled out the application form. If you are eligible but the number of applicants are higher than the supplied quantity, then they will carry out a lottery. When I bought mine in 1989, the amount of applicants

were three times more than the housing supply. Of course now it is getting much harder than ever. Recently, they built three-family housing and I think the amount of applicants are 300 times more than the supply. The price was very cheap: \$700K for a three-family house. But there were only five houses with hundreds of people applying. I took the form but I did not apply.

CMW: Can you tell me what's your favorite part of Coney Island?

KF: The best part of it is the beach. Not only residents, people from all over the city love to spend their summer here. Luxurious dwellings are being constructed now. Although I personally do not think it is going to work: If I am rich I will not live here. But other than the safety, the environment here is pretty nice. We have the Boardwalk and the amusement park. People love to visit here whenever there are holidays or celebrations. I know we now have a big music theater and new roller coasters. Being the annual hotdog contest venue and Brooklyn Marathon finish line, Coney Island attracts myriads of visitors.

CMW: Have you taken your children to the amusement park?

KF: Oh that's so strange that I never bring my kids there. The only time I visited the amusement park was the second day I arrived in the United States. I lived here for almost 30 years but I never visited it after my residence. I don't know why.

CMW: I guess that's because you always take the subway to Coney Island station then transfer to a bus home, so you don't get a chance to visit the park, right?

KF: Yes, you are right. Other than the safety issue, transportation was another shortcoming here. I live on 35th St, which is almost at the tip of Coney Island so I have to transfer to a bus after I get off the train at Stillwell Avenue. But I have to say, the situation is so much better now. When I first moved in, I had to pay the bus fare in addition to the subway fare. After two or three years they began providing free transfer services. It is still inconvenient though, especially if you miss the bus. As I always got off from

work in a non-business hour, if I left the station but the bus just left, oh my god you're gonna stand there forever! You need to wait at least 15 minutes for the next bus. I usually drove and park my car near the train station so that I could drive home after I got off from Stillwell Avenue station.

CMW: How long does the shuttle bus take from Stillwell Avenue to home?

KF: The distance was not too far. We can arrive in around ten minutes. The issue is if you miss a bus, sometimes you have to wait for more than half an hour for the next ride.

CMW: For you, what is the worst part of Coney Island?

KF: I can say other than safety and transportation, I love every bit of Coney Island.

CMW: Last year you retired. How are you going to plan your life? I know you are going to this senior center on W 37th Street to play ping pong. Do you have any plan for your future?

KF: Temporarily, I play ping pong, Tai'chi in the center and go swimming at the YMCA to kill time. Onweekends I will take care of my grandchildren so that my son and daughter-in-law can have some private time for their relationship. My wife and I will travel to different countries when she retires, as we love traveling so much. However, if I ask her to go traveling with me now, she would stare at me and say: "Ain't nobody got time for that! Can I give up my job?" I understand that's hard for her. The two biggest problems in the US include health insurance. Our financial situation allows us to retire at the same time, but the problem is we will have no health insurance coverage. Now I am benefiting from my wife's company insurance as I can't take Medicare. I am not yet 65. So my wife says: "Then how much longer will I have to work? Is Medicare my only solution?" I console her that "I got three more years to receive Medicare, then you can buy your own insurance. That would not cost too much and we can enjoy our retirement together. Then we can travel around the world

together." She loves cruise trips. We are now planning it.

CMW: I see. Did you visit Hong Kong? When was the last time?

KF: I like to visit Hong Kong too but I hate the flight. You need to sit there for over ten hours without sleep. I hope after my wife's retirement, we can take cruises to Hong Kong. It would be more pleasant.

CMW: Wow it's such a great idea. You can visit different countries on the way back to Hong Kong across the Pacific Ocean. OK, we had such a nice conversation today. This is the end of our interview.