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Interview with Stephen Chen December 8, 2022

Marieke Van Damme [00:00:01] So today is December 8th, 2022. I'm Marieke Van Damme, executive director of History Cambridge, and I'm here at the Hooper Lee Nichols House, and I'm joined by Stephen Chen. Hi, Stephen.

Stephen Chen [00:00:16] Hi. How are you?

MVD [00:00:17] Stephen with a "ph."

SC [00:00:18] Correct. Right, right. It's a pleasure to be here.

MVD [00:00:22] Well, I'm happy to have you here because we are going to talk about you. We're going to talk about your family, and we'll talk about what it was like to grow up here in Cambridge.

SC [00:00:32] Great.

MVD [00:00:33] So maybe start off by saying, how did you get to be here in Cambridge?

SC [00:00:41] Well, actually, I was born in Cambridge. I was born right down the street from here, at Mount Auburn Hospital in 1952. February 25th. So that puts me at 70 years old. But my mother came to Cambridge from China. It was actually the last boat that left Shanghai before mainland China was taken over by the communists, and she came directly to Cambridge. And the reason why she came from Cambridge, because in China, she had many friends that were either went to MIT or Harvard. And they said, if you come to America, you have to live in Cambridge. So when she came, she made a big deal. She came with my father and my two, my sister, my older sister and older brother, and they, lived on Kirkland Street. And that was before I was born. And then when I came around, they already moved to Alpine Street, which were, postwar housing that was built after the war. So the houses there at that time were all duplex. And, it was a very interesting street because there were people from all over the world and people with different cultures. So I think it was really kind of, it was a great opportunity[...] in that area was kind of a enclave of, black families that actually own homes. So I was friends with them. There were people from Ireland, people from Europe, from Hawaii. And, you know, we were all kind of baby boomers and we would always play together. And I was a little bit older. So I tend to be the kind of the leader of the pack. So we would play, at that time, Army... I would be the general and the kids would be like sergeants. And the girls, sorry to stereotype, but they would be the nurses. So, you know, we'll pretend like we're wounded and [say] Nurse, nurse. Come here. Help us. And they would come up and kind of pretend to heal us and bandage us up. But it was really fun. And we would just play, really, into the night. The neighborhood was very safe. The parents really kind of let us go out and play.[...] We just played and just...explored the neighborhood, went to other people's houses down the street. There was also a back alley...in Alpine Street at that time. And I just remember,... big puddles of water during the springtime and kind of marching through puddles and things like that. And of course, behind the house was the, playground and had tennis courts and Merry-Go-Round and things like that. And we just had really a grand time. So, and there were people who were professional people who were going to Harvard. I brought a sheet that one of our neighbors was Nicholas Bloembergen, who was a professor at Harvard and physics. And he actually he won the Nobel Prize in 19, I think 81 or 80s for a laser. He was one of the developers of the laser. And I'm still good, good friends with his, with his son, which is probably my age. So we still keep in touch, but, is interesting fact, because when they immigrated, they had to have someone kind of vouch for them. Someone that, you know, if the immigration or FBI would come and say, okay, we want to check on them. And actually, they interviewed my mother and father, so they gave them really high marks, which I hopefully maybe helped with the immigration status. Another person I used to play with was Paul Sullivan. And his father was actually, Louis Wade Sullivan, who...became Secretary of Health and Services under the senior Bush administration. So it was great. We had kids who were Jewish. Kids were were black, Muslim. We had kids who were Irish and

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German. It was just it was just a lot of fun...al always had a dog growing up, so I still always have a dog. And [in] those times we just let our dogs kind of wander the streets, and they would just follow us around....they were really well-behaved. Of course, nowadays there's a leash law, but in those days...the dog wanted to go out, you open the door and the dog's gone and comes back, and that was it. So that was really fun.

MVD [00:05:44] What house did you live at on Alpine?

SC [00:05:45] I lived well, we had a duplex called— was 49-47 Alpine Street, was the duplex. And eventually my mother purchased the house, and then we broke the walls. So we used both sides, which was kind of interesting because it was like a mirror image. So we had two kitchens, two bathrooms, two living rooms. And they looked exactly the same, but they were the mirror image, because they were both sides of the house...we had at one time two stairways [that were] separated by a wall because they were duplexes.

MVD [00:06:23] Did you use both kitchens?

SC [00:06:25] We used one kitchen, and then we used the other as a storage area.

MVD [00:06:30] I'm wondering if you can tell me— say the names of your parents and tell me a little bit about them.

SC [00:06:38] Okay. My [father] was Thomas Chen. And my mother was Joyce Chen. And my father was really kind of outdoorsy. Actually, I can share a picture. I don't do this anymore, but he liked to go deer hunting. So he went out, got a deer. And of all things, he brought it home. And he hanged up the dead deer on our play set in the backyard. And then the neighbors were complaining like, you know, this is not really proper for kids to see this dead deer hanging on your swing set.

MVD [00:07:17] Where did he go hunting?

SC [00:07:20] Out west somewhere or something like that. So I have a picture I can share with you with him, with the deer hanging on their swing set.

MVD [00:07:28] I don't think that's legal in Cambridge right now.

SC [00:07:31] Yeah, well, everything was really...very different then. I mean, even the type of toys you played with were probably considered dangerous now. I went to school and I started at transition class at Buckingham. And that time it was Buckingham, not Brown Nichols yet. My sister went to Buckingham. She... [went] to high school and graduated from Buckingham. And I went up to, at that time, the fourth grade. The boys after the fourth grade were either going to Brown, Nichols or going somewhere else. I was the only Asian Chinese person in Buckingham at that time, and my sister was in the upper school and she was the only Asian person. But then again, her classmates were... [Sylvia] Poggioli who was the reporter for NPR. They're still good friends. And she also went to school with [Edwin] Land, the founder of Polaroid's, daughter. So there are a lot of influential people that we kind of, stuck around with, and we're friends. And again, they were all very friendly. They would go to our house. We'd go to their house. My mom was always very progressive. I remember we had one of the first TVs. It was a little tiny TVs and the neighborhood kids would come over to the house and watch TV. So... we were very, very open, very, you know, very accommodating to all the kids. And again, my mom really enjoyed having kids around.

MVD [00:09:16] How did it feel to be the only Chinese or Asian person?

SC [00:09:21] Well I didn't know because I didn't really have anything to compare it with. So what I always felt was kind of part of the society. I didn't really feel anything. The really strange thing is I remember going to California because I [would], you know, see Chinese people and like, even in the restaurant scene or Chinatown. But I remember going when I was young and going to a breakfast place

and there was a Chinese person cooking pancakes. And American breakfast. And I thought that was strange.

MVD [00:09:56] Why was that strange?

SC [00:09:58] I don't know, because, you know, here on the East Coast, you know, there weren't that many Chinese. I remember looking at the phone book, and that time it was the Greater Boston phone book. And I think I counted like seven Chens in the whole book. You know, even though they don't have phone books now, but I'm quite sure it's probably in the tens or 20 pages of Chens in the phone book. But it was very, very rare that you would see a Chen in the phone book. So... [this was around the] late 50s and early 60s.

MVD [00:10:38] So can you tell us the story about your mother bringing treats to the bake sale?

SC [00:10:46] Yes. Well, what happened was we were going to Buckingham, and every May they have what's called the Buckingham Circus. And parents are encouraged to bring in baked goods and cookies and things like that. So my mother said, okay, she'll bake cookies that kind of look like pumpkins. I don't know why they but she did that. And then she spent the night making egg rolls. You know, these are kind of, but more kind of American-style egg rolls. But they were, you know, so she brought them to the bake table, and then she went home to kind of change a little bit to freshen up. She came back and she saw the cookies on the table, but she didn't see any of her egg rolls there. And of course, she thought, oh, maybe they don't like them. Or they didn't know what they were so and they were too embarrassed to put them out. But when she got closer to the table, one of the parents said, oh, you know, Mrs. Chen, those egg rolls you made, they sold out like hotcakes. Can you make more? And then she was so happy that you actually went back and made more for the bake sale. And then from there, parents asked her. Well, how do you do this? How do you cook this? And then she started cooking classes in our home. At that time, we lived [on] only one side, so it was a little tiny kitchen. But she would have people come to the house and do, cooking classes. And then eventually she started doing, cooking classes at the adult Cambridge Adult Center and then Boston Adult Center. And then, she opened the restaurant, [in] 1958 on Concord Avenue, 617 Concord Avenue. And then she wrote a cookbook. And the cookbook was kind of interesting because when she first did the book, lot of publishers didn't want it published because they said, you know, because my mom insisted there has to be a color picture of the food and a lot of the publisher said, "People don't want color pictures in their cookbooks." You know, they wanted something like the Joy of Cooking, just the recipes, you know, it also was just too expensive. So but, you know, my mom was the type of person who would not take no for an answer. So she self-published her book. So she self-published her book and sold it through the restaurant, through her friends. And she sold... a couple of thousand cookbooks. And then, later on, Lippincott, took over the prints of the book.

MVD [00:13:13] I can't even imagine, in this age of Instagram and TikTok and social media, where it's all visual, not having a picture of the food.

SC [00:13:23] Right? Well, even if you look at cookbooks now... the pictures of the foods is larger than the recipe sometimes. So again, she was very determined. If there was something that had to be done, she would figure out how to do it. So, yeah. So she self-published the book. And then at that time in the mid 60s, the Julia Child Cook Show from GBH was done. And I don't know if you've been watching that series on HBO, Julia. So anyways, there was a point where actually she mentions Joyce Chen, and that's in that series. But there was a point when Julia wasn't quite sure if she wanted to do a show or not again. So then the producers of her show came to the restaurant, spoke to my mother and..."We [would] like to do a Chinese cooking show. Would you like to do it?" And my mom said yes. And you know what's interesting? Her English was not really that great. She had a hard time pronouncing words. So that's why if you [watch] lots of shows which you can now through [the] GBH archives, you can sometimes see her or hear her spell the word because she had a hard time with the R's. And, so she did the cooking show. Was really hard because it was a lot of rehearsal. She had to. She had to gather all the ingredients, pots and pans, everything herself. All the set. The set was actually Julia Child's set. And put the Asian slope to it, a slant to it. Also, Julia Child was a very tall woman. I think she was like

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six two. My mom is not six two. So, my mom would have to wear high heels in order to put her height up on the counter. But she did it. And she rehearsed with the producers, Ruth Lockwood, for a few days in our home. Because in those days, videotape was not editable and was black and white. If you had to edit, you actually had to cut the tape. And then if you cut the tape, it has kind of a blurb. So the show had to be done 23 minutes or 25 minutes [straight]. It had to be done straight, nonstop. So everything had to be kind of timed. Yeah. Like the rice and the water had to boil at the right time and the cooking had to be done at the right time. So timing was very important. And of course, so were the ingredients. And that's why if you look at the show, my mom would have the ingredients labeled, and there would be a picture of the servings because I think also [it was] just easier for her to remember. But also, she had ...a hard time pronouncing certain words or not. So she did a series, I think, of 24 shows.

MVD [00:16:23] That all sounds very stressful. How did she handle it?

SC [00:16:25] Well, she had three children. She was running a restaurant, and she was doing the TV show. She was able to do it, but then also, it kind of made us self-sufficient because when we had the restaurant, that was really hard. She was there most of the time. And I remember, we would say, okay, what's for dinner? And our parents are working and we say, okay, we'll order delivery from Chicken Delight. Which was a kind of, a delivery service on Mass Avenue...we'd get the fried chicken and the fries, seafood platter, and stuff like that. And we would be home and we'd be watching TV and they were working.

MVD [00:17:16] What was family time like with your parents?

SC [00:17:19] Well, before the restaurant, it was more family time, but it was really it was kind of a little more difficult. Like, we weren't really beach people...[or people who go for a short trip to] the White Mountains...we really didn't do that. It was mostly just kind of working...for me, at the age of maybe 9 or 10, my job at the restaurant...after school was to fill out takeout containers of duck sauce and mustard. And then my sister would be the one who would actually pack the orders. And then by the time I was able to get my driver's license, my job would be to pick up the help. Because one thing is my mother provide[d] housing for all the chefs. Rent free, because it was hard to get chefs.

MVD [00:18:09] Tell me more about that. That's interesting.

SC [00:18:11] So she would actually purchase homes. So at one time I think we had like 3 or 4 houses in Cambridge. And, my job was to go there and pick them up. And then after the restaurant closed, take them home. So she was, yeah, pretty progressive.

MVD [00:18:32] Where did the chefs come from?

SC [00:18:34] Well, they came from Japan, Taiwan. Some some from Brazil. Couldn't do China yet because [of] the relations between US and China...And actually, she eventually brought/help[ed] them bring their families over to America too. And I think she did maybe about 37 H1 visas. H1 is showing the United States government that this person has a special talent that cannot be fulfilled by someone in America. So [it involved] having the lawyers going to immigration, pleading the case, putting ads in the paper showing that there was a need for someone to cook Chinese food because you couldn't find Chinese chefs. So that's why she kind of created the whole growth of Chinese restaurants... And the reason I can always tell if [a restaurant was influenced by] Joyce Chen is because in 1958, my mom on her menu [called dumplings] Peking Ravioli. So really in the Boston area, you hear it called Peking Ravioli. And that was number four on the menu, because what she also did was we also had non-Chinese working as servers. So she needed to figure out the way to communicate with the kitchen. So everything was numbered. So all the beef started with 50 and then chicken was 30. If there was more than ten, [you found a way to] extend it. But Peking Ravioli was always number four. So even now, sometimes I'll go to restaurants and I'll see their menu. And number four is Peking Ravioli.

MVD [00:20:33] It's just stuck in their brains.

SC [00:20:35] Well, because we actually had one chef who opened his own restaurant, and they've created a new menu, and they put all the numbers. And he couldn't. He couldn't because he remembered the Joyce Chen numbers. So he said, I can't do this because the numbers are different. They have to be the same as a Joyce Chen menu, so then I can cook them.

MVD [00:20:58] That's so interesting. So those chefs would eventually go on and open their own businesses.

SC [00:21:04] Yeah. Yeah. At one time we actually had three Joyce Chen restaurants in Cambridge. And I was thinking we've got three Chinese restaurants in Cambridge. Does Cambridge need three restaurants that serve Chinese food? Well, actually, I was wrong. There are more than three.

MVD [00:21:28] So you started working in the restaurants from a young age?

SC [00:21:33] Yeah. And as soon as I could drive, then I was able to do more, more items like go to Chinatown and pick up supplies and pick up the help and open the restaurant and close the restaurant.

MVD [00:21:44] Yeah. Did you get paid?

SC [00:21:47] Not really. You know, because a lot of Chinese families do it because it's a family thing. You don't really get paid for it. I was just grateful that I had a place to live and food to eat.

MVD [00:22:02] And your siblings did the same.

SC [00:22:05] The same? Yeah. Yeah. Until it became a little profitable. And I remember my first paycheck was maybe like \$1,500. I said, oh, wow. Because I guess the minimum wage at that time was like \$1.25 or something per hour.

MVD [00:22:21] So the whole restaurant was a family business. Did you have time for other activities?

SC [00:22:28] Well, before... the restaurant, I [played with] the neighborhood kids. So from until I was 16, most of the time I was hanging around with the neighborhood kids. In my high school years, again with a lot of Black families. So some of my best friends were Black. And actually, one his father was a Cambridge police officer who later became a detective. And we would ride—this is before we would drive—we'd ride our bicycles all over Cambridge, and do a whole set thing. So we're kind of like a bicycle gang. It would be like six of us kind of terrorizing. And then back in 1968. My mother... on a trip to Taiwan, she bought the pedicab, a real-size pedicab, and then the smaller one for kids. And I remember we would ride the pedicab through Harvard Square.

MVD [00:23:33] What kind of reaction would there be?

SC [00:23:35] [A] great reaction. Because it said Joyce Chen on the back, but there would be three of us. One would pedal, and two would ride. And if we went uphill, the other two would get out and help push if we had to go uphill. But that was kind of really kind of a fun thing to take a trip to Harvard Square and ride that pedicab around.

MVD [00:23:59] Did you hang out in Harvard Square with your friends?

SC [00:24:02] Not that much. Not much. You know, after school, I usually came home or I usually went to work.

MVD [00:24:12] What were your friends doing at that time?

SC [00:24:15] I really don't know. I wasn't with them, so.

MVD [00:24:23] Where did the kids go to get into trouble? When you were a kid in Cambridge.

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SC [00:24:29] Well, we were I think we were all pretty good. Because you remember, my friends, the father was a police officer, so really, they couldn't really get into trouble. And we didn't hang around the so-called "pit" area of Cambridge or something like that. So, we were pretty good kids.

MVD [00:24:53] Was there ever an expectation of you to automatically go into the family business?

SC [00:25:00] Well, I did. It was when we had the restaurant on 500 Memorial Drive by MIT... We opened that restaurant back in '68, I think. MIT came to my mother and said we have this restaurant called the Smith House, and eventually it's going to be torn down, but would you like to rent it and use [it as] a restaurant? And it held 500 people. So my mom said, yeah, and I think the rent was like \$2,000 a month. And it'll hold 500 people. But it was old. So rather than put a lot of money into it, a architect, friend of my mom and MIT said, look, just paint it these different colors. And if I can find some old pictures, it was like red and blue and yellow and just very colorful. And it made it look kind of new. And then we fixed up the chairs and things like that because we knew eventually it would be torn down and again, it would hold 500 people. That was a big step for us. And it had a great view of the Charles River, because [it was] right along the the river. And then MIT tore it down and then built a dorm. And then after that, some of the students who remember the restaurant used to call it the Joyce Chen Dorm.

MVD [00:26:30] Yeah. What kind of people would go to the restaurant, especially in the early years.

SC [00:26:37] Well, people in Cambridge, professors, people who lived in Belmont, Cambridge. We also had regular customers that came from Rhode Island... So all sorts of people. She also helped introduce the Chinese buffet. We found that Tuesday night was not a busy night. So, my mom decided to do a buffet all you can eat, and I think it was, like \$6.95 or something like that. So what she did first was, she had the buffet and we had hot plates out. And in the beginning she offered [a] carving station with ham and turkey, because she felt that if it was all Chinese food, American people would say, well, I'm not really into Chinese food or I'm with my friends. So she thought if they put the turkey and the ham, their people would say, well, \$6.95, that's a great deal, and I can eat turkey. But she did that, and she found that more and more people went towards the more authentic Chinese food. And within just a few weeks, she was able to get rid of the turkey and ham and put other more [Chinese] dishes on. So she was really good [introducing people to Chinese food], but in a way that they could identify with. And they got so busy there would be waiting lines in the parking lot. And then my mother and father, married at that time, [used to play music on records]. And his thing was, okay, we're busy. So you put on the tango. And he felt that that made people move faster.

MVD [00:28:28] What was your father's role in the restaurant?

SC [00:28:31] Well, he was, kind of the manager, but his other business was importing Chinese art objects; jade and ivory figurines. And he would take these long trips. He would go down to Florida, sometimes even Alabama. Or New Orleans. At that time he would drive his Volkswagen. Back in the early 60s. I mean, at that time, Volkswagens were such a novelty item. If you saw another Volkswagen, you would beep your horn. So again, [my parents] were very open and pretty westernized.

MVD [00:29:19] Yeah, well, I heard that the restaurant was popular for dates.

SC [00:29:27] Yeah, yeah, but not for me.

MVD [00:29:32] What do you mean?

SC [00:29:34] Well, how can you take a date to to where you work?

MVD [00:29:42] Would you see your classmates?

SC [00:29:44] I would, and I would say hi, but I don't know. To me, my mother was just my mother.

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MVD [00:29:59] I suppose for you all, that was normal.

SC [00:30:03] Well, in some ways it was kind of embarrassing sometimes, because you don't want that, you just want to be a normal person, you know? And when someone says this and that, you feel like, well, you have to be a certain way. And we never really said, "oh, I'm Joyce Chen's son" or, "oh, by the way, my mom's Joyce Chen."

MVD [00:30:29] Yeah. So tell me more about when the restaurants started to close and then the, I guess, the next iteration of the business.

SC [00:30:38] Well, my mom started to have dementia back in the [19]80s, and [there were] more restaurants opening, and I was a little bit too ambitious. So I did a project in downtown Boston, in the theater district, and I thought it had potential. So I opened it...back in 2008, the recession hit, and I really realized that that restaurant did very well when there's theater, but if there's no theater, there's really no business. So, after 7 or 8 years, it closed...Restaurants do have a life...Joyce Chen restaurants [had existed] for 40 years. More restaurants [were] opening. People wouldn't travel. It was not much of a destination point as it was in the early time. So then, we closed the restaurant, and then I took a year off. Also, my wife and I adopted a daughter from China. And she's now 27 and she's going for her law degree. She graduated [with a degree in] computer science, and she worked for MIT for five years, and now she's decided to go into law. So she will be graduating in May. And when I look back, I said, well, it was really difficult. But then again, that really kind of changed my life. It gave me a lot of free time, and it gave me a lot of time to spend with my daughter. I didn't have to work. Like I tell people — you have a restaurant, you work during lunch, you work during dinner. It's like you don't work. You can't invite people to have dinner because you're working dinner or lunch. Then also the restaurant can be very sociable because you do have regular customers. You do have people. So in a sense, it kind of can encompass your whole life because it's not only working, but it's also being very social, too. So that closed, and then I took a year off. Then I actually did something that was really interesting. I actually worked for someone else and I worked for a company called Building 19. Which was because they were looking for someone to buy their food, and Building 19 was actually a salvage store. I don't know if you remember, but they were pretty big and I was in charge of the food department. [W]hat I learned there I tell people you cannot learn in school because it's just such a different business. [I]t's buying over stocks and insurance claims and things like that. So if there was a fire, a marker or something, I would actually go with the insurance companies and negotiate how much we would buy the product for, and then they would ship it to their warehouse in Fall River, and then they would reprocess it, clean it and everything like that, and sell it. So it was a lot of handling situation, but also it was a lot of negotiation, because the question is, how much do you pay for it? And you just have to negotiate for the lowest price in order to pass the savings on to the consumer. So that was kind of interesting. But also at the same time I was working [for] the Joyce Chen Food Company. Which does sauces. And that was created by my mother back in 1984. And so I was still running that. And then after I left Building 19, in 2003, I said, well, maybe I should do frozen dumplings or Peking Raviolis. So I did that. And, I still do that and sauces. And, you know, we are selling the Peking Ravioli, or the dumplings, at Market Basket and at Wegmans. Which I think are very good stores. It's interesting, though. When we first came out with the packaging, I wanted to use the word Peking Ravioli. And USDA says you can't use that word. Because you have to establish that that's what the item is called. So I said, wow, you know, it's so well known in Cambridge and there's still articles written about it. So I said, well, what do I do? And the woman was very nice. She says well, if you call it Ravioli Peking, you'll be okay.

MVD [00:35:22] It's not the same thing.

SC [00:35:23] It's not the same thing.

MVD [00:35:26] That's interesting.

SC [00:35:27] Yeah. See, as my mom said, there's always got to be a way around something. Right. So. So that was it. So, actually, I'm still having that problem with someone new at USDA, so I've been sending them articles that are written like "Why in Boston do they call it Peking Ravioli?" If you do a

Google search, you'll find the whole story. But also before that, in the 70s, I was involved with my sister with the Joyce Chen cookware. So, you know my mom. Very inventive. She helped develop the flat bottom wok. Back in the early 70s. And, even yesterday, I looked at the New York Times gift giving, and they rate [it] as one of the best gifts because it's been around for over 50 years. And she first, on her shows in 60s, she used the traditional round wok, but then you have to use a ring on the western stove. But a lot of people in America also have electric. So the ring doesn't really work well with electric stoves. So she came up with a flat bottom with a handle on both sides with a long handle. And also she made a smaller 12in because she felt, you know, the American stoves are smaller. You put something too big, it just won't fit. You can't use the other burners. So she came up with the flat bottom wok, and she actually had a design patent on her flat bottom wok. But now you see almost everyone has a flat bottom wok. So she really helped develop that in America.

MVD [00:37:13] Did she have any other inventions or ideas that didn't quite make it to fruition?

SC [00:37:20] Sometimes. Well, there's another thing that's gone. I don't know if you've ever seen the Joyce Chen scissors.

MVD [00:37:26] No.

SC [00:37:27] They're scissors that are Asian with their flexible handles. So you can put your hand in and the scissors conform with your hand. And they've been around for a long time and they're still written up. Highly recommended by jewelry makers, gardeners, kitchen, a matter of fact, if you go to the Smithsonian, you'll see them hanging up in Julia's kitchen at the Smithsonian Institute.

MVD [00:37:54] Well, that's a fun Cambridge mash up.

SC [00:37:57] Yeah, yeah. So she did more than just cooking. She was also a developer of products too.

MVD [00:38:04] Wow. That's interesting. That should make it on the New York Times list as well. Seems like a good idea.

SC [00:38:10] I think it has, because that's been around for over 45 years.

MVD [00:38:18] Wow.

SC [00:38:19] So, you know, developing the cookware, developing the scissors, cutting boards. She was one of the first persons to actually import the polyethylene cutting board. We were on a trip to Japan, and we were in a sushi restaurant, and they were doing the board, and we have our training agent with us, who lives in Japan. And my mom said, this is really interesting. So you found out and it was controlled by a company called Sumitomo, which is a really big company in Japan. They actually own banks and things like that. And she became the sole agent for the polyethylene cutting boards in America.

MVD [00:39:00] All right.

SC [00:39:02] We were the first family to go back to China in 1972 and do a PBS documentary. Which has just been released, and I'm kind of proud of that because I was 20 years old when I filmed that, and I had no experience with 16 millimeter camera film. I took some quick lessons from GBH and they said, we'll go rent a camera with film, take some pictures. And this is how you do the light meter, and...there was no automatic light adjustment. There was no autofocus. There was no stabilization. [You had to hold] this 10 pound camera and kind of zoom it with a crank and hold it very steady. So I remember I did about six rolls... and only one roll came out. And we're leaving for China. So then we went to Hong Kong and I bought a new camera. And we bought the film. We bought 200 rolls of film. And the film only lasts three minutes. So after you take the film, you have to unload it and you have to put it in a bag. You have to do it in the dark just by feel. I filmed most of the 200 rolls. I think only two of them came out.

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MVD [00:40:32] That's impressive.

SC [00:40:35] So I was pretty happy with that.

MVD [00:40:38] How did it feel to go to China? You had only heard stories.

SC [00:40:41] That was back in 1972. It was still the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. So our family, number one, they were surprised to see us because there's really no way to see [China]. Very few of them came. We'd always have dinner together. We were staying at the Overseas Chinese Hotel in Shanghai. And my mom would [invite the family] for dinner. So then we would have usually about 30 people to get to 2 or 3 tables of ten, and they would all eat with us. And then after they ate they would bring their plastic bags, put the food in the bag, and take it home...I don't speak Chinese, so that was kind of difficult. But we all had a lot of fun.

MVD [00:41:41] Was that a decision on your parent's part? Not to learn Chinese?

SC [00:41:45] Well, my mom didn't really push me on that. And again...all my friends were more Western people... And nowadays, of course, it's very different because if you have your iPhone, you can speak Chinese fairly well.

MVD [00:42:06] When did you start to notice more Chinese people in Cambridge?

SC [00:42:12] Well, of course there were Chinese people in Chinatown in back in the 50s.

MVD [00:42:19] Chinatown in Boston.

SC [00:42:21] Yeah. And in the 50s, immigration was very limited. Into Chinatown. I remember being a young person, a toddler, and all you would see is mostly men. No families you would see? No. Hardly any women. They're all men. So you would go to the grocery store, and there would be just men in these kind of denim aprons. And with the fresh vegetables and baskets and everything like that. [!]n fact, because my mother doesn't speak Taishanese or Cantonese, so if we did go to a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown, she had actually write the menu down because writing in China is universal. They wanted to read writing. So then even for a bowl of rice, you would have to write rice. And then give the order to the server, and they would prepare the dish. So even the communication with something is difficult because my mother spoke Shanghainese and Mandarin.

MVD [00:43:30] So would you go to Boston's Chinatown a lot?

SC [00:43:35] Only [when] we needed some goods. But, you know, Chinatown at that time was very sparse. It there's only like, one market. And I don't remember any bakeries. And this is back in the 50s. And I just remember going there and [seeing] wooden floors and things like that. And I remember I was waiting in the car for my mom and some men would come up and, because I was, probably a very cute kid, they would wave to met. And I was like, get away...You know, being kind of a shy kid in the first place.

MVD [00:44:19] And did you see other Chinese families here in Cambridge?

SC [00:44:25] Not really. Not really...There weren't that many...I think we [thought] okay, we're Chinese, so we're unique in some ways, and we have something that we can offer to Cambridge. So that's what my mother did because, yeah, when she first came to America, her family said, stay in China, we're still playing tennis and we're doing this and that. And you're going to have prejudice. People were prejudiced in the US. And my mom kept on saying to them, look, if I smile at people, there's no reason they can't smile back at me. [If she encountered prejudice, she thought], "Well, that's their problem, not my problem."

MVD [00:45:29] Well, it's good to hear that it wasn't prevalent.

SC [00:45:32] Well, I think also where I lived, too, in West Cambridge. Because I know my mom bought a house in North Cambridge, and I remember being in the front yard and this old person...said, "Go back to China!" And I said, "What? Go back to China. I'm American. I'm here." So I think in that time, North Cambridge was really kind of different, different types of people in North Cambridge. But West Cambridge was different. I mean, we were in the 02138 ZIP code. And of course, going to school and things like that. You know I go to my classmates birthday parties and things like that. So I think I was very fortunate. I'm quite sure there's still that type of feeling out there. But, again, people are people. People have their opinions and when they say things like that, they want to get you upset. And the best thing is, don't be upset.

MVD [00:46:49] Yeah. I guess I want to ask about any dream that your mother had that was unfulfilled. Or do you think that she. Her legacy. I mean, her legacy still lives on. She must have been proud of it.

SC [00:47:09] Oh, yeah. No, she felt very proud of what she did. When we had the cookware, she would travel around the states doing cooking classes. And I remember when we were in Hawaii in the 60s and this woman was selling leis, and she said, "Oh, you're Joyce Chen!" And my mom said, well, how do you know this? "Because I could recognize your voice." So she was very happy in this. She kind of always remembered that. After she passed away, in 2014, they actually issued the Joyce Chen U.S. postage stamp. I think she was one of the first Asian Americans to actually have a stamp. So that was a great honor. And then, of course, the *Dumpling Dream* book, which was published in [2017].. We didn't even know about it. They never called us and said, we need to interview [you]. They got all the information from what I basically have posted on our JoyceChenFoods.com website.

MVD [00:48:15] What do you think is next for the business?

SC [00:48:19] Well, the business is surprisingly[thriving] during the Covid [pandemic]. More people are eating at home. So actually my business has actually increased with my current customers. And I'm not really looking to actually go after more stores...And it's really difficult because you have certain things called slotting, which you have to pay in order to get into a supermarket. So if you have a frozen product at Stop and Shop, normally it's about \$50,000 per item that you have to pay to the supermarket just to be on the shelf, and there's no guarantee you're going to be there for a long time. For me, it's like, do I really want to spend that money? And the other thing is that supply chain prices [are] going up. Transportation is getting really difficult. So I am just concentrating to keep my current customers happy and keep them supplied.

MVD [00:49:36] You said earlier that you went by your old neighborhood.

SC [00:49:40] Yeah. Today.

MVD [00:49:41] What are the big changes that you see when you come to Cambridge?

SC [00:49:43] Well the houses are you know been remodeled. They mostly are now single family. [Alpine Street] was a development. So there are four houses on that street that were exact duplicates. And all the other ones are the same type of house. So we lived in one of the bigger houses. And there's a house down Alpine Street Ttat's the same style, has the same shingles, has the same railing as it was when back when we got the house in the 50s. Like they haven't changed it at all. So that was kind of that was kind of cool to see that.

MVD [00:50:26] Yeah. Would you say that, I guess, what other changes have you seen with Cambridge? Good and bad.

SC [00:50:34] Well, I think, you know more Chinese. And more students. I think is is really great. Cambridge is, to me, a special place because you can come to Cambridge, be accepted, and you can walk down the street and you're not going to have any real difficulty. I don't know if you yourself have

any difficulties, but not usually. Very few [people do].. Yeah. Yeah. So Cambridge is very progressive. Growing up where we had just multiracial neighborhoods was also really something nice.

MVD [00:51:25] Unless you have anything else you want to talk about.

SC [00:51:28] Well. Let's see. No. But, you know, my mom is actually buried in my father's buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, so they still stay in Cambridge. I moved out of Cambridge, back in '73, '74 because we actually had a home invasion.

MVD [00:51:51] Oh.

SC [00:51:53] Yeah. Five people broke into our house when we were there, and they stayed over four hours, and they tied us up. And they had guns and knives and they ransacked through our house. So that was an experience. What?

MVD [00:52:11] I'm a bit speechless at that. That's. That's a horrible thing to go through.

SC [00:52:15] Oh, yeah. It is. And, and then our house was actually on the news and people started to know where we lived. And I remember looking out and seeing cars pass by. Slow down, point to the house. And then we said we have to move. So that's why we moved.

MVD [00:52:36] Why did people invade your home?

SC [00:52:39] Well because [it was] the weekend [and we were at the restaurant]...Unfortunately, when they think you're well known, they have this impression that you're rich.

MVD [00:52:51] Oh, man.

SC [00:52:52] Actually, we were pretty cool. My mom. It's funny because I told the robbers— they're all masked—and [I] said, “You know, you gotta be really—be careful. I just heard a story about this man who had a heart attack being robbed, and now the other robbers are up for murder.” So they were really nice to my mom; and he said, “Do you need anything? Don't get excited. Stay calm.” And she said, “Well, I am calm. I'm even calm enough to make you a cup of tea if you want to.”

MVD [00:53:26] This is wild. I feel like it should be like it's the plot of a movie or something.

SC [00:53:32] Yeah. I could go on for hours, but there are other stories about my wife and growing up with my mom. [In] 1968 she took my sister and I on a trip around the world. And I was 16 at the time. So she bought a ticket on Pan American Flight 001, and it departs New York, destination New York. And it flies around the world every day. And you can get off the plane and rebook anywhere it stops. And it took us three months. For a trip. I mean, that's experience. And I just, I'm very fortunate to take a trip like that.

MVD [00:54:32] What is something that your mother would always say?

SC [00:54:37] Well few of her sayings was again the old. “If you smile at people, there should be no reason they should[n't] smile” that she said. Also she said, “If you don't want people to know you did something wrong, don't do it.”

MVD [00:54:55] It's a great mom saying.

SC [00:55:00] Yeah. I still remember that because whatever you do, someone else is going to find out sooner or later. So best not to do it. And that's why, with our products and stuff, we are very proud. We want to keep on her legacy, [and make the food] healthy. No preservatives. Even our dumplings. I was visiting the factory. Everything is made from scratch. Sometimes people buy pre-cooked meat and put it together, but [our] dumplings, everything is fresh.

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MVD [00:55:48] Maybe we could close out with one. Maybe you could tell me what was your favorite dish from the restaurant.

SC [00:55:59] From the restaurant? Actually, I had two. One was moo shu pork, And, I remember there was an article in the Christian Science Monitor [with] a picture of me eating moo shu pork. So I'll try and get you that picture. And beef and broccoli. That's always my favorite. It's very simple. But one of my other non-Chinese dishes, which is an interesting story, was a Russian beef borscht. And the story about that is that my mom always loved to cook, and she started cooking when she was just a child. [H]er family was fairly wealthy [and employed] a couple...the man was the chef of the house and the the woman was the one taking care of my mother. So one of my uncles was actually going to Russia, and he complained that there's no good Chinese restaurant or food in Russia. So he said, can I borrow your chef to take to Russia with me? And my grandfather said, okay, sure...And then the wife stayed, [but had to take on the cooking in addition to] taking care of my mom. So my mom spent a lot of time in the kitchen. And that's where she became interested in cooking. But the borscht story was, when she was young in Shanghai, she had a telephone number. And in those days, you couldn't just drop a number; they were very rare. So if you had a number, it had to go with you wherever you moved. So she didn't need the number anymore [and] she had this Russian woman who wanted to buy the number. But the company has to be sure that you're living where the number is going to be. So my mother moved in with this Russian woman for a week until the phone company came. And during that time, she taught my mother how to make a Russian borscht.

MVD [00:58:16] And it was good?

SC [00:58:17] I still make it today. It's still pretty popular in Shanghai. The borscht.

MVD [00:58:28] Well, Stephen, thank you for talking with me today.

SC [00:58:32] Oh, you're very welcome. It's a lot of fun to kind of go back. And if you ever need more information on—there's plenty of stories.

MVD [00:58:40] Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW