

Bachelor's Project: Edmund Benny Wong
Interviewed by Bradley Lee
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Ed Wong Recounts the Sex Trade in Chinatown

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Bradley: Right. So, part – part of – part of this, of the – the eventual purpose of this – of this study that, uh, Professor Chenier is doing is to look at the, um, the social intersection between, um, uh, two marginalized communities. One being the Chinese Bachelors Society and the other being the, uh, basically women that were lesbians, but they - they found that they, y'know, uh, apart from having sort a sex trade in common, they actually found some sort of, uh... companionship in each other, because they were two parts of the society, out of the mainstream society, that were marginalized, pushed to the very edges of it. Umm... I - this is - I know th- I- I realize this is a young age that you're, you know, you're in, um, you're in Toronto for the first time. But, even during the rest of your childhood and stuff, were you, were you aware of these sorts of things that were happening in (talking at same time) society?

00:9:15-00:20:03

Ed: Well, yeah. During that trip I was very aware of it. (Laughs.) Remember, I was eleven or twelve years old, you know, at the time. When I – when we took that train trip. When we stayed overnight in Montreal... Eugene and - and, um, Frank decided to, I don't know where they went, they went to visit something, and I stayed in the hotel room. And I remember, I don't remember where the hotel was, but it was in Chinatown, and I remember I was downstairs. They took and I decided to go back to the room. I went upstairs to the room, and I just closed the door when there was a knock on the door and it was a prostitute soliciting me. (Laughs.) So – so this was Chinatown. [(Talking at same time) and you were only twelve] yeah, I was eleven or twelve years old. Well, I was pretty big [Uh huh] for my age [Okay], you know, so, at the time. And (laughs) as I said, that was - to me, that was a shock. I didn't-

00:20:04-00:20:10

Bradley: Well, what - I mean, do you remember what was, like, what was said, in y-your exchange with this woman? What did she appear as? Like, what did she look like?

00:20:11-00:20:22

Ed: Well, she was French Canadian, obviously [Mmhm]. Like, uh, I remember that much, and she didn't speak very good English. But I don't member what she said exactly. But I know what she meant (laughs.) But I was so sacred I st- slammed the door closed. (Laughs.)

00:20:24-00:20:30

Bradley: Did you - did you - for instance, did you know what she meant because [Oh yeah, I know what she meant] you - you' d been warned? [No] Or (talking at same time) you had previous knowledge of-

00:20:31-00:20:39

Ed: No, no - No, no, no, I just, you know, I just – you know, you know these things, when (?) it happens [Okay, okay.] I - I don't remember what she said to me though [Right, right.] But I knew what she meant (laughs.)

00:20:40-0020:47

Bradley: So you - when you say she - she knew what she meant, you know what she was - she was offering and what she was expecting? [That's right. Yeah.] Right. Oh, okay.

00:20:48-00:20:51

Ed: Yeah, so that was one experience in Chinatown in - in Montreal.

00:20:52-00:20:54

Bradley: Do you - do you suspect that that was happening in Toronto at that time too?

00:20:55-00:21:17

Ed: Yeahhh... I - I would... we used to see prostitutes hanging around, all the time. You know, there was always women hangin' up, around streets in Chinatown. Here, Calgary, you name it [Mmhmm]. You know, wherever we went. Uh, it was like that, and Chinatown seemed to be the haven for prostitutes. [Mmhmm.] And don't know whether they were lesbians, but I mean, I know there were women that were were selling themselves. I knew that much. But-

00:21:18-00:21:21

Bradley: (Stuttering) was through - through which years?

00:21:22-00:21:29

Ed: All through my teenage years. And all the Chinatowns I ever visited [Mmhmm] were the same. [Mmhmm.] There was always women there. And, uh-

00:21:29-00:21:38

Bradley: Be- because that's quite different than the Chinatown today. Chinatown is kinda like, a um, it's like one of those family rated, um, tourist destinations know [Oh yeah] so, like, you don't see prostitution now.

00:21:-00:21:51

Ed: No, no, no. That - but in those days I think the prostitutes knew, uh... keeping in mind all these, All these – all these men. These Chinese old men that were in Chinatowns at the time, none of them had wives.

00:21:52-00:21:54

Bradley: So these - these are actually Chinese bachelors that we talk about.

00:21:54-00:22:22

Ed: Yeah, they're all the Chinese bachelors, and they, and, um, they had a bit of money, you know? And, uh, the prostitutes, they - they weren't violent people. Not like a lot of people are today that solicit prostitutes. And, uh, the prostitutes felt safe there. And they, you know, they - if the men wanted to – to have sex, well, the women are right there and, you know, they had sex, paid them, they were gone, and standing on the street corner again, you know? [Right.] So there's no problem. [W-] no hassle-

00:22:23-00:22:25

Bradley: When – when you - you made the comment that they felt safe, like, in which respect?

00:22:26-00:23:02

Ed: Safe in that they were, the - you know, you get all these, uh, today, you get pimps and the drugs and whatever, you know, that are... you know, it's actually dangerous to be a prostitute. [Mmhmm.] You know, nowadays. In those days, uh, and maybe it was too, maybe less so in, say, a place like Calgary - a smaller place. Maybe Vancouver was worse. But, uh - or maybe Toronto might have been worse – but, uh... you know, they - they felt safe in that the – the Chinese men wouldn't beat 'em up, or, you know, do anything to them. They were just [Mmhmm] - they were there for the sex and paid 'em off and they're on their way, you know. [Right, right, yeah.] So, that's what I meant by being comfortable.

00:23:03-00:23:14

Bradley: Right, so I mean it was - It was somewhat of a, um, of a, um, symb - almost a symbiotic relationship... that, uh, these - these prostitutes, the women had with the men of Chinatown. [Mmhmm.] Right?

00:23:15-00:23:31

Ed: And I'm sure they, um - I bet you most of them knew the men too, you know. I mean at some point they probably did business with 'em, you know, and so they... [Mmhmm] you know, they probably knew each- 'cause it's a small place. [Oh yeah.] Calgary's Chinatown was a small place [Right.] You know, so, uh, in those days then, in the – in the '40's and '50's, the early '50's.