

Oral History with Chi En-Chu

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Interview with Chi En-Chu
SESSION 1 (2/22/2021)

COLLINGS (00:00:00):

Okay, so we're recording. It's February 22nd, 2021. I'm Jane Collings. And Chi, would you like to introduce yourself?

CHU-EN (00:00:09):

Sure. My name is Chi En-Chu and thank you for providing this opportunity.

COLLINGS (00:00:13):

All right. And let me just ask you a basic question. When you did you first hear about COVID-19 and how did you hear about it?

CHU-EN (00:00:25):

Sure. I first heard about COVID-19 back in actually December, 2019. I grew up in Taiwan, so I was, I follow really closely to everything that's happened in China. And about 10 years ago we had a similar pandemic. So ever since then, I've been, this pandemic has always been a, sort of a, a sensitive word. And in December last year, we heard about a new strain of respiratory disease, desperate very quickly in China, that that sort of just brought all of us back to 10 years ago when the pandemic first happened. However, this time-- At first I did not think this virus could travel as far across Pacific to the United States. At first, myself and my friends were thinking that this might be a, a regional pandemic, a pandemic that we could just be like an audience and (inaudible).

COLLINGS (00:01:20):

And can I ask you a question, when you were thinking back, were you thinking back to SARS or another event?

CHU-EN (00:01:35):

Right. Right, right. And then fast forward in January we start seeing news popping out that this pandemic has shown no sign of stopping. And in fact, it was spreading really, really quickly. And at this point I was just really worried about my parents and my other relatives' safety in Taiwan, because we're so close, that Taiwan and the neighboring countries to China were going to be the first to be impacted by the virus.

COLLINGS (00:02:10):

And have you heard-- We know that Taiwan has managed extremely well during this period. I think it's one of the three countries that have done the best job in the world. Were you hearing from your family back in Taiwan about how that was managed? Their experiences with that?

CHU-EN (00:02:33):

Yes. Yes. My parents and my other friends were talking about how they were doing contact tracing, how they were able to follow all the individuals that were entering Taiwan from China and how there were a systematic medical method that the government put in to really continue to track and provide support of those that have entered or those who are planning travel elsewhere.

COLLINGS (00:03:01):

Right. Right. And I guess having been through SARS there, the population was mentally prepared for all of this.

CHU-EN (00:03:10):

Right, right. So in comparison to where we are in the United States it was still feeling like a fairy tale, because it was still so far away. And I, myself having been living here for 10 years-- And I never actually thought a virus, which is an invisible enemy could cause this much harm to us as a nation. It was unimaginable.

COLLINGS (00:03:35):

Right, right. Yeah. That notion of the invisibility. It's very strange. So what was the first impact in your life?

CHU-EN (00:03:50):

Sure, sure. I will say the first impact in my life was-- Fast forward to late January towards the end of the winter quarter. We were thinking about -- Actually I was with the master of public policy-- So I studied with the school of public affairs. And every year around January to February, we were planning to have a trip overseas, an education--academic, but also a very entertaining, fun trip to, actually, Japan. And our goal was to visit their facilities that they built for the Olympics and how they manage the policies and everything. And I wanted to go to that trip since the first day I entered a school back in 2018 because it was one of the selling points. And the application process--I wouldn't say rigorous, but the space was limited.

CHU-EN (00:04:50):

So we really had to, in a way, demonstrate the best of yourself in that process. And fortunately, I made it through the second selection. So I was assigned to the trip in 2020, but then when February comes around, there's starting to be a lot of rumors saying, well, maybe we have to cancel the trip, or maybe we can still go, we just have to be precautionous. We have to be extremely cautious about where we're going, but the whole, the whole mental state that we all share was we don't want to bring this back. This COVID thing is still going to be a regional pandemic. Most likely North Asia, there was a little bit in Italy, that's Europe's problem, we still don't want to bring it back to the US. But then towards mid-February, towards March, the trip was canceled.

CHU-EN (00:05:49):

And we were really busy with our graduation project. So at the moment we thought, at least for me, I thought that, Oh, well, that means more time for us to do our project, but that came to be a second problem because the pandemic had gotten so bad. I wouldn't say bad, but the mental state of the United States had changed from anticipating a virus to arrive to very frustrated and really nervous and sort of in a panic mode of what should we do about this, because it is coming, it's not stopping. It is coming to you. And when everybody was thinking about ways to stop-- First and foremost was to stop human contact. So a lot of meetings that we needed to do for our graduation project became remote sessions, like remote meetings, virtual meetings, and in a way that really, really decreased the value of human interaction, especially when you think about doing something like public policy that informs a lot of social processes. You need to hear the voice of different parties. And sometimes it's difficult to feel that sort of human energy through a computer monitor. So I would say those two were the first impacts.

First, the trip was cancelled, second, the loss of human interaction that was so crucial to the completion of our project.

COLLINGS ([00:07:27](#)):

What was the project and did it involve people outside of the university?

CHU-EN ([00:07:35](#)):

So our graduation project is called the capstone project. Normally a group of three to four students will have to partner with a local or out of state organization or a government branch to work on solving a political or a policy related issue that they have. For my group specifically we decided to do a project with the LA city attorney's office. And our specific issue that we were trying to solve was human trafficking in L A. So that really, really required a lot of conversations. A lot of meetings, a lot of--not just interaction, but required a lot of visiting, like seeing how the facilities are doing things to really see how the potential traffic route could be-- Or what kind of facility that people would have to work into as undocumented trafficked individuals.

COLLINGS ([00:08:45](#)):

So you would actually visit places where trafficked people had been, kind of like trafficked through, like stations or something.

CHU-EN ([00:08:56](#)):

Absolutely. Because we were trying to really get a firsthand experience of how things work. Because a lot of time when people get trafficked over to the United States, they tend to stay within their cultural population. For example, if you have an Hispanic or Mexican individual coming in, they will most likely be staying in areas that have a lot of Hispanic Mexican population. If you're a Chinese or mainland Chinese, you will be most likely staying in, for example, the San Gabriel Valley. There's a lot of businesses that are owned by Chinese individuals. So we were really trying to see firsthand observations and see how that gets carried out, because we actually went to one of the few restaurants--and they were just buffet restaurants. Like you will never think there's any trafficked individual working in there because everybody is wearing a uniform, people clock in, clock out. So we were really trying to get firsthand "eye" evidence in a way.

COLLINGS ([00:10:06](#)):

Yes. That's a fascinating project and I can see how that would be really impacted by this. Were you able to work around the restrictions or not?

CHU-EN ([00:10:21](#)):

Yes. So, at first I was really panicking. A lot of people were panicking, but I think because-- I think what is funny about humans. A lot of time people have different opinions. A lot of times people have different ways of doing things, but if you have a common goal, you saw how to make it happen, regardless of how difficult the situation was. For our partner, the LA city council, LA city attorney office-- They want us to have this project done that can really support their work. Therefore we really want to get this done so we can support their work. So we ended up having virtual meetings right off the bat. The city partners were doing virtual meetings already. It wasn't at the scale that they're at now, but they had that sort of practice before.

CHU-EN (00:11:16):

And the reason for that was because they had a lot of not only County partners, but they also had to collaborate with other government officials from other states. So they already had those kinds of long range communication channels set up. And we sort of copied that. In a way that also gave us a opportunity to think that-- It really gave us opportunities to think that well, since everything is virtual now, since everything we're doing remotely, that also means we can reach anyone we want, because we don't have to visit them in person. Why don't we just, we might as well expand the the client pool or the list of officials that we want to talk to since we can just do it on a virtual call. And people, people were more inclined to do virtual meetings, because it had already become their daily practice and for a lot of them, and for myself, you know, the more practice the better because it became so so commonly used. So I will say right away because we had a deadline pressure, everything switched to virtual really quickly. And, and the other thing that really helped myself and other people to transition was school decided to move everything online and because you have that shift, your whole mentality shifts at the same time, so everything became virtual. Everything became in a way distanced as well.

COLLINGS (00:13:01):

Oh. So it's fascinating that going online opened up your project in a certain way. And so you did graduate then in the spring of 2020.

CHU-EN (00:13:18):

So fortunately with the help, with my own dedication and the help of many individuals, really many individuals and, and a lot of coworkers, a lot of colleagues' support, I was able to graduate along with all my colleagues in June 2020 last year.

COLLINGS (00:13:38):

And how was the graduation handled remotely? Was there anything?

CHU-EN (00:13:42):

So since this conversation will become a history, I think I'll just have to really lay it out there. I think in a way that the graduation ceremony could have been done better, because what we ended up having was just a prerecorded, graduation ceremony completely online. And I know for me, myself, also that a lot of, a lot of our classmates really look forward to this day in a way. And a lot of our colleagues were really the first among their family to earn a degree beyond the bachelor or even a degree in a master-- And at the end it was, it was closed up so suddenly you were, you were thinking that maybe after the graduation ceremony video, there will be some sort of following up, but there wasn't really much of a wrapping up. There was just a sudden stop. And I think that could have been handled better, but looking back after, you know, living remotely for a whole year, I could understand, I could really understand the frustrations that a lot of our staff would have. On one hand, they had to just deal with school.

CHU-EN (00:15:09):

Back then they just had to deal with projects. They had to just deal with research. Now all of the sudden they had to deal with the graduation ceremony, something that just came out--

COLLINGS (00:15:18):

Exactly

CHU-EN (00:15:21):

But I want to end this on a positive note by saying a lot of us were really disappointed in the way that our graduation ceremony was handled-- At the same time, we had a clear understanding, which is a graduation ceremony is just one tiny facet during our time to pursue individual achievement and more accomplishment in life. So in a way it became a motivation for myself and many others, which is, we are going to meet again. And when we do, we want to be better than where we are. Better, not just in terms of where we are career wise, but also, you know, our mental states where we are. We are conscious of that. And I think that that's how I would describe the whole experience with the graduation ceremony. A little bit of disappointment, but I can see the potential in the horizon.

COLLINGS (00:16:29):

Right. Yeah. Everything was still sort of on an emergency basis at that time. So you were living in the LA area at the time?

CHU-EN (00:16:41):

Yes. I live in Long Beach.

COLLINGS (00:16:44):

Okay. And I presume that it was no issue for you to take all kinds of precautions in terms of what you brought into your home and and so forth in those early days. I mean, it sounds like you would have almost been pre introduced to all of those ideas, 10 years ago with SARS.

CHU-EN (00:17:09):

Right. I will say, in the very beginning I was not taking this seriously. Even though we went into the whole remote learning-- But at the same time we weren't doing that bad. We weren't having 500,000 deceased members of this country. Back then, there was a lot of frustration I will say. But in terms of precautions, I was just thinking, okay, where do I have to get my food? What was the timeframe? It was less about health guidance. It was more about what do I have to do to continue to live life as I would normally. It wasn't until around May that I started to be really, really, really cautious about what I do. For example, I don't go to the grocery store until maybe 10:00 PM at night when there's not that many people. So I would shop at off hours. And when I do laundry I will go early morning or late night when there's nobody. And when I get home, I will wash my hands for the durations of, two happy birthday songs, that long, and you throw away your clothes. So that was how it was after like, maybe May, but before that it was more about what can I do now to act as if I was to live normally.

COLLINGS (00:18:49):

So it hadn't really sunk in for a little while. Why did it start sinking in?

CHU-EN (00:18:57):

Because I started to realize that there was no-- And part of the reason was because during SARS, the pandemic was dying down the same year towards summer. So it became a thing for me, which was, does a pandemic only happen in winter. When the heat comes up and thanks to climate change, it's going to come, it's got to come up, it will just magically evaporate. But as we get closer toward May and June things have gotten way worse, it's gotten worse to a point where it's almost like the Spanish flu of our generation, of the 21st century. The cases of people getting the COVID continue to go up. And at the

same time, our medical accommodations weren't exactly there to deal with that kind of stuff. And at that point, I really realized, okay if you want to wait for government to turn this thing around, that's impossible because government is only one part. You gotta do your part too. And then for somebody that, say, studies public policy, if I don't live the way, like the government wants us to live and really follow through those standards, then I'm just lying to myself. So I started off, with myself, to be really, really careful about the situation.

COLLINGS ([00:20:40](#)):

So as a public policy person, how, how did you evaluate the response on the County level, the state level, the federal level, I mean, were you following all of those different kinds of mandates as they came out over the period?

CHU-EN ([00:20:58](#)):

Well, I follow more closely about-- with regard to how the California state policies, in terms of dealing with this situation. I saw that we had two weeks of mandatory shutdown shut down across the state and that that created a lot of resentment. But I understood why it was necessary at that time. But I think for me personally, what went wrong about that policy was you had a shutdown for a whatever long period of time, but you didn't have something else to support this policy. There can not only be shut down. If possible there should be mandatory COVID tests, screening, things like that, but a lot of those things weren't in place. But, there's also another thing that I learned later on, which was since the states and this country has never really faced something like this, for many government officials, this pandemic was also their first time.

CHU-EN ([00:22:19](#)):

So it was more like a first time thing for everybody, but you will expect them to react to it that much quicker. For example, we heard news where a lot of officials from other states had to purchase masks from elsewhere because we weren't able to produce those masks. And a lot of medical supplies that we rely on were produced by countries in Central America that were greatly ravaged by hurricanes from the last years. So they weren't able to come back to the industrial capacity to create those medical supplies. And that affects us. And when I look at other countries, for example, China, during that time, also Taiwan, Taiwan, pretty much, I'll give you one example, Taiwan, in order to quickly mass produce masks in Taiwan, the government has decided to really form an alliance of different industries and combine them into like an assembly line model.

CHU-EN ([00:23:33](#)):

So different industries can handle different parts of the production. And that really speeds up the manufacturing of masks. And for China, they even brought in some of the military facility industry to accommodate the most complicated process of making higher-end masks, such as N-95, just for example. And I think for us because the nation is so big. And because it's a Republic political model, different states had different ways of dealing with their issues in terms of the pandemic. There wasn't much of a national unified effort to deal with it. And I think in a way as an American, I felt that was very disappointing when you see that other countries came together and try to do something for all their country men and women. And here we are still trying to work through a lot of bureaucratic situations in order to reach a unified agreement, not even a unified effort, but just agreement. And I think that hurt a lot of people. It hurt me, and I think I hurt more people physically. So I think that was the bad impact of our response.

COLLINGS ([00:25:04](#)):

Yeah. And some people have said that there's a lot of fragmentation in terms of the various health departments and not a lot of communication back and forth between municipalities and that it's a very fragmented patchwork kind of governmental hodgepodge, which I suppose you've seen some of that from the public policy perspective,

CHU-EN ([00:25:36](#)):

For sure. For sure.

COLLINGS ([00:25:38](#)):

Yeah. So when you look back at the larger society, was there anything in particular that you didn't expect to see beyond things not flowing very well together, which you've described very nicely, but, you know, there was a lot of turmoil. There was, you know, the racial justice protests, mask protests, as well as around the election. I mean, what was your experience of the larger society looking back at the whole year

CHU-EN ([00:26:22](#)):

For sure. And thank you for asking me this question, because I think I will say that my life from August, sorry, from July, 2020, all the way to December, 2020 have really picked up. And that was largely due to the society's response to COVID and also a lot of civil issues. For example, I was volunteering at Long Beach COVID testing sites, starting from late May all the way to August. And in the beginning of June, when the George Floyd situation occurred, I saw a lot of cops. So a lot of police officers there were practicing anti-riot tactics. I will say they were practicing, they were anticipating a lot of riots to happen.

COLLINGS ([00:27:26](#)):

And how were they practicing them? Where were they doing that?

CHU-EN ([00:27:30](#)):

Sure, sure. So, the COVID testing site I was at was at the Veteran's (Memorial) Stadium, which was really close to a Long Beach Airport. And during the, during the protest, I think that that whole week the officers were stationed behind the Veterans stadium at that area. And they were trying to establish some sort of a rapid response force. And they were thinking that wherever protests happened, they could just go right away. And I didn't, I don't, I don't, I didn't mind the way they, they set up because I understand I did have problem with the way they describe it. So I asked one of, I work with a few officers and a lot of military retired military personnel at the testing sites. And for myself since I came from a very liberal school. So I try to--when I talk to them--I try to speak far more neutral conservative perspective to really try to understand how they look at these issues.

CHU-EN ([00:28:45](#)):

And I remember-- I asked one of the officers in particular, I say, hi, how do you guys know which areas in Long Beach that might have a greater possibility of having riots? How do you know? Long Beach is really. You know, you have the downtown area, you have the poor-- How do you know where they're going to go? And the officers were saying, well, you know, we know we know the protests are going to happen in XYZ because a lot of "them" are going to be here. And then I asked another question, which is, what do you mean by a lot of "them?" And the officer-- And I think one of the officers kind of, sensed my vibe, so

he said, well, you know, you know, there's certain areas in Long Beach that, you know, they historically have more safety issues, more criminal activities. So we had to really plan accordingly. So as if-- Looking back, I understand where they came from, because maybe they look at it from a systematic outcome. Maybe they study the patterns of the protests

COLLINGS ([00:29:57](#)):

The data.

CHU-EN ([00:29:59](#)):

Right. I understand that. But it was the way they say it, that really bothered me, which we also saw, because a lot of time you have protesters that want to protest peacefully, but there were other people from other areas that came in-- And do the wrong things, or provoke the police and police always respond in greater force because that's just, that's just how the system works. But they had to respond with greater value of force to really deter the protest. But then it was just the way they say it, you know, like, yeah, we know the protest is going to happen in those areas because we, we know a lot of them are here

COLLINGS ([00:30:48](#)):

In LA a lot of the protests were happening in Beverly Hills and in Santa Monica, in some of the shopping areas of Santa Monica. So that was interesting.

CHU-EN ([00:31:02](#)):

Right. Right. And for Long Beach in particular, our protests were mostly in the shopping center by the coast, then of course a riot happened. And then there were gas bullets used and a lot of issues happened, but I think what happened next was really remarkable, which was, I think the day right after the protests happened, the riots happened, the day after, a lot of members of the community showed up and cleaned the streets

COLLINGS ([00:31:37](#)):

Right. In Long Beach. I saw that. Yeah.

CHU-EN ([00:31:41](#)):

Yeah. That's a clear message, at least for me, because if you say there's a lot of "them" at the area, things going to go back, then how do you explain what happened the day after? And I think at that point, it really, it shows me that we have strong community solidarity in Long Beach. And I was just hoping that there were better responses from the government, the local government officials. But in response to your questions about how I saw all this civil unrest, it was very alarming to me because we saw a lot of protests in Long Beach, in LA, and then people were saying about the defunding, the police. I personally think that was not a very good, what do you call? It's not good PR because defunding, the police can be interpreted in ways that that would totally undermine your cause.

CHU-EN ([00:32:53](#)):

But then we look into the budget of law enforcement, there's a bigger issue. They took a chunk of that budget. And, that's what we get as a result. You have armored cars, you have military grade equipment, I will say, but the city's not getting any safer. And we understand people don't tend to be-- And by the

way, this is one of the conversations I had with the retired officer. I said, you do understand that, you know, people don't normally do bad things, like they don't want to--as far as I know--people don't want to be on the streets. Nobody wants to get out there and just like shooting blank and just robbing stores. If they had a path to go to school, if they could find jobs that can earn them honorable wage.

CHU-EN ([00:33:47](#)):

I think a lot of people wouldn't be in a gang or wouldn't be in criminal groups if they had support like that. But those protests taught us one thing, which is in this nation, we have a certain amount of people living a style of life. And we have another group of people that don't have the opportunity that the previous group had. When the group that has the most resources, refuse to recognize the reality, then those kinds of protests-- Which has continued to happen. And even though you might demonize their actions, it will only be fair if you look into the motives, because at the end of the day, nobody wants to be on the streets and not go home. You know, when you have your grandma or grandpa or relatives at home waiting for you to go back, people don't want to be out there unless they really feel like-- They want--

CHU-EN ([00:34:50](#)):

They say something and their demands were not heard or not even recognized. And I that was-- So that's what I, that's my experience. And from June to September, I will say, if I may bring up one more point. As the November election approaches, you could, you could tell people were getting amped up, like they really wanted it to be done. I, myself was the same. So I got lucky. I got really lucky that I was hired by the County of Orange to work on their election support team. And this is also one of the responses we saw from this country, which was a lot of people were saying that maybe the presidential election had to be postponed, and maybe we don't have the physical space for this election to take place.

CHU-EN ([00:35:54](#)):

We have a pandemic and all those things going on, whatnot, but for County of Orange and many other municipalities and state governments across this nation, what they did was they adapted, because they realized voting rights is not something that you want to play with. You can do something about it, but maybe your career would just end right here. And nobody wants their careers to end. And in particular, in Orange County, they set up about a couple dozen voting centers. And the voting center that I worked at was a mega voting center, which was in Anaheim in the Honda Center, the home stadium for the Anaheim Ducks, which is a hockey team. And the reason why they set up this voting center was to set up an in-person voting area, as well as the drive-thru voting areas to really minimize possible COVID exposure.

CHU-EN ([00:37:00](#)):

And it was a successful operation. I worked there for about 20 days. And you really got to see that this nation can really progress under great pressure if there's a common interest. Voting was the common interest, like regardless of your Democrats or Republicans, you, you want to vote because you want your guy or your girl to get to that highest public duty, if you will. And that was what happened in Anaheim. We had a lot of cars coming up, really towards the end of the elections, like the last couple of days. At one point we had rush hours. We had about 400, 500 cars coming in every hour. And people were able to cast in their votes without going out of the car.

CHU-EN (00:38:01):

So our setup was, we have an entrance. People come in and you have registration sessions, where our staff would verify your status on an iPad. If you voted before, we'll double check to make sure that you don't violate the law, if you never voted, we'll also accommodate you. And the second station was you could-- We will print out the ballot and you will write down who you want to vote for on those ballot. And on the third station, you scan those ballots electronically, but you don't have to come out of your car. You could just pull next to the machine and scan the ballot in one at a time. So that set up really encouraged people to come out and vote. But most interestingly we had a lot of people coming in early through the election cycles. Where they came in to drop in mail in ballots.

COLLINGS (00:39:05):

Yes. That's what I wanted to ask you. It sounds like there was so much of this emphasis on in-person voting. So they were doing mail-in voting as well.

CHU-EN (00:39:14):

Right, right. There were so many mail-in ballots, but we did not see that many at the sites. Instead we saw that a particular group of voters came out really towards the end of the elections. And at first, myself and other staff were, in a way we're worried, we're thinking like, Oh my gosh, everybody wants to vote a certain way? Is that another four years? Or, you know, I mean, I'm not saying anything but another four years, really? And then on the night of election people that voted in person got counted first. So, the election was tilted one way. And then the next couple of days, it began to a shift the other way, which I think was one of the most memorable-- I will say that's one of the most memorable campaigns, I think for the last 10 to 20 years, and we saw that happen.

CHU-EN (00:40:18):

But, I will say it really, in a way, it really-- At first it really disappointed us on the night of the election, when we saw things were going one way, a lot of us staff, myself, and there were most-- And by the way, our staff were mostly minorities, believe it or not. I think that was very interesting. And if I can give you one more example, which is a lot of time-- Because I'm really I'm really passionate about public services, so I will volunteer, or I will work on campaigns or I'll work for vote centers or stuff like that. And a lot of times I see most of the staff that work there are minority individuals. They're people of color and you don't see that many Caucasian population come out to do those kinds of things. So I think in a way, when I first started, it was my way of trying to show allegiance. When I first got my citizenship, I will really, I will really do a lot of public services to show that I really want to be here. And I think that's sort of a common consensus that's shared by a lot of first-generation immigrants, I will say. So the election cycle-- We saw how the thing progressed and then that's pretty much it.

COLLINGS (00:41:55):

Wow. That's really interesting. So did you say that you have been been job hunting during the pandemic and what does that look like?

CHU-EN (00:42:08):

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yes, for sure. So before, I would say, before February, before the pandemic hits, I had a different mindset. I was thinking maybe I will try to find a job with some sort of think tank or something that's public policy analysis, something about analytical work. And then the next thing, you know, when the pandemic happened, a lot of places started to-- they froze their process looking for new

people. They kind of just let the remaining labor force work whatever tasks there were. So there were a lot of shifts. And I will say at first there was a lot of disappointment, specifically from May to August, because at first I was thinking that, you know, with a degree from UCLA, a master degree is worth the (inaudible).

CHU-EN (00:43:25):

And, and for a long time, I couldn't, I couldn't really get a job. I had a lot of interview opportunities but it was always, you know, you've made it second round, you've made it third round, but there's always one step further, always one step closer. So there was a lot of-- I doubted myself a lot during that time. And I saw that I saw that a lot of my classmates were having the same issues. A large group of my classmates were international students. And could tell they wanted to stay and, you know, expand their professional experience at the U S, but because of this pandemic and because of the political tension between China and the US, that got way worse since the pandemic started, a lot of the Chinese classmates that I had ended up going back to China--

CHU-EN (00:44:33):

So suddenly that we really didn't have time to talk or really have time to say goodbye to one another. So that's part of the job hunting quagmire that a lot of people are facing. For me, and for me in particular, I was frustrated for a few months, then I started to think, you know, even though I'm still job hunting there's got to be some kind of way to put myself out there. I can't just be sitting here and be depressed about things because I don't have immediate financial hardship. And I know a lot of people do, a lot of shops are closed down. What about them? And they have kids, right. I can't be the one that would be like, yeah, my life sucks. Well, sad for you, but that's the same for everybody else too. So I decided to, I said, you know what, like if I can't get a job right now, maybe I can do something good for the public. So that's how I started to, to volunteer at the the COVID testing site. And I think that helped me a bit in job hunting later on, because it shows that I was still active, I was still trying to help people. I was still trying to stay.

CHU-EN (00:45:50):

And that helped me to get a job with Orange County for the voting positions in November. But I will say from, from June, since I graduated, From June to November, I wasn't really working. And then after that election job was finished, I became a court interpreter, immigration court interpreter for Mandarin English. And I passed the screening. I went to the court one time, and this is what happened, of course. So, they still, they still do immigration cases, but what they do is they have you as an interpreter, the attorney for the respondent, and respondent in one room, and then the judge will be in another. So you will have a physical and a virtual meeting at the same time through all those court processes. But that immigration court interpreter position did not last long because in December, our cases were still going up.

CHU-EN (00:47:00):

The court was thinking about maybe expanding more, more servicing capacity, but they couldn't. So, I am still an interpreter, but at that time I was just staying at home. And I knew that, you know, I can't be like that all the time. And I tried to apply for more jobs. And luckily I was-- Orange County was hiring again for something called Operation Independence, which is to have the majority of Orange County residents be vaccinated by July 4th. So that's what the name was for. And they were looking for people that will work at the vaccine distribution sites. And I have a bilingual background and I worked with the

County before. So I started to work for them on January 31st, and I've been working long hours every week ever since.

CHU-EN (00:48:08):

And the reason why I said this to you is because in grad school, we expect things to happen, but things don't really happen the way we want it. And when that happened, you will get, I will get really disappointed because you work towards it, like you spent two years doing something. So you sort of shape your career goal to one direction. You think when I graduate, this is going to happen, that's going to happen and that's going to happen. Well, what if when a pandemic happens? Nothing else happened, but a pandemic did. And that really helped me to sit down and think, okay, what happens now? Like, are you really going to go for policy related jobs, or you want to go for opportunities that are needed now. It might not necessarily relate to what you study, but I think one of the things, the most important thing, is you have to stay active.

CHU-EN (00:49:12):

So my strategy changed, and I apply a lot of self care process as well, just to, you know, stay sane, but continue to apply. And I also want to give a quick shout out-- I want to give a shout out to really our, our school, Master's of Public Affairs, School of Public Affairs, the graduate, what do you call it? The career service center. There's a lady named Dora Lee and she continued to support students online. And I talked to her four or five times, and she helped me with, you know, reshaping your cover letters. How do you frame your resume? How do you, you know-- And I think other than her being helpful, it was also helpful for me because it made me feel like, you know, the school didn't just disappear and the school was trying to help you because you're part of UCLA or you're part of the family of Master's of Public Policy and now the Master's of Public Policy wants to be here for you.

CHU-EN (00:50:35):

And I carried that sort of a gratitude when I go to work. Like I was recently offered some opportunity to work on projects and I would really want to stand up because I felt like I wouldn't have been able to overcome the last year without the support of many other people. And a majority of them work for UCLA School of Public Affairs. So you will really want to represent. I think that's the positive outcome of my job hunting, but I will say the first few months were very hard.

COLLINGS (00:51:18):

Yeah. Yeah. I think we can all agree on that one. You said that that there were things that you did for yourself to prevent you from going crazy. What are those things like? How do you manage your life during a pandemic?

CHU-EN (00:51:36):

Sure, sure. So, I used to go to a gym a lot. I like to lift weights. I do, I used to train up power lifting where you do that--lift, squat bench press heavy weights. And because COVID happened. So all the gyms got closed down and you don't have heavy weights anymore. Yeah. So I was staying at home and I really wanted to lift weights., but I couldn't get any. And I started thinking like, well, maybe I can do something else. And I realized I bought a pull-up bar about four years ago, but I never used it. It's still in a box. So I took it out and I took all the pull up bars, I assembled it. I put it on the back of my the doorframe for my restroom. And I will do like you know, 50, 60 pull ups every day. And then I will do it for-- I did it for a few days and my body got really, really, really sore.

CHU-EN (00:52:38):

And then they really helped me. It was alarming because, I've never got that sore from lifting heavy weights, but I got really, really sore from lifting my own weights. And that was a wake up call. I would say, wait a minute, maybe I need to do something else. Maybe that whole weight lifting thing wasn't the way to go. Because from my doing body weight pull ups, it definitely tells me that, you know, the previous training lacked certain things. So I shifted my entire training regime. I started to do a lot of pushups, a lot of body weight dips, some pull ups, and I started to run again. I never actually ran. I started with a mile and then two miles, and then just walked around the neighborhood. You know, you, you will be surprised.

CHU-EN (00:53:37):

And I think a lot of people too-- is you live in a place for so long, but you always travel by car. And for me, that was like that. I actually live right next to Cal State Long Beach, that's where I went to a undergrad. And I will just go run and walk around the campus. And I never walked like that when I was there. And you really got to discover a lot of hidden beauty, if you will, hidden gems. And I will walk around the neighborhood. And I started to do a lot of stretching, like trying to pull your head towards your toes or your foot kind of stuff, some yoga to really develop overall fitness capacity, I will say. And I think that really helped me to rethink what I want to have. When I was training during college, I wanted to get really big, really strong. Lift a lot of weights, but then your mental strength was never trained.

CHU-EN (00:54:45):

You know, you need to be to train those two. And I think I treated this pandemic as an experience of regaining that part because a lot of time the strongest person out there is not the one that can lift the most weights. A lot of the time there's people that really, really have a real understanding of their value and their strength. And I think I lack a lot of that. So I spent time and do those things. And I also went hiking. I like to hike a lot. I will go to--and this is my personal recommendation to you as well. I will say Mount Wilson specifically. Specifically the trail head in Sierra Madre, that trailhead, I will say was the best. So sometimes I'll go maybe every two weeks to just go hike.

CHU-EN (00:55:41):

And it was a humbling experience. And I say all this just to really emphasize that, you know, when I was running out there, when I was hiking or when I was walking and I look at those trees and those rocks, it just reminds me that these things been here longer than I have. All those tall trees have been here hundreds of years. For them the pandemic is just one tiny bit of their whole cycle. And when I have that understanding set up, it was enlightening. And it was also very humbling. I understand that, you know, this pandemic will go away, but you can stay healthy throughout this process. And I think because I began to adapt that mentality, I shared that with my friends and a lot of my friends shared the same thing, which is, you know, like we, the only reason we're training right now is to see each other again, when the pandemic's finished.

CHU-EN (00:56:51):

Really be able to re reconnect. And I think that's, yeah. So I will say those kinds of self care routines helped me to understand myself a little bit more. And I think those routines also helped me to overcome the frustration I had during my job hunting process, I will say. Like, I will do a job application for two hours and then get really tired, but then you will do 50 pull-ups and, you know, maybe job application is not that bad. And then you do it again. So, yeah, those are my routines. Just a lot of exercise.

COLLINGS ([00:57:39](#)):

Do you feel like you've changed, you know, internally in a way that will outlast the pandemic? Do you feel that you will approach the rest of your life in a different way, in a way that's been inspired by your pandemic life,

CHU-EN ([00:58:00](#)):

For sure. For sure. Absolutely. And I think what I've learned from this pandemic, I have been trying to reflect that through my daily living so that people, so a lot of my friends can see that, Oh, like, Chi's really different since the pandemic started. But at the same time, it's also a way for me to-- You really grow. And I think this experience is so important to all of us because, not trying to be pessimistic, but things like Covid is going to happen again, this is not going to be the first one we see in our lifetime.

COLLINGS ([00:58:41](#)):

You really feel that way, you feel like you have to be prepared for the next time.

CHU-EN ([00:58:45](#)):

Right, right. There, there could be obstacles and all shapes and all forms. There's pandemics. You also have climate change. There's a lot of possible-- There might be war. There might be other stuff. And even though on these the assessors are different in nature or scale, but the impact they will have on humanity are very similar. So to really mature yourself while you can, will help you to last longer when the next thing hits, at least that's my perspective on this pandemic.

COLLINGS ([00:59:30](#)):

Oh, very good. It seems like a good place to leave it. Have we forgotten to say anything? Is there anything that's been that's left unsaid that somebody in the future should know about?

CHU-EN ([00:59:48](#)):

Hmm. Yeah. If I can. At one point I think in the pandemic, it really helped me to understand that not nothing lasts forever. A pandemic doesn't last forever, but a lot of times people's lives don't last forever. And I got lucky because I don't have any relatives that passed away, but I have a lot of friends and colleagues that had their relatives pass away. And because of that, that also taught me, you know, even though pandemics won't happen all the time, but a lot of the time, but moving forward, you really will have to sometimes pull yourself out of what you're doing. And look at things from a perspective as if a pandemic is still happening, because that helps you to understand what is really valuable at hand.

CHU-EN ([01:00:51](#)):

For example, like job hunting, those things can wait, those things can wait, but maybe your friends can't. So really trying to maintain those relationship, phone call, virtual, you know, virtual happy hours, call parents, talk to your mom and dad, not just on a phone call, but maybe text messages, those things have more value than trying to get more money or trying to find a job, because jobs will always be here. I have to say that I said, because I don't have immediate financial hardship, I struggle, but I don't have immediate financial hardships. But I think it's important that, you know, there are certain things that last, and there are certain things that inaudible you, and it's important that you separate them and try to always keep yourself at a place that you're mentally satisfied.

COLLINGS ([01:01:55](#)):

So just one last question. So you've spoken about how you yourself have changed in answer to this set of events. Is there anything you would like to see happen society-wide as a function of all of this? Is there a change that you'd like to see in the larger society come about and, you know, from the public policy perspective as well, that couldn't have happened without the pandemic, perhaps?

CHU-EN ([01:02:34](#)):

Hmm. You mean like what I would want to see moving forward?

COLLINGS ([01:02:38](#)):

Yeah. Like, is there something that you would want to see coming out of this? If it's good?

CHU-EN ([01:02:46](#)):

Yeah. If it's possible, I think people need to be more sympathetic to other individuals. And I don't mean by, you know, well, I do mean by, you know, when you're on the street, say hi, and then when, you know, when people need help, help them just a little bit and maybe a simple sign of a gesture will help because in this whole pandemic I've seen, I will be honest because I'm Asian American myself. I didn't experience those, but I've seen a lot of hate crimes towards Asian Americans happen. And I've also seen a lot of people that they will go travel to Florida from whatever the States that were having a lockdown. And they will just party in Florida and bring all the diseases back. And I think because of those situations-

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CHU-EN ([01:03:45](#)):

Those scenarios exist. It's really hard for me to see the bright side of the society, but I will say, you know, if the society-- What I will want to see in the society moving forward, if a similar situation were to happen-- You know what, let me take that back. I just say that those situations make me not able to see the bright sides of what humanity can accomplish. But also recently I've also seen a lot of response to that. A lot of alliances have been developed throughout the entire social media platforms. And because of the pandemic, we also saw how the voters turned out during the elections. A lot of people don't usually vote, but they came out and voted. I think that was a sign of, you know, society response to a crisis and taking it to another level.

CHU-EN ([01:04:49](#)):

So I love seeing those, but it was a one time thing. What I will want to see moving forward, as people continue to engage with their community. Like, we talk about support your local businesses, but don't just do it right now. Don't just do it this time. You know, continue to support and continue to help them to grow. And again, I recall my previous point, and be sympathetic to other individuals when you see them on the streets, because you don't know what they're going through. And I tried doing that in my daily living as well. I'll give you one example. I remember I was at the supermarket one time and this guy and the girl were trying to push the car because their car all of a sudden lost the energy, electric fuel or whatnot. And it was during the height of hate crimes against Asian Americans. And so I feel like I wanted to do something. So it would represent us in a good image.

CHU-EN ([01:05:52](#)):

And, and the guy and the girl, they were really appreciative. And then that was a great experience. And yeah, so I will say, you know, the same society, how society reacts to elections, we want to see (inaudible). And how people respond to hate crimes towards George Floyd, what happened to George Floyd, and what happened to a lot of Asian-Americans. We want to see that all the time, not just talking about it, but continuing to stay engaged and not just to stay engaged in those issues. There were so many issues out there that we can pay attention to. Volunteer, really volunteer. And I think if somebody wants to get engaged politically, you need to volunteer. Because a lot of times we kind of look at things from far away. But if you get to the field and do it yourself, you will know why things are being carried out the way they're being carried out.

CHU-EN (01:06:58):

So I think more involvement will be really helpful for us as a society moving forward. Unfortunately I think we're, we are-- Well, I will say this, I think we're not as divided as we think we are. I think the media and how we see on a lot of things makes us kind of hostile towards one another. But again, I work at the vaccination distribution sites and there's a lot of people that voted Republican or a lot of people who voted Democrat. We all voted. So people will talk about it. People will naturally tell you what they think about certain issues. And you could kind of tell their voting patterns. And a lot of time down the line, they will let you know also, but at least for me, people are comfortable with telling me what they think because I was never judgmental.

CHU-EN (01:08:00):

And I think that was another important part, is you cannot really value a person based on how he or she votes. You got to know this person more. And my point was you know no matter what parties you support, no matter who they voted for-- We all came together and we all hated people that don't wear a mask. So that's like, you know, different group of people--because there's a lot more in common between us than what was dividing us. And I think, you know if we can find ways to really emphasize that, I think this nation will be in a better place and really, truly reach the democratic society that it's always trying to reach.

COLLINGS (01:08:53):

Yes. I'm sorry to keep you. But, you know, I spoke with a young woman who grew up in Shanghai and she was saying how, you know, she'd been here for a little while but she never really understood just how deeply individualistic American society is. And she was sort of shocked by it. And she was referring specifically to the mask wearing debate, if you could call it a debate. And you just said, you know, we don't care how they vote as long as they wear masks or something like that. So for you, I guess that's a red line that they need to-- People need to follow the science and not be individualistic to the point of, you know, refusing to wear a mask during a pandemic.

CHU-EN (01:09:47):

Right. Right. I will say individual opinions are valued, but if your individual behaviors or opinions have the potential of harming people that you don't know, they need to watch how you carry your individual gestures around. If I may add on, at first not many people wore a mask. I think people started to really wear a mask because our death toll was too, too scary. And just kept going up. And I think because we have that real tough lesson, people started to wear a mask. I still encounter a few individuals at the sites that refuse to wear a mask. We have also seen people that show up and try to have a protest about not to have a vaccine.

COLLINGS ([01:10:39](#)):

Oh, right. You've had the actual protesters come to your vaccine site.

CHU-EN ([01:10:42](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I think part of it has to do with, we were in Anaheim or we were in Orange County and the protesters were coming around and they were yelling, screaming, saying, I want to live, I don't want a vaccine. And it was interesting to see because you see a lot of elders and 65 and above sitting in the car trying to get to the testing sites to get their vaccinations, and you see a lot of young people mostly between the age of the late thirties to early fifties, carrying those signs, walking around and saying, I want to live. And that's like, yeah, you can live, but you being here, well, you have the least possibility to get COVID than all these elders sitting in the car. So you're not being considerate or you're just being a hypocrite. And that's no good. But I agree with her.

CHU-EN ([01:11:43](#)):

People were really individualistic throughout this whole situation. And if the situation hadn't gotten this bad, I think we will have seen more individualistic behavior. And I hope going forward. And this is also in response to your previous question, which is going forward, I think people should hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. You know, you can always do things certain ways, but you have to always remember the potential. What this could possibly be, like when COVID first started, we didn't know it was going to get this bad. We're just like playing cool. It's not going to happen. Nothing's going to happen. We're going to be back in school in like April. Well, guess what, school's been closed since March. And I think a lot of time it has to deal with us not taking us seriously. And I think being individualistic definitely has something to do with it. But we should always attempt to call out the best of people's individualism, such as, I want to wear a mask, such as, I want to volunteer, such as, if I see someone not wear a mask, I'm going to say something.

CHU-EN ([01:13:13](#)):

Those are all individualistic behaviors. They should be more-- They should be widely broadcast. You know, if we can focus more on the good, it will show the true value of people being very individualistic.

COLLINGS ([01:13:34](#)):

Okay. Let's, let's leave it there. And I'll, I'll turn off the recorder and then we can just chat for a moment.