

## **FHS Oral History Project – Henry Kwan**

### **Description:**

Henry Kwan was born in Winter Park, Florida, in 1988. His parents fled China in the early 1980s. Henry recollected stories his grandmother told about China's authoritarian regime, particularly memories about Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to seeking economic prosperity, these conditions prompted Henry's grandmother and parents to emigrate to the US during the early 1980s. His grandmother deeply influenced Henry's childhood, citing her as why he learned Cantonese before English. Throughout the oral history, Henry emphasized the duality between his American and Chinese identities, associating more with the former yet always wondering about the latter, especially later in adulthood. After graduating from high school in 2006, Henry enlisted in the Marine Corps as a reservist, sharing his various motives for joining. In addition to recounting his basic training experience, Henry detailed several takeaways he learned about himself and the United States while serving as an Asian American. After he concluded his service in 2012, Henry fell into a depressive state, contemplating suicide at one point. He recalled how he overcame such emotions and navigated the broader cultural stigmas associated with mental health circa 2012. In 2014, Henry graduated from the University of Central Florida with a bachelor's in psychology. He discussed broader anti-Chinese sentiments in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how he indirectly felt the influence in Orlando. In his broader observations about Orlando, he questioned the identity the city will embrace amidst the current (c. 2025) political climate. Additionally, he feared the increasing intensification of hurricanes and their economic and demographic impacts on the state while underlining inclusivity for all peoples in America.

### **Transcription:**

00;00;04 - 00;00;20

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Henry Kwan on May 20th, 2025, in Orlando, Florida for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please restate your name, date of birth and where you were born?

00;00;20 - 00;00;28

**HENRY KWAN:** My name is Henry Kwan. I was born January 5th, 1988, and I was born in Winter Park, Florida.

00;00;28 - 00;00;44

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Can you just tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up in Winter Park during the late 90s, early 2000, particularly as a Chinese American and living in a Chinese household in America?

00;00;44 - 00;04;49

**HENRY KWAN:** My parents in those days rented an apartment and I have very limited memories of my time spent in those apartments. I just remember my parents were always working. And before they went to work, they would leave me and my brother with a family friend. And I remember we always used to go swimming. There was this other little girl that was the daughter of that family. And they had a swimming pool in their backyard, and they would always go swimming back there. So that was probably the only memory I have during those times.

Eventually my parents were able to purchase a home in Orlando, over by UCF. And from that point on, I have the weirdest dreams about my time as a child living there. [I have] dreams and memories about the time my dad knocked down a wall between one of the hallways so that he could have a door between the hallway and the garage. And I remember he was handing me the hammer so that I could smash parts of the door open. Then there were other times where I remember, I think it was captured on video where, silly to think about now, but I was a child back then, but my mom and brother had finished the last of the ice cream, and I got really mad about that. I got so upset about that that I basically threw myself onto the ground and started stomping and kicking the wall with both my feet and just basically making all kinds of noise and screaming like a child does. And I remember the whole time looking over at my mom and my brother, and they were just nonchalantly just licking their ice cream, not a care in the world. And it was the silliest thing ever.

From there, I went to Arbor Ridge Elementary School, which is not too far from where we lived. Me and my brother rode the bus out there all the time, and my brother is only about three years older than me. And so he was always the big brother looking out for me as we were going through our different grades together. My first language was Chinese that I learned from my grandma. My grandma was a huge, huge influence in my life. And tragically for her situation, I do not think things really ended the way that I would have wanted to ended. And she eventually died of colon cancer. So that was how she passed away. But she was essentially the person who took care of me, my brother, as we [grew] up. And her herself being an immigrant and being from China, she did not know English. She only knew how to speak Chinese. And so the only way she spoke to me in my brother was in Cantonese, which is a dialect of Chinese. And so that was our first language. So my experience from that was that going straight from knowing only Chinese to going into an American school where everyone spoke English, everyone understood the mannerisms, everyone knew how to interact with one another in an American style. It was hard. It was really hard. And I had a really difficult time in trying to understand, like the literature, like English was always my hardest class, not learning English, eventually, of course, I learned English, but they would give you an assignment to say, “Hey, read this book or read this poem and then extrapolate and tell me what this is about, or tell me the motifs.” And I would not have a single clue because I could barely read the words. I would read the words, and then I would just drift off and I could not understand what half the words meant. So it was a really hard time. It was really a hard time.

00;04;49 - 00;04;52

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what did your parents do for a living?

00;04;52 - 00;05;11

**HENRY KWAN:** So my dad, he was a chef, Chinese. He owned several failed, unfortunately, Chinese restaurants. And eventually he just settled down to just being a chef at a restaurant. And my mother worked as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant. So they were both in the Chinese restaurant industries.

00;05;11 - 00;05;17

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you mentioned how you had a brother. Was it just you two, or [did] you have other siblings?

00;05;18 - 00;05;20

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. It was just me and my brother. Just me and my brother.

00;05;20; - 00;05;35

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you emphasized the importance of your grandmother in your life. Did she ever pass down any stories from China that that still stick with you to this day?

00;05;35 - 00;07;09

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. And it is not the most pleasant story. And my grandma passed away at ninety or ninety-two years old. So she lived to a very old age. But if you do the math, she [lived] in China during Japanese occupation. And during those timeframes, things were really hard. And I do not know if it was either during, Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, which caused mass famine and killed millions of people in China where she had this memory or if it was from Japanese occupation of China. But she was sharing her story where she was living in the village and the soldiers came by with rice and they were handing it out to the starving villagers at that time, which, of course, my grandma was there, and the people were scrambling to try to get food as much as they can that she witnessed a gentleman reaching for and grabbing rice to try to eat the rice right then and there and then, he got slashed through the mouth and opened up part of his cheek. And apparently he did not care. He was so hungry that he just kept eating through the injury. And so that was one of those stories that I remember from her. And then there were other little things where my grandma definitely suffered from PTSD. Some nights I would hear her, and she would be screaming and hollering. So it was a very unfortunate situation that she found herself in those times.

00;07;09 - 00;07;14

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And do you know what year she left China to come to the US?

00;07;14 - 00;07;55

**HENRY KWAN:** That is a good question. I know it was most likely after my parents got here, in about the 80s. So my parents settled here. Actually it was my dad that initially came over here from Guangzhou, China to New York City. And then from there, once he kind of established a bit of a foothold, he was able to coordinate and work to get my mother from China over here as well. And they had met her on a farm in China. And then eventually, they moved down here to Florida. And then around 1984 is when they had my brother. So I know it was after my parents had settled down here.

00;07;55 - 00;08;09

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And to stick with that theme of passing down stories from China, did your parents ever also share their experiences growing up in mainland China?

00;08;09 - 00;09;51

**HENRY KWAN:** Little tidbits here and there. I think the only story I remember from my parents was how they met, which I think is really interesting. So for lack of a better term, I

guess my father's father, so my grandfather, he was a foreman of some factory out there, and I guess, either because of his status or because of his political affiliations, his family, my dad's family was required to give up children or give up sons or family members to work on farms. And it was a mandatory thing for a lot of different families where you had to send someone from that family to go work on a farm. And so my dad was one of those persons that went to work on a farm, and it was actually at these farms where he met my mother, and I guess he was just completely taken away by her. And so he would sneak out to try to have conversation with her. And they secretly got married. And when he had flew over here to the United States, I remember my mom telling me that, all of her friends—she stayed back in China—all of her friends that she had in where they stayed [and] where they slept in, like little huts together, they would make fun of her and tell her that she is stupid because “why do you think this boy who is going to America, what makes you think he is going to come back for you?” And she was like, “No, I trust him. He is going to come back for me.” And I think it took like three years before my dad finally got a foothold where he was able to bring her over, and sure enough, she proved them all wrong as she went over here and then she made it.

00;09;51 - 00;10;09

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Right. Absolutely. Did they ever share with you and your brother, why they left? Like, what did they see in the US as a place to leave China or what did they not see in China that forced them to leave?

00;10;09 - 00;11;03

**HENRY KWAN:** That is a really good question. I do not think my parents had flat out told me the reason why they had left. If I were to guess, I would say, it was probably one or two things. It was economic prosperity. They wanted that prosperity. And for two, I think just through knowing my parents for my whole life, I think it was their ideologies. I think their thinking did not align with the type of thinking that existed back in those days because they were born right at the time of the Cultural Revolution. So that was like 1958, give or take. So that was when all that madness was going on. So I imagine that was probably one of the reasons why they wanted to leave before it caught up to them. But that is a good question.

00;11;03 - 00;11;26

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Your family obviously was here already at this time, and you were only like a year or two old, but maybe when you got older or looking back, do you recall sort of how your family reacted to the Tiananmen Square event in 1989?

00;11;27 - 00;11;45

**HENRY KWAN:** They never talked about it. They never talked about it. And if I were to ask them, they would probably recognize it for what it is, that it is a massacre. It is a tragedy and that they are probably glad that they got out of there when they did. Absolutely.

00;11;45 - 00;11;55

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. So you shared the elementary school you went to, what middle school and high schools did you attend?

00;11;55 - 00;12;24

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. So in middle school, I went all the way out to the East side in the Bithlo area to a middle school called Corner Lake Middle School, which I believe was fairly new at that time when, when I first went out there. I just remember there being a really long bus ride and sleeping on the bus a lot heading out there. And a lot of exposure to new cultures, some of it good, some of it negative, and not many Asian kids in a school like that.

00;12;24 - 00;12;59

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah. You mentioned how in elementary school and now middle school and I am assuming high school, correct me if I am wrong, you struggled navigating your dual identity, as an American, born in America, but also from Chinese heritage. And now you just told me how there were not that many Chinese kids. So just talk to me about that experience. How did you navigate that?

00;12;59 - 00;15;51

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. You find people who look like you, and you naturally just kind of click with them. So through middle school and through high school, there were—I do not know how it happens. Like, naturally, you just start to float in and associate with people who look like you and you start to talk with them, and eventually you just become friends. But then you at the same time, to the best of my knowledge, my parents never really tried to put a lot of emphasis in teaching me a lot of the Chinese culture. So they would be traditional things that they would do and that me and my brother would participate in, but I just do not remember the significance of them. I do not know the reason why we have to eat this certain food on a certain day or have a family get together on this particular moon festival or whatever. It just never really clicked for me. And I think there was a purpose behind it. And that they wanted me to be as American as I could be. And so with that kind of upbringing going into the school system and even still today, like, I find myself very much more American, if that makes sense, than I do on my Asian heritage, and it was only recently that I tried to reconnect with that and try to understand that aspect of me more. But growing up as a kid and the people that you hang out with, we only hung out with each other because we looked like each other. I did not really know much about their cultural history. I hung out with folks who were Vietnamese and who were Hawaiian and who were Filipino. And these were my core group of friends that I hung out with. But in terms of culture and learning about who they are, [it] never really crossed my mind. They were just people who I thought were cool and they accepted me, whereas I would try to interact with other kids, and it was not so much the same. I remember playing basketball one morning at Corner Lake Middle School, and me and my friend, back in those days, he was a Vietnamese kid, and we were both really good at basketball. And so we played, 2V2 against two Black kids and we schooled them. We absolutely floored them! We wiped them off. And in the school bell ring and I guess, one of the kids did not like the fact that you got beat by two Asian kids, and he just chucked the ball in my face and hit my nose and hit it really hard. And I was a kid, and I was not accustomed to anger or violence like that. And so I just stood there completely dumbfounded and shocked, and I was like, I do not know what just happened. And so I do not know if that was something to deal with because of who I am, or maybe the kid was just angry, but this was one of the things that [has] stuck with me.

00;15;51 - 00;16;04

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you mentioned how it was only recently that you are starting to reconnect with your cultural heritage. Why do you think that is so?

00;16;04 - 00;17;02

**HENRY KWAN:** The way that I try to make sense of it is like if I was an adopted child and I had the best adoptive parents in the world, I figured at some point in time, no matter how good you had it as a kid and how much your adoptive parents loved you, there is still that bit of curiosity where you want to know who my biological parents are. And this is what I equate it to. I had a really good American upbringing, despite my parents attempts because obviously they were immigrants—they did their best to try to get me acclimatized to the American culture as much as I could—but there is a side of me where I have always questioned my identity, and I have never really felt comfortable around people of my own culture. So let me try to figure out why that is. Let me try to reconnect with that side of the culture and just try to get to know myself a bit better.

00;17;03 - 00;17;08

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. What high school did you attend?

00;17;08 - 00;17;29

**HENRY KWAN:** I went to University High School, which is right next to UCF as well. So it was all kind of in the same area. And that was where things really kicked off, we had full blown Asian clubs and Asian associations. And so I was joining that and just about everyone that I was hanging out with was Asian.

00;17;29 - 00;17;55

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** I am curious. You just lay it out to me, why now, as a full-fledged adult, you are reconnecting back with your culture, and then you just now told me that in high school, you were joining these Asian clubs. So, as a teenager, why did you join those clubs?

00;17;55 - 00;18;19

**HENRY KWAN:** To me, it was a social gathering. Yeah. So similar to how I hung out with my friends back in those days because they look like me. I hung out with these people because they looked like me. Were there cultural things done in these clubs? Absolutely. A hundred percent. But I did it because I just wanted to have friends. I just wanted to enjoy their company.

00;18;19 - 00;18;27

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah, absolutely. What were some of the cultural programs that you all initiated through those clubs?

00;18;27 - 00;19;11

**HENRY KWAN:** So, the adult who was the president of that club, I am going to butcher his name, but it was like Mr. Kahuna or something like that. And he was a really big Hawaiian guy. And so he would always get us together. You know what? I do not even know what we did, now that I think about it. I just remember him, and I remember he would always get us together, and he was this big jolly guy. But in terms of, like, what we actually did, I do not even know. I am

sure we did some stuff related to certain cultures and heritages, but to me, it was all about remembering the people that I hung out with, less about what we did.

00;19;11 - 00;19;17

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What class were you a part of? Like your graduating class? What year?

00;19;17 - 00;19;22;

**HENRY KWAN:** I graduated in 2006.

00;19;22 - 00;19;28

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** So after you graduated high school, did you attend college?

00;19;28 - 00;20;15

**HENRY KWAN:** A little bit of that and a little bit of the military. I had these really unusual aspirations at that time at eighteen years old. And so I actually enlisted into the Marine Corps and shipped out that same year I graduated in the summertime to join the Marine Corps to go to boot camp and go through all that fun stuff, as a reservist. So not as a full time Marine, but just as a reservist. So then after I got done with all the training, I [came] back to my hometown and started going to college at the same time. And so, as a reservist, [I] would just be required to once a month and then two weeks out of the year, attend certain trainings that they have set up to keep your quote unquote, your skills up.

00;20;15 - 00;20;25

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Why did you feel the need to enlist in the Marine Corps?

00;20;25 - 00;21;46

**HENRY KWAN:** At that time, I was eighteen years old and I kind of saw the path that my life was going to take, and I did not like it. I was not a bad kid. And I did okay in school, but I kind of already saw how everything was going to be laid out. I would go to college, I would get a nice job, make money, get a wife, have kids and just work and die. And I am sure for a lot of people that was a hard thing to attain. And I am sure a lot of people would want something like that. And I should be grateful that I even have an opportunity to have something like that. But for me, I did not like that it was already this cookie cutter mold of a life that was already set before me, and I did not like that. I wanted to break out of that. I wanted something completely just off the wall, rebellious, different than what you would expect. And maybe something even to piss my parents off, which they were not happy about that, but they were really proud about it after they saw me in graduation. So that was probably the reason why I wanted to join. And the other side of it is because your eighteen year old kid, you want to be a badass. And so you are going to try to join the toughest military you can, and you say you are going to go Special Forces and be the super, super tough guy, but that never pans out. So a little bit of naivete and a little bit of just wanted to break the mold.

00;21;46 - 00;21;50

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah, absolutely. Why were your parents pissed off?

00;21;50 - 00;22;22

**HENRY KWAN:** Because they do not want to see their kid die. It was just that simple. You join the military and there is an active war going on at that time, after the invasion of Iraq. So they were really worried about something would happen. And yes, I did deploy overseas. They did deploy me as an infantryman. But nothing bad happened. Nothing bad happened. My deployment was—it was not a vacation—but it was very, I would say insignificant, very insignificant.

00;22;22 - 00;22;28

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And talk to me about your basic training boot camp experience.

00;22;28 - 00;24;38

**HENRY KWAN:** Oh my God. Oh, geez. It was culture shock. Culture shock is the lightest way I can say it. One of the very first weeks I was there in boot camp, I had joined up, one of my buddies back in the day in high school, his name was Wayne. I cannot remember his last name, but his name was Wayne. He was really tall, skinny, Black guy, maybe, like six [foot], three [inches] or something like that. But he was super nice, and him and I were buddies going through high school, and we knew that we were going to join the Marines. And so I remember after we had done our initial chew out session staying on the yellow footprints and all the other fun indoctrination stuff, we were basically standing on a yellow line, waiting for the next thing to happen. And I remember our senior drill instructor, or I should say, my first senior drill instructor at that time was kind of calling out different names for different things, I do not know, mail call or whatever. And then he shouts my name, he goes, “Kwan!” [I responded], “Yes, sir.” And he goes, “Do you know somebody named Wayne whatever his last name is?” And I am like, “Yes, sir.” And he was like, “Take your shit and go to whatever floor and you are going to be with them now.” And I was like, okay, I did not know what the heck was going on. So I had to grab all of my junk inside of this giant locker that I was carrying with me and had to go up three flights of stairs because I started off on the first floor. His thing was all up on like the fourth floor and had to run all the way up to the fourth floor and I barge in and then the drill instructor was like, “What the fuck do you want?” I was like, “I was asked to report to the whatever, whatever for so and so.” And then the other guy shouts over his name is like, “for Wayne?” And then Wayne is like, “Yes, sir,” standing out in front. And I was like, this m-fer told the senior drill instructor that I was his battle buddy so that they would pull me away from this platoon and insert into his platoon. So they made me run all four flights of stairs up with this big ole fifty pound locker that I am carrying with me, just so we could be battle buddies. And I thought it was the funniest thing ever.

00;24;38 - 00;24;58

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah, that is funny. I am breaking chronology a little bit because I should have asked before, but why the Marine Corps out of the other branches? What were the influences?

00;24;58 - 00;26;01

**HENRY KWAN:** So, as a young kid, I am sure as most kids are probably gamers and as kids do they like to play shooting games. And so I got really into a video game called Counter-Strike back in the day. And it was a really straightforward shooter game. And part of that kind of



seeped into the other influences, I am sure, like movies and television had a lot to do with it, and a lot of like the really nice advertisements that the Marine Corps puts out of people in their dressed blues and looking super sharp, and people always telling you that you are going to pull a lot of chicks wearing this kind of uniform, really kind of influences you to lean one way versus another. It also does not hurt that UHS's [University High School's] ROTC program is with the Marines. So I am sure they already had some recruiters on deck trying to get people to join. And I was really easily influenced back in those days. All you had to say was dress blues. I was like, "Yeah, sign me up. Sign me up."

00;26;01 - 00;26;09

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** I am curious, what was it like as an Asian American serving in the military?

00;26;09 - 00;27;10

**HENRY KWAN:** It was the best. It was hands down the best I can. I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that I did not experience any type of ill treatment or racism during my time in the military. Not a single iota. Now, that does not mean were we racist to each other, because you bet your ass we were racist to each other. But it was all in good fun. And it was on kind of that guy locker room type deal. But we never had any ill intent. I loved my time in the Marines. I am sure a lot of other veterans say this, but we love the clowns, but we hate the circus. The guys that I serve with were some of the best people that I have ever known. And yeah, some, some of the best memories were serving with them. But some of the shenanigans that the military pulls on you and the hurry up and wait stuff that you got to do. Yeah, I can do without that. I can do without that.

00;27;10 - 00;27;20

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What did you learn about a) yourself and b) the United States serving in the military?

00;27;20 - 00;28;32

**HENRY KWAN:** Oh, that is a good question. What I learned about myself serving in the military was that the world is not a kind place. And kind of what they always say, you rate what you put in. If you do not put in the effort to improve yourself, if you do not put in an effort to solve your own problems. No one else is going to solve your problem for you, and it is ultimately your responsibility to take control of your life. And if you are going to take a lot of shit from people, and then you are going to get a lot of flak and you are going to have a lot of problems going your way, so then what, what are you going to do about it? And so going through the military for me was a really fast paced way to wake [me] up to say, all right, you are an adult now and you have a lot of adult responsibilities. And if you do not take care of the responsibilities, there is going to be punishment for that. And so you learn really quick to just take care of yourself and to grow up. So me being a young kid at that time, just not really having that much responsibility and not really having that much world experience. Yeah, that was definitely culture shock. And I am sorry, what is your other question?

00;28;32 - 00;28;35

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And then about the US generally.

00;28;35 - 00;29;14

**HENRY KWAN:** About the US. I think, looking back on it now, culturally, I think that there would be no racism in the world if or I guess in America, if everyone served in the military. Because once you start mingling with people who look different from you, you do not even see the color anymore. You do not even look at that as part of their identity. You look at them as who they are as a person, as their personality, as their name, as what they can do in terms of how hard they work. You do not care about the color of the skin anymore.

00;29;14 - 00;29;21

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you mentioned how—well, first I should ask how long did you serve?

00;29;21 - 00;29;51

**HENRY KWAN:** So I did six years in the reserves, and then six years and what they call the IRR [Individual Ready Reserve], which is basically you are out, and you are obligated to go back in if something crazy happens or a war breaks out. But there is no requirement to go to training anymore. So it was six years of reserve duty with about a year and some odd months of active duty time for my deployment.

00;29;51;18 - 00;30;03;06

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you mentioned how, after your service, your parents were proud. Why do you think they switched up from initially being pissed?

00;30;03 - 00;30;47

**HENRY KWAN:** The dress blues man! The dress blues! No, no, I think, I do not know, maybe to them, they saw that as your son is not a child anymore. He is an adult, and he is grown up to do his own thing. And he did something that was really difficult. And something that my dad had always talked about was when he was growing up as a kid, his dream was always to be a fighter pilot, to be in the military. And he still to this day watches a ton of military movies because that is just his thing. And I guess initially they were just very scared that something would happen to their child. But then once they saw that he was okay and that he did pretty okay for himself, they had something that they wanted to show off.

00;30;47 - 00;30;57

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Do you think that your service deepened their sense of Americanness, if that makes any sense?

00;30;57 - 00;31;13

**HENRY KWAN:** I would say so, yeah, I would say so. They are still very much involved in the Asian community. But I think, being able to say that, oh yeah, I have a son that served in military really kind of solidifies that identity that, yeah, I am an American now.

00;31;13 - 00;31;18

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Yeah. What year exactly did you finish your service?

00;31;18 - 00;31;41

**HENRY KWAN:** Oh, that was in 2014 when I finished IRR, and then the last year that I actually had to serve, I want to say it was 2012. So it was an eight year contract, six years in reserves and two years in IRR, and that was how it worked there. So it was 2014 when I finished in 2012 was when I stopped going.

00;31;41 - 00;31;46

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And so was it around this time that you went back to college or no?

00;31;46 - 00;32;34

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. I was a terrible student. All throughout the whole process, when I was in the reserves, I was actively going to UCF taking classes, here and there. I still did not have that good of a foundational understanding of literature and English and things like that. Like I understood how to read words, but trying to see the force of the trees, as it were, was still difficult for me. So, I was still going to college kind of intermittently and failing a couple classes here and there. But eventually I got it together. Once I officially got done with the military and had a lot more time to really kind of just hone in and focus, I was able to attend college full time at that point and graduated in 2014 with a bachelor's of science degree in psychology.

00;32;34 - 00;32;35

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Why psychology?

00;32;35 - 00;33;01

**HENRY KWAN:** I am really fascinated with people. I am really fascinated with understanding how people kind of tick. I did have aspirations at that time to get into what is known as industrial organizational psychology, which is improving people's processes and workflows to make business more efficient. But eventually I landed a job. And so I was kind of comfortable after that.

00;33;01 - 00;33;08

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Is this job that you just mentioned, your current position in Orange County or a different job?

00;33;08 - 00;34;03

**HENRY KWAN:** Well, this job I have right now, this is my current position in Orange County. So, the industrial organizational aspect of it would be more like a master's degree. So, for this position I have now, I am a trainer here with Orange County 311. I did not start off as a trainer. I did have some experience back in my days, when I was in high school working for at that time was Cingular Wireless, now it is AT&T, as a collections representative because as every good kid does back in those days, used to get your first job, and that was my first job. So I had some experience with call taking. And so I kind of translated those skills many, many years later into getting a job here because I always wanted to work for [the] government. I always wanted to do something that was a little more selfless, something that was not going to be for profit. And so this was a good fit when they gave me the call to say, "hey, we want to give you an interview."

00;34;03 - 00;34;05

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And when was this? What year?

00;34;05 - 00;36;15

**HENRY KWAN:** 2014. When I was going through college, I was going through a federal work study program, which they pay you minimum wage, but you get to work for the federal government. At the same time, you are working for the federal government, you get to study and work on getting A's in your classes. And this was with the Orlando Vet Center. And I first knew about the Orlando Vet Center, because after I had gone out of the military in like 2012 and I [stayed] with my ex at that time, I was going through a really depressive state because I did not feel like I had any direction. I did not really know what to do with my life. And in the military, they tell you exactly what to do every minute of every day, and basically your whole life is planned out. Going from that to suddenly now you have to figure out everything on your own, I [struggled] with that. So I got in a bit of a depressive state. And so I contacted a suicide helpline. And the nice person on there actually directed me to go visit a counselor over at the Orlando Vet Center. So when I went over there to the appointment, the counselor that I spoke with, his name was Rafiq Raza. He basically said, "I do not think you are depressed. I think you just need a purpose." And so he basically said, "Hey, we have this program going on here at our location for a work study program. Why don't you sign up for that? That way you can finish your studies, get paid, be out with the public and interact." And so that worked out really nicely. So I was part of that program for those two years until I got my degree and the whole while there was supposed to be a job lined up, but unfortunately that fell through working for the federal government. So I [scrambled] to try to find a job. And eventually I threw in a lot of applications. I started working for a call center up in Lake Mary. And then, a few months down the line, I got a call from Orange County here to say, "Hey, we would like to interview for this position and hire you." And I said, heck yeah. It was exactly what I wanted. And then ten years later—that was in 2014, when I got hired at the Orange County.

00;36;15 - 00;36;38

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** During your depressive state, how did you navigate the stigmas at the time? In other words, mental health awareness in 2025 [has been] greatly expanded.

00;36;38 - 00;36;40

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. Absolutely.

00;36;40 - 00;36;51

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** But even ten years ago it was still somewhat of you look the other way, you do not really talk [about it]. And when you layer in the cultural—how different cultures understand mental health. So what was that like for you?

00;36;51 - 00;37;58

**HENRY KWAN:** My parents still do not know. They still do not know. I think the only person I told is my brother, only because him and I aligned a lot in the way that we think. And we are very open about our thoughts now. We have adjusted and adapted to the times. But like ten years ago, no. Heck no. I did not tell anyone any of that stuff because that was a sign of weakness, which I do not agree with now, I do not think it is a sign of weakness. But back in

those days, it was received as a sign of weakness, and you do not want to do something like that. So something I kept very close to my chest and even the people I work with over at the vet center, they did not know about that. They just thought I was some kid signing up for a work study program. They did not know I went there because I had suicidal ideations. So yeah, even for today, I am a lot more open about it. That is why I do not have an issue speaking about it and talking about because I think it is important for people to talk about it. So that way they are not feeling like they are compelled to keep it within themselves. But definitely not back in the day. And I have not told my parents nowadays because they are old, they do not need to be stressed out with stuff like that. They just need to know their kid is doing good.

00;37;58 - 00;38;18

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And thanks for sharing. So transitioning into my final questions here. You have lived essentially in Orlando your whole life. How has Orlando changed culturally since you have been here?

00;38;18 - 00;40;03

**HENRY KWAN:** It is a dual edged sword. On one side of the coin, I feel like Orlando is the perfect place to be if you are different, because especially with the kind of climate that we have, things are a lot more open. People are a lot more free to share who they are, what they represent, who they love. But on the other side of the coin, it is the opposite. So living here in Orlando, like, I never even thought about this stuff growing up. I never even considered it like someone would look at me one way or another until COVID-19 happened. COVID-19 was a very interesting time for people who look like me because all the stories that [came] out of Los Angeles and California, were that all elderly Asian people were getting attacked because I assume they were being blamed for the COVID virus. It was a very scary and a very real thing that was happening. And so although thankfully, I did not experience anything like that down here [in Orlando], there is still that influence, there is still that mentality that something could happen. Someone is looking at you a certain way and you do not know what they are thinking. And I think it is really unfortunate that that has become a reality for some folks and has become a reality for a way in which we view our society here in America. But for the most part, I feel like that has died down since then. I still feel like Orlando is a perfect place to live in diversity.

00;40;03 - 00;40;49

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** I am glad you brought that up because I was going to ask that. COVID was somewhat of a turning point for a multitude of reasons. But in the context of sort of anti-Asian racism, it was a spike, a surge. So I am glad you mentioned that despite you not experiencing that explicitly here, the influence is certainly palpable, which is hundred percent true. Somewhat related—what challenges does Orlando face today?

00;40;49 - 00;41;42

**HENRY KWAN:** In the current political climate, I would say its identity. Who does Orlando want to be in the face of certain outside political influences they are facing? What decisions are they going to make? Are they going to be willingly going along with these changes, or are they going to push back? Because I think it all ultimately boils down to some simple concepts of who are you going to be representing? Who is the city of Orlando? Who is Orange County

government? Who is Orange County as a whole going to represent? Is it going to represent all of us or just a few of us?

00;41;42 - 00;41;50

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Well said. From your perspective, how will Orlando change in the next twenty five years?

00;41;50 - 00;42;53

**HENRY KWAN:** Oh, in twenty five years, assuming we are not all underwater from global warming? No, I am kidding. Kidding. I do not know. I am a little worried about climate change. I am a little worried about the rapid intensification of hurricanes. It is May 20th right now. In two days, NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] is going to be releasing their Atlantic hurricane predictions. And it is already expected to be an above average hurricane season. And so with more hurricanes and with the hurricanes rapidly intensifying when they do develop, I see that there is probably going to be, maybe an exodus of people out of the state of Florida, because how long can you sustain owning a property with ever increasing insurance rates with ever increasing housing costs, while trying to maintain your standard of living? At some point something is got to break. And so I think in twenty five years, we may not have as many people as we do now.

00;42;53 - 00;43;12

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** How has your Chinese heritage influence your perspective on life generally and living in Central Florida specifically?

00;43;12 - 00;43;43

**HENRY KWAN:** I do not know if I can answer that question. Not that I do not want to answer it, I just do not know if I have an answer for that. I have always just seen myself as just American. I have had a really hard time trying to adopt the Chinese culture, even though my heritage is Chinese only because I just do not know much about it. And I hope that the more I learn about it, the more I am able to find myself.

00;43;43 - 00;44;05

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Well said. So I will ask this way. In what ways has your American identity influenced your perspective on life and living in Central Florida? And it probably be helpful if you could define what does America mean to you?

00;44;05 - 00;45;02

**HENRY KWAN:** Those are good questions. My American identity, I would define it as what we all know and think of as the identity of what Americans represent in the world, right? The melting pot of the world, the free thinking, the free speech, the ability to be prosperous, the ability to have any religion, any love you want. I think to me that would be the representation of what I feel as an American, of what an American should represent. And my influence on how I look out, on how I look at the world?

00;45;02 - 00;45;04

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Life. Central Florida.

00;45;04 - 00;45;25

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. Central Florida. My outlook is that I hope that other people share the same kind of mentality as well moving forward into the future. And that type of mentality that people who live here in Central Florida hopefully have continues to have that outlook.

00;45;25 - 00;45;48

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Lastly, and somewhat relatedly, if someone is listening to this recording fifty or a hundred years from now, what do you want them to know about American culture, Chinese culture, however you want to take it, and the state of Florida.

00;45;48 - 00;46;34

**HENRY KWAN:** Chinese people do exist here in Central Florida, and it is obvious statement. There are attempts to try to have more influence as Chinese Americans in our standing in this community, right, so that we can be recognized, that we can be heard, so that we can have some impact on the future of Central Florida. We do exist. We do want to be known. And we just want to belong, just like you.

00;46;34 - 00;46;39

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Henry, thank you so much for taking some time out of your work schedule—

00;46;39 - 00;46;40

**HENRY KWAN:** Yeah. It was my pleasure.

00;46;40 - 00;46;45

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Because we are here at your job to share a little bit of your life story. I really appreciate it.

00;46;45 - 00;46;48

**HENRY KWAN:** Oh, thank you, Sebastian. I appreciate that.