

Ricky Poon - ILLUMINATION interview

Thomas [00:00:00] Welcome, everybody, to a discussion as part of the ILLUMINATION project of the Springfield History Museum. I am the story collector for this year, Thomas Hiura, and this project is co-led by our consultant Aimee Yogi and our photographer Mimi Nollo. Right now, I'm happy to be chatting with a community leader here in Springfield. This is Ricky Poon, a retired pastor with this wonderful Eugene Springfield Chinese Christian Church. How are you doing today, Mr. Poon?.

Ricky Poon [00:00:29] Good. Thank you, Tom, for having me.

Thomas [00:00:30] Thank you. And thanks for being willing to sit, you know, close. It makes a nice shot. It's gonna be-- people are going to be watching this for generations to come, to hear your wisdom. And so it's just great to be connected with you. And so can you tell me about the origins of your involvement with the church?

Ricky Poon [00:00:48] Wow. Where should I begin?

Thomas [00:00:51] Probably with origins.

Ricky Poon [00:00:54] Yeah. Right. Well, just quickly, I was born in Gwangzhou, China, in southern China. And then when I was seven years old, my family immigrated to Hong Kong. This is back in 1953.

Thomas [00:01:10] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:01:10] Okay. And then we were there from '53 to '59. And then my father, who had worked for the -- as an interpreter, during the Korean War -- for the American military. On Okinawa. Because he could speak Japanese, Chinese and English. And because of his involvement there, you know, he was able to find sponsors, you know, for our family, for his family to come to the United States under a refugee status. So we were outside of the regular quota. Wow. And because our sponsors, you know, were in Seattle, that's where we ended up. I had no idea where Seattle was.

Thomas [00:01:54] Oh, wow!

Ricky Poon [00:01:55] And why we were there.

Thomas [00:01:57] But you're like, is it by Texas? Florida?

Ricky Poon [00:02:01] Right! So I grew up in Seattle as a teenager, went to college, and then I started working as an engineer after I graduated in Portland, Oregon. For Bonneville Power Administration.

Thomas [00:02:10] Oh, wow. So is it electrical engineering?

Ricky Poon [00:02:13] Electrical power engineering.

Thomas [00:02:15] Wow. If the lights shut off, he's going to be the one who has to fix it. So we hope it doesn't happen. So, amazing.

Ricky Poon [00:02:23] Yeah. So I was there in Portland. That's where both our daughter and our son were born. And then in the mid 1990s-- or early 1990s, you know. We decided, my wife and I, to give our children a different experience.

Thomas [00:02:42] Mm hmm.

Ricky Poon [00:02:43] And so I found and got a job as district engineer in Idaho Falls. Which, by the way, is about the size of Springfield.

Thomas [00:02:53] I can imagine. Okay.

Ricky Poon [00:02:55] Yeah, 50,000 people in an area with very few Asians. But there were some, because there was the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory there. That's where they trained the sailors to, you know, operate nuclear submarines. So it's called a desert navy.

Thomas [00:03:19] Before we started rolling, we were talking about the University of Oregon and the Chinese population. And I think of it as being, in some ways, a gateway to that community. And it sounds like in Idaho Falls, that laboratory was a small gateway of some Chinese presence in that community.

Ricky Poon [00:03:35] Yeah. But we enjoyed the five years, you know, we were in Idaho. My son and daughter were in their, I guess, teenage years. But it was just too far from the ocean. It was a little bit cold in the wintertime. You know, you'd get about four feet of snow. Good snow, powder snow. But when there was an opportunity to come back on the West Coast, I could have picked, you know, anywhere that our agency Bonneville Power operates in. But having lived in Idaho Falls, we wanted to come back to maybe not a big city like Portland or Seattle. And we also enjoyed being around young people. So, you know, Eugene/Springfield with the University of Oregon. Not too far from the ocean, not too far from the mountains and Portland, you know. So it seemed like an ideal place to relocate the family. And that was 1990-- uh, I think '94 or '95, thereabouts. And that's when we moved into this area.

Thomas [00:04:56] Did your connection -- "connection" with electrical engineering -- and the Bonneville Power, I don't remember the third word..

Ricky Poon [00:05:06] Administration. BPA, for short.

Thomas [00:05:06] Administration. I'm very professional in this history museum project, aren't I?

Ricky Poon [00:05:12] You're doing fine.

Thomas [00:05:13] Was that a connection that led you into Springfield, or did it happen that you moved to Springfield and you became connected with the Springfield Utility Board in some ways?

Ricky Poon [00:05:22] This is so amazing. I had no idea what Springfield was like. And as you know, Springfield was very much different than Eugene. But when we came I realized, you know, there's a smaller town across the freeway from Eugene, and it's Springfield. And because of my background in engineering, not so much in sales or marketing, they decided I would be a good fit. You know, my company agency, a good fit for the smaller

municipals and co-ops in the area. Because, you know, even though I grew up in big cities, I'm kind of a down home person.

Thomas [00:06:08] Yeah, it's wonderful. Corner markets, see the person you know, you know?

Ricky Poon [00:06:13] Yeah. So instead of EWEB, I got the better end of the deal. I got SUB as one of my dozen or so customers. The rest of them are co-ops along the Oregon coast.

Thomas [00:06:29] Mhm.

Ricky Poon [00:06:29] So SUB was really my... you know, other than, like, Monmouth, my main municipal utility customer. And so coming here in the mid nineties and that was in the... you know, the reason I, from engineering, took the job of a county executive was because at that time there was a deregulation of the utility industry. So, you know, they separated what we do into two businesses: the power side and the transmission side. So I was an engineer who worked on the power side, the deregulated part of the operation. Because the transmission side is still, you have to have control because if you control the transmission, you control who gets what. Right? And at what cost.

Thomas [00:07:40] The levers. The switches.

Ricky Poon [00:07:41] So because of my engineering expertise and experience, you know, they said, well, you know, we could use you in the power business. Then those were the only three years that I did not really do engineering as my main job. And I could tell you that was the toughest, toughest three years of my career. Because it's different, you know? Being in power sales, it's different than designing and building transmission lines. But because of that--

Thomas [00:08:17] Are you telling me that you're an Asian-American who loves working? Is that true? Is that what I heard?

Ricky Poon [00:08:24] Well, I love working on something that I'm passionate about, let's put it that way.

Thomas [00:08:31] Yes, of course. And I'm sure it's fulfilling to make literal connections happen that empower people's ability to use power.

Ricky Poon [00:08:37] Yeah, but I tell you Tom, it's because of that experience, having SUB as my customer. So I got to know Steve Loveland who was a wonderful person, you know, the general manager at the time. And after he retired, Bob Linahan, and after he retired, I got to know Jeff Nelson a little bit. You know, when I came, he was just a beginning engineer in the SUB organization. But all through that, I just felt, you know, with the people in Springfield. There's something about, oh, I don't know if you'd call it honesty or integrity, I don't know if it's the small town attitude, but, you know, very friendly. So I really enjoyed those years, and that's how I got to know Springfield a little bit, because I'd come here for meetings all the time. I mean, of course, you know, there's one year that we there was a kind of a power crunch and SUB decided to install like a dozen or so emergency generators. So I was involved in helping them with that. So all of that, you know, even though I lived in Eugene, there's a connection with Springfield, all of that time.

Thomas [00:10:08] And we will certainly get into, with the church that we're sitting in, having a history of existing in both of the towns. And it currently is in Springfield. Would you like to go into that?

Ricky Poon [00:10:21] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Thomas [00:10:21] So okay, retired pastor, you've given, you've helped people. You've helped people reflect about their faith and their journey. And that's a powerful thing.

Ricky Poon [00:10:35] The church has, like 40 year history and, you know, it began in 1980. And really, it's a part of the whole Asian-American journey, you know, which a lot of people don't know about. There's a lot of rich-- and I tell the people that I know in church, and in the community in general, that once you look into the Asian-American presence here and understand where we came from and where we are now, it's amazing. It's amazing. So the church was started. You know, a lot of Chinese churches in this country began with English-speaking churches. You know, white churches sponsoring a Bible study in Chinese, in their facility. So they would allow us to have a room or space, usually on Friday nights. And that's how this church started. But it was started by, at that time in the 1980s, the students were from Hong Kong. They spoke Cantonese. It was a Bible study, at that time even meeting at the same place that later when it became a church, it met at the Emerald Baptist Church, on 19th and Patterson in Eugene. And so these Cantonese speaking students from Hong Kong and, you know, at that time there were refugees coming in, Southeast Asian refugees. And people maybe don't realize that a lot of the Vietnamese that came? They have Chinese heritage. Mm hmm. You know, when they were living in Vietnam. Right? So I mean, a lot of the restaurants here, you know, or Asian markets, they may have Vietnamese surnames, but they also could speak Chinese, many of them. Because back in what used to be called Saigon, which is now Ho Chi Minh City, there's a district there, Chợ Lớn district. It's all, you know, Chinese businesspeople's shops. So a lot of them, when they come here, these Hong Kong students, you know, wanted to help these refugees coming in. And so they begin to reach out to them. And that was part of the impetus for establishing, you know, the Chinese church. At that time. So on our wall here in the church, there's a history, whole history, which I helped to. You know actually, before, memories of what happened was kind of in bits and pieces. So that's one of the things, and like you, I enjoy history.

Thomas [00:14:01] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:14:02] So I began to actually, you know, write down what I know. And then Teresa, one of our wonderful ladies in the church, finished it when I when I retired. And we've got 40 years of history. On the wall here. So now, how? You know, as I said before, after our stint in Idaho Falls, we actually chose, our family actually chose to come to Eugene. And of course, there's only one Chinese church in Eugene.

Thomas [00:14:47] Yeah. I always have to imagine it's tough if you sour a relationship with somebody, you know, in situations like that. I mean, churches are very friendly. They're full of people that are gregarious and easy to get along with. But it is kind of challenging when your culture and your community only has one place to go in the place that you live.

Ricky Poon [00:15:11] Okay, Tom, let me correct you on that a little bit.

Thomas [00:15:13] Okay. Feel free.

Ricky Poon [00:15:18] How should I put it?

Ricky Poon [00:15:20] Again, you know, this is my Asian-American experience, but also perhaps that of many people, like Aimee. You know, because I came here as a 12 year old, so I learned, I mean I took English classes in Hong Kong. So my grammar was always good, coming here. It didn't take me too long to become very proficient in English, you know, growing up in Seattle.

Thomas [00:15:52] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:15:53] So English became my first language. And then Cantonese was my second language. That's my heart language. And then I did not--

Thomas [00:16:06] Heart language, I like that term.

Ricky Poon [00:16:06] Yeah. Yeah. I mean, Cantonese. When I hear my mom speak Cantonese, you know, she's passed now. But when I hear people who are native Cantonese speakers still, you know, I get emotional sometimes.

Thomas [00:16:24] Feels like home. Feels like youth.

Ricky Poon [00:16:27] Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But growing up it was funny at home in Seattle, my mom and dad would speak to me in Cantonese, but I always would respond in English.

Thomas [00:16:40] That's how it was in my household. My mom wanted me to speak Japanese. I was listening to her but responding in English. You know it.

Ricky Poon [00:16:48] And I didn't get it back until I became an adult, and on my own. And it never went away. Thank God. But so, in Idaho Falls, there were no Chinese churches, so we went to an English-speaking church. I actually became vice chairman of the church for whatever reason. But my wife and I did start a Chinese Bible study. The first one, that's still going. You know, I mean, 20, 30 years ago. So, coming to Eugene. My wife and I actually visited some English-speaking churches and, you know, attended a few worship services. But I guess for me it would be so much easier, you know, to communicate in English like I'm doing with you. Right?

Thomas [00:17:41] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:17:43] But then for whatever reason, we decided, really deep down, we want to be with a group of Chinese people, and I begin to learn to speak Mandarin Chinese. My third language after becoming a Christian in Portland.

Thomas [00:18:06] A lot of people in the stories, who've told me, have been trilingual.

Ricky Poon [00:18:09] Yeah, my first job in church after, you know, I became a Christian, a believer, was to be my pastor's interpreter. You know, he calls me the interrupter.

Thomas [00:18:23] Hilarious. A little renegade interpreter.

Ricky Poon [00:18:26] So that's how I that's how I learned Mandarin Chinese. You know, my wife Irene grew up in Taiwan. And she was also born in Guangzhou, China. So, you

know, a native Cantonese speaker. So at home, we never spoke Mandarin Chinese, you know, we always spoke Cantonese or English. But because of our involvement in the Chinese church, at that time, the only Mandarin-speaking Chinese church of maybe a dozen Chinese churches at the time in Portland. For whatever reason, you know. So when we came here, actually, I said, well, I've been used to going to an English-speaking church in Idaho. So coming here was so much easier. And frankly, I wanted to maybe have an easier life, you know, no responsibilities. But somehow, you know, God ordained that we come to the Eugene Chinese Church.

Thomas [00:19:23] God may have ordained that cell phone that we might have heard on the microphone [note: it was mostly inaudible]. But it's good because this is a historical document, so people can remember, that's the classic ringtone from that era.

Ricky Poon [00:19:36] And then so we we became members of the church and, you know, starting to serve in the church in various capacities for about ten years.

Thomas [00:19:46] Mhm.

Ricky Poon [00:19:47] And within those ten years the church went through a transition of like, I think four different pastors. So when the pastor left, you know about 2005, 2006, you know, I was approached by church leaders. So, Ricky, have you considered, you know, becoming a pastor of this church? And I said, well-- because at the time I would say I would be the last person, because of my background, to be pastoring a Chinese church. But, well, it turned out. And now it's kind of a very critical turning point for the whole family.

Thomas [00:20:42] Yeah. When I think about pastors and the work they do, they have this text to choose what they're going to emphasize or highlight or excerpt, each Sunday, each week. What values from the Bible do you think maybe were your bread and butter? Or were you when you were preaching, what kinds of values? It could be stories, it could be values, whether it's compassion, you know, selflessness. Sacrifice.

Ricky Poon [00:21:15] Well, if I were to choose this one word, it would be grace.

Thomas [00:21:20] Mmm.

Ricky Poon [00:21:20] And I always look at the people, whether it's in this congregation, or even my family. Our oldest grandkid is named Grace. And when I see her, I always say, you know, you are the physical grace of God. And it's a sense of being thankful. Life is full of trials and difficulties. I think when we think of how God has put us, you know, into the situation for His purpose. And how, you know, I always encourage the church members to be giving. There's an artwork by our resident artist Dan Chan. And one day he came to me and say, Pastor. The word, in Chinese, for love, ài. I'm thinking of doing an art piece centrally focused on that word. But can you help me to find, like, translations of so many languages you can, of the word love. So I did that. So you'll see, you know, this.

Thomas [00:22:55] Well, ài is one of those where it's the Japanese word too, and I'm sure it comes from the origin, there. Yeah, we say ai shiteru, if you love somebody.

Ricky Poon [00:23:07] And getting back to your excellent question. So the love that is on display there in this artwork is what I would call the godly, or the sacrificial kind of love. Or it's putting others' needs, you know, before ours. And we could do that because of grace of

God. So, I mean that's simple as that. That's kind of my-- I try to model that way of living. I think, you know, I'm so grateful for you, Tom.

Thomas [00:23:54] Oh,.

Ricky Poon [00:23:55] No, no, really, I think the first time I met you, I said, you know, Tom could be a good friend. Right?

Thomas [00:24:05] It's only our second time together. We're already there, man. Yeah, I would love to continue to be in touch.

Ricky Poon [00:24:14] And so I'm doing this, hopefully not because I feel I deserve to be interviewed. I mean, even though Aimee thought I am worthy of this honor. Right?

Thomas [00:24:30] Already, I can totally see why. You have humor, you have stories, you're willing to talk. It's great.

Ricky Poon [00:24:38] Yeah, but I'm just hoping, you know, whatever I say will provide some encouragement.

Thomas [00:24:48] Mm hmm.

Ricky Poon [00:24:50] To people. Even with totally different backgrounds.

Thomas [00:24:57] That's a great sort of lead-in to one thing I was thinking about, about so many of the churches that I've seen in my life, and I've been a little bit in and out of some. I didn't grow up in a particularly organized faith family. But one thing that I've seen is so many of them are involved in the community, in service. Acts of service that do touch far beyond practitioners that practice, observers, worshipers of that own church. And throughout the neighborhood, throughout the community. Just today, I came in and somebody had left a piece of furniture in the parking lot, because they believed that this was like a Salvation Army or somewhere that would take it. And I was told it wasn't the first time. You know?

Ricky Poon [00:25:41] Yeah. I think that's an excellent way.

Thomas [00:25:46] Service. What's the church doing in the community, or has been that you would like to spotlight?

Ricky Poon [00:25:54] Well, I think when I was pastoring, I don't know if we're still doing that. There's a network of churches in the Lane County area called One Hope. So they do a couple of things every year. So we were kind of involved in that. One is to, at the beginning of the school year or just before, to have something called Project Hope, to give out free school supplies, brand new shoes. To children of families who, you know, who cannot maybe have the financial resources to do that. But the key there is not so much just giving out the stuff. But I think the key, as always, Tom, is the relationship that came about. So this project basically enabled these churches who came together for the good of the community to establish an excellent relationship with 4J or Bethel.

Thomas [00:27:04] I see.

Ricky Poon [00:27:05] You know, or Junction City, or Springfield school districts.

Thomas [00:27:09] Mhm.

Ricky Poon [00:27:10] So we have a kind of credibility, I guess. That indeed we are people who live the way we talk. I mean, that's important. Right?

Thomas [00:27:27] And relationships, deeper relationships among the churches. Interfaith, in between different faiths.

Ricky Poon [00:27:33] And I mean, I always emphasized the generational aspects, you know, being Asian-American. That connection between generations is very important.

Thomas [00:27:47] Right. Mhm.

Ricky Poon [00:27:48] And you know, helping the young school kids this way. The other one is every Thanksgiving or thereabouts, we have free meal boxes of, you know, all the turkey and all the fixings, as they call it.

Thomas [00:28:09] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:28:09] And so, the church's individuals will donate to buy these. And people would put it together, and church people would distribute those. So my wife and I have done that, when we were pastoring. But even more recently, our church decided to begin and revive a service to the seniors, the elderly. So we had a kick off luncheon. You know, the purpose is to allow the seniors, a lot of them would be Asian-Americans or Chinese-Americans, to give them opportunities to build friendships. Not only that, but to learn. So we had a kickoff luncheon with about 40 of them. 40 people came. So this will be something we will continue to do. You know, it could be just getting together and doing excursions or field trips. In fact, one's coming up. You know, I have a connection with the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, and now I have a connection with the Springfield History Museum. Maybe doing a tour there, you know, with the group, or we could go to the Wildlife Safari, I don't know. Because these elderly Chinese people, they came from a totally-- they come mainly because their children are here, and they come to maybe help out with the caring of the grandchildren. They are not all that fluent in English, and transportation is a problem. So I think that's something that our church, you know, is hoping to be of some help. Again, it's the building of relationships now that really is the key here.

Thomas [00:30:19] Given all of these wonderful things that the church has done, I also just can't help but ask. This sounds like a negative, but I think it is the opportunity to discuss something positive. Which is, people have conceptions. And often they have misconceptions from just not knowing. Maybe they're Christian, but they're not Chinese. They don't have that background at all, or they're Chinese, but they don't understand the faith aspect of it. Do you feel that people have misconceptions sometimes, about the church or the community, that you've discovered? Or has that not been the case?

Ricky Poon [00:30:58] You know, that's a good question. And that's a tough question.

Thomas [00:31:00] Yeah. Or maybe even stereotypes people have.

Ricky Poon [00:31:04] Yeah, I think a lot has to do with maybe, in terms of relationships. The danger of stereotyping. You know, I don't care who. So I mean, you might have some preconceptions of who I am, and I may have some--

Thomas [00:31:27] Never.

Ricky Poon [00:31:28] But until we sit down like this.

Thomas [00:31:31] Yes.

Ricky Poon [00:31:32] And be open to, you know, having a dialogue. Learn about the other person. And learn to listen. People need to maybe practice more. In the New Testament there is, in the Book of James about, you know, slow to speak, slow to anger. But quick to listen.

Thomas [00:32:10] Amazing.

Ricky Poon [00:32:11] And I think that's what we need to do more and more nowadays. You know, instead of jumping to conclusions, based on what we heard from others. Come and learn about, you know, and reach out. It takes a little bit of, I don't know if it's willingness to be vulnerable, I suppose. I am not without faults, I could tell you that. Alright? I am by no means perfect, but I just enjoy even now, being with you, Tom. And just having this. This is, to me, a very relaxing, productive dialogue, right?

Thomas [00:32:56] How can I make it really tense? No, that's excellent. Do you? I don't know. It's clear that you have energy to share about this space and about your story.

Ricky Poon [00:33:09] Yeah. So I've started to write down, you know, there's a guy named Ron Chew. And he was the former director of the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle.

Thomas [00:33:20] Mm hmm. And he's nodding, off camera.

Ricky Poon [00:33:25] He wrote a memoir, you know, and it's called [My] Unforgotten Seattle.

Thomas [00:33:31] Mm hmm.

Ricky Poon [00:33:32] And I got to know him, and he went to the same university I did. He went to the same high school I did in Seattle. So because of his example, I started to write down my my story a little bit. You know, I'm only up to high school.

Thomas [00:33:51] Cool! Oh, wow. But that's excellent.

Ricky Poon [00:33:54] But I figure for my for my children and grandchildren, they know pretty much, the way I am. Certainly our children, son and daughter. But they don't know very much about who I was before they knew me.

Thomas [00:34:16] Or what shaped you to become who you are, really. Those early years.

Ricky Poon [00:34:19] Yeah, and it's so wonderful that the Springfield History Museum is doing the ILLUMINATION. You have no idea.

Thomas [00:34:35] We want to thank Mindy Linder and Maddi McGraw, for helping to put the spotlight on this exhibit.

Ricky Poon [00:34:40] I would say, you know, as a pastor, it's an answer to prayer.

Thomas [00:34:47] Lovely.

Ricky Poon [00:34:49] And I don't know if you want to,

Thomas [00:34:51] Since you've been writing, though, and that you've been revisiting your childhood right after high school. Probably some embarrassing stuff in there. Like a moment or anything, I can't help but ask, the classic, like tell me about a moment where you were embarrassed, or something.

Ricky Poon [00:35:11] Oh, wow. Wow.

Thomas [00:35:13] That you're willing to share, I mean, I'm just prodding.

Ricky Poon [00:35:14] And I don't know how much time you've got.

Thomas [00:35:17] We've got time.

Ricky Poon [00:35:18] I do want to reserve some time to explain the origin of the Chinese name of this church, at current. okay. So, you know, put that in the parking lot somewhere in your thinking.

Thomas [00:35:32] Put a pin in it.

Ricky Poon [00:35:34] It's, how shall I say? I came from, actually, a dysfunctional family. You know, people may not know that, but I'm more free. The Chinese has the old saying, you know, all the the bad things about your family, you should not share. Right? Because it shames the family. And that's very important, in our culture. You don't want to shame your family. But I mentioned I came as a 12 year-old, so it was my parents actually at the prime of their lives. And they could have done pretty successfully back in Hong Kong, you know, have a good life there. But again, as you know, for the sake of the children, they felt that an opportunity to be coming here would be good, for us.

Thomas [00:36:46] Mm hmm.

Ricky Poon [00:36:47] And I believe it turned out that way.

Thomas [00:36:49] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:36:50] But coming over here and, you know, we got to Seattle. Actually, our first home was not a house. It was a converted storage space. In Seattle, in the international district, in Chinatown.

Thomas [00:37:13] Converted by your own...?

Ricky Poon [00:37:17] No, no, it was there.

Thomas [00:37:17] Okay, it had already-- are we talking about water? Plumbing?

Ricky Poon [00:37:19] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But there was hardly any windows.

Thomas [00:37:21] Yeah, yeah. Very humble.

Ricky Poon [00:37:26] But the address was on Maynard Alley, which was one of only two alleys at that time in Seattle, which had names. And guess what the other one is.

Thomas [00:37:41] Hmm. Poon.

Ricky Poon [00:37:46] No. Canton Alley.

Aimee Yogi [00:37:47] Oh.

Ricky Poon [00:37:48] Canton was the name of Guangzhou. My birthplace.

Thomas [00:37:54] Yes, before you moved to Hong Kong.

Ricky Poon [00:37:56] You're telling me...? You know, I look back and that's how I connect my thoughts. I don't know how you connect your dots. I connect my dots by looking back and everything seemed to just fit. But it was shortly after the family arrived that my mom found out from my dad's mom, you know, her mother in law, that my dad actually took a second wife.

Thomas [00:38:26] Oh, wow.

Ricky Poon [00:38:27] You imagine, you know, finding out about that, First, you know, getting off the boat, so to speak.

Thomas [00:38:39] Yeah. Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:38:40] So that's how I, that's the condition that I grew up in.

Thomas [00:38:46] So he kind of was leading two, sort of,

Ricky Poon [00:38:48] Oh yeah, I mean, there was, you know,

Thomas [00:38:51] Two-timing..

Ricky Poon [00:38:53] Yeah, the family's conflicted, you know? And the four children, the siblings grew up in the midst of a lot of argument between mom and dad. And all that.

Thomas [00:39:14] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:39:14] So, I mean, looking at that, again it's grace of God that I turned out the way I am. Really, my life story could have been a lot different. But what I'm saying is even that experience, as painful as it as it was? You know, today I felt there was a purpose in that, because now I could help others.

Thomas [00:39:50] No doubt.

Ricky Poon [00:39:51] And that's part of the reason that I think I became a pastor. Because if I didn't have that experience, I would not be as, how would I say, compassionate or understanding,

Aimee Yogi [00:40:09] Empathetic. Yes.

Ricky Poon [00:40:11] Of that particular-- I mean, being immersed into a totally Western culture. And then this is the first experience you had within the family? I mean, the chances of failure, you know. As a person, I always tell, we have a lot of young college students that came to our church. And what I desire of them is really, you may value yourself in terms of your performance. But let me tell you, it's your character. It's your character, you know, that really counts at the end. Not performance. Your true value is based on your character.

Thomas [00:41:16] I like that you used the word performance in what you're describing, because I think it has two fundamental different kinds of meaning. One is just, competence is performance, right? But also, artifice is performance, too. I'm performing onstage. I'm acting.

Ricky Poon [00:41:34] Yeah. Yeah.

Thomas [00:41:36] And I'm not gonna say there's no value in those things. Those are certainly important. Yeah. But if they come at the expense of character?

Ricky Poon [00:41:44] Exactly. Yup.

Thomas [00:41:48] People won't trust you. You can't form alliances. You can't do as much, with that competence.

Ricky Poon [00:41:53] Yeah. I think you framed that perfectly, Tom. No, I mean, I had a very successful engineering career. And I could have retired as an engineer. But somehow, God had some other purpose in my life. But I feel, there's an old saying, it's more blessed to give than to receive. Imagine that being kind of the mantra. How often do you hear that anymore, right

Thomas [00:42:44] Very Christlike idea.

Ricky Poon [00:42:46] But in my life, it's been true. You know, in my life, it's been true. I really felt blessed, even as I give a little bit of myself, you know, into this project. But what I've received so far, having to just go back, and search again. Going back to my own history. And hopefully, again, what I have to share here will help others.

Thomas [00:43:21] It already has. And it will. And you have seen the evolution of the Asian-American community, AAPI community in this region. And so I'm curious as one of the last questions, unless you have more to get to, besides the name which I know you want to get to. The future of the Asian-American community in Springfield and Eugene. What do you think it looks like?

Ricky Poon [00:44:00] Wow. Well, from my perspective, and I have to admit, I'm not your-- maybe I'm not the kind of Asian-American that people think about. Because I have no, you see, I'm privileged. Right? Because I have no difficulty communicating with you, in English.

Thomas [00:44:27] Yeah. I think nine out of ten white Springfielders on the street would see you, and not think that you could carry on the kind of English conversation that you are doing.

Ricky Poon [00:44:38] You know, if I have a desire it's that people who may not be as fluent in English as I am, or who may have come, maybe, at a later age in life. And those are the people that I think could really make a contribution to Springfield. Or already are. And I have not thought out how that could be done, yet.

Thomas [00:45:17] It was a pretty large visionary question, I was asking.

Ricky Poon [00:45:18] Well, I know, but Tom, it's got to be beyond culture. I'm not against, you know, being proud of your where you're from, your culture. But. I am even more excited about people of different cultures coming together and understanding each other.

Thomas [00:45:43] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:45:46] This is just basically human beings, you know? You know, beyond the differences, I mean there's a lot to talk about.

Thomas [00:45:58] There's so much division.

Ricky Poon [00:45:59] Yeah. Diversity should not be division, right? It's the whole concept of unity in diversity. And I think the Asian-American population, because of who we are and where we came from, I see the Asian-- and I hope I don't sound too grandiose. I don't mean to say we're somehow better than anyone. But I think, and you may or may not agree with me, that Asian-Americans, because of who we are and where we came from, can serve as that bridge.

Thomas [00:46:47] I see.

Ricky Poon [00:46:48] Okay. That bridge to bring people that may be different than us, together. It's just because of who we are.

Thomas [00:46:59] And I think you're certainly saying it's not about telling other racial groups, other cultures to have to be a certain way. But you're saying the way that-- I mean, I think when you talk about the history of how this Asian experience, or identity, or "Asian-American," all of these things have come about is because we've had to reckon with our own Asian strife in some ways when we were here. We have to reckon with the history that's come from. I mean, Japan, you know, Guangzhou, Hong Kong.

Ricky Poon [00:47:33] You know, you and I are Asian-Americans. But I could tell you, Tom, you and I have not-- that's a danger. When people say Asian-American, they don't realize that within that group, whether it's designated by the government or whatever else, you know, how you designate these things.

Thomas [00:47:52] Yeah, constructed ideas.

Ricky Poon [00:47:53] Even within that, there's a lot of diversity within that. Your experiences may be different than mine, but it just happens that my dad was born in

Nagasaki. That's how he learned to speak Japanese. He never taught me. But you know, so when I heard of your background, I said well, okay. I have a little bit of you.

Thomas [00:48:23] This is the thing. I am being asked to be an interviewer. You've done more research on me than I've done on you.

Ricky Poon [00:48:31] No I haven't, no, that's not true.

Thomas [00:48:34] It's likely true, but we'll just move through it. You wanted to tell me about the significance of the name of the church.

Ricky Poon [00:48:46] Okay, let's see. So when the church was established, the Chinese name for Eugene is yǔ-jīn. I don't know if you know, there's a big city in China called Tianjin. Tiān means heaven. Jīn is a word that means abundance. In fact, overflowing abundance, okay? And so there's Tianjin, heavenly abundance. And then when whoever came up with the Chinese name for Eugene, they decided to use yǔ-jīn. Yǔ means rain. But it's a good kind of rain. Rain that brings abundance.

Thomas [00:49:39] Oh yes.

Ricky Poon [00:49:40] Of fruit crops and crops, you know. So, Eugene.

Thomas [00:49:45] Can I tell you that, one of the churches I grew up in, it had kind of a central passage, that was kind of the main passage that the pastor talked about a lot. I believe it's John 10:10. But I know that it was about abundant.

Ricky Poon [00:50:00] Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Thomas [00:50:00] It said the thief comes to lie and destroy. But I have come that they may have life, in abundance.

Ricky Poon [00:50:09] Wow. Thank you, Tom.

Thomas [00:50:09] Well, it's just the fact that you used that word abundance.

Ricky Poon [00:50:13] That's exactly, you know, the Gospel of John happens to be my favorite book in the New Testament. So, there you go. So Eugene, of course, is an English name.

Thomas [00:50:31] Yes, comes from Eugene Skinner.

Ricky Poon [00:50:34] But it's based on Greek.

Thomas [00:50:35] Mm hmm.

Ricky Poon [00:50:38] Eugene in Greek means well-born.

Thomas [00:50:40] Right.

Ricky Poon [00:50:41] Of course, sometimes it's used in a bad way, in eugenics.

Thomas [00:50:48] Yes, yes.

Ricky Poon [00:50:48] So the Chinese name. When the Chinese convert American city names, or western city names to Chinese from English. They do it either two ways. If it could be translated literally, they do that. But most of the time it's phonetics. So that's why, Eugene, alright? So that's been the name of the church for a long time. And when I became pastor, there was a Chinese song, a hymn that seemed to be always in my mind. That song has to do with, you know, I have to kind of think of it in the Chinese and then translate it for you. In Mandarin Chinese, it's zhǔ, the Lord, zhùfú, giving of blessings. Yǔ chūnyǔ. It's like the spring rain. So when I became the pastor, you know, I kind of made that the theme song. Of the church because, you know, God's blessing coming down like a spring rain seemed to just fit. So, since the mid-nineties, and my wife and I became members of the church and all those years, then became pastor, after I retired from engineering, there originally was a location, I think the Southern Baptists had a building on either 24th or 25th and Harris, near campus. So we met there for a while. And then later we decided to move it to Emerald Baptist Church on 19th and Patterson. Mhm. So, throughout my tenure as pastor, that's where we were. And as I mentioned before, we were hoping to maybe some day purchase that property, because it was close to school. We have a lot of students coming in, it's convenient, it's centrally located and all that.

Thomas [00:53:21] But then we probably wouldn't be doing this interview. If it stayed in Eugene.

Ricky Poon [00:53:27] Well I'll tell you, Tom, so I retired in 2016 on good terms, right? So I'm now kind of, if they have questions of me, they want to consult with, I give them my suggestion.

Thomas [00:53:45] Yes. Yes.

Ricky Poon [00:53:47] But we're still very much, you know, connected to to the people of the church. And I noticed some time back in, just before the pandemic, I believe, COVID-19. Out of the blue, my wife and I learned Ada Lee, our good friend, a Chinese community elder, you know, respected elder. Mentioned about this place, in Springfield, being available. It was a Salvation Army depot, the chapel. So the church, people found out about it. They came and took a look at it and made an offer for it. And if you see it now, it was not-- I mean when Brother Steve said, you know, I'm the person that knows the least about,

Thomas [00:54:48] Yes, when I came in, he made a point to say that you're the person who knows the least about this building.

Ricky Poon [00:54:52] And only now, Tom, my friend.

Thomas [00:54:58] That's right.

Ricky Poon [00:54:58] You're interviewing me, and here I'm looking up at the lighting, the sound system, which you know a little bit about. Only now, do I realize how much our little church, I mean you're talking about no more than maybe 60 to, you know, 80 on a good day, you know.

Thomas [00:55:21] Sure. Congregation.

Ricky Poon [00:55:24] I looked at it and I was like, I marvel at what has actually been-- when I come here now, once in a while, as a guest speaker, I'm worried about what I'm going to do up there, on the pulpit. But now, because of this interview,

Thomas [00:55:43] Right, it's different.

Ricky Poon [00:55:45] So, when we had our 40th-- and then and then COVID happened, so then we went online. So we actually had our 40th anniversary celebration. That would be 2020, online. And they invited me to be a speaker and, and I spoke on the grace of God, naturally. And then it was about that time that, someone, or I might have hinted at that in the past. But now that we are located in Springfield, it should not be just Eugene Chinese Christian Church anymore, right?

Thomas [00:56:35] Yes.

Ricky Poon [00:56:35] Springfield has to be in there. Because we are now part of your community. Okay? This is our community. And so it was almost like, uh, you know, a consensus of everyone that we should change the name. Instead of yǔ-jīn. You know, the Chinese Christian Church is now chūnyǔ. Yǔ, the rain, is still there. The chūn, okay? The name Springfield, in Chinese, literally means chūn tián. That's how, chūn means spring. Tián means field. Okay? So chūn tián is the official Chinese name for good old Springfield.

Thomas [00:57:31] I see.

Ricky Poon [00:57:32] So what we did was to take the first,

Thomas [00:57:34] Probably true for all the Springfields in the U.S., maybe?

Ricky Poon [00:57:38] Yes. Because if you do phonetics, Springfield doesn't come out as good as Eugene.

Thomas [00:57:44] Mm hmm.

Ricky Poon [00:57:45] Eugene is not yǔ-jīn anymore, it's yóu-jīn. If you talk to someone from mainland China, or you talk to people who are coming here for the Olympic Trials, so, you know, they would not use yu-jin. This is the old Chinese name for the town across the freeway. But, so we decided to use the first character from the Chinese name for Springfield. Chūn, which means spring. And use this first character from the Chinese name for yǔ-jīn, which means rain. So we became the Chūnyǔ Chinese Christian Church, which means the Church of the Spring Rain.

Thomas [00:58:40] That's amazing.

Ricky Poon [00:58:42] Blessing of God. In abundance. As you so ably quoted, from John 10.

Thomas [00:58:51] I love that that decision was made in somewhat of a collective way.

Ricky Poon [00:58:55] There was no doubt. Yes, there was no doubt that this would be the name here. And notice that Chūn came before Yǔ. Springfield came before. In Chinese. Which, rightfully should be so. That's only fair. Because in English it's what? Eugene-Springfield.

Thomas [00:59:14] Yeah.

Ricky Poon [00:59:17] But those of us in the know, you had your first Chinese lesson. If you have to translate it. It's Springfield, then Eugene.

Thomas [00:59:27] Yeah. The pop quiz will be off camera.

Ricky Poon [00:59:31] Springfield-Eugene Chinese Christian Church. So I tell you, Tom, and Aimee, sitting. What can I say? This cannot be random.

Thomas [00:59:42] I can say thank you. I can only say thank you. And I can say that as I'm doing my personal podcast, which is a very similar thing. Shameless plug, it's called Broken Class with Thomas Hiura. It's on YouTube and all the audio platform services. I'd love to dive into so much more with you. It was really enjoyable. You complimented me like a zillion times. You can't also accept when I say that I just very much enjoyed--

Ricky Poon [01:00:13] I tell you, after my interview, I got another appointment at night. The first Chinese couple that I married here. Husband from Shanghai, wife is from Taiwan. You know, they and my wife and I are going on a double date. At the Italian restaurant, Mazzi's?

Thomas [01:00:38] Yes. I like the big meatball , if you get spaghetti and meatballs.

Ricky Poon [01:00:45] So again, people like you, and Aimee, you know, and me, we are to be the bridges. I mean, I've been to Shanghai. I've been to Taiwan. And here I am in the little town of Springfield. But not at all little, in my heart. In my mind.

Thomas [01:01:10] No doubt.

Ricky Poon [01:01:11] It's a big, I would have to say it's a small town with a big heart. How's that for a motto?

Thomas [01:01:18] Yes.

Ricky Poon [01:01:19] Small town with a big heart. How's that?

Thomas [01:01:22] I love the relationship. We've kind of gone at it in some ways, and maybe joking and disparaging, but Eugene depends on Springfield. And Springfield depends on Eugene. In really deep ways.

Ricky Poon [01:01:34] You know, neither city would be the same without the other.

Thomas [01:01:37] Not at all.

Ricky Poon [01:01:38] I-5 is an artificial barrier, right?

Thomas [01:01:43] Frankly, so many people in Eugene need cars to get around. And so much of [Springfield] has auto shops and mechanics that, it's needed.

Ricky Poon [01:01:51] That's where my mechanic is located. My body shop.

Thomas [01:01:54] If in Springfield, every business shut down, Eugene wouldn't know what to do.

Ricky Poon [01:01:59] And you have to go through Springfield to, you know, one of my favorite spots is McKenzie Bridge and beyond, right?

Thomas [01:02:07] So many things, so many lovely things.

Ricky Poon [01:02:09] I'm connected with Springfield in maybe a peripheral way, but now that the church is located here, I just hope that we will be a blessing to this community in some way. I don't know what it is yet, you know, but I believe it will be. I believe it will be.

Thomas [01:02:35] It's right here on Mill and Centennial. Easy to find. What's the address? One something something?

Ricky Poon [01:02:40] I don't know.

Thomas [01:02:40] Alright. Look it up.

Ricky Poon [01:02:43] I think it's 1027 Mill Street [Correction: 1275 Mill St].

Thomas [01:02:45] Sounds right. Sounds right. I don't remember numbers these days.

Ricky Poon [01:02:49] And it's where Martin Luther King turns into Centennial.

Thomas [01:02:54] Yes.

Aimee Yogi [01:02:55] Oh, yes.

Ricky Poon [01:02:56] I got a story about that, too.

Thomas [01:02:58] Oh, I remember it. I remember when that happened as a kid. Because I didn't know that much about what occurred, except that it was something Eugene wanted to do. I thought it sounded great. And then the thing I heard was that, I mean, any time you change a road, there's a lot of costs that are involved. And so Springfield maybe didn't want to move forward with it in the same way. Because Centennial, for anyone young, they might not know. MLK, past Autzen and everything, it used to be all just called Centennial.

Ricky Poon [01:03:27] Yeah, and there's Glenwood. Which is another animal. But it's this love of history. You know, something that you and I share in common. But it's more than just reminiscing, right? You know your way ahead by looking back. Basically. And then as I say, you always live in the present. But you're always constantly looking back, and looking forward. But you live in the present. So I am, I'm philosophizing, you know. Preaching again. As usual.

Thomas [01:04:04] I've really enjoyed it. And unless you have anything else you think we should get into.

Ricky Poon [01:04:08] No.

Thomas [01:04:09] I'll say that I really have appreciated you all at home as well. And anybody checking it out at the museum itself. Springfield History Museum on Main Street.

This conversation has been a part of the ILLUMINATION series, and we look forward to seeing you for the next one. Thank you very much.

Ricky Poon [01:04:25] Thank you, Tom. I appreciate you.

Thomas [01:04:27] Thank you, Ricky.