

Oral Histories of the Post-1965 Lives of Asian Americans in Idaho

The Reminiscences of  
Jack Min and Sarah Wu

Asian American Comparative Collection  
University of Idaho  
2020

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jack Min and Sarah Wu on the history of Boise Modern Chinese School, conducted by Kathy M. Min on August 17, 2020. This interview is part of the Oral Histories of the Post-1965 Lives of Asian Americans in Idaho project, conducted in partnership with the Asian American Comparative Collection.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Transcriptionist	Kathy M. Min
Narrator	Jack Min and Sarah Wu
Interviewer	Kathy M. Min
Session Number	1
Location	Boise, Idaho
Date	August 17, 2020

**00:00:05**

Q: Hi, I'm Kathy, the interviewer. Today is August 17, 2020, and I'm interviewing Jack Min and Sarah Wu, who are my parents. And the topic of today's recording is a history of the Boise Modern Chinese School for the Asian American oral history project.

**00:00:23**

Q: So, first question, what are your names and when did you come to Boise?

Wu: My name is Sarah Wu. 1998 January, we came to Boise.

Min: Yeah, same here. My name is Jack Min, and we came to Boise, January 1998.

**00:00:51**

Q: And we can just dive into questions, so tell me about the Chinese school, how it began, how you were a part of its origins.

Wu: Do you remember which year was it, when we had the meeting that time?

Min: I think it's 1998.

Wu: 1998.

Min: Yes.

Wu: When our oldest only—

Min: —one year old—

Wu: —one year old when we first came here. I think that's just during the summertime, we just went to the clubhouse, and with other families together. Then we just had a brainstorming session. That's how we get started.

Min: Yes. At that time we talked about we don't have any Chinese school for the kids here and we kind of all want to have some form of school, so we can encourage the Chinese students, our children, to learn Chinese language and share a little bit of the culture too.

**00:01:57**

Q: Also, I think we all need to speak up a little bit, probably—

Min: Okay.

Q: —just in case it doesn't pick up. So tell me about that initial kind of informal meeting that started the Chinese school.

Min: Yeah, I think one person in there is important, I think his name is Lu Gang, and I think he transferred because of his employment. He transferred to Boise from somewhere else, a bigger city. I don't remember, but probably Chicago or somewhere. And his kids was older and was in Chinese school, and he really wanted to do something similar, to have a Chinese school, use the same textbook he was using. He showed us the textbook to see if that's a good idea, if that's practical for us to have enough students and teachers to do it.

**00:02:55**

Wu: Yeah, that's about right. I'm just wondering, is this recording already [points at camera]?

Q: Yeah, I turned down the brightness on the computer, so we can look at each other.

Wu: Oh, Okay. Sorry. I didn't know. I thought this is just a prep session.

**00:03:13**

Q: And then what was Boise's Chinese community in the '90s?

Wu: At that time, we pretty much know each other. I don't think we have so many Chinese around. That time when Chinese New Year, we can pretty much fit all of us in one clubhouse, so we pretty much know all the families. So it's small. I don't know what's exactly the number there, but it's a pretty small community—

Min: Much smaller.

Wu: —and we're very tight to each other. We are kind of like a big family.

**00:03:51**

Q: And how were you introduced to the Chinese community?

Min: I think we know from work. We know friends, like other Chinese people who work at the Micron Technology in Boise. And there's quite a big Chinese population there, workers there, employment, working in Micron. And I know some people there. So we talk about it. So we get to know each other that way. There's some other Chinese members, they work in BSU [Boise State University] or other places.

**00:04:26**

Wu: Another interesting aspect to how we know each other, I think like Jack just mentioned, through work, certain groups. Actually, I think one interesting aspect is our parents. We actually have lots of visitors from China who visit us. We are their children. So they came here, visit us. And so the elders just get together and so they know each other. Then afterwards, we know their children. So that's another way we know each other. That time, there's so many elders.

**00:05:11**

Q: And then, tell me about how from that informal meeting moved into formally creating Chinese school.

Min: I don't remember at the meeting how many people were there. Maybe six to eight families there. And like us, our oldest one that time was only one year old, so we know we don't have the need for Chinese school at that year, but we definitely want to support it. That's why I showed up at the meeting and supported the meeting. I remember at that meeting all the people participating there, they really want to start a Chinese school. But I don't remember the details.

**00:05:57**

Wu: One thing I remember, it's Willie, my oldest, he was so young, and I was hand-holding him, and just trying to walk on the floor. There's another family actually. I think they have younger children in the room as well. That particular picture, I still can remember. It's just the toddlers, just walk around the room and the parents talk to each other. It's pretty informal, but it was pretty—like Jack said, we just wanted to support your brother. He was so young.

**00:06:44**

Wu: Then, definitely, you said Lu Gang, and I think he even brought some examples of the textbooks.

Min: Yep.

Wu: That's the detail I can remember. Then we talked about where we are going to start it, and we didn't know how many people probably will attend. So it's just very informal and brainstorming there. It was—how many years ago? 22 years ago. I don't know much details. I can't remember much details. That's pretty much it.

**00:07:17**

Q: Where did you meet again, for the meeting?

Wu: I know that place!

Min: It's Apple Street and southeast Boise, and the apartment is called Carriage Crossing.

Wu: We were at their clubhouse. Yeah, it's not that big. Yeah, we were all there, just walking, talking. Watching kids.

**00:07:43**

Q: What about—you said there was about eight families that were there? Can you tell me a little bit about some of the other families and how they contributed as well?

Min: I think, definitely, there are some families, their kids are older. So they want to get it started. And I'm thinking there's Vincent's family, so Vincent Ma's parents. And I think Cindy Deng was there, but I'm not exactly sure now.

**00:08:13**

Wu: Is it okay we mention names here?

Q: You can, and we can contact them as well if they're okay with their names being released.

Wu: I think, definitely Julia is there. Julia Chen. Wesley [Julia's son], he's the same age as your brother, so that's the picture when I talk about it, these two toddlers just walking on the floor. And another aspect is—so you know Wesley's mom's from Taiwan. She also be in that discussion as well. I don't remember others. Lu Gang, definitely, and Vincent. I don't know if we still have a picture. I don't remember. I think we took pictures that time.

**00:09:04**

Q: And what was the feeling of the meeting like? Did you feel like you all accomplished something at the end of it? What was the atmosphere like?

Min: We are kind of excited, but we are not really—because our kids was very young. Basically we tell everyone just to come support. But I definitely feel people, they really want to start. Also they feel like they had—since Lu Gang mentioned how it was run in another city—I think people there kind of had some idea now of how they want to do something sooner. So they feel like we can do it, not just talk about it.

**00:09:43**

Wu: Yeah, they put it into the action. Actually right after that year, end of the summer, I think they started.

Min: I think so.

Wu: Yup, they started. The first place for Chinese school, I think they use the facility in BSU, Boise State University. Yeah. Certainly, we were not there for the grand opening. We were not there, but for the first meeting, we were there.

**00:10:13**

Q: So what was your level of involvement after the first meeting?

Wu: We didn't involve until four, five years later, when your brother was six years old. Then he started to join the Chinese school regularly. It's every Sunday afternoon, two to four [p.m.]. We started as just for learning language. Then afterwards, later on, we added another activity session, four to five. And so as parents, as a student, you guys started joining. And another involvement, I let you speak [puts hand on Jack's shoulder], because you became principal.

**00:11:11**

Min: Oh yeah, I was—kind of been a volunteer. First I do some volunteering at the Chinese school. And then one year, I become the principal, serve the Chinese school for one year.

Wu: Which year was that?

Min: I think it was about 2010, 2009 to 2010.

**00:11:29**

Wu: Okay. I think before Jack became principal, we actually used the facility at the church. So we are very grateful. I even don't remember the church's name.<sup>1</sup> It's by Five Mile [Road] and—

Min: McMillan [Road].

Wu: —McMillan, the corner there. I think that's after BSU, then we used the church facility, because they just provided the facility to us for free. So we used it for a couple of years. I don't know exactly how many years. But at that time, because the school become bigger, we have more students, and then we are looking for a new facility. And Jack contributed humongously. And I think that's a milestone. First, we found the school, which is Gateway [Elementary School]. The discussion, actually, it's at our house, how we get that place.

**00:12:35**

Q: Do you want to tell me more about that?

Min: Yes. I think we heard Gateway, they're having a bilingual, focused on Chinese learning in their school. So we figured we have a Chinese school, and Gateway, they have something to cooperate, and we need a place, so we talked to their principal—I think it's Marshall?<sup>2</sup> I don't quite remember his name now. And so I talked to him several times and they are willing to host us every Sunday. And I remember, they don't charge us for using the facility, either. The only thing I remember I have to pay for is they need to have a janitor on-site during our session. So it's like from one-thirty or one, until after finish our school, like five-thirty or six, so we have to pay that part. That's the only part we need to pay. And we feel that's very reasonable and very generous from the school.

**00:13:38**

Min: And I think I also attended—that time, it's called the Meridian Joint School District. Now, they changed the name to West Ada. So the principal said they have to put this item on the agenda in the school district meeting. So actually, myself and I took my vice principal, I think it's Liu Nengjing, we went to the meeting. And there's just one minor item in that meeting. So they finished discussing many of their agendas for the school year, and then they come to our item. And, basically, we were a little bit worried, because we are afraid they may say no, because we didn't really pay anything. But they just showed their interest, and curiously [asked about] how

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<sup>1</sup> The church was Covenant Presbyterian Church.

<sup>2</sup> Principal Craig Ayala-Marshall spearheaded Gateway Elementary's Chinese immersion program. Gateway became the first and only public elementary school in Idaho to add Chinese to its curriculum in 2010. From Cynthia Sewell, "Chinese is language of choice at Meridian school," *Idaho Press*, March 10, 2012, [https://www.idahopress.com/news/state/chinese-is-language-of-choice-at-meridian-school/article\\_96ce8435-7a46-5f8c-9aae-e970aa30db28.html](https://www.idahopress.com/news/state/chinese-is-language-of-choice-at-meridian-school/article_96ce8435-7a46-5f8c-9aae-e970aa30db28.html).



long the Chinese school was there, what you are doing, those type of questions. And the school district approved Gateway school to host us.

**00:14:47**

Wu: Actually, the Chinese school been at Gateway a couple of years. We moved to the current location. Now it's all paid. Another thing is—I know you haven't asked, but I don't know if it's on your list—so for principal, they are all volunteers. They are not getting paid. So it's all volunteer works, but we pay for the teacher. So the teacher gets paid. It's very minimum, but at least we pay them. But the principal doesn't get paid at all. I don't know if they still have that tradition now.

Min: I think so.

Wu: So, all the staff get paid, except the principal.

**00:15:40**

Q: And what made you, Dad, decide to be principal, and why did you stay on for one year?

Min: Kind of the tradition there is we always have our group of volunteers. So I was a volunteer at the school first. And then normally the board and some of the parents will choose the principal, and normally for one year. It's a lot of work. And also we have a day job too. So this is kind of like you do on your own time to get everything coordinated.

**00:16:20**

Min: So the structure is like this. I think we have a principal, vice principal, kind of doing the daily things. We also have people take care of the cashier, to do the accounting stuff. And there should be one more person, I think. And we have about maybe ten, twelve classes, so we have ten or twelve teachers. There's also a group of Chinese parent coordinators, so we have organized the parents to volunteer to watch the kids during recess and stuff.

Wu: Kind of like PTA [parent-teacher association]. The parents definitely didn't get paid at all. They have on-duty every Sunday. So it's well organized.

**00:17:33**

Q: I want to back up a little bit. I think you mentioned that the after-class programs started about when Will was going to Chinese school [2005]. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that history, and why that came about, how it came about.

Wu: I don't know exactly when it get started. I think one of the after school program—it's very successful and very influential in the [Treasure] Valley—it's the Chinese dance group. Both you and me, actually, we were in that group. I think we were so thankful for the organizer, the founder of the dance group, Yan Hua. She is also a Chinese teacher, so she basically taking two hours class. Then afterwards, she started teaching by herself. Then afterwards, she actually trained the teachers. Then she got more dance trainers as well. So it's real good for, Mom [points at herself], the Chinese moms, and the Chinese students. We learn the Chinese song and the Chinese folk dance. Pretty much the performance is everywhere in the Valley. Kudos to Yan Hua Laoshi [Teacher], she started it, and we all enjoyed it a lot.

**00:19:18**

Wu: That was one of the biggest after-school activities. I think the reason that parents joined, because the parents went there, and some save the commute. Sometimes the parents just stay in the school. So that's how they started more and more after school. They have tai chi, yoga. They have chess. And now they even have Mathcounts, then more, you name it. Oh, and paint. So they have so many after-school activities now. So it's pretty alive.

**00:20:00**

Q: Yeah, I think you all maybe didn't say this as much, but I think when Dad was principal, he ran into quite a huge crisis of sorts. And I was wondering if you could talk about some of the difficulties that Chinese school has faced over the years that you've been a part of it.

Min: Yeah, I think that time, I remember, we have a large student body. I don't remember how many [by] count. Maybe 120 or something. So there's always kids—there will be kids who really want to learn Chinese. There's kids, kind of their parents send them to Chinese school, so they're not really coming here to learn. They sometimes make a mess somewhere. And also for the parents' side, too, they come from all different backgrounds. So some of them, if you think about their parents are engineers, or they really encourage their students to learn. Some of them might be from the restaurant side. They don't have time or the resources to help their children to learn. So they want the children to learn, but most of the time, they just drop off their students to the school and don't participate in any of the—

Wu: And sometimes forget—not forget. Pick them up not on time. Then there are so many incidents that happened.

**00:21:33**

Min: So with all those things going on, sometimes it seems that time when I was principal—I think I was vice principal that time, actually. Before I became principal, the church that hosted, they're not very happy that some of the kids leave a mess there. And so, the relation is kind of

getting tense. So we are looking for new places, but we don't have place for us yet. So me and several other persons, and also my wife, we kind of looking a lot to find a place in Boise where they can host us.

**00:22:15**

Wu: Yeah, so that location definitely become a challenge. I think even the size of the school, we don't have that much, really, money to rent a place temporarily just for two or three hours per week. But meanwhile we have this huge demand that the Chinese school is really moving forward. I think the location becomes a challenge. I remember myself, as the wife of the principal, then talk to so many people trying to figure out where the resources. We even think about [Cecil D.] Andrus [Elementary School] here [points behind]. Say, "Oh, maybe we need to talk to them."

**00:23:59**

Wu: So really this big help is from actually my coworker's wife. That's the Christmas time. We just get a Christmas gathering at my house, and her name's Karen Kulinski. She actually works for the school district. So she actually introduced—we talked about the situation, the challenges we are facing. And she actually volunteered, then gave the contact to your dad. That's how we get to Gateway.

**00:23:34**

Q: So that was kind of the dinner party that you had mentioned earlier?

Wu: Yep, the dinner party! She brought the snack you really like. She made the, I think, the chocolate with, with—what's that? The stick. It's kind of like a hat. So she made it. You really like it.

**00:23:56**

Wu: One thing Jack, your dad, just talked about—the different type of parents. Actually, there are another type of parents. I don't know if you know, in Boise, we actually have lots of families, they adopted Chinese kids. So these type of parents actually, they made their efforts to send their kids to Chinese school. And even one of my HP [Hewlett-Packard] coworkers, she said, "Oh really? There's a Chinese school?" I say, "Yeah." So she actually sent her daughter to Chinese school.

**00:24:38**

Wu: But given the different background of the students—so doing homework become a challenge. That's another challenge. One thing Jack mentioned, we have probably more regular time at home. So then we can help our children to get the Chinese homework done. But given

some people, they're working different hours. They're not with their kids that much, even if they want. So it's hard for them [the parents] to help them [their kids] to do the Chinese homework.

**00:25:16**

Wu: Because the challenge is the Chinese homework, the textbook—everything's in Chinese.<sup>3</sup> There's no English. So that becomes a challenge for the third type of parent I just mentioned. They are American. They don't know Chinese. The only reason they're sending their kids to Chinese school, because their kid's adopted from China. So that become a big challenge for the third type of parents to help their kids to do Chinese homework. But I'm proud of them. They still keep sending their kids. They're asking help. Even myself, I offered, "I can help," [unclear.]

**00:25:56**

Q: So with Chinese adoptees, is it just [Chinese] parents volunteering to help? How has that sort of issue been addressed?

Wu: I don't know. Some of them, I know, because of the challenges, they dropped the school, because the kids struggled with homework and the parents cannot help. But I know for after-school, these type of parents [parents of Chinese adoptees], they actually send their kids for dance groups. They volunteer to help this type of [things]. But particularly for Chinese homework, probably some people know that there's some groups or it's there. I don't know.

**00:26:53**

Q: And then you've been a part of the Chinese school community for many, many years. How would you say it's changed over the years?

Wu: So the first change was, for me, our family, we went to China. We went back to work, because HP sent us back to work. So we've been in China 2011 and 2013. When we came back, August 2013, then I send you guys back to Chinese school. So that's the first day for Chinese school, and we want you to the new location, which is—what's the name of the school? Not Andrus.

Min: Is it Anser [Charter School]?

**00:27:43**

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<sup>3</sup> The Chinese textbooks the interviewer used during her time in Boise Modern Chinese School (2006–2015) did have English translations and/or vocabulary lists with English. However, the interviewer's learning experience was based on an instruction model for Chinese heritage speakers, which presumes the student grew up speaking some Chinese in the home, but is not necessarily literate or fluent.

Wu: Anser. Yeah, so, first all answer, that's a new location. When we came back, kind of, “Oh, this is a much bigger gym.” Then we went to there, and people didn't know us anymore. So I remember I printed out the registration form, and we put the cash in, and people didn't know me. I'm kind of like, “Only two years, the school just become big and people even don't know me!” I'm kind of like, “Oh wow.” Before, everybody knows each other and we been in this community so long and it seems everybody knows me. But now, when I went back, I'm kind of like, “[Mimics filling out registration form] Oh, what's your kid's name?” when we did the registration. That was a big shock to me.

**00:28:35**

Q: Any other changes that you've noticed over time?

Wu: Much more people.

Min: Yeah.

Wu: Much more people—

Min: It's getting bigger.

Wu: —and getting bigger. And I see the parents actually associating with each other more. They basically get the kids to school. They either play poker together or they walk together. And then, it definitely become a community. And the church actually had their book study there, so to give the moms [tips on] how to raise kids and things. So there's so many small groups during the school class. During the class, the kids all went to their classroom; the parents just got much more involvement with each other. That's another change I do see. Before, we didn't have that, right? So we just dropped kids. So it's much more alive.

**00:29:43**

Q: And then, any other sorts of important events or things to note about Chinese school?

Min: One thing, I think kind of like a tradition, we have, the Chinese school, is every end of semester, we always have performance. Also, a lot of times we'll order some pizza, fried chicken stuff. And people can celebrate the end of year. And I think we also did, for Chinese New Year, we also sometimes give out red packets.

Wu: Oh, yeah.

Min: Put some money in there—

Wu: Keep the tradition.

Min: —so people know for Chinese New Year, you get some money.

Wu: Yeah, that's good. I always enjoy that—enjoy the big performance, then dance, then food, [unclear].

**00:30:35**

Min: Another big change is—we did that for two years, I remember—is your brother, he took the AP [Advanced Placement] Chinese. But he figured out he had to go through his own high school to get things arranged and test, because it's only him, just one person, doing that AP Chinese test. There's no class, so he was studying by himself and then trying to get tested. But after that, I think he worked with a Chinese teacher there. There's a lot of interest in doing the AP Chinese test. So your brother Will, he worked with one of the Chinese school teacher. They did a special program or class—

Wu: It's just a class. AP Chinese. Basically it's AP Chinese.

Min: —so your brother was an assistant to the class—

Wu: Not assistant.

Min: —and he also go back to his high school to arrange, to get all the students registered, how to get registered, and get it easier for them to do the test. Yeah, I think we did that for one or two years.

**00:31:47**

Wu: Well, Will founded it. So he started it. But because of this, so many interest, he didn't ask [for the AP Chinese program at Boise Modern Chinese School]. Yes, he founded with another teacher, but he was asked if he can do this to help the Chinese community, the American Chinese students, how to go through the AP process. So that part, your brother did lots of work. I think his title is not “assistant.” I think it's “strategist”, “AP strategist”—

Min: [Chuckles] I don't know.

Wu: —because he's not teaching them language. He basically taught how to prepare the test, where to register, and the tricks—you know, all this. Actually, we should talk to him to ask him what he has done. I cannot speak for him. Yeah. So, that's another change. Yes.

**00:32:56**

Min: Also, I think it always depends on what teachers you have, so sometimes we have visitors. They may do kung fu or tai chi. Then that person will teach that lesson there for that year or two during he was here. Or there's people good with other things, like “we know dance,” “we know painting.”

Wu: It's the resources.

Min: Using the resources. We have the Chinese school always going on, and pretty much have the dance and chess going on for a long time. But for the other activities, it kind of depends on what teacher you have for that period.

Wu: Yeah, what resources you have.

**00:33:35**

Wu: Back to that AP class, I don't know if this still happens.

Q: I think they might. On the website itself, it said they have it.

Wu: But I was so excited to see the Chinese teacher, Yu Ming Laoshi [teacher]. She's really—oh, you were in there! [Kathy nods off-camera.] Oh okay, you know that AP Chinese. I think that whole class, most people got five or four.<sup>4</sup>

Q: I think so.

Wu: So pretty much everybody got a good score. I forget about that. Thanks for doing that.

**00:34:12**

Q: Yeah. And then are there any stories about Chinese school that you want to share that you haven't shared already?

Min: There are probably a lot of stories.

Wu: There are so many stories. Probably now, they have even more.

**00:34:28**

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<sup>4</sup> AP examinations are scored one through five, one being the lowest score, five being the highest. To pass the test, one must score three or above.

Q: Any stories that you want, that you think are especially important to share?

Min: Let me think.

Wu: I think probably two or three years ago, when your younger brother finished Chinese school, ever since, we didn't go there. So we didn't go there for you. At that time, I think it's a huge—what's the term I'm using? So pretty much people drop [off] things. And then if I want to give you something, I say, “Go pick up from Chinese school, because everybody goes to there.” And then also some lady from Hong Kong, she's real good at bakery. Then she have some back truck, kind of to sell, you know. And then we have fruit or eggs, some Chinese vegetable to exchange or share, you know. It definitely become a very lively, every week, Chinese community. It's very important.

**00:35:49**

Wu: Currently the Chinese here, we have three major groups. One is ICO, Idaho Chinese Organization. Another one is the Chinese school. Another one is the Chinese church. So all these three, I think, at that time, Chinese school become a real location to get all these type of people get together. And exchange information, exchange food, exchange experience, talk to each other.

**00:36:26**

Wu: I think one important thing is ICO—I've been in ICO seven years as a board member—every time ICO does this Chinese New Year show, every time we talk to Chinese school, we want to see Chinese school kind of like a part of ICO. Actually, it's not. It's a separate entity. Chinese school is independent. So like I said, this is kind of three organizations.

**00:37:11**

Q: Anything you want to add, Dad?

Min: Not right now. So happy to share all these things. Happy to talk about it.

Wu: Yeah, it's lots of good memories. We wish the best for the Chinese school to continue like this, and the kids to keep their culture, keep the language.

**00:37:30**

Q: And then, I think, probably my last question that I have for you now is what is the personal meaning that Chinese school has to you?



Min: Simply thinking, we have three kids, including you, all go through Chinese school, from the beginning to their highest grades. We're very happy about it. And also I think it give us a chance to meet our parents to [unclear].

**00:38:16**

Wu: So in personal, I actually [think] learning Chinese, it's really a way for me to connect with them more. I remember one summer, [unclear]. That time, it's hard, actually, for age groups, because some age only have one [student], or they have different level of Chinese language ability. So it's hard to have class for each age. So that time, your brother became only one or two in that class. So, in order he can move to a higher class, he has to learn one book in order to pass to get to the higher level. Otherwise, he will drop to another class. So that summer, I actually studied—I teach your brother the whole book. He's real good. So he catches up, then get into the higher class. So for me, it's really a personal connection. You guys are great. I'm very thankful you guys are smart and hardworking, and I don't really pay attention for your other class, except Chinese. I only help you with Chinese. So that's really important for me. Being a mother, I think I did at least a little bit my part for your class. Otherwise, I didn't do other class.

**00:39:57**

Q: Anything you want to add?

Min: No. Then find out we didn't record anything!

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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