

**Houston Asian American Archive**  
**Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

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Interviewee: Kenneth Li  
Interviewers: Tiffany Sloan, Akhil Jonnalagadda  
Date of Interview: July 11, 2019  
Transcribed by: Tiffany Sloan, Akhil Jonnalagadda  
Edited by: Sonia He (9/25/2019)  
Audio Track Time: 1:02:26

Background: Kenneth Li was born in 1957 in Taipei, Taiwan where he grew up before moving to Hong Kong at the age of 14. After completing his high school in Hong Kong, he arrived to Houston in 1981 to study at Houston Baptist University. He began to work in a supermarket on Bellaire Boulevard with his uncle before launching his real estate company, Texas George Realty, in 1988. Mr. Li spent the next few decades working to expand Houston's Chinatown by bringing in immigrants, investors, and tourists to the area. He was appointed to be the first Asian to serve on the city's planning commission, and his company has been named one of the top Asian-owned businesses in Houston. Mr. Li also helped start the Asian Real Estate Association in America, was involved with the Asian Chamber of Commerce, and served as the chairman of the Chinese Community Center in Houston.

Setting: The interview was conducted at Fondren Library on July 11<sup>th</sup> and lasted around one hour.

Key:

KL: Kenneth Li  
TS: Tiffany Sloan  
AJ: Akhil Jonnalagadda  
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop  
...: speech trails off; pause  
Italics: emphasis  
(?): preceding word may not be accurate  
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

**TS:** Hello! Today is July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, we are here in Fondren Library. My name is Tiffany Sloan.

**AJ:** I'm Akhil Jonnalagadda.

**TS:** And today we're here to interview Kenneth Li [**KL:** Mhmm, yes]. And so, Mr. Li, could you please start off by telling us about your childhood and where you were born?

**KL:** Kenneth Li, I was born in Taiwan. Um, a beautiful uh island uh it's called Republic of China. And uh, I grew up uh in uh, I should say, when I was uh fourteen, I moved to Hong Kong. And then in Hong Kong, I—actually I finish my high school education, and uh I came to uh the United States in 1980... '81. So I stay in Los Angeles for about, well, less than half a year, and then I decide to move to Houston. So—mainly it's for my education. So, my background, I should say, I... I was born in a middle-class family. Uh, you know, my grandfather, my—my... my parents they are in the business. So, uh I grew in that um environment. And uh, uh... I should say I have a very fortunate, uh very enjoyable uh, uh life when I was in Taiwan and Hong Kong. And then, uh, and I came by myself. So, I came here to study my, uh, finish my college education. So I—I went to Houston Baptist University. Uh, at that time... uh, my uncle uh opened the first Asian grocery store on Bellaire, and then he uh, uh asked me to help him. I think that's the reason I choose Houston Baptist is because it's close to the store. It's in the uh, southwest area. So that's my early part of life.

**TS:** And so, you said you were born in Taiwan, correct? [**KL:** Mhmm, yes.] Um, was your family originally from Taiwan, or did they come from Mainland China?

**KL:** Uh, actually my par- both—both of my, uh, my parents born in Shanghai. And uh, uh... they're uh, they're originally from uh Zhejiang it's another province, small village. Uh, but they uh, they met in Taiwan and then they, they're—they were married in Taiwan. So uh, well, uh so I—I should say I should be the uh... uh I mean I was born in Taiwan, but my parents is from Mainland China.

**TS:** And what kind of inspired the move to Hong Kong? Whenever you were fourteen.

**KL:** It's two reasons. One, is uh [cough] the uh... uh, the U.S. Government, uh they uh, uh, how do you say that? They—they uh, they broke their relationship with uh, with R.O.C. and, at that time, of course every- uh, you know, a lot of people got panic. And I'm the—I'm the first child, so uh my parents say, "you better move to Hong Kong, stay with uh—with your uncle. And uh, let's see uh we're gonna... you know, what's a plan it will be." And that's why I moved to Hong Kong, you know. And uh, but the—that is the uh, uh... a big change of my life. That's the first time I left my uh, my home. Uh, my—my home town, and live uh independently, you know. But fortunately, my uncle take a good care of me. Just like their own child [laughs], so I still enjoy the life. Uh, probably that's uh the best part uh of Hong Kong at that time.

**TS:** And so, were you always planning on coming to America? Or was that something...

**KL:** No, not really—not really. You know, uh, you know, Hong Kong is a British colony, right? [**TS:** Mhmm] So all my friends, they went to Britain, uh Australia, Canada. I think the main reason I come to U.S. is uh my uncle decide to uh—uh move to uh United States. And he told me that, "uh if I go to United States, I wish that you can come with me and then maybe, uh, you know, uh I can help you." So that's why uh I—I start to prepare myself to come to United States to finish my college uh, uh education. And then maybe, uh, as he said: maybe you can help. And that's why I came to Houston.

**TS:** And so, were your parents supportive of you coming to the United States?

**KL:** Yes, I think uh, uh everybody thinking the United States is uh, is a great place to go. And uh, uh... so, so uh they support that. Yes.

**TS:** And, I believe you mentioned the first city you came to was L.A., correct?

**KL:** Yes, L.A. it is.

**TS:** Um, can you kind of talk about your first impressions of that city and what it was like for you?

**KL:** Oh [laughs], it's great! Weather is great, um m- the second day is uh, I went to the Disneyland [laughs]. And, uh uh, and then uh my uncle's friend allow me to stay there for, you know, for a while. And he just bought a—a *big* mansion, you know. I still remember it's—it's uh—it's a beautiful house, you know, just like the movie in the uh, *Gone with the Wind* [laughs] like a *huge* mansion. I said, "wow, America is so good, everybody live in a big house," you know [**KL** and **TS** laugh]. So uh, I—yeah, it- the impressions are very good. Yeah, yeah... But the reason I move there is uh, I think, uh uh I've never been to Houston and uh, uh but my uncle decide he's going to open a store, which is a chain store from L.A. called uh Diho Market. You know, and then he said, "well, let's—let's do it." And then, uh "why don't you go first? And then we're gonna plan, you know, to... to go there soon." That's why I decide to move.

**TS:** And so, how long were you in L.A.?

**KL:** It's about... actually, I can say about four month. [**TS:** Oh, okay.] Yeah. Three or four month, yeah, uh huh.

**TS:** And, were you kind of surprised by Houston in anyway? Was it very different from L.A.?

**KL:** It's... well, I can tell you in the—in the early '80s, uh... I feel it's about the same. Because Houston, it was booming at that time, in the early '80s. And uh, of course uh it's—it's hot and humid like uh Hong Kong and Taiwan. So the weather, uh I—I can—I should say... uh it's a bit hot, but then I got used to that. Other than that, uh, I just feel uh small uh... well it's—it's Texas. So it's—it's different, you know. And, uh so I couldn't believe that I stay here for such a long time [**AJ** laughs] since '80 'til now [laughs]. Never move, yeah.

**TS:** Can you kind of talk about the process of setting up the super market with your uncle, and was that a really impactful experience for you?

**KL:** Uh, it is. Uh, I was at a school and a full-time student, I also work full-time uh, you know, uh... for—with my uncle. And then, at the time he not only doing the super market but a joint venture with, uh, some local uh developers. So, they also owned the real-estate and that's hard getting all of that, you know. Not only just a—the, the grocery store, but also the real-estate. And um, and... which is probably the first one in the southwest area. And so uh, that give me a uh a lot of learning experience of course: how to set up a store from scratch, you know, and see... the building was uh... uh it's built up from, from scratch. Uh, and then uh, you know, and everybody share their knowledge with me and it's really, it's really uh kind of uh new to me. Yeah. [**TS:** And so--] So that's quite a good—quite a bit experience.

**TS:** And so, what were you studying at school at HBU?

**KL:** I study the easiest subject, I think [**TS** laughs]. Mathematics and uh, computer information system. You know, I stay in—I stay in the dorm, you know, and fortunately I graduate with uh a very high uh almost a 4.0. You know, so uh, I feel pretty lucky there.

**TS:** So, did this kind of study help you in your future life with business?

**KL:** I think every training help, you know, especially uh... uh during my uh... during my study in the campus, I made a lot of friends and uh I really enjoy, you know, uh the campus life. And at a later time, I uh start to work, you know, in the market. Uh, but I enjoy both. So uh, it's really uh, probably the—the happiest moments [laughs] in my life.

**TS:** And so, had you always intended on going onto business, or was there a moment that kind of changed your mind?

**KL:** Well, actually... that's a good question, you know, uh—I never work for anybody. Uh, always, uh, maybe it is... it is uh... it's uh, the heritage. My mom always tell me, “don't work for anybody, should just work for—for yourself.” Um, which uh... you know, it's maybe not true, but—but when you, when you brought up and then when you have that kind of uh concept, and then of course when I graduate in the, in the mid '80s. Uh, and then start—starting you see the downturn of the—the oil prices, and Houston's really, uh the economy is, is down to the drain —uh down to—down to the bottom. So, all the people actually move out of Houston, right? And uh, it's not easy to find a job. So, that's why I start helping my uncle to [**KL** add: instead of “to”, he intended to say “and”] start my own business. Uh, so I—I uh... you know, I join several other business like uh, uh not only supermarket: uh restaurant, uh trading, and uh...uh. So it give me a lot of, uh, exposure to a lot of kind of business. And then, um, I really concentrate

on the real-estate business, uh since—I think I founded my company in uh 1988, and uh ever since that so I—I'm doing this. You know, like forever. Yeah.

**TS:** And so, how long were you working at the supermarket and what kind of steps did you take after that to lead up to your career now?

**KL:** How long? Uh... I think I should say, uh... after the Diho market, we expanded uh to the adjacent shopping center. At that time, uh, all the... all the store close out, because of economy. And there's a one super market, uh, was vacant. And then we—I convert that into uh, uh a new uh Asian uh market. Uh, and uh so, after that, I just decide I need to go to the real-estate. So you can say, uh it should be about from 1983 to probably to—to—to the '91.

**TS:** And so, were you still kind of working at the market whenever you were starting up your own real-estate business in '88?

**KL:** Uh, no, I only—I only shop at the—at the super market [**TS** and **AJ** laugh], but I love super market. Every time I go to every city I go to, either visit the Chinatown—I want to see to see uh the su- the—the trend of the super market. Uh, yeah, stay here... you know, it's—it's not a easy job but uh, I enjoyed it you know...

**TS:** So what kind of businesses were booming around your super market, and have those kind of changed over time?

**KL:** Well, I think the model is uh super market, hometown food, book store, uh a lot of things that relate to, you know, the people who—where—where—where are from. At that time, in the '80s, uh, it's people who uh either are born here or from uh, uh... or from, I think from Taiwan at that time, from '70s. And uh, and then—of course the Chinese always changing. You know, later it's from Hong Kong, and then now it's more like from Mainland China. Yeah.

**TS:** Could you talk about how the Texas George Realty came to be?

**KL:** Well it's uh, it's really a catchy name. Why Texas George? By that time, I uh—I was very in favor of the Republican Party. So when George Bush Senior is running the president, I said, "I'm for that." And then, not only for the, uh... So I said, "well, let's say uh... I am from—from Texas. So Texas George Realty." And then the super market, uh, you know, I said just convert. We called it George '99 Super Market. You know [laughs] so, uh, and that's why I met—I met uh, uh... you know, uh Mr. Bush Senior, later on, and he just say, "oh, that's so nice of you. So, I hope the business is doing well." [laughs] I said, "it's doing well, thank you." [laughs] Yeah. So the George '99 Super Market, uh, we sold it to uh, uh to another group. It's called the Welcome Center, which is, you know, uh still exists now-a-days. Yeah—the Diho Market, we, we uh we—we founded, we formed, which was sold. Now it's called a Jusgo. So you can see, you know, it uh, uh it changes. Because we uh, I think our family is total out of uh grocery business right now. Yeah.

**TS:** And so, can you kind of talk about what Texas George Realty does and what your mission was—

**KL:** Well, when I—well, well yeah. When I want to get into the real-estate business, it's to—it's to uh, uh... There's two vision I have, one is uh I see the growing of the Asian community, especially the Chinese—Chinese uh, uh you know, uh immigrants. At that time we have uh, estimate about 30,000 uh Chinese, or Asian, in Houston in the early '80s. And then uh, when we want to find some real-estate uh it's not too many real-estate uh agent uh provide that service. So I think it's a need for that. And uh, and the second thing is, uh, you know, whenever there's a crisis there's uh opportunities... If you remember

during the late '80s, the RTC and there's a lot of uh foreclosure of the bank, savings, and then the properties. So, uh, I mean som- the whole street is, is vacant [KL add: instead of "vacant", he intended to say "for sale"]. And then, especially in the southwest area. And I'm thinking, that is a good uh opportunity to invest. Because I truly believe uh real-estate should always increase in value. And then afterward you have to build on that, bring the value to that. So I uh, I decide, you know, to expand it to uh—not expand, I went to California, go to the east coast, or even go to overseas, try to gather some investors, you know, to do some investment [KL add: he intended to say "invest in Houston"]].

And nothing help, I—I bring a lot of investors uh from outside Houston area during the worst time. And that's why [coughs] form a base that on Bellaire it's a lot of property was bought out during that time. And uh, I think it sustain the value of that, you know, didn't go down. Uh, I remember uh shops on Alief used to be a very good middle class uh subdivisions like Sugarland is, you know. But 'cause of the, uh, the economy downturn change of the—change the demographic, you know. But the all—all these uh give me the uh, uh incentive and motivation, you know. And then uh, fortunately, uh a lot of people seeing this kind of uh opportunities and then um it's uh quite a few uh come to Houston. And then um, now, today, we have about uh 300,000 uh well they say the Chinese or Asian population in Houston. So population did uh increase. So uh, and also uh, when you're driving down on Bellaire, uh there's about six miles uh non-stop almost—I think 90% of the real-estate are owned by Asians. Which is amazing, yeah.

**TS:** Um, so, I understand that Texas George Realty was named one of the top Asian-owned businesses in Houston [KL: Yes]. Um, could you talk about that achievement and what that was like for you?

**KL:** Um, I can just say... maybe I'm lucky [TS laughs]. Timing is good, uh not too many competition at that time, you know. But I—I always work with uh, uh, you know it's not just the brokerage. Uh, I also involve with the commercial uh property management, uh and uh development, you know. And uh I work with every- uh every body, uh... even it's uh not my company but other company, you know. So at that time, we have uh just a few. You know, maybe handful of uh, uh Asian-owned real-estate company. Uh, and then I think we work very closely, help each other, uh bring a lot of people uh from out of town, and uh, uh it's doing great. And that's why, uh, at that time I think Houston Post, you know, when they—when they—when they do a, a polling and then uh I was lucky to be selected as the, you know, one of the top one with other Asian uh enterprise, yeah. So, uh, uh we are still in the business. I'm still working. So uh, and uh, now I think my vision is I need to bring uh a younger generation to uh, uh you know to this business. And also, uh, uh this is a different information age; when I start my business, everything is done by fax [TS laughs] or uh carbon paper [laughs]. Now it's totally change, you know, yeah. Digital, yeah.

**TS:** Could you talk about the progression of your career and how your focus has kind of changed over time?

**KL:** Uh, I can say I always try to have a, a challenge or a change. Uh, so when I have my Texas George Realty uh been establish, and then I... I say, "why, why uh—I want to try a franchise," you know. We should go to the mainstream. So, I bought a franchise uh, uh Century 21 at that time, and then uh uh and found out I'm the only one in Texas, you know, for, for I mean uh... All the Asian they—they just thinking uh, *I can do, I can do great just within my community and I don't have to go to the mainstream or to whatever*. But I want to reach out, and I think—I think the main thing is I'm still trying to do uh, not only promoting my business, promoting Houston to the outside world. To promote uh, Chinatown to the, you know, to the whole Houston area. Uh, I want that turn into, you know, uh we should be part of the Houston it's not separated from, from that area. And that—that's why I devoted my business, not only in the real-estate but also I devote a lot of time in the uh, uh community work promoting, you know, our community. You know, not only just Chinese but Asian. Yeah, so I think the real-estate business really help me to do that because it's a people business. Yeah, so I really enjoyed that.

**TS:** And so, in your line of work, did you experience a lot of discrimination? And were these kinds of setbacks towards your progress?

**KL:** Discrimination, yes. Uh, when I start in the '80s, uh I couldn't find any Asians live in the River Oaks or Memorial, not too many. When we got into the commercial real-estate, uh... nobody wanted to talk to me because they don't know who I am. Uh, but I feel that is a challenge because uh we... you know, uh I always tell people we come late. We are 200 years late, so we need to do uh some catch up. Uh but we had—you had to show that you deserve that. So uh, you know, so I ask my colleague "What is the uh, the—the most difficult designation you can get for the real-estate practitioner at that time?" Oh, they say "CCIM, Certified uh Commercial Investment Member." That costs you a lot of money and you have to do a—so I said, "I'm gonna get it," you know. To get it to just want to show people I'm serious about the business, and then you have to join uh, you know, their membership, go to their meetings, and then uh... of course that's one of the reason I join one of the main franchise. At that time, franchise is everything, not like uh now-a-days. Uh so, so—so I go to a lot of conventions and I found out I'm the only Asian, or a few Asian faces. You know, uh it's... not enough. And that's why—uh give me some idea I need to create some uh organization—trade organizations, especially for Asian. You know and, and then that's the beginning I start getting into a lot of uh... work in the community side. Yes.

**TS:** And so, in 2015 your influence led to the city of Houston approving a budget of 21 million in order to reconstruct the roads in Chinatown. [**KL:** Mhmm] Um, can you talk about how that impacted the Chinese community and what that milestone was like for you personally?

**KL:** Okay, the reason that uh I want to do that is when I was appointed by uh Mayor Lanier to be uh, the first Asian to serve on the planning commission. And I learned that uh, you know, uh in the real-estate or a lot of business, um the American way is you have to work with the government and you have to uh play leverage. And uh, the government can also help on some, uh uh on something that when you do your development. So [coughs], uh... and then I—I helped to create a uh, we call the Tax Re-investment Zone (TIRZ). Which is a government body, and then uh, uh you create a district and then uh if the economic value goes up, uh there'd be a portion of the uh extra money will stay in the same area for the infrastructure. And uh, of course—and still the budget is controlled by the city. So I think that's a great vehicle, you know, it's like uh downtown and—and Galleria, you know, they are using—using that. And then in the southwest area, uh, I know our council member is working hard, but the city never give—using enough, they call CIP money, to do all this infrastructure work.

So, uh, maybe the TIRZ can help. At that time, um, I work with the Sharpstown [Mall] Owners, the [indistinguishable] Tower, some major real-estate owners uh to form this district. The purpose is, in the uh, in the—that's in the '90s. Uh, the Sharpstown mall still it's doing really good, but the mall concepts starting getting old and then need to—need to change. So, the main purpose is maybe to redevelop the mall, and then do some other infrastructure help, and then uh especially the expansion and update of Bellaire boulevard. And Chinatown just for- uh happened to be, to be there, to be a part of it. So uh [coughs] after a lot of planning, uh a lot of uh, uh... after uh many mayor administrations, uh finally we got a budget approve. And then we uh, issue the bond by the TIRZ and so uh... that's how we get the money. And then of course, I mean, we do have some other project it's like uh we help the Halliburton side uh, on the uh Beltway 8, uh it's—it's part of that and then uh... And then we wait for the redevelopment of the mall, and then uh of course we uh, you know, we're still waiting and at that time it's just say, "well, uh, since we have—still have some budget, why don't we concentrate on the road expansion?" So actually, the expansion is—the phase one is from 59 South Freeway on Bellaire uh from the east all the way to Beltway 8. You know, and so uh... the Chinatown is on the west side of this section, so uh again uh that's how we get the money. Uh, and after that we also spend another 20 million dollars to expand the Fondren corridor, which is an intersection at uh Bellaire and then uh close to the uh, uh 59.

So that's how we got the money, you know. If we had—if—you have to have funding, of course the rest is just the construction work. Yeah, so uh, so that is the process when, when you, when you uh... when you have the uh, uh this... uh, you know, when you have this uh organization being formed uh you have to work on that because not every TIRZ has the right project, have the uh budget to do that. Just fortunately we have a good team, good memb- good board members, and then with the mayor's support, and then with uh, you know, the uh... the right uh professional to help uh to make it happen. And uh, so after that, I also helped to create a management district, it's called the Southwest Management District. And the Southwest Management District is—go through the state of Texas and then got commercial property owners, uh you know, petition. So this management district is more like uh maintaining the property. So because when you expand the property, the city will say, “well, it's all yours then. You have to maintain that. Maintain all the landscape, uh the uh the trash pick up,” already a lot of—little bit elementary thing. So that's why, uh, we have Management District and the TIRZ to serve this area. So later on you can see if another district was formed called an International Management District, but the TIRZ didn't expand to that area so they only have a Management District but they don't have a TIRZ to, to—to help them to fund this infrastructure.

So all this I—I think learned through the uh, you know, through the uh... my experience with the city, uh to meet a lot of professionals, and uh to learn how to work with a—not just by, within our committee, but you have to work outside the box, outside the committee and let's work together. And surprising I found out, you know, on this Management District we are the only one uh because we are the most diversified district. Uh, I... when I—when I helped to create that I said, “I want to divide it, not divide it but to zone this as a different zone.” For instance, on Hillcroft and 59, there's a—they call that—now they call it Little India, you know, they call it the South Asian District. And then on the uh, when including the Houston Baptist, we call that more like a university zone uh, including the Memorial Hermann. And then we have Harwin, which is a probably one of the more famous outlet, uh... there's you know a lot of uh small retail, wholesale strip, uh Harwin District. And Sharpstown Mall we call that the Sharpstown area. And then Chinatown... uh you know, total of six zones. So this is the only, the only place uh the only Chinatown they called within a Management District, uh in the—in the entire America. So that's why they say, “oh, this is probably the most new one and then clean one,” you know. So all this is work not only just within our self, but have to work with, you know, uh, uh the whole community to work with. And—and this uh Management District and then the TIRZ uh we don't want to affect the residents. So we don't—we don't tax the residents, but they can get the benefits of that. Who pay for that? All the commercial property owners pay for that. And we think if we bring the value on that, it gonna benefit everybody. So so far, it's a win-win situation. Yeah. So so it's... I'm sorry it's simple question but it's complicated [KL, TS, and AJ laughs] and ho— wh—why it happened you know. It's—it's—it's not— It take— It take— It took us about over 15 years to make it happened. Yeah. Long time. Yeah.

**TS:** So, I've seen that you've gotten some really illustrious titles, such as “The Pioneer” or even, maybe, the “Mayor of Houston Chinatown”, so if you were to give a title to the role that you play within the Chinese community, what do you think it would be?

**KL:** A role— a, a [KL laughs]— uh, they call me because, uh, they say ‘Ken why you want to spend so much time, you know. I mean, you have your own business, you always work— uh, no private life— you always, uh, go to a lot of functions, you know, and, uh, support a lot of candidates, you know, and then, uh, promote Chinatown, you know.’ I told them Chinatown is not a territory. It is a concept, you know. Uh, in every, uh, interna— international city in the world, they always have a Chinatown. And, uh, uh, it didn't say it has to be, uh, in a certain area is a Chinatown. Maybe you can say or less a boundary, but as a concept, you say, ‘it is a international city. We welcome everybody.’ Uh, I want to promote is a tourist spot. I work with the city of Houston, the, uh, visiting bureau. Uh, they said, actually, in the last fifteen years, uh, we have a lot of newcomers from all over the America. And then if you go outside the

Southwest Houston, it's— it's more like, uh, every other, uh, major city. You know, it's pattern. It's always the—the franchise, the chain stores, the fast food. But once you come to the Southwest area, you enjoy so much identity, you know. You can go to, uh, Hillcroft. They have a Middle East, they have a Indians, South Asian, whatever, it's a lot of things. And then when you driving down on Bellaire, you can enjoy all kinds of food. And then, in this apartments that, that, in this area, we are the most densely populated, and then there's over— I heard it's a ninety countries, over a hundred languages was being spoken in the area, so you can enjoy all kinds of food. Now it's all not only in Chinatown. You drive down on Bellaire, all the way to Highway 6, you can see, uh, Vietnamese, you know, uh, even Korean, or— all kind of, uh, uh, int— international flavor— Colombia, or whatever, you know, sometimes I just don't know which country that is. An— and, uh, so, uh, I thin— I think— I think, uh, that is amazing thing, you know, to happen.

I want to promote— I want to promote that, uh, not only to— to the outside world but even within the Houston. And people feel that they don't have to go to Asia or go to some other place. They can enjoy the, the, uh, you know, a lot of different flavor of the food. Uh, food is, I think, uh, uh, the most, uh, enjoyable things for people to, uh, you know, uh, enjoy the culture, you know. So, uh, I even work with the, uh, Chinese Community Center to arrange a Asian heritage tour, you know. So that is, uh, let not just the Asian, actually is non-Asian to know, I mean, uh, the flavor, you know. So, wha—what not only visiting the food— uh, I mean, the restaurant, uh, went to Harwin to shopping, maybe to temple, or even a, uh, a Vietnamese, uh, a church, to experience. Uh, actually, uh, I think there's an Indian, uh, temple, uh, you know, and people love that, you know. So, uh, uh, working very well. I mean, the Hou—, uh, visiting bureau is promoting that. Because if you have a one day you want to spend for newcomers, uh, this is one with tour— half—day tour to— to allow you experience that. So— so it's a lot of things, you know, I'm thinking— I want to promote that. I want to— why I want to do that because, uh, just want to reach out to let the people know, uh, how fortunate we have— [indistinguishable] this rich of the— rich culture to have in Houston, yeah.

**TS:** And so, you've mentioned the Asian Heritage Tour [**KL:** Yeah.] as kind of a combination with the visiting bureau, [**KL:** Yeah.] as a way to promote [**KL:** Yes.] the diversity of Houston [**KL:** Yes.]. Um, could you talk a little bit more about some other initiatives you've gone through in order to promote diversity of Houston?

**KL:** Well, I mean, act—actually it—it's, uh— of course, like, we reached out to the Rodeo. Uh, put some ad on that. And then, if they say event going on— for instance, this— next week, [**KL** coughs], uh, I think the Global Sister City have a— have a conference in Houston, and we help on that to promote that. So we want to promote everything is international, and then bring some, uh, economic and business, uh, to the— to the— to the area, you know. So— so, to answer back your last question, you know, so wha— what did I do— to do for the— uh, you know, for the— for the— for our community is— you know, I mean, remember, when I came in the '80s, there's another Chinatown in downtown that's, uh, nearby the George Brown Convention Center. But, not too many people remember that anymore. Uh, it's totally gone, you know. And, uh, and the Southwest, the new Chinatown, emerged. So, uh, I think not only just because, uh, I think that, uh, I think during the downturn uh, when business fade away, people didn't realize they have to work together. You know, they have to really— not just get out, but you have to— to be be more... I think, uh, persistent to make the business better. That— that's how the Southwest doing that. And then, uh— uh, I'm working on that all the time since the '80s, nonstop. So, uh, I bring all the business to this area, I promote this area, I form— I help to form this kind of district, so people say 'oh'— and then, finally people say 'well, we need to define the zone of Chinatown', so I help. Then I help the bilingual sign.

The bilingual sign is another controversial thing at the time, but I help that. I was thinking— the reason for that is the Chinese character actually use the phonetics of the sound. Like the Bellaire Boulevard, we



call the Bǎilì. It's for the new immigrants how to pronounce the name and give it a very lucky name, like a Bǎilì, which means 'hundreds of benefits', you know, so it— it's good name. Like Harwin we call the *Hǎoyùn*, uh, good luck. So people feel 'oh, this is nice street to stay or do business'. An— and that really promote, you know, and, uh— but, uh... so, that's why people say 'oh, you're the mayor, you know everybody, you know every— everybody, and then, you know, you're being so generous to, uh, whatever', but, uh, I help these people remember, you know, I'm a part of it, you know. Maybe, I'm the, uh— I'm the person people recognize, but you can see, there's over a hundred restaurant within— I count that— 0.7 miles. Four, five shopping centers continuously. I mean, uh, you know, uh... lot of, uh, massage place, a lot of restaurants, a lot of banks. You know, Houston Business Journal even say 'Bellaire and the Corporate are the Asian Wall St. of Houston'. The highest concentration of the bank in the area. And then they all have a very high, uh... uh, I can say deposit— people like to save. And, uh, so, safety is one the major management district's task. So, we work with police department very closely. You can check our reference. Uh, we are probably the best and the busiest district to work with the Houston police. We translate a safety brochure in about ten languages, all in Asian— mostly in Asian languages. And just want to let people be aware that you should be aware— this is America, but you have to be aware. A lot of safety brochures, a lot of things that we promote, lot of thing we work with the police department, and, uh, that help to, of course, uh, I think, safety. When people come to the United States, safety is the number one rea— you know, uh, reason. And then, um, an— and that's why, uh, I spent a lot of time on— on this. It's not by myself. A lot of people work with me, you know. So, uh, I just been part of that. And, I just feel so fortunate to have, you know, a lot of people to help me to do— to make this happen. Uh, the other Chinatown is about a hundred, two hundred years old. And we are starting from the '80s— it's only forty years old. We are the youngest one, but I think we are the cleanest and the best one [KL laughs].

**TS:** And so, could you kind of talk about some of the areas or aspects of the Chinese community, or even Chinatown, that you wish that the city of Houston would support more?

**KL:** Yes, I— I want, uh— yeah, uh, you know, I went to a lot of international trip, uh, with the mayor, with the congressman. Uh, the only reason I— I went is to promote Houston. And, uh, city of Houston, we always say we are the, uh... the most diversified city. And then, every time when city have a, uh, international advisory board, I was always on the board and then try to, uh, sp— you know, but we always spend our own money and our own budget. City never have a budget to promote Houston as international. Of course, they have a budget to do a lot of other things. So I think the city should really, uh— you know, if we are a international city, we really should have, uh, a lot of, uh, you know, uh... doesn't have to be an office overseas, but at least, you need some kind of a promotion to promote Houston as a international city, you know. And, uh, that's one of the things that we should see they can help. The second thing is, Southwest Houston is it's the most diversified district. And then, the city should allocate some budget, you know— if the city can do an excellent job, we don't have to create a, uh, tourist or TIRZ district. Because we'll take care of it ourselves. But, uh, Houston is become so huge, and that's why this TIRZ and management district can— in fact, it will help, uh, you know, maintain the city, uh, but I would still like to see— uh, for instance, in Alief, the community center— we passed a budget of maybe over twenty million dollars. Budget was approved, but we don't have the money. Right? So, how could I get the money for, uh... it's a lot of priorities, but, uh, we have to put Southwest Houston on the priority, you know. Uh, I think— I shouldn't say it's the most neglected, but with the tax dollars we contribute, and then with the, uh— with the things that we have, you know, we need to have a voice, you know. So that's why, uh, I— I always encourage, uh, Asian-American to come out to— to, uh, you know, to run or— or to vote, you know. I think, uh, that there's something that— that I want to— I think, especially for the younger generation, uh, we need to give them, you know, uh, uh, more voice and more representation. And then, uh, that's h— how we need to work on, yeah.

**TS:** And so, you started numerous organizations to support the Chinese community and other Asian-American populations as well in Houston. [**KL:** Yes.] Could you talk about the development of these groups and their functions?

**KL:** Yeah, uh, you know, uh, there's a several organization, I— I always work because, uh, uh— I— the reason, I— I— I— when I— when I took the lead of a organization, uh, uh, there's a purpose I'm thinking. I want to— for instance, when I served as the, uh, the Chinese Merchant Association, uh, [indistinguishable], which is— they formed in the... I mean, the, uh, headquarter is in— in New York. They formed a hundred years ago, you know. And, uh, in Houston, about sixty years. And this all led by, uh, uh, older generations. So, when I took a lead, I want to bring them to the, you know, bring the new people in. You know, that's why I try to involve them. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't work. Uh, I formed, uh— there's two organizations I formed— I— I just remembered very clearly is, uh— the first one is the, uh... the Asian Real Estate Association of America (AREAA). Uh, before that it is called Asian American Real Estate Association. Kind of confusing, A.R.E.A. I formed that, uh, is because— when I formed the Chinese Real Estate Association about twenty-five years ago, I found out Chinese used to be the first Asian group to immigrate to Houston. And, now, it's a later— Vietnamese, South Asian, they come. So, Chinese, I think is not inclusive, so I expanded to Asian-American. So when that was formed, uh, uh, that catch the attention of the national organizations. So... I remember H.A.R., Houston Association of Realtors— uh, we went to a convention— they said, 'why don't we host a planning commit— a meeting to invite all the Asian real estate or— organizations to Houston. Can we form a— kind of a nationwide one?' Which, uh, we did form in Houston. It's called Asian Real Estate Association of America. It's formed in Houston. Now, later on they moved to California— of course, because California— it's the most Asian lived there. So, that was formed, I think, in the uh— uh, early 2000. Now this organization has eighteen thousand members and a forty chapters in North America. It's probably is one of the largest, uh, Asian organization. You know, and that's— it's trade organization. I mean, we are not only inc— including the real estate professional, but the— the developers, a lot of the businesses. And I think that is something that I want to accomplish, because we are not only concentrated on trade organizations.

We are also, uh, go to Capitol Hill, uh— I mean, go to D.C. to promote Asian policy. This one thing that we do— that we— we did is on the census, I think, we have a kind of— the Asian was classified as 'others'. Not like Hispanic an— and African—American. We are 'others'. Others like, uh, including, uh... the Ind— uh, the Indian, or Native or Amer— [indistinguishable]. So we say Asian are not others. We should classify as, uh, you know— and the reasoning for— behind that is because whenever you have a government policy, the budget will not— will go to 'others'. But they wouldn't go to specifically to Asians. So, well— so, we changed that through the legislation. So, which means, we are not only a trade organization. We trying to cha— we're also influ— try to change the policy in favor of the Asians, you know. Of course, I know there's lot of other organizations doing the same thing. Uh, but I just feel united is power. So— so it's one thing, uh, you know, I think which is good. Yeah. And, uh— uh, I say two organ— I found very many organizations. Uh, and sometimes, just for, you know— uh, I was involved with the, uh, Taiwanese Chamber because I was from Taiwan. But I always tell, you know, we should be open—minded. It's not j— we really— we are Taiwanese chamber. It doesn't mean that we— we only work with the Taiwanese, right? Uh, so I was the president. And then, uh, at the next organization, I probably involved was the, uh, Asian Chamber right now. Because I think Asian Chamber should, like Hispanic Chamber or other chambers— it's, uh, not only a chamber but it should be the voice of Asian community. Because you carry such a good name. And one of the proud thing that I— I did is the, uh, Chinese Community Center, you know. Uh, when I was the chairman, uh, I help to— to raise the funds, uh, to build a new facility about, uh— uh— the budget's about \$7 million, and, uh— uh— and then with the first time— it's the first time that Asian organization got a funding from the federal through the City of Houston— the 1.5 million, uh, you know— uh— uh, grant, to build that senior center. And, uh— uh— so, again, I think that— hope just the beginning, and then, uh— uh, I think more Asian organization

should do with that— just not only raising fund within your community. Of course, we raised another five million through different foundations. And then, uh— and then that's something that I think will create a— uh, a lot of benefits to our communities. Yeah.

**TS:** Um, could you speak a little bit more about promoting different Asian policies in D.C.?

**KL:** The, uh— yeah, what we did is— uh, you know, I— I— And— What I did is we— uh, the national leader we always, you know, to make like a three points or a five points policy, every year. So, in every May, uh, we visit, uh, you know, the capital from all over the nation. So every region or every city, you know your own legis— uh, congressman, or senator. So, we— normally we get about, uh, three hundred, five hundred people to m— meet at the D.C., and visit their office, and tell about the policy that we want them to, uh, or support them and all these things and then probably they can help us to change. Which is, uh, that's how we do. And then what happened is, uh— uh— uh, I copied that in, uh, Texas. So, uh, our way— we call it Asian [inaudible] Association— we have four [AREAA] chapters in Texas. Uh, Houston, Dallas, uh, San Antonio, and Austin. So, uh, in every May, we also visit when— when there's a session during the, uh— during the, uh— uh, session. Uh, we have a— right now, we have a three Asian state rep in Austin— two from Houston, one from Dallas. And then they are the only Asian— and remember, there's a hundreds of state rep over there. They need the support. So we get all three hundred people to be— to be at— at the, uh— you know, at the— how do you say, at the— uh— uh— at— at the state capitol. And then to show up and show the Asian that we are supporting our state rep. And— and then also, uh, so we want to, uh, other organization to copy that, uh, in every state. So at least, you know, show that we care about politics, we care about our benefits. So I think that's the, uh— uh— that's the next movement we want to do. Yeah. Try to encourage people to vote, to influence that, you know. And then whenever there's a voter registration, whenever there's a, uh, census going, we always encourage people to participate. Because I— I think it's non—political— it doesn't matter what organization you are. Uh, it's for the benefits of us and for our future generations. Yeah.

**TS:** And so, what would you define as your, um, American Dream, and while reflecting on your achievements in Houston, do you think you've accomplished this?

**KL:** Uh, my dream never ends [KL and TS laugh]. But, yeah, I'm— I'm proud of all— what I've done. People say I'm successful. I don't feel that way because you always have to compete with yourself. You know, uh, if you are satisfied, you are done. I'm— so you always try to think 'how am I going to improve, uh, you know, uh, just not myself'. I'm thinking, if I can improve all my surroundings, all the people around me, uh, then, uh, I'm going to benefit anyway, you know. You cannot just say I have to— uh, just think of yourself only. Because, uh, it's not enough, you know. If you are surrounding by the successful people, uh, you will be success. So, uh, I think, uh, Houston is just beginning because what people say is like, uh— uh, we are— we are a young and dynamic city. Uh, it's, uh— it's good for young people because our— our population will be doubled till maybe 2025 or later. But, uh, if you go to other cities, you find out Houston is really dynamic, you know, we are moving. And— and then people are nice. People are friendly. By 25%— I was told 20% or 25% of the Houstonian were born outside the United States. So, uh, now people will recognize that, but we have to, uh, let people know that and especially as minority. Because, um, other people wouldn't help us to pro— to promote that. And we have to think of, uh, what is the advantage of that. So, I think my goal is, uh, of course I will continue to grow my business, but I also want to, uh, help our community to grow and then, uh, to b— become, uh, not— not just say 'actually we are one of the mainstream right now'. Yeah, that's my goal. Yeah.

**TS:** And so, what would you say is your cultural identity now, and how has it changed over the years?

**KL:** My cultural identity— it's good question. Uh— actually my son asked me this good question, 'Dad, are you a, uh... are you a Taiwanese?' Because I— I married to a— I, I married to a girl from China,

Hunan. So definitely she's a Chinese, right? So I said, uh, 'I'm a Taiwanese, but I'm also a Chinese because of my culture background.' Uh, and, uh— you know, all the language— my first language is Chinese. So, I'm— I'm now proud of the, uh, you know, my heritage, uh, but I only have the one passport. That's the U.S. passport. So, I'm a U.S. citizen, you know. So I, uh, really, uh— if you ask me, I say I'm American, but, uh, I'm also a Chinese-American. You know. So my son says, 'Yeah, I agree with you, but that I'm— I'm American.' And I say, 'yeah, you're right,' [KL laughs].

**TS:** Um, do you think there was a moment when you felt like a true American, and are there moments where you feel more Taiwanese or American?

**KL:** Uh, well, I feel I'm, uh— I think I'm American, but— but the— what— but the other people may not think I'm American. Because even— even my child— they are really born here, American. People will still— if they don't know him, they still say, 'oh, are you American-born or you're foreign-born,' and then they ask him, 'oh, where you from?' Right? Even my friend, [name indistinguishable], he was born here, third-generation. People still say to him, 'are you American?' Of course, you know. But— but the— if you ask me— uh, when I was raised in Taiwan, we always thinking we are Chinese, we are not Taiwanese. Because my parents are from China, from Shanghai, so they always tell me, even on ID card, which province you are from, you know. I think that the political changed. But doesn't matter. If you say, uh, Taiwanese, yes, I— I— yeah, I was born in Taiwan. But are you Taiwanese or Chinese? I would say I'm— I'm Taiwanese and Chinese, but, I mean, they all the same to me. Uh, that's my origin. But I'm from America, you know. Uh, so, uh, that's their business. I mean, they want to be independent, whatever. I think you have to think about the people who live in Taiwan. Are they really to be— want to be independent or they been educated as they are Taiwanese only. But the book they read is Chinese, it's not Taiwanese. They— only in the language, the dialect, they say is Taiwanese. You know, just change by the Taiwanese. And then the, uh— uh, maybe just identity, but culture—wise, uh, I think it's a Chinese heritage. Uh, so to answer your question is— uh, of course, I mean— when— when I'm in the business, I try to stay neutral, you know. I work with the people from Taiwan, I work with people with, uh— uh, with China. But, uh, on the political side, I try to stay neutral, you know, and say I'm a American anyway.

**TS:** Uh, if your great-great-grandchildren were to come back and watch this record years from now [KL: Yes.], is there anything you would like them to know?

**KL:** Well, I— I would tell them, you know, I— I— I am proud to be American. And, uh, I think the reason I— I— I can achieve something is because the heritage that I was brought up to give me the motivation and the incen— incentive, you know. It's our family tradition, uh, always to help people, be generous, and then you'll get the award any— anyway. I wish that my children, all the grand-grandchildren, America can be a really— a country that, you know, no discrimination. Because, uh, you know, we— we came here late, but I think we contribute also. Uh, and then what I— what I observe from, uh, some friends is the future generation, uh, when they grow up in America, uh, they lost the really, you know, the reason why we— why we came here, you know. I wish my— my— my, uh, my children, my grandchildren can always visit the place that where I come from, and they will appreciate what American give us. Uh, because I think there's a lot of thing that we don't know. Uh, always, you know, when people not in American they say, 'oh, America is, uh, like a heaven.' You know. Of course, heaven— you still have some rich people [KL laughs], some poor people. But you should see other things that— that— that we enjoy. And then, if you don't go to see those places then you don't feel, you know, how lucky we are. And that's why, I think, we have to remember that. You know, it's nothing for free. Yeah. And, uh— uh, and really— it goes back to the, you know, Confucius mind. I mean, we want every— the whole world is in harmony. Yeah.

**TS:** I think we're good on time.

**KL:** Good on time? Okay, good.

**TS:** Thank you so much.

**KL:** Yeah, uh—huh. I— I told, uh, A— Akhil [**AJ:** Yes, sir.]. You want a second interview, another interview, let's come to my office. Let's go to enjoy the meal [Everyone laughs]. Yeah, Yeah.

[interview ends]