Background:

Mr. Gene Lee, founder of the Lee Printing Company of Houston, was born in 1926 in Taishan, Guangdong, China. He moved to the United States in 1949 and settled in Houston, Texas. Mr. Lee did not receive any formal education during his early years beside a printing and Chinese typesetting apprenticeship in China. After immigrating to Houston, Mr. Lee first worked in a relative’s grocery business for room and board. Mr. Lee met his wife Hedy while serving in the U.S. Army in Europe from 1951-1953. After returning to Houston, Mr. and Mrs. Lee later opened their own grocery business and then a successful printing company. Mr. Lee is a member and leader of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), the Chinese Professional Club, the Lee Family Association, and the Wuyup (?) Association. He also participated in the Retail Grocers Association of Houston, the Printing Industries of the Gulf Coast, the East-End Chamber of Commerce, and the Houston Minority Business Council.

Setting:

This interview is conducted in the morning of Friday, June 4, 2010 at the home of Mr. Gene Lee and Mrs. Hedy Lee by Yuanzhuo (Yuan) Wang of Swarthmore College and Tracey Lam of Rice University on behalf of the Houston Asian American Archival Project at Rice University’s Chao Center for Asian Studies. The focus of this interview is centered on the labor and business history of Mr. Gene Lee as an Asian American living in Houston. Mrs. Hedy Lee, wife of Mr. Gene Lee participated in the interview as well to provide details that Mr. Lee did not remember. The interview lasted approximately two hours.

Below is the transcript of the interview completed by Yuanzhuo Wang and Tracey Lam. All Chinese translations are done by Yuanzhuo Wang and all Cantonese translations are done by Tracey Lam.

NOTE: Due to the low audio quality in some parts of the recorded interview, errors may have been made during the process of transcription. Minor changes were also made to correct obvious grammatical errors for clarification both during the process of transcription and also later at the request of the interviewee after reviewing the completed transcript. Both changes to the actual content of the transcript requested by the interviewee and points of clarifications inserted by the interviewee upon review of the completed transcript are noted by footnotes. Please refer to the original audio recording for original wording or content.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

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YW: Thank you for being with us today this morning.

GL: You quite welcome. I be great in my age, and it’s the…what they call…early Chinese, uh come to this town, and I can tell you whatever I know. It’s just plain simple, uh old, old fashion Chinese. And let me see, adapt to the life over here that’s all…not too much outstanding…just work hard. Uh, Chinese say [speaking in Cantonese, repeats phrase in Mandarin- 勤儉興家 - Hard work leads to a good life]. [speaking in Mandarin] I learned my Mandarin here, by reading books etc, [laughs] bit by bit.

YW: Um okay, so let’s start with your childhood experience living on Mainland China because as you said in your questionnaire that you um had an apprenticeship in China. What’s your experience when you were in China?

GL: When I’m in China? …well…I come from the village, childhood, play along with them. We don’t have toys or anything, but we made our toys. We had fun just with different toys, we didn’t have anything but we can create our own… we could catching fishes and make mud pie and all kinds of fun. We really enjoyed childhood. And then my childhood was…uh…When the Japanese invaded our area, and then we, at that time, my older sister and my mother just passed away not too long ago, I’m young and not too much to do in our community so at that time lots of people in our southerner go to uh…the north of Guangdong… Shaoguan…you know, at that place—time we had some friend over there…so they say okay…can you, you know look after me and…relatives. So I went up there, and then for—until the war was over and then I came back home and then I came to the United States. So my childhood, uh not really too much outstanding remarkable things to, to, to say just ordinary, ordinary old Chinese, you know…childhood.

TL: Can you talk about your printing apprenticeship?

GL: Okay. When I was in Shaoguan, over there, and then…you know, you cannot do nothing, so my relatives uh know some people…and let me see, in the printing community some help…at that time I might be how old…

HL: …thirteen, fourteen?

GL: … thirteen, fourteen years old, so at that time I don’t know what’s like. So okay, as long as they give me food and a place to stay, that’s all. A little spending money. So I went in to the printing company, to—it’s an apprenticeship, and over there, and I learned how to pick the Chinese character [speaking in Cantonese- 拾字粒]. Let me see, compose Chinese character, so I learned it and I never thought I would ever use it. But somehow when I get into this printing business in Houston, it came in handy, at least the knowledge, not exactly the same skill but the—in the printing community, knowledge and other thing. And besides, I always…I don’t have edu—formal education. There were actually schools in our community, but no more chance for me to go to school. So I always… I never cease to learn. Anytime, I pick the Chinese book, English book, I don’t use, I cannot master Chinese…uh… English but you, you know, you uh…you know, you study—look at it long enough you learn something little bit by little bit, so I, I learn… so I’m interested in thinking. Right now I would say, I have never been exposed to the old Chinese classics like [speaking in Cantonese - 《論語》 - ‘Analects’, 《孟子》 - ‘Mengzi’]. Those, all those…I like to read all those things, especially, I developed a hobby. I play music, I play violin, I play the guitar. And I, I—because I play with the group of young girls they sing and we play along, provide the music for them to sing along. So when I have time, I play at home, I put on the tape… I listen to the tape, and I read, even [go walking]\(^{11}\). When I retire over here, it’s really boring. [My wife continued to work in our print shop]. So far I go out for a walk, then
play the music, and my time seems pass pretty good. Then grandchildren come here, now they grown up, they have [laugh] their own friend, [laughs] they don’t come that much anymore. So my childhood really in China is not too much…uh [laughs] … don’t have any kind of … that colorful [speaking in Cantonese].

YW: Umm, we’re also interested in how you came to the United States. Did you have any money with you? Or did you go through the process of….

GL: I had some…

HL: [Mrs. Lee reminds Mr. Lee] You might want to mention your dad was in Canada?

GL: … yeah, my sister in Houston, my older sister in Houston, and then her husband been in business over here, been here long, long time. And somehow he helped me come to Houston.

TL: Did you come by yourself?

GL: By myself. That’s it. [laughs]

YW: So did your sister provide the money for you to come or did you come up with the money yourself?

GL: Umm…well about the money…my father was an oversea Chinese in Canada and you know, and you know, and so he provided all the financial things I need, but my brother in law they all take care of that; the paperwork and immigration things like that. I come over here.

YW: So what did you bring with you to the United States?

GL: I beg your pardon?

HL: [repeated the question] What did you bring with you?

GL: I bring myself; and one luggage…simple, very simple; we don’t have anything anyway. Yeah.

HL: Did you have any books? Did you bring any books along?

GL: One or two, something like that. I read, that’s about all, I don’t even know what kind of book I read… not particularly anything like that. It’s just I bring myself over here to Houston.

YW: So after you came here, you lived with your sister?

GL: Yeah, they had the grocery store out over here, in…close to Navigation and Jackson Drive. And so I… upstairs they have the living quarter, and I stayed there with it some part owner and I help wherever I can… but uh… But daytime, I go to English special school and learn English. And after that…and then uh, the—hold on, the Korean War. So the government, the United States government, drafted me into the service. So that’s how the basic training over here, after the basic training, they send me out to Europe and so happen some of my comrade they went to uh France, Korea, different direction. But anyway, I— they assign me to station in Germany, and that’s how I met my wife. That’s fifty-seven years ago.

(10:00)

We been married that long. Yeah, old [speaking in Mandarin, repeats phrase in Mandarin - 老夫老妻了- old couple]. [laughs]

YW: [laughs] So did you receive any training over there?

GL: Oh yeah, oh yeah, they give you Basic Training out in El Paso.
**HL:** What he's asking did you have training that helped you in the Army like how to use the typewriter and other things.

**GL:** Oh, you talk about that? You know in the, in the army, they uh, I utilize all kinds of opportunities to educate myself. Like, at the time, not too much activity. Really do nothing. What they call? Maintaining the equipment, every year, you do the same thing. When I find out they have the—some kind of program; if I go to school, and I can wear first class uniform instead of fatigue, and they go to war, and then I go over there to attend the school, and I say, well I don't have any education in English, so I study English, and study typing, learn all those things, whatever they have program, I try the [laughs] apply for it… and they… [laughs]… always say you want to learn. You come… very, very good. I think [laughs] the army, it’s really good for me, another thing I’m feeling. Because the Chinese over here, you only Chinese, you stay with the Chinese, more like in China, you go outside you see American people, but the living style and everything still Chinese. So at the beginning when I was in the service, it… the Americans… and you know uh talk with them, and see their customs, it opened my eyes. See the different cultures. So give me, it help me in a way…so uh [speaking in Cantonese - Their attitudes towards life were different]. You know, so I come over and I’m in business, it’s easier to adapt to.

**YW:** Did you make any connections or anything in the military that helped later on? Met somebody important?

**GL:** No, no, nothing. When I come over here, after two year, and then you were drafted, and you can … you don’t have to reenlist, but I know that, it takes so much for the American government to train a soldier, they always want you to reenlist, to utilize the money they spend on you. I said no way; I want to go back to the grocery store and work. In my mind I say I learned the, the trade, I want to be in business myself. So that’s it, step by step, fulfill my so-called dream. Well, work hard, but I always tell my grandchildren and some young people, when you are young, nothing is so hard, because you are so full of energy. You are not tired something like that. Like now I do a little bit outside and already kind of I’m tired, you know. At the time you are young, full of energy, you know…umm… over-confident on my own self [laughs]… and then I met my wife in Germany, come back, and she come along, and later on, we opened the grocery store, she helped me in the business and later on we have some more other children, but they all do good, the children, so the family grows.

**HL:** The reason we wanted to go into the grocery business was because how many percent of the Chinese at that time owned grocery stores?

**GL:** Eighty percent.

**HL:** I think in San Francisco and other cities they started off with the laundries, but here it was mostly grocery stores. And some of the people they…do it.

**GL:** You see, Chinese old time come from the west coast… from west coast, they go to the east coast, New York something like that, but mostly they come to San Francisco…and over there, the people, Chinese…what can you do when you come from China you don’t have any skill, you don’t have any money, and besides, at that time, they even prejudice against China, Chinese much more than when I come. So, what Americans don’t do, left for them, laundry and all those things like that…they do uh restaurant, they do those things. So, Chinese, what you can say that, we have our old philosophy [speaking in Cantonese, repeats phrase in Mandarin - 适应—being adaptable]. When you go to a situation, you see a thing like that, you do yourself, you fit to the situation to become comfortable, make a living, what more do you want? So that’s how they do it over there. But when they are in Houston, being away from a big city like San Francisco, and all those things like that, you have to deal with the local people, you don’t even speak the language, and then, during the war, I guess…not that many Chinese over here. Mostly they even come from San Antonio. Houston really, Houston, you can call [speaking in Cantonese - 这里是不毛之地 - It's a barren land with no good soil] it’s very few Chinese come over here. So they come mostly they come from San Antonio and later from the other parts, because they heard about the good opportunity over here, so they come over here, and more and more people. And Chinese always good at that. When you have relative in that time or friend, in that kind of business, you try to learn the trade, and you get into. So, for me to come over here, my brother in law and his partner in grocery, I stay over there, I learn it, use common sense and work hard, nothing else. And use that to open the business. And then, not only that, common sense most. I tell my children especially when I come over here…I might be don’t educated, but PhD friend, doctor friend, because they know, when they hear me talk, they right away…they—many of them, they kind of look down…at the southerner, because they say, laundryman,
restaurant-man, grocery man like that, look down. Sometimes, I couldn’t stand it. But I say, look, if you get
the…uh…you know, graduate from college, it’s not bad. We don’t have the opportunity, if we have the opportunity,
PhD, so what, you can learn, I can learn. That’s how common sense, that’s what we have in our common sense. And
I always say, don’t look down on those things. You know, they just don’t have the opportunity. They in their
business, but they are still professional. When you get the degree in the college, use that and go outside to work. Just
like that…uh like in this corner, if you believe…uh…education, the teacher, something like a teacher, go this way,
so that we go there. If I never been like that, [gesturing]…I don’t know what— if some in front, in the middle, I go
this way—for sure I go [around] this way, just take a little longer, that’s all. I say, I always tell them, I say, ‘Look, I
don’t care, if you have the college degree, PhD, if you have no common sense, you are nothing but an educated
fool.’ I say, common sense, most important. Look at in China—many people don’t even have any kind of
opportunity to go get an education. I say not so much, so proud, don’t you know, look down on the people…

(20:00)

…to bring yourself up like that, because they don’t have that kind of good job… they don’t have other way. It’s
simple just like that. Sometime they say, ‘Oh Gene, I’m not talking about you.’ And I say, ‘[laughs] Yeah, I hear
you talk about me like that, but I didn’t say much. I know what I’m doing.’ So I come over here, just do English
class, learn a little bit, and then get into business. Business needs common sense too. I tell…later on we have many,
many employ—employees…thirty something employee work for us… [in the print shop and office supplies.]

HL: …that’s much later. We’ve been in the grocery business for almost fifteen years. And then mostly the Chinese
had grocery stores in black neighborhoods. [We always had a very good relationship with our customers. It was
people from outside of our neighborhood who sometimes gave us trouble. In the late 60s there were more and more
hold- ups in small grocery stores and we decided we had to get out of those conditions]. And we sold our business
and then we tried to think, what could we do? We had five children, and Gene remembered his printing experience
and there were no Chinese printers at that time in Houston, so actually we are the very first ones to start with the
printing business.

YW: So where did you get the capital to start your own grocery store?

HL: The grocery store, I think his father helped him out, and he had to borrow money from some friends.

YW: [to Mrs. Lee] So his father… [to Mr. Lee] your father wasn’t here.

HL: No, he was in Canada.

YW: Okay.

GL: But you see China, all the parents always try the best to help their children the most. For me it is the same
thing, even my children need help, I’d be glad to, if I’m able to, I will help them…regardless….no reason, I help the
children. And they go help their children, they get great example…and so, how it is. Another thing too, talking about
common sense.

YW: Did you… when you, when you started your grocery store, did you receive any help from the Chinese
community?

GL: No, local people, local people, and another thing, I, I tell you a story about this. Over here there’s the On-
Leong Association (安良会) …and they have the big hall and big building down on Chartres Street, and one time
was a… the holdup…killed some Chinese merchant and they had a meeting how to, how to deal with it and all those
things like that. So I attended and all those things like that, I didn’t say too much, the so many smarter people were
there know more, and let them talk, and those things like that. But I… to think in my mind, I say you are over here
making a living, and the local people, you cannot be a…uh…I mean, openly, let them uh… feel you are coming just
to make your money. Don’t let that. I say, you have to be sincere. What I think Chinese call [speaking in
Cantonese - 睦邻] good to your neighbor. That’s important. When they come over here, they think, and they will
come… I remember the old lady uh come almost every day come like that. And then, one time they had some kind
of Black Muslim not too far from us. You know, at that time those people, they try make hard time for you and all
those things. And they [come here] and all those things like that…and then my customer tell them, ‘Look, if you want any trouble, go somewhere else, Mr. and Mrs. Lee they are nice people.’ When they [the customer says] one word, better than I explain in a hundred word to them. So they looked at them, and they left. You know people…you know, we didn’t mistreat them…what kind of trouble you try to make…you know lots of people like that try to, you know, I don’t know what they are up to. Anyway, so I say being in business in the neighborhood...

HL: …in a black neighborhood

GL: Whatever…they have some Chinese grocery store in white neighborhood too. Like Herbert Joe they have big supermarket, you know, I mean mostly, but regardless, when you deal directly with uh your customers...not like big Foley’s, or Macy’s, those...uh...those uh CEO they’ll never see their customers something like that, but that’s important when you have personal contact with your customers, you be nice to them, make them feel welcomed, and they keep coming back. And that’s very, very important. Common sense too, tell you. You know, so at that time I say, Chinese in no matter what it is, bad people are always everywhere, but if you, let me see, the important thing is [speaking in Cantonese - 睦邻] good to your neighborhood—neighbor. It’s very important in business. When you don’t need it, you don’t—when you are in the business, you need their trade, you have [to be good to them]…this is where my common sense come to play. You see, I said, you know, those, when you go to college you probably you go learn those things, I learn it on the trade. [laughs]

YW: So why did you…when you started your grocery store business, why did you choose…I think it’s called Leeland Street… why did you choose that particular area?

GL: [coughs] Excuse me. Because I was…my brother-in-law…and eighty percent of Chinese mostly in the grocery business, so that’s a trend.

HL: [to repeat the question] The reason why you picked the location on Leeland.

GL: Oh...

HL: The store was owned by the Italian people. We had to shop around town and for health reasons they wanted to sell. And we found out that this store was available and located in the right place and that's how we moved there.

GL: It’s not only that too… at that time, you don’t have much a choice, alright? When you want to look for a business, the sales people like that, ‘Oh I know [some store is] for sale because they want—they are old, they want to retire, or it might be they made enough money, they want to retire,’ or all those things like that. So not by choice, but look around depending on store on sale, see which one you, use your judgment…kind of examine [examine] your own ability, what can you do. Might be they, they, they don’t know how to run the business right, the business go down, if you run it right, and it might be you bring up the business. When the store for sale, not too much business, they always sell it cheaper, so you can get it at bargain price and you can use your ability to bring up the business. Our grocery store, we do lots of business. More than the previously owner because like I said, I use common sense, I treat the customers right, and get the fresh uh fruit, I go to the farmers market, work hard, no question about that, you know, and then bring in... get the meat in, get the good meat, reasonable price, what more do you want?

TL: What kind of things did you sell in your grocery store? Did you sell more ethnic foods or did you cater more towards your neighborhood?


HL: Now there were some grocery stores in Mexican neighborhoods, and then those stores would sell the items that Mexicans needed. Pure lard and different, different things that in our location, nobody asked for.

(29:59)

YW: So I think the first grocery store you worked for was in a Hispanic neighborhood, did they the kind of ethnic goods?
GL: Yeah, mostly Hispanic over there, I know they sell for—I even learned some Spanish too [laughs]. Oh yeah you better do it…uh they come in here, [I would say] ‘cómo está?’. You know, ‘how do you do’, greeting, it’s simple. Might be first I didn’t say it correctly, but I can ask how you say it. You know [speaking in Mandarin] [laughs], you learn from them too, and they like it, they don’t mind, they teach you. And then, you know, like flour they call [speaking phrases in Spanish]. You learn this too. Chinese, I tell you…yeah. And about this, today I read this book about, talk about Chinese big boat, big ship, I think that’s [speaking in Cantonese - 郑和, 郑和下西洋的大船- Zheng He, the big ships from Zheng He’s trip to the Western Oceans]. That’s only one I remember, I read a little bit something about it. So Chinese, [laughs] they use the common sense: [laughs]

TL: And you mentioned reasonable prices.

GL: Oh yeah, that’s important, reasonable, I don’t want to uh get their arms and legs, one time they never come back. No sir. I say the customers keep coming back, that’s a good sign.

TL: So what were prices like back then?

GL: I beg your pardon? The price, usually, they differ, say ten percent? Or…twenty percent…the mark up twenty percent. Sometime I can see those items more popular, people buy all the time, easy to remember the price, so I lower them, might be twelve percent or something like ten percent or something like that. Those things not too much…customers buy our impulse, they don’t mind, you know, pay a little bit more. And especially the vegetable, the meat, you know, good fresh…you know, I mean, reasonable.

HL: I think you wanted to know the price of something? Okay, the short loaf bread I remember was nineteen cents…and the long loaf twenty-four cents. I remember that, and milk half a gallon forty-nine cents.

GL: She know more detail than I do. Really!

HL: Cigarettes were twenty-five cents.

GL: Yeah, she help me every time.

YW: So those prices are still competitive with some of the larger stores?

HL: Yes.

GL: Chinese say [speaking in Cantonese and Mandarin]. I say you are good help [laughs] to your husband. [laughs] I tell you, fifty-six years we still you know [laughs] didn’t have too much squabbles. Al Gore after forty-something years still break up [laughs].

YW: Um, did you—when you were running your own store, did you employ anyone, or just you two working?

HL: We had a butcher, and he was the brother of the previous owner, and he stayed on as the butcher. And then we had one black young man.

GL: Delivery?

HL: Yes. You know at that time, we delivered to people’s houses on the bicycle. He had a bicycle with a big basket, and then he would take it to the people's houses and he would … and sweep the store and he would put up the … on the shelf. Just helped, all around. And then later we had more young people come and help us …. and after school they would come and do the deliveries for us.

YW: How much did you pay them?

HL: I don’t remember…
GL: At that time, according to the market price, we pay them.

HL: All I remember is since I was mostly in the store behind the counter and we had five children, it was a lot of work. I had a lady come in two or three times a week to help me [clean] and the going rate was five dollars a day. She would clean and iron.

YW: So did you... because I remember Mr. Lee said when he was at his uh sister’s... um...

HL: ... brother-in-law?

YW: ... brother-in-law’s grocery store, they lived upstairs from their grocery store...

HL: And we did the same thing. We had the store downstairs, and upstairs were apartments... living quarters.

GL: Let me tell you something, at that time, mostly, previously, mostly... uh Italian people in this business. Later on when they, they make enough, they retire, mostly Chinese take over. After you have the capital later on you can open the new one, supermarket something like that. But I said basic, small papa mama store mostly how it is. Italian want to sell it, Chinese buy it, operate it same thing, save some money later on you can open a bigger store, mostly like that. And so those people, Italian people, they mostly, they also live in the neighborhood, mostly upstairs in the quarter, so they can live. Let me see, one more thing... convenience, safety, save expenses, let me see, ideal, what more do you want? So, and you have the foundation set, I come over here with nothing. And because at that time, the wholesale, and they... you know... Chinese very... keep their word, how do you call it? [speaking in Cantonese 信用 - credibility, trustworthiness]. Very important. And they say okay, I will be cosigning something for you like that. Later on, the, the grocery store always say the Chinese people help me whole lot when I, you know, trying to uh...

HL: Are you talking about the groceries wholesale?

GL: Wholesale. Because the Chinese, at that time, I don’t think they ever fail... ever owe him some money and don’t pay back. Even if they have hardship, they always honor their, their debt. So he had good relationship with the Chinese. I suppose to [bring my brother-in-law] to cosign some how many thousand dollar and he said you don’t need anything. [He said you just need] the receipt. So it’s very important. Very important about the credit. And so at that time, I make sure I pay my bill on time, and I make sure I have good credit. That’s why later on I open the print shop, no problem—credit no problem.

YW: So this is more... did you— was it dealing with a bank or was it more among relatives, friends, and community?

HL: Um, what he referred to you know, was the grocers' wholesale, so like you buy by the case your groceries.

YW: Oh okay, okay.

HL: They extended trade to you without having anybody cosign for it because they trusted Chinese will pay.

YW: Okay.

GL: And the owner of the wholesale is Jewish people. I think he passed away already and the son took over. Grocery wholesale.

HL: I think it's called Grocer's Supply Co.

GL: [talking to Mrs. Lee] Grocery supply, something like that. But at that time, he started from small too. He got lots of little bit of cash and sale, the Chinese go there and pick up, and they grew bigger, and the Chinese become their uh steady customer. And they had dealt with the Chinese for maybe a decade, two decades already? They kind of know how the Chinese do things. So later on when we come in here, they extend the same uh credit to us so it helped us because we had no credit. That’s why I line up my relative as a cosigner. I don’t go to the bank because probably the bank want this... collateral and all those things, anyways, so we had other sources, we can get easy
credit with the grocery wholesaler nearby]. So seems like we didn’t have any problem after we started the business. And another thing…

(40:00)

…we worked hard in the business, and the cash come in, we pay all our debts and everything. But another thing too, about hiring people, first we always do whatever we can do, until business come and increase, and you hire people to help…but we still work hard. Like after the store close, we eat supper. Sometime I still go outside and stock it up. You know I always say when you are young like you, hundred and ten percent of confidence, there’s nothing hard, nothing I cannot do. That kind of confidence…so you, you are bound to succeed. That’s the way I feel. If you, if you not succeed [Speaking in Cantonese and Mandarin - 天不由人... 不得講的啦, 對不對啊？ – If Heaven doesn’t mean for you to succeed, then there’s nothing you can do about it. There’s no arguing it, am I right?].

YW: Did you try to expand your grocery store business?

HL: Uh no, the store, it never changed but we put air conditioning in and that was the first air-conditioned store here.

YW: [laughs] Really?

HL: Yeah.

YW: Oh, yeah, especially in Houston's weather [laughs].

HL: …And maybe some new equipment. And the hours were 7:30 [A.M.] —9 P.M. six days a week and Sundays maybe eight to one? But other than that, nothing…

GL: So she comes from Germany. The uh…philosophy is different, different from here. But anyway, you know, uh…since…uh…she’s a nice lady…uh…I never have anything uh complain from her. She works hard and all those things. Um Germans have lots of virtues like the Chinese; hard working and then use their head and all those things. So we get lots of—might be different culture, different race, but lots in common, besides…we want to work together, make the same goal. You don’t want to be, you know, fail business like that…so the grocery store is a success for us. Coming here with nothing, it was a success; saved some money, buy the house and all those things. And later on about uh…one year, at that time, I play in the stock market. I looked at the chart and all those things. That gave me tension, I didn’t realize that, then I developed an ulcer. And then, I went to the hospital to get my ulcer operated [for an operation for the ulcer], but now they say you don’t need an operation anymore. But anyway at that time, I think, ago, operate [inaudible]. But anyway after that, and I feel and I say, children started to grow up, and the hour we work at the grocery store not good for the children, you know. So okay, we have made something, we had our own house and all those things like that. And finally, I think I want the children in their childhood to know their parents a little bit more than—even the children they work in the store too. Chinese grocery store the children have to help out. Lots of our friends’ children, they help out, no complain, you know, I mean, so you know…

YW: What do they get in return?

GL: Nothing. [everybody laughs] A little spending money that’s about all. They don’t have…a salary…no such thing. Besides anyway, their uh schooling comes first. We all look out for them. We don’t enslave them, no such thing. No, not that way. No, no. People all of sudden think about that, they don’t know what’s going on. You got to be, how do you say it, the children have to be comfortable with you. You look out for them. And then when they grow older a little bit, they might be proud that they helped their parents and this and that. So they have something to be proud of, not something feeling bad about, that’s different. So all of my children now, they, they have education over here, they make good grades, our second daughter is a lawyer. You know, and they are always doing good—their lives are set. So the grandchildren are growing up too. And when they are small, I instill in them my Chinese uh virtue, philosophy in there, stay in there, they always good to the community, and they study hard, they excel in their study, and then, I mean, that’s all I ask for. I say when you grow up, know what you think about, nothing I can do too much. You know, so that’s how it is. I guess in China we do the same thing too. You know, the parents always try to encourage the best for you but sometimes the children just don’t think that way. Over here too
much independent thinking. I say when you are able to think, [when you grow up] you can go outside and do whatever you want to do but when you are small at home, [speaking in Mandarin, repeats phrase in Cantonese -家庭教育- family education], very important. Sometimes on TV I see so many people…it’s disgusting. Because they are broken family. They don’t know what to do. And they uh…you know, let me see, they don’t see the law [speaking Mandarin and Chinese ] (无法无天). Not Chinese. I say…Mainland China…everything. Might be…I always say this, Taiwan Chinese another class of people, Mainland Chinese another, oversea Chinese another class of people. If you want old, old traditional Chinese virtue, you have to come to the foreign country to get it. Not anymore in Mainland and all those places. They say, you know [laughs]…[speaking in Cantonese -给毛泽东洗脑了- brainwashed by Mao]…[laughs] completely different. But the basics still there, I think they are still in there. Right now they study about the uh…Confucian [speaking in Cantonese -论语—‘Antalects’], they go back, they miss it, all of those things…[speaking in Cantonese], all those things, they miss those things. Yeah, that’s why how I think it is…now I’m too old to do anything, I just enjoy my life, I enjoy. To me, not how much money you have, you enjoy [speaking Cantonese -心情开朗—a happy mood), that’s important.

YW: So going back to your grocery store business, um who were your main competitors, do you remember?

GL: Main competitor?

HL: Other Chinese stores. There was, every few blocks there was a Chinese store.

GL: Any kind of uh…any kind of—they have the…not too far, but you have to do better, and treat the customers better, price better to over…just like right now. The HEB, and Kroger, and all those things, they have figure out how to…if the price is right. So [speaking Cantonese - 微中取利 - make very little profit at a time]…you know, you have to sell more items…the profit is a little thin, but the volume make it up. You have to…use the best uh techniques to, to, to…[speaking Cantonese and Mandarin -商场如战场,大家都用斗技 -The market place is like a battlefield, everyone uses tactics to compete]…you, you use the best thing.

(50:57)

…You know how…the people say…think it’s the same thing, if something for nothing, they like it. If it’s cheaper, they like it, you have business; human nature. [laughs]

YW: So there wasn’t uh any large chain stores or…

GL: Oh yeah, they have a lot…

HL: Yeah, they were closed on Sundays, that's one thing…

GL: Henke & Pilot not too far, Weingarten’s not too far at that time…Sunday, cannot bill…

HL: We had something… Big stores and supermarket cannot open on Sundays. Sunday mornings we … good volume … the business.

YW: So you guys are allowed to open on Sundays?

HL: Yes, for some reason, but certain things we couldn't sell.

GL: …beer, alcohol…

HL: I think only a few. We also carried maybe frying pans or wire cable or something that we could not sell on Sundays.

GL: And another thing too, and that’s why we lay low, the big store close and we open and we get business. People have something they forgot about, oh the big stores close, they come over here. At that time, people don’t have…not too many people have a car, private car. You see, walking distance, they cannot always go to big store too far away from them, so I mean, you know, everything comes and you just have to survive under the circumstances, that’s all.
TL: Were you friends with any of those Chinese groceries?

GL: Oh yeah, we have friends…

TL: You probably went to the same farmers' market, and…

GL: That’s right…[store name —Herbert Joe?] not only that [we met] in the evening…even form Chinese Merchant Association and something like that.

HL: They went to pick up meat from them meat wholesales men. I remember when I had the pickup truck open, and they just threw the meat on there [laughs], right? …by the case. [everybody laughs]

GL: We went to the [milk company]…I remember the [milk company] …the guy who, who, who roll the cart…his name was Roy or something… he always say ‘oh the Chinese conference’ [laughs]. Before, we, we don’t have the chance see each other, so we…at that time, 90% come from our region…[speaking in Cantonese - 四邑 - four county] from Canton: Kaiping, Taishan, Enping, um…[reflecting]…Xinhui. Four counties, [speaking Cantonese, repeats phrase in Mandarin - 四邑人 - ‘Sze Yup’ people]… Right now in Mainland China they say you have to include Heshan (so it becomes five counties), [speaking in Cantonese - 五邑] [laughs]. But at that time, we all speak the same language, you know, like uh speak the home dialect uh…communicate with each other. So we are, we are fine. And some friends and relatives over here, they come over for party and relaxation. We work hard.

HL: And you mention those parties. The only time we went out to eat in a restaurant in those days, was probably a 80th birthday for somebody or a wedding, a one month baby party, but we would never go just on a Sunday evening with your friends [to a restaurant]. That was too expensive. And if his friends had a get-together, that was in the grocery store. There was a big butcher block, then we put paper on it, that was the table. And women were cooking and cleaning up, and men were talking, and that was called a party.

GL: It’s a party, they get together, you know.

HL: [laughs] Oh, it was a shock for me, when I first went to one of those gatherings.

YW: How many people were there at those parties?

HL: Oh, maybe thirty; closest relatives, closest friends.

YW: So were there any business meetings of that type?

HL: Business meetings?

GL: No, no. No business. No, grocery—you don’t need business meetings. It’s simple, no strategy, nothing, you just do your best to get business, that’s all. That’s our secret. [laughs] It’s not that bad…use common sense. That’s all I say, common sense above everything, you know.

TL: Can you talk to us about your printing business now? Just how you started.

GL: Oh, I tell you that’s another story too. Okay, [reflecting] when, when—after my stomach ulcer operations, not like before anymore, they say, ‘Gene, you better get out of business. Long hour and so much stress, if you want to live longer, you better get out.’ So I guess something in my mind, and the children are growing up. So I will be, you know—grocery store working long—too long hours, not, not a good life for them, for second generation over here; they are educated over here, and when they grow up they are different. So I say, well, before they grow up, we might need to get out early. And then, I think about it, looked through the newspaper, look for the…saw the print shop for sale, or something like that…and I know I still kept the open truck from the grocery store. And I talked to my wife. But first we were [considering] the flower business too right? But somehow, my wife says (s)he doesn’t know what… in the flower business…you know, I always assume I can learn, no matter what, I can learn, you know, simple thing. She told me [reflecting]…she doesn’t want to uh deliver flower to the funeral home. That’s it, that’s it,
no more. I don’t want to think about it. No more flower shop. [laughs] I say the Chinese think too much about death, not too good. So after that, I look for the printing, so I saw the advertisement on this printing, so we—she get in the truck and go over there look at the print shop to see how it is. We went to Pasadena, out there. We were over there, I said, did I get the wrong address? Print shop out in the middle of nowhere. You know, I couldn’t believe it my own self. And I looked at the paper I drew and everything… finally we found it. There was a lady, and she…[and she showed us the printers]. She had the really simple printing facility. In the farm house behind her own house in the garages or something like that. So we finally—she sold me the item. Compared to what I have in China, those are big machine and just…and you know, I said how could that be? And then she explained to me…you know at that time I always curious, always ask question. I remember when I went to the community college, and then the teacher told me ‘you know I’ve been teaching over here for twenty six years, I’ve never had a student asking so many questions’.[thinking about the teacher’s name] What is his name? [inaudible] or something like that. Those students, the government pay them to go to school, to learn skill, so they don’t have to be on welfare; different. For me, I really want knowledge, because I need it. I already bought the machine and everything like that, ready for me to run it. That’s a different situation.

HL: Okay, you might go back and say we checked in with what kind of businesses are for sale and mainly we’re looking for something [where we could be off on Sundays. We checked out some Kwik Kopy shops].

(1:00:00)

And we visited several, and you know, and the owner told us, it doesn't matter if you open a store on your own, or if you buy a franchise, you still have to go out and...

GL: Still have work hard [to get customers].

HL: Yes, and work hard, and a franchise is pretty expensive.

GL: Kwik Kopy. At that time he… I think the guy who owned the big print shop too. He told me, ‘Gene you go franchise…you are going to look and ask and talk to people about that [explaining how franchising for him may not be the best option].’ I said, that’s good, but I don’t listen. I take up you would. But he was explaining too. And he opened seven Kwik Copy in Houston…now in other state and everywhere. But anyway, so the lady out in Pasadena, (s)he showed me a little bit, I looked at them, even more interesting. I asked all kinds of questions. Then I can come back. I said, well, why should I buy the…then I look in Kwik Copy, and I see, okay, I know what it is. The people in downtown, they don’t have the hassle so much to get a business. The people a little further out in the uh suburban community, they have to go outside to get business too. So, it’s not that…when you open the franchise they all come to you, and all that…franchise is good when you have the money and the capital and you don’t know anything. And they help you buy the equipment and give you the support and something like that. And, well, another thing too, about the…get into business, I wrote to the Small, American, Small Business partner [Small Business Bureau]…I told them, I want to get into business in what is and how and like that; and they, they get so much research material, they sent me big bags of document. At that time, I have time to read [to read all those things]. I read, those ones not too much sense, I put aside, and all those things, and them I read something I like it, and they, they even told me to make a list: pro and con. It’s very important to me. They say, okay, pro, what you know, how much you know in the thing, and all those things you put in the pro, on a sheet of paper; and the con, you don’t know anything like that, then put it in the con; something like that. So I say, important thing, [they asked] ‘have you been in business before?’; ‘how long?’, and this and that. I checked…it’s good…they are my experience. Small business might become in the thing… So I read all those things like that, and I see my pro much more than in the con. So I say for me, get into the business should be good. So at that time, then I go more, what they call uh [reflecting]…definitely looking into the printing business. Then I go to the Kwik Copy…[I decided] I don’t want to pay the uh high overhead or anything like that. Then I talked to the printing machine company; they tell you all that. They say I can…second hand one cheaper, you know and all these like that…so you don’t know…they will volunteer the information to you. So this good for me. So I picked up something; I didn’t say anything, [laughs] I act like a dumb dumb. [everyone laughs] So, little bit and little bit from here. And then I know what kind of equipment I need to start the basic thing; to get the press, and get the print maker. And then, about the print -maker, at that time, I said I couldn’t believe what those…so simple. Then it’s new to me. And at that time I bought the machine, I don’t know what to do with the machine [laughs]. I bought all those equipment, a little bit, and rent the building, and you have to pay rent and all those things. I don’t know…then I went to the community college in [name] and register for the
like that. Even the Navy, we get some jobs from the Navy because once, you know… how it is, they, the people like we had more equipment and this and that; and the more experience, and we can [laughs] get the job for the odd thing like that. So how in the beginning we can make pretty good money on the printing…in the print shop. That's why thousand, hundred thousand come in…lots of money, and I don't have to spend a penny; they gave me everything and I think they were each $5 a thousand, the colored ink… you know my machine can turn out twelve dollars a

me the print, gave me the paper, gave me the ink, and tells me…and he told me okay, the black ink , he charge me, just suggests, he doesn't want to tell him, it's not what…you know [describing personal relationship between the

thousand an hour. Let me see, once set up, I just keep watching. And then sometimes about twenty, thirty, forty

companies, different departments…you see, sometimes, the different departments give me the order, when they come, forget it for so long… and he gives the order to those people…if they delay or something like, they never call him to let him know. [He said,] 'So I was stuck, I don't know what to do, what to tell those people'. He said 'when I go to uh Lee Printing, I don't have any kind of problem like that. They always get my orders on time. If not on time,
son say; I said I’m out [everybody laughs]. So, I’m working hard. Uh Saturday we don’t work. Saturday I go to do the layout work; I do layout work all by myself. Nobody teach me; I just look at them…[laughs] common sense, common knowledge, common sense, like this like that, you know, I didn’t go to school to learn how to [laughs] do the layout and all those things. So later on I get a computer. Oh, at that time, computers are expensive. And then, computer type-setting; they give you I think one week or two weeks or how many days, and in the computer company to teach you how to [use the computer]. So I went over there to learn. I asked so much questions just like that. And, and the instructor said, tell the salesman…because they had free uh support…if we had some questions…[I can ask them for help]. And then he told the salesperson about the machine. He said, ‘I think Mr. Lee over there asked you a whole lot of questions.’ The [salesperson] said, ‘He didn’t even know how to switch the switch on the computer on and off.’ I didn’t know… on and off the same switch, you know! Never seen a computer, never exposed to it, you know…my grandchildren know more than I do. So I, I started to learn…but I never even called them one time; they have the manual, I read over that. I taught the girl over there how to run the computer and how to uh…at that time, not like now, there’s more computer…you know, at that time we had chemicals in the computer to develop the thing just like you develop a picture, you know. So, that was something. I know at that time seventeen something thousand dollars for that one computer; but now those…cheap, cheap uh desktop two or three thousand dollars, and you can get much more function. Right now we have in our shop, you know, the laser printer, and all those things, completely different, no more. But I learned, you know. So, little bit by little bit, our business expanding and growing; hiring more people.

HL: [For] Chinese invitation we had to buy the Chinese typewriter, right?

GL: Yeah. Oh, Chinese type. I just bought the Chinese typewriter, is that from Hong Kong…or Mainland?

HL: Hong Kong. Mainland didn’t have any at that time.

GL: The Chinese typewriter, you have to look for the thing and hold the thing and, and hit it like that. You know about the newspaper, [speaking in Chinese - 西南时报 - Southwest Chinese Journal]? That at the beginning…and uh, okay another thing, how, how I get into newspaper business. That’s something. [speaking in Mandarin and Cantonese - 现在这个美南新闻呐 - the ‘Southern Chinese Daily News’ today], [speaking in Cantonese - 他姓李呀 - the owner, he’s last name is also ‘Lee’] also last name Lee. And he come over here to the college out in Beaumont to look for a job something like that…then he went to San Francisco, and I guess things didn’t go the way he wanted, then he came back over here and he come visit me in this home because we are Lee, you know, and he mentioned about that…he used to study uh journalism in Taiwan. Then he mentioned about want to make a little small newspaper and other things. I said, well, Chinese community getting bigger, and I say, [the Chinese here are] different from New York, San Francisco, congregating in one small area. They are all spread out, all over. I said yeah, you need something like that to spread the news out and all those things like that. And so…well, he’s a journalist so he knew what to do; [speaking in Chinese - 采访新闻 一—interviewing], write things, and all those things supposed to do. For me, because I know more people over here, and try to get business, the advertisement, the layout; and even the Southern Chinese Daily News’s layout, still has my, my uh my signature in there, not the signature…not a column, a little block uh…in advertisement by the, by the little block, how big how small like that, that’s how the Southwester Chinese Journal…at the time I do all of the things I know how to do. But anyway, so we start, and then, his wife [name]…

(01:20:00)

…use the typewriter to type the Southwest Chinese Journal at the beginning. Typing at that time because the type was too big, you cannot do too many because the paper is too small. So then I use my darkroom to reduce them and fit them. So you know, being in the printing business…I have the print shop, it enhanced the, the Southwest Chinese Journal. And then later on, he goes around, knows more people, see the good business, so he starts his own business; newspaper. At that time, the Southwest Chinese Journal already in the market so long, then I have to carry the full load. Then I have a student from UH and, you know, to help us part time. But when the examination coming up, they cannot come, then I have to go out and get new, come back and… I tell you, I don’t even know what I’m doing. I had to write article too! You know I never do things like that. But I use my common sense to write articles and you know [laughs]…many articles I write when they don’t have the time. When the exams are over and they come back to work part-time, then I, I take care of other things. But overall, the Southwest Chinese Journal has been already in the community for I think twelve years…
HL: I think ten. I believe it was ten.

GL: Ten? Ten or twelve years. But anyways, that’s too much for me. I have my business, a full business going on, newspaper, you know, it’s not my job. [speaking in Cantonese - 報紙非吾業啊 - The newspaper was not my job], not my job, you know. So I say, well, at that time the Vietnamese people come here…and they…and then first they have some Vietnamese and Chinese…and later they have Japanese… [laughs]

HL: After a while, it is all, all Vietnamese. And Vietnamese people wanted to be in partnership with the newspaper, and I said, we’re going to have Vietnamese companies … we train all the ...interviewing …

YW: So right now it’s a Vietnamese newspaper?

GL: No, we close the Southwest Chinese Journal many, many years already. I think I’ve been in the article over there…my friend wrote about me and my wife went to China and all those things…he writes very good…he tells the, the readers of the Southwest Chinese Journal and you know, when I come back [he] wrote a good report writing about my trip back to China, all those things like that. He...[speaking in Chinese], over-praised me. At that time I didn’t put it [in the Southwest Chinese Journal], then later on, the Southern Chinese Daily News's Vice President during some kind of occasion sat together with us at the same table. Because one singer come from Canton…[speaking in Cantonese, repeats name in Mandarin] Yip You Kei, [speaking in Chinese - 葉友期啊, 星空的全亮小明星 - the brightest little star in the sky] very, very, very…his own, own uh…how do you call…his own way of singing in Canton, Macau, Hong Kong very popular. Even now lots of people like to listen to his tape. But now he come over from the…so as he comes over here, and they, they had a party for him to sing and perform and like that…so after that we sat over there, so that uh the Southern Chinese Daily News's Vice President…he sat over there and he said, ‘Mr. Lee…I heard your name [speaking in Chinese - 久闻大名了, 还没有机会见到你呢 - your reputation precedes you but I have not have the opportunity to meet you in person]’. At that time I said, ‘I never met her before, who told you about me?’ He said, ‘my boss’. You know, Wea Lee, [speaking in Chinese - 美南新闻的大老板 - the owner of the Southern Chinese Daily News]. He said, ‘he always talked about you’. I said ‘I don’t know what he’s talking about’. So when— later on he asked me if I have any kind of thing I would want to put in the newspaper, that’s when that article my friend wrote…at that time I said…[speaking in Chinese] this is what my friend wrote when I was in charge of the Southwest Chinese Journal. At that time, I didn’t put it in the paper because I don’t want my friends say, oh yeah, he can put anything about himself [in his newspaper] and things like that [everyone laughs]. I don’t want the uh [speaking in Mandarin - 误会—misunderstanding], misunderstanding like this one. I said now my friend’s already [speaking in Chinese - 千古了, 去世了 — passed away]. He’s already dead. And then…and also I said I don’t want to [speaking in Chinese - 辜负她的美意 - let down her good intentions]. [speaking in Chinese - 过去的事情已经过去了 - What’s passed is already passed]. If my friends don’t understand and they want to say something, I...I [don’t care anymore]...in that moment, I-not that kind anymore [speaking in Chinese] … And then the Southern Chinese Daily News…put down layout very good...[I forwarded the article to them and they] printed my friend’s article. It is very good. So I put down how the Southwest Chinese Journal started and all that…how in my… I said [in Chinese - 报业我是学非所长的 - I learned about the newspaper business but it’s not what I’m good at]… [laughing] I was forced into the position. But anyway, [in Chinese - 西南时报是个好价钱 - the Southwest Chinese Journal was a good thing I did as a part of my life] [laughs] Yeah. So I miss the Southwest Chinese Journal, but now [in Chinese -这美南新闻搞得非常成功 - the Southern Chinese Daily News is a great success].

YW: So did the Southern Chinese Daily News come after the Southwest Chinese Journal?

GL: Yeah; way after.

YW: So you guys weren’t competitors at all?

GL : That’s right. And at that time, [names of newspapers] and lots of other newspapers come to the Houston market. Lots of commercial publications…that’s when un…at the end why we closed…I explain now. Our duty was already fulfilled. At that time, we wanted communication among the Chinese, but now more and more...so those papers can do all those work we intended to do like that, you know. I miss…you know…Chinese; I don’t know…I never had the Chinese formal education. I guess it’s because I read so much. If I have to, I can still write
now understandable. So the people…and that’s how the boxes and other boxes…I always like save things like that. And we still have a whole lot more in other places, but they say they don’t know what happened. The house…we rented out to somebody…I don’t know. These ones we kept in our uh attic.

(01:30:00)

My daughter…I don’t know how she…she’s lawyer…how she got hold of them.

HL: She must have met Anne Chao at some kind of function.

GL: Judy Lee; she’s…

YW: She wrote articles in um the Southwest Chinese Journal. I actually went through the boxes you donated and looked through them; she had her own column.

GL: Okay…later on I always look out for the people…the newspaper…at the very beginning, Judy, I said, Judy, I need a volunteer [laughs]…at that time she’s in college [laughs]. Free, everything free.

YW: So is it more like every community member contribute to the newspaper at the beginning?

HL and GL: Yeah, oh yeah. Whoever wanted to; whoever.

YW: So they weren’t paid, it’s just a community service?

GL: No pay, nothing. No pay. Even for me I didn't get no pay [laughs]. Even in my shop I do whole lot those kind of layout, and nothing.

HL: It was not a moneymaking thing.

GL: Even my employees have to help out too. Mr. Lim who does the layout, when the publication comes, everything in my shop was dropped. Everybody had to get the paper out…

YW: So there wasn’t any change at all. It just continued to be not for profit…

HL: Advertisements ... (covered the costs?). We didn't have...

GL: And another thing…let me tell you something, you know, commercial market is just like the battlefield. When I was in…I get lots of friend to advertise in the paper. Later on I heard somebody told me… ‘Gene, your paper is communist’. So those people who have links with Taiwan would say ‘he is communist’ and don’t put advertisement in the paper. So they…

YW: oh… so this is…

HL: In the beginning when the [Mainland (PRC)] Chinese Consulate came ... and I think this newspaper did some coverage on it. I saw many people there against Communist China and for Taiwan...

YW: Right…I noticed you put in some sort of disclaimer in the March 1980 newspaper explaining that you are politically neutral. So at that time you faced some uh pressure from the traditional community on political issues?

HL: [nods]

GL: You know another thing too. Later on when Wea Lee with the Southern Chinese Daily News…I made sure…if Taiwan government have some news, Mainland government have some news, I put them in the same place. I don’t want to say…oh he put me on number one, he put me on… you know you never can tell…

YW: …yeah… [laughs]
GL: …you have to think that way. People…even if you report it, but they even—they make up something… I say okay, I put it in there; I don't care, because I’m neutral. I’m Chinese American. You know I’ve been here for so long, I was exposed to the democratic way and all those things like that. I say another thing about China, I say Taiwan, Chinese Mainland Chinese, right now you squabble [speaking Chinese], sooner or later once you get together, what am I going to do? What do the overseas Chinese do? You would be—both sides hate you...[laughs]. So when I was in the newspaper like that, I made sure [speaking in Chinese -政治喊话 - no one can accuse me of speaking out politically], you know. So I think some other...make sure those are the same ones...when the student asked me ‘Mr. Lee what do you want to do?’ …I say put it right here in the front. If they, they still find something to say, there’s nothing I can do.

YW: So did it impact your business when this thing happened? You said some, some of the advertisers withdrew.

GL: Yeah, they...

HL: Just the newspaper, but our rest of the business had nothing to do with it.

YW: oh okay…

GL: Only newspaper. Our business 90% local; American people, so it doesn’t affect us at all. But you see, it makes me feel bad because in my thinking, in my mind, I’m not that kind of person. But, you know...so they make up the story [speaking in Cantonese -做佬仲傷 - get injured at work]. I said okay...that’s why I say I’m glad to let the business close up and let somebody else...[speaking in Chinese - 费力不讨好 - work hard but don’t gain any gratitude] [laughs].

YW: So advertisement; um did you notice a trend...did the advertisements change? Did the advertisement in the newspaper start out with mainly Chinese business and more and more other businesses came in?

GL: Advertisement, to me it’s all the same thing. People want to do some Chinese business. They will look for the advertisement. Like one of the, the...how you call it...the school, American school want to teach the people how to uh...[reflecting]

HL: …read Chinese?

GL: …English. How to get into high school, passing some kind of...like TOEFL something like that. I see this sort of advertising over there. You know they have the need for somebody need that kind of service so they advertise it.

YW: Were any...uh...American business doing ads in your newspaper?

GL: Sometimes; sometimes American people...but they are short one...because at that time I say ‘one month how much’, ‘three month how much’, ‘six month how much’, ‘one year how much’; many, many of them for six month, one year. At that time...[store name — Chung Hing?] grocery store, all those [laughs]...oh yeah.

HL: Situation completely changed because when we started with the newspaper there were no other newspapers in the whole Southwest. And then more people came from Mainland China, more people came from Taiwan, and most of the people [had] money and also the knowledge of the printing business. So this paper was just, you know, how do you call it [laughs], not too professional, let's put it that way.

GL: …everything amateur…you know about Judy, she volunteered for the English section. And another things, the first issue came out all in Chinese...all our friends they say, ‘Gene, you know we cannot read Chinese’ [everyone laughs] ‘and now you...you put those all in Chinese, we want to know what’s going on too!’ . That’s why I asked Judy ‘I need a volunteer’; so from second issue she started writing... [laughs]

HL: You know a lot of Chinese that were from here can still speak the Chinese but they don't know how to read and write.
GL: …they were born here, you know…

YW: so this is why you started…I know there was a change in the setting because you started English edition in November of 1977; so one cover you start from this side it’s all Chinese, and then the other half it’s all in English; so that’s why you did this, because the Chinese community, some of them who can’t read Chinese asked that you do it?

GL and HL: yeah…

YW: …alright.

TL: So when did you stop printing the newspaper?

GL: Because…

HL: …why or when?

TL: Both…

YW: I think he already told us why—it’s because of the business…

GL: Why? Because I get the feeling nobody helped me with my business…my business growing, and my business keeps me very busy. And the student when they have the exam, they are not dependable, then what am I going to do? And another thing, the local…lots of commercial publications…

(01:40:02)

so I say why should you compete? Let them do the job. They do better because they already have it in Taiwan…they are professional. And so get out of the way and let them have the free field. Besides, newspaper is not, you know [speaking Cantonese - 報紙非吾業，不需要我有自己的生意做 - The newspaper is not profitable. We don't need it. I have my own business to run]… I use my concentration on my own business. So that’s how the main thing… more other publications in, in, in the Chinese community…so you don’t need it anymore.

YW: Okay. So kind of going back…how was the paper distributed? You said the Chinese community was all over the place…

GL: Okay, alright…those people like restaurant, Chinese grocery store, we, we just like…like the Southern Chinese Daily News now, take it over there, a bunch over here, a bunch over there…and distribute like that, no subscription. Might be out of town, a few of them, like San Antonio if they want it send, you know, we get the postage coverage 70%, but not too many.

YW: So there weren’t many subscriptions?

GL: No, no…mostly…

HL: …

YW: Because I noticed in the newspaper it says at the beginning it…I think it’s $3.50 a year, then it increased to $5.00 a year…so you guys didn’t receive any subscriptions?

HL: [laughing] I don’t think so…

GL: Just in there…we didn’t receive any…mostly the advertising comes in, that’s all. And besides, uh you know, my, my Lee Printing fully operational…cover lots of expenses mostly anyway…and pay those students [laughs]…you know college students come and help me…all the other ones are free, all those other things…my labor’s free…but no such sale…not like, not the commercial ones.
YW: So your main revenue came from what you did with your printing business…so I think at first you said you and Mrs. Lee worked twelve, fourteen hours a day and later on you employed more people?

HL: Yes, actually we paid the maintenance when Gene started the printing we also started in office supplies. Because we knew that a lot of printers, they're also in the office supplies, and we said, well we have the experience in selling from the grocery store, why don't we try to do also the office supplies, so we did this very soon after we opened the printing, right? And then gradually, office supplies became maybe ten times more business than the printing. You know, really, really doing good.

GL: You see, the office supply, our daughter, she’s a lawyer now—she helped her over there. And so, at that time, just like…because I went to the minority meeting, get lots of contact from those big companies, and then by that time they are already our customers, and they…I think they called them up and they get them good service and right price, and so those people buy from us.

HL: Yeah, we were doing very well with the office supplies. And when Judy went to college she helped part time [or did all the other children], and then we would hire some people. And I think it was maybe two years after Judy graduated, she said, ‘I didn't go to school to work here, I want to do something that has to do with my education.’ And then she left and by that time I was too maybe worn out by that time and we sold the office supplies and continued with the printing.

YW: So how would you say the printing business expanded?

HL: It really didn't expand—t's just still the same thing. Maybe a little more revenue, but you know, you don't have the energy to expand [buying new] equipment. What did we do, we farm out anything we couldn't do ourselves. We took them to the big print shops. There are some [and American] Chinese printers that have more equipment and they need [extra] business, Sam our son, he has to do a certain part of the job [in our shop], then he tells them [lets the larger shops complete the work] what to do.

YW: Is there any major competitors in Chinese? Because I think you said that at first the Chinese printing part, only you had it.

HL: That's correct.

YW: Did that change over time?

HL: Oh, yes, in no time at all.

GL: Even now the Chinatown Printing Company, they do the invitations too. [coughs] If I'm not there, nobody can do anything, so sooner or later...

HL: We do have help you know. We actually have three Chinese employees.

YW: Okay, so the majority of the business, did it come from…

HL: Not from the Chinese; more American companies.

GL: Well, at that time when I started the business, I already figured out that there is not that many Chinese; I’m aiming for 70% American business [coughs], 30% Chinese business, I’m already very happy, very satisfied. But later on—in the beginning, the invitations, at that time, nobody do it… and then we made it pretty good. So my, my common sense tell me what I’m thinking is correct. Later on, we cultivated local business more because you know…simple thing…uh Chinese uh…I don’t know…if I’m not there, last thing…it’s not that right because you proofread and the layout and all that, use your common sense…you know. Some people…not, not, not worth the hassle. [laughs]
TL: Can you tell us a little bit about your community associations? Because I know you're a member of the Chinese American Citizens' Alliance…

GL: A member of that, a member of the, what's the…

HL: Chinese Professional Club.

GL: Chinese Professional Club, I was a member of the American Legion, right? And I was the President of the [speaking in Cantonese - 中华公所 - Association of Chinese Organizations of Houston], and I miss all of those.

YW: Did those help your business?

GL: No. Not really.

YW: More of a pastime thing?

GL: Yeah, because you know, I’ve been the president of the Lee Association and all those things like that. When you are in a community so small, you know, everybody knows each other. But not now, now the Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Mainland, you know, all those things…that’s why, how the Chinese Consulate…they still pretty much you know uh…support me and all those things like that. At the beginning, the Taiwan government too; [speaking in Mandarin and Cantonese - 协调 - work together/coordinate to do something] every time they come and the director invite us to go to the restaurant. So, I say…at that time, not anymore now, now the community is too big; [speaking in Chinese - 你可以说是我在求学了，可以说徒附虚名 - you can say I was trying to learn, have nothing but the name (in those organizations)]. [speaking in Chinese - 面子是人家给我的 - my [positions and] reputation was given by others] I try, but I still want to be…do anything I can do. [coughs] [speaking in Chinese] Anything kind of volunteer thing I can do, I will do it…

(01:50:02)

[speaking Chinese - 中国人…我们老一代的华侨了…爱家庭，爱国家，爱社会 - Chinese…us older generation overseas Chinese…love the family, love the country, love society]…right now even…like last time when we went to China, how many people went with us? Twenty one… [speaking in Chinese] - 我的全家21个人 - all 21 members of my family]…

HL: Just our family, but Gene was also very active on the, was it the CACA bowling league? …

GL: Oh, that’s right… [speaking Chinese - 保龄球—bowling]…Chinese say, you get life all over yourself…it’s enough to do any good thing…[speaking Cantonese - 百张刀无一张利 - one hundred swords that cannot cut anything]. But anyway, I enjoyed it; and I get good game too.

TL: And a trophy.

GL: [laughing] oh yeah, the big tall trophy; the children…the grandchildren want the big one; I said the big one stays here…that’s my highest score…the CACA we had about uh fifty, sixty people, mostly Chinese, bowling, and then I bowled the highest game. It’s not easy [speaking in Mandarin - 不容易—not easy] [laughs] but uh…[speaking in Mandarin - 幸运啊—I was lucky] [laughs].

YW: [laughs] Did you also learn that on your own?

GL: That’s right, yeah [laughs]…at the very beginning I looked at it…it’s so simple, you just throw it in the middle. [everyone laugh] Nothing…but later on, the more you know, the more uh techniques…they say if you can follow through you get strike, if you just little bit you don’t follow through, you get split. [laughs] Well you know, when you have good people like that; once a week you get together, you have companionship too. I miss it…it’s been many years…and the children, the joy, and all those things like that.
YW: So, you were also the president of the Lee Family Association, and I think you were on the board of the Lee Family Credit Union…did that help you in anyway in your business, or professional life?

HL: No; none of the Chinese associations or individual things, there was not any money in it for our business.

GL: Mr. Wong, another thing too…I don’t [get as much as I give to them]. [YW laughs] If they need some printing, okay, I’ll take care of it… [laughs].

YW: So you were more of an asset to them than they were to you?

HL: Ninety-eight percent was commercial printing with an American company. You see, we were on the east side of downtown, and in the Bellaire Chinatown are several Chinese printers, so for those businesses, company, offices … more convenient for them to go to those shops over there.

YW: So did…um…for your printing company, to the American company, did the composition of the business change? Because I think you said at first, there were some of the big companies and some of the government jobs. Did that change over time?

HL: No, it didn't, it stayed the same.

GL: You see about business…especially government…big companies, once the purchasing agent change, then you have to…depend on how lucky you are…sometimes they have some connection…the, the Chinese, same thing uh…like before I do lots of menus, guest list like that…Vietnamese printing come, and they might be part of some…they speak Vietnamese, might be giving a little bit cheaper price. At the beginning…I would ask myself how do I meet the competition. I said okay, let them go…able to meet our obligation. Pay the bill, light bill, rent…it’s okay. In the beginning…you are more harsh, you are more gung-ho about that…if you want that much I can meet the price, but because I have expenses, I have to pay for my employee; at the beginning, you know, I just make a little less…I just get the business even. It’s different…in uh in business…I always say common sense. That’s it.

TL: That's all the questions we have. I have a couple more, I guess spelling corrections. You said there was a Mr. Lustgarten, who helped with your printing ads?

HL: Lustgarten. That was a buyer from Fingers Furniture … many, many years ago. L-U-S-T-G-A-R-T-E-N. Lustgarten.

GL: You know, we are…we are customer relationship, but became good friends.

TL: There was also a Dr. Watanova?

HL: Watanabe? When Gene was ready to pull back from the newspaper, Dr. Watanabe, he's the Japanese man, and he thought he could continue it, working together with the Vietnamese, who wanted to…

GL: Not Vietnamese, Japanese, eh?

HL: No, no, Watanabe's Japanese, but at that time, the Vietnamese wanted to be part of the newspaper, but Dr. Watanabe couldn't handle it.

TL: How do you spell it again?


YW: This is all the question we have, thank you very much for your time.

(01:57:30)
[Interview ends.]