

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

---

Interviewee: Lewis Yee

Interviewer: Yuanzhuo Wang, Juean Chen

Date/Time of Interview: June 15, 2010

Transcribed by: Yuanzhuo Wang, Juean Chen

Audio Track Time: 01:33:26

Edited by: Chris Johnson, Sara Davis (11/29/16)

Background:

Mr. Lewis Woo Yee was born in Taishan, Guangdong, China in 1922 and immigrated to the United States in 1938. Mr. Yee attended middle school in China and received training for one year at the Air Force Training School learning technical skills in anticipation of the draft. During World War II, Mr. Yee served as a mechanic and co-pilot in the 14th Air Service Group at first in India, and then in various locations in western and southwestern China alongside the group popularly known as the ‘Flying Tigers,’ while holding the rank of staff sergeant. After the war, Mr. Yee owned or co-owned several restaurants and cafés including the China Star Restaurant, the North Star Restaurant, and Lewis’s Branding Iron. In 1983, Mr. Yee became a founding board member of the Asian American National Bank of Houston. He became Chairman of the bank in 1992 and retired in 1997. Mr. Yee is a respected community leader and volunteer, having served as the President of the Chinese American Citizen Alliance and the Houston Yee Family Association, while participating extensively in the Organization of Chinese Americans, and the American Legion Post #596 in Houston.

Setting:

This interview of Mr. Lewis Yee is conducted in the morning of Tuesday, June 15, 2010 inside a study room on the fourth floor of Rice University’s Fondren Library by Yuanzhuo (Yuan) Wang of Swarthmore College and Juean Chen 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 on the labor and business history of Mr. Lewis Yee as an Asian American living in Houston but ventured into Mr. Yee’s World War II experiences. The interview lasted approximately one and one half hours before coming to a premature conclusion when Mr. Yee’s daughter Mamie Yee Cheng telephoned to inform the interviewers that she has arrived on Rice University campus to pick Mr. Yee up.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

LY	Lewis Yee
JC	Juean Chen
YW	Yuanzhuo Wang
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

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

---

**YW:** Good morning Mr. Yee. Thank you for coming all the way here to Rice University to be interviewed by the Houston Asian American Archival Project. We are very honored and privileged to interview today. My name is Yuan. I go to Swarthmore College near Philadelphia.

**JC:** I'm Juean, I'm a Rice student.

**LY:** I'm really honored to be here today, in uh...special Chinese American we serve United States in China during the World War II, I feel very honored to be here today.

**YW:** Okay. Umm...the focus of our interview is on labor and capital. We are all very excited to um...we want to hear all about your war stories but we need to...get a little bit of your work history down on the record before we can do that so... Um, why don't we start with your educational background? Do you want to tell us a little bit more about where you went to school and things like that?

**LY:** [laughs] I, well...with school, I was finished with junior high school in China when I was fifteen years old, I come to America. And I went to junior high school up to ninth grade. From there on, I was eighteen years old, Uncle Sam called me on duty. So I quit the school and I went to um Air Force Training School uh in Houston. I know some day they are going to draft me to the service, so I might as well learn some technical training when I go back to serve the country in United States. So anyway, I didn't finish high school at all. I uh quit; I was about ninth grade when I went to the school...the training school. After that Uncle Sam drafted me, I was eighteen, I was ready to serve. So then...from then, I was oversea.

**JC:** So where were you born?

**LY:** I was born in Canton, China; Taishan, Canton, China.

**YW:** So when you came to the United States, did you speak any English? Or did you have to learn here?

**LY:** You had to learn here. Because back in those days, they don't teach English in Chinese schools [laughs]. So I come here, I got to learn all over you know. I was here 1937, in Houston.

**YW:** So you learned that in the middle school when you were here?

**LY:** Yeah, I went to the middle school over here. Then the Army called me; I was eighteen then.

**YW:** Do you remember maybe the ethnic make-up of the classes? Were you the only Chinese American in the class?

**LY:** Not many Chinese Americans in those days. I think we got one or two in the whole school? They come to Houston...back in 1937, '38, '39, not many; we only got about 215 Chinese in Houston at that time.

**JC:** So what's the reason that your family moved here?

**LY:** My father was here. My father was...opened restaurant in Houston. That's the reason I come to Houston.

**JC:** So he came here first, and then they—he let you and your mother come here?

**LY:** Yeah, that's right. I uh come here first when after the war, I send my brother and my mom to come to the United States in the '50s. You know, come to the United States. During that time...my mom...during the time of the war, my brother and my mom was stationed in Canton, China. After the war, then I bring them over to the United States.

**YW:** So, when did your father came to the United States?

**LY:** I think he came early in the '20s, real early. I don't know what year but he came to the United States real early.

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

---

**YW:** So, where did he settle down at first?

**LY:** He was settled down first in Boston. And then later on he came to Houston.

**YW:** So at the time you came, you and your mother came, he's already settled in Houston?

**LY:** Uh...he settled in Houston, I come first before after the war I sent my mother over. I come here by myself first. My father sent me over because he was a citizen of the United States at that time. I come over 1937.

**YW:** So going back a little bit to your class and educational experience. Did you experience any, maybe, racism or prejudice when you were in school?

**LY:** What's that?

**YW:** Racism or prejudice?

**LY:** Oh yeah, they had racists. Yeah...

**YW:** Do you have stories you want to tell us?

**LY:** Yeah...we...come to school, lot of time, they threw the rocks at us...

**YW:** Really?

**LY:** During that time, they still discrimination. But Houston is better than any other city. You know, but Houston pretty good. It's not too bad, not too bad; yeah, at that time.

**YW:** So did all the Asian students kind of band together in solidarity?

**LY:** Yeah, that's right; we did. So anyway, we do a lot of community work in Houston. You know like the Unite Fund and any kind of function. Our Chinese community put in a lot of work effort for the City of Houston. That's the reason when you come to Houston, people recognize you more than any other city because of the foundation our group of Chinese Americans, they call Chinese American Citizens Alliance in uh...they do help the community, they raise fund in charity, we all get together to help the city. It's a two-way street. In the other way you have community also recognize you. That's why they look up to you when you come to Houston.

**YW:** Um. Alright, now we want to talk about your experiences before the war started, before you were drafted. Did have any um...jobs, or...did you have any jobs at that time before you were drafted into the army?

**LY:** What did you mean a job?

**YW:** Job like any kind of jobs, like apprenticeships...

**LY:** Yeah, I was working in the Brown Shipyard, you know building ship?

**YW:** Building ships? Really?

**LY:** Building ships...yeah...in...we have a group of Chinese Americans about fifteen or twenty. They come; we were working in the shipyard building ships, you know, during the war time. So anyway, when you become eighteen to twenty-five, they draft you into the service, regardless of what your position is. When you qualify, you are in. See, we were work...I was work...about seventeen years old...I worked about a year or some in the shipyard before they draft me.

**YW:** What kind of ships were you working on?

**LY:** Destroyer escort. You know destroyer they chase...destroyer escort, yeah. They in the Brown Shipyard...

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

---

**YW:** So they made in Houston as well?

**LY:** yeah, in Brown Shipyard. They have this big shipyard during World War II. A lot of Chinese Americans worked there before they were drafted into the service.

**YW:** So, a lot of Chinese Americans beside you worked there as well?

**LY:** Yeah, we got fifteen to twenty of them.

**YW:** Really?

**LY:** Yeah...

**YW:** What's the total work force like? How many people were working over there total?

**LY:** Oh it's quite many, many people. But only about fifteen or twenty Chinese Americans that's all; but it's a huge place, it's a shipyard, you know, it's a huge place. I don't know how many people worked there; it's quite few. Yeah, but they always recognize our Chinese Americans in Houston because we've done so much you know charity work, foundation, we are good citizens you know. They recognize you more in Houston.

**YW:** Um, how long did you work in the shipyard? How long during the day, from what time to what time?

**LY:** We usually work eight o'clock in the morning get up about five o'clock always in the morning shift you know in the shipyard.

**JC:** How did they pay you?

**LY:** They paid \$8/hr. [laughs] They compensate real good, eight dollars an hour.

**YW:** [laughing] At that time that's a real good wage?

**LY:** ...that's really, really good; \$8/hr really good.

**YW:** So did they give you any training in the beginning to...?

**LY:** Yeah they gave you training, you know, but...in after all the things you do defense work...defending America, you feel real good, you know. But regardless, Uncle Sam needed young men bad, especially when you got two wars, one in Europe and one in Asia. When you are eighteen to twenty-five, you qualify for the draft, if you are physically fit, you know, you are drafted into the service regardless.

**YW:** Where did you live at that time?

**LY:** Where I live?

**YW:** Yeah, what particular area in Houston?

**LY:** I lived in Houston at that time.

**YW:** Do you remember any particular area? What's the neighborhood like?

**LY:** I lived all over; I lived in north side, in downtown, everywhere. I lived here since 1937. I lived in downtown. After that, after the war, I bought my home on the north side, then after—after I do business in the Southwest, on Hillcroft on the east side; so my home now in Hillcroft, in area.

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

---

**JC:** So how was the living expense at the time before you being drafted? Do you remember if you owned a car or do you have fridge?

**LY:** No, you mean own a house?

**YW:** Yeah.

**LY:** No. Don't own a house. We just leased the house. Yeah, after the war I used the G.I. Bill to buy a house in north side after the war. But before the war I was living in an apartment with a whole group of Chinese at that time, when I first come over, yeah.

**YW:** So was that uh a mini-Chinatown in a sense?

**LY:** No, no Chinatown at that time. No Chinatown.

**YW:** So just a group of Chinese Americans living together?

**LY:** Just a group of Chinese, get together sometimes. At that time there is no Chinatown, [laughs] not like today.

**YW:** [laughs] So did you—did you have a car to commute to places?

**LY:** No, no car. After the war then I have a car; before when I would go to work, no car.

**YW:** So how did you go to work?

**LY:** By they pool together a group of people, carpool. They pool together then they pick you up you know. You got to pay so much a week, they picked you up. Yeah, no car. After the war, then I have a car, came back to Houston.

**YW:** So did you have any family network, etc., that helped you? You said your father was here before so did he give you any...um insights into working in Houston and etc.?

**LY:** No, he didn't. My father during that time it's hard to find a job, in 1937, it's like a Depression. You know, it's hard to find a job before, so um my father just barely making...you know...make a living to take care of me at that time; of course he has to send money back to my mom too; and my brother you know. So he had a hard time, you know, during that time.

**YW:** Was he in the grocery business? Because I heard a lot of Chinese at that time were in the grocery business.

**LY:** Grocery business? No, he was in the café business.

**YW:** Really?

**LY:** Yeah, on Main Street, have a café.

**YW:** So he owned the business?

**LY:** My father and a few partners owned the business. Four of them owned the business.

**YW:** Were they all Chinese Americans?

**LY:** All Chinese Americans; on Main Street, 1609 Main Street. Now the building not there anymore; but was there many, many years. In Houston people still look at our Chinese Americans as a very good class of good citizen you know, real good citizen.

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

---

**YW:** Hm. So, um like we said before, we want to talk about your work experience first. So um, right now we want to talk about your experiences after the war, and after that we'll talk about your exciting war-time stories. So um, after you were discharged from the army after the war...did you...how did you get a job?

**LY:** You know after the war, I tried to go back to school. Come to Rice University, you know, use the G.I. Bill right you know. So instead my father said, he said, 'Lewis, I need your help in the café. We just opened up, expanded the café, I need you to work in the café'. So I told him, I said if I go to Rice, if I like it, I will go to school and help you part time. But when I come to Rice, my mind still across the ocean. I'm not in the classroom [laughs]. So I tell my father, I said 'I don't think I will go to school. I'm going to take care of the business because I help support my mom and my brother in China,' and take care of my father's business because he's getting old you know. So instead, I operated the restaurant in Main Street, 1609 Main Street. They have four partners over there, we are open 24-hour. [laughs]

**YW & JC:** Oh, wow...

**JC:** Is that the only restaurant that opened 24-hour?

**LY:** What helped me in my war stories, in Houston Chronicle write me a big piece of write up World War II...World War II hero, you know, give me big write up. So I got a lot of business, I couldn't even take care [laughs]. So I tried to expand, you know, opened a lot of cafés, they called Blue Star, China Star, North Star, you know, opened three of them. Everything too good, but the China Star it stayed there, I made money, the other two don't have business, I don't make any money [laughs]...so you know the story.

**YW:** So—so you owned three stores?

**LY:** Owned three cafés and one Barbecue place too. Chinese...American barbecue. But one time one reporter asked me, he said, 'Mr. Yee, how you know the Barbecue business?' A Chinese opened a barbecue, you know, like he gave me a hard time. I said 'yeah, I did'. I said 'you come to the kitchen and see what we got'. I got all these Black ladies lined up [laughs]. I said these are my Barbecue ladies over here [everyone laughs]. So anyways, I got more business than I could take care because when they cook barbecue you know, the smell all over the place. So the people come all over the north side come to see me, they all can smell the barbecue you know [laughs]. So, in your lifetime, you are going to win some, you are going to loose some. It's not always success like you think. When you fail, don't give up, it'll come back. In my lifetime I failed many times, when I was 46 years old my pocket was empty. After this today...I feel good and safe today. See, because...don't ever give up when you are young because certain things you failed; because you are going to change, gonna change. Life's not that smooth. You'll always have little something in the road, but don't ever give up. You got to fight for it.

**YW:** So, how did you...where did you come up with the capital to start the cafés and the barbecue place?

**LY:** The capital...because the people trust me, you know like the equipment company, you do business for so long, they trust you. Those...you don't have to...like own a restaurant supply... if you do good...especially if you are Chinese American, you always pay your bill, you establish a good reputation, they will help you. They—they don't have a signed agreement or anything, you need it, come and get it, that's all, you call. They trust each other back in those days. By a certain time, you got to pay the note...so the Chinese American they have a good reputation in Houston; real good reputation, yeah. Sometimes during the Unite Fund all Chinese Americans who owned a restaurant, owned a business, we donate food and time to help the community. See, you probably interviewed Mr. Albert Gee; Jane Gee, his husband Albert Gee is one of the leaders in Houston today, one of the good man. But too bad he died really young...he died young. See in Houston we built up a good, good relationship with the community. We do a lot of community work. Help the city, whatever you know. When you come to Houston, people always recognize you much more than other cities, in Houston, I've been there, I tell you because we built all the good foundation, in Houston today.

**YW:** So, the money and the equipment and everything you got for the café was more of a community thing? Did you have to deal with any banks?

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

---

**LY:** No, you...direct...deal with the company ...like wholesale, grocery store, like a hotel equipment place, you deal with them people, you don't really work with a bank. One day you are going to make a payment then you pay the direct down, that's how trust they have, back in those days. In other words, your word is good, see, the Chinese Americans build up a good reputation in Houston, real good reputation.

**JC:** So when was that? Was that '60s or '70s?

**LY:** From 1937 on, even up to...up to the year 2000, they still good, yeah, even now. Of course now a lot of different immigrant come to Houston, now you know you got Vietnamese, you got Thailand, you know, all mixed now, they are not all from China you know. But most Chinese Americans, they trust us.

**YW:** So when did you—when did you start the restaurant business?

**LY:** My father started it see, in...I come back from the war, back in 19...I was working there part-time when I...1937 I come over. Part time go there and part time go to school. When Uncle Sam called me in 1942, I had to register, I was in the service from '42 -'46; been overseas four years. I come back uh...uh '46, '47, I come back to my father's business to operate it.

**YW:** And then after you...operated your father's business, you opened up your own store, I mean your own restaurant?

**LY:** Right.

**YW:** Okay...um so did you find any of your military training helped you when you are doing business?

**LY:** Oh yeah; military training help you; help you discipline, obey orders, hard work determination, fight for everything that you have. Military training is real good for me. You know when you are fifteen, sixteen, eighteen years old, you don't know too much. But discipline, you can take order, the army taught me a lot of hard work. And also, teach me how to obey order, you know. You take order you better stay. The army taught me a lot. It learn me how to drive a jeep, because I didn't know how to drive [laughs]. I don't have a car. They teach me driving, see...drive the army stuff, you know. Actually, the army helped me, it helped me a lot because I didn't get killed...it's a good thing about...a lot of boys didn't come back, a lot of them, you see. But anyway, army training is real good for me. They teach you from a—from man to a boy...uh...boy to the man. That's how tough it is.

**JC:** So were there any government policies that, after the war, that helped you to get back to the society and start work?

**LY:** Yeah, they have the G.I. Bill. You can go to school, you can open a business, you know, on government fund, it helps you a lot. But I didn't use the G.I. Bill at all hardly you know. But I did use the G.I. Bill buy my house. They give you a better loan to buy a house. You know like 4.5%, you got a G.I. loan, you got about 4%, you know at that time, they help you. But anyway um, the government, you know, also have VA hospitals; if you don't have any money, you get sick, you can go to VA hospitals. You see, they help you that much. Yeah, they do help you, help you a lot. The G.I. Bill help you a lot. A lot of people...the G.I. Bill during WWII...take advantage...a lot of those boys used the G.I. Bill to go to school, made America so great on account of the G.I. Bill [taps the table]. Today, I mean to talk about all the whole picture together in United States. It helped a lot. G.I. Bill help a lot.

**JC:** So, I kind of want to go back to the very beginning, like, how did you get the American citizenship?

**LY:** Oh, because my father is citizen.

**JC:** Oh, okay.

**LY:** My father is an American citizen. You know he applied to get the citizenship. I'm a son of a citizen so I came over as a citizen.

**YW:** So you were automatically a citizen?

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

---

**LY:** Automatically citizen...

**YW:** You didn't have to apply or anything?

**LY:** Don't need to apply...don't need to apply because my father was a citizen, see.

**YW:** Then, the same thing happened when you brought your mother over as well?

**LY:** Well when you...automatically done...um...with the armed force...when you serve the country, United States during time of war, they really recognize you. You got the G.I. Bill to go to school; you can bring your family to come and help you a lot of time. That's how I brought my mom and my brother to come to America. I didn't have to go to the immigration office, come directly...

**YW:** really?

**LY:** ...oh yeah, that's how good it is.

**YW:** So did other people you knew did this...?

**LY:** They had to go to the immigration office if they were not in the armed forces.

**YW & JC:** oh okay...

**LY:** If you are not in the armed force...that's the reason Americans, they did a lot of things for the servicemen. They do lot of things.

**YW:** So did other G.I.s that had family in China also brought their family here?

**LY:** Yeah, absolutely. You see, that time, you know during the time of the war, if you marry in China, you can bring the girlfriend, government furniture, everything; bring the wife over, expense and everything. But probably, I couldn't even get married [laughs]. Another guy in my office got married bring the wife, the colonel asked me, he said, 'Sergeant Yee, how come you didn't get married, everybody...' I said, 'Sir, I couldn't even take care of myself.' [laughs] You see, I have, I have responsibility, I have to take care of my father and my mom, and my brother; I couldn't marry at that time because I have others depending on me. By that time, Houston's economy is real bad, during that time, especially after the war. You know you waste so much money in the wartime, the economy's real bad during that time you know.

**YW:** Even after the war? The economy's bad?

**LY:** Even after the war, real bad; real real bad.

**YW:** So what was the situation then? Were a lot of people unemployed?

**LY:** Yeah, a lot of people unemployed. The government used so much money on the war time, and you know all the...it's until the '50s before it turned around. Yeah...

**JC:** How-how was the living expense at the time?

**LY:** At that time, it's not too bad, it's not like inflation like it is today. Everything's pretty cheap back then, you know. When I first came over in 1937, I remember getting a hamburger for a nickel.

**YW:** Really?

**LY:** Yeah, soda water for a nickel, hamburger for a nickel, sometimes give you free French fries [laughs]. Back in 1937 that's how bad. I think after the war you get a hamburger for about 25 cents, at that time.



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

---

**JC:** When did you marry?

**LY:** I married in 1947.

**YW:** Was that...that's right after the war right?

**LY:** After the war...

**YW:** Did you meet your wife in Houston or...?

**LY:** No, [laughing] she lived in San Antonio. A friend of mine introduced me to her. You know...one of the lady told me, she said 'Lewis...a lady came from China, you probably like her.' One of the man said 'no, he's really particular; during the time of the war, he can get all the girlfriend in China all he wanted [laughs]'. When I saw her, I said 'yeah, that's the lady for me, you know told myself. And the guy introduced, he said 'he didn't even...believe her' I was getting married... But anyway, she and I got married in '47.

**JC:** So your wife is um...she's from China?

**LY:** She's from China also.

**JC:** Oh...and...

**LY:** It happened when she came from China, she and my friend are in one boat together come to China. The friend introduced me to marry her [laughs].

**YW:** So, I guess after the war how did the quality of life change?

**LY:** After the war, it's pretty hard. You know the business is kind of slow, people out of job, you know, spent so much in the war. But it gradually slowly, slowly coming back.

**YW:** So personally, did you...I think you said...after the war you bought a car, was there any other improvements in your life after the war?

**LY:** Yeah after the war, I went to, you know, open different kinds of businesses you know, and...opened two, three restaurants, opened a bowling alley, you know bowling, and opened a barbecue place, and the bowling alley and the barbecue place made money, but others, the Chinese restaurant, the one on Main Street, when I come back, you know when you got four partners, you opened twenty-four hours, you just make the wages. The other two got pretty good business but I couldn't manage good, but kind of so-so; don't make any money, don't lose too much. But the other two, the barbecue place and the bowling alley I've done very well. Yeah, doing real well.

**YW:** So do you still own the two business or...? Do you still own the two businesses today?

**LY:** What's that?

**YW:** The barbeque—do you still own the barbecue place and the bowling alley?

**LY:** Yeah, I owned it, yeah, yeah. I didn't own the bowling alley, I owned the restaurant in the bowling alley. And the barbecue place I owned it by myself. But I hired all these black people to help me. You know, they actually do the work for me and actually doing a good job. And later on then I opened the Asian American National Bank; later on with a group of people.

**YW:** Right...was that after you—after you came out of the restaurant business or did you...?

**LY:** After the restaurant business I was 62 years old, I'm almost retired.

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

---

**YW:** Oh okay, so it's at the same time as the restaurants...okay.

**LY:** Yeah, see, I sold my business and everything then that group of people was organizing a bank, so each—each family, like the Wang family, you can join, the Yee family, the Chen family; different groups, each one they can in the community can join us banks. When we go get the charter, you know at that time it's pretty hard to get a charter because so many banks in downtown already. See, back in those days you got to see how many square foot between each bank before you can open another one, you know. But later on they do away with it. So anyway, when they interviewed me in uh to get a bank charter, he said 'why did you open a bank in here?' he asked me first thing. I said 'well', I said 'we want to assure the Asian community a better understanding, that's why we are going to open these banks'; you know, I told him. He said, 'Mr. Yee, I look at your army service record', he said, 'you 62,' the lady who interviewed me said I'm 62, she said 'my husband is 62, he also in WWII.' She said 'you hand in these applications for me, I looked at your resume, you overseas for so long and everything.' She said 'I will give you the charter.' She told me that already. She said 'Mr. Yee, I want to give you the charter because of your reputation'. I said 'good'; her name is [name—Monson?]; I said 'Good Ms. [name-Monson?]' . So those boy will help you. See, when you—we opened the Asian American National Bank, a national bank, you have to go to the state, you have to go to the federal government too before you can get a charter. So when we finished that...taxes, we got to go to federal, so...the tax that gave us good reputation. So they can get the charter. So I tell them, she said 'Mr. Yee, before I give you the charter, I want a few guidelines. You got to be honest man'. I said 'well, give it to me Ms. Monson'. She said 'when you open the bank, the first thing, don't ever get greedy; try to make money. Secondly, don't ever use the bank's business for your own personal profit. In other words don't use the bank for your own personal interest. Thirdly, give the customers good service. They got a hundred dollars, a million dollars, you give them the best service.' See, she gave me all these guidelines. I said 'Ms. Monson, this old soldier always obey order. You tell your secretary, put it down [tapping the table], I will put on my desk. I wouldn't get out of line'. She said 'Mr. Yee, I'm going to see you get that charter'. Good, good...[YW laughs]. But when we get the charter, not that happy. You know 1982, '84, '85, Houston economy go down; you remember that? How long have you been here [addressing YW]?

**YW:** I've been here since 2002 so...[laughs]

**LY:** [laughs] oh, you don't know... [addressing JC] how long have you been here? You don't know?

**JC:** No [laughs]

**LY:** But in the 80s, Houston's economy real bad. A lot banks closed.

**YW:** Was it because of the oil shock?

**LY:** Yeah, because of oil shock. We—we almost gone, we just hang in there [laughs]; we almost... We got two million dollars, four, six months later we only got 1 million; they said if you lose any more, we're going to take it over. But we turned it around, we turned it around. We sold the bank back in nineteen... ninety...'04...five times; like if you invest one hundred dollars, you got 500 dollars back [laughs]. We sold it '04, '03, now the bank going down; everything going down today...yeah. You know the...

**YW:** Huh, after the financial crisis. Okay

**LY:** But we sold just in time...

**YW:** ...just before that...

**LY:** Just before this crisis, so everybody happy; yeah, everybody happy. You see, whatever you do, the timing is most important. You know timing; sometimes you have to be good, sometimes go bad too [laughs]. But between those times you got to be really, really cautious.

**JC:** So the time when you opened the bank, how many people are there together?

**LY:** We got thirteen original people; thirteen of us.

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

---

**JC:** So thirteen...how much money originally?

**LY:** Two million dollar; owned two million dollar. At that time got two million dollar to get a charter. So we...we pooled some cash, we used the charter to borrow some money. When you got the charter you can get money. So you know each member...

**JC:** So...how did those thirteen people meet each other?

**LY:** They mostly community leaders; like the Yee family, the Wang family, the Lee family, the Chen family, each one got a representative in there. It's real neatly organized. In other words, each family association they got one can be our member. Like the Wang family, the Chen family, the Yee family, each one they have a member come to our bank. They want to...you know, it's...but we open for each organization. They want to participate with our bank, you know. But we have a good group of people. But the time is bad, sometimes you can't help it; even now today look what happens [laughs]. If you have any kind of business, you are going to have a problem, you going to have problem; you don't know when this problem is going to be solved yet, you know.

**JC:** What's the reason that you opened the bank?

**LY:** Well, when we opened the bank we were trying to help the new immigrants that come to Houston. The ones that couldn't speak English, whatever. We try to help them develop their business, you know. That's the main reason; I told the OCC1 same thing. I said we want to help the community, the Asian community, to build up its business. That's the reason we opened the business; main purpose. He said 'Mr. Yee, you are going to be honest and clean'. I said 'yeah, check my record' [laughs]. Open it up all the time... So anyway, back in nineteen uh...I was chairman of the board in the bank. So anyway, I got about fifteen directors in the bank you know; college students, PhDs, doctors, lawyers; they sent it to the OCC, they couldn't recognize...sometime...somewhere...but when they put my name in there, they accepted it. I said no, this high school dropout can't be a president [laughs]. So OCC said...I said, 'you know what, you name me chairman of the board?!' I said 'look at my resume!' He said 'we did look at your resume'. I said, you know, high school dropout, all of that. He said 'yeah, but your army record [tapping on the table]. You served your country well. We appreciate it'. He said 'anything you have problem, we're behind you'. I said 'when you said 'we're behind you', [laughing] I'm worried no more; when I open the board meeting, you guys with me, I worry no more'. He said, 'yeah, do your best, we'll help you'. When he told me that, I'm not worried, you see. You see sometimes, you own your community; you know especially you own the title whatever. You got to be clean, you got to be honest, you got to have integrity, you got to be friendly, it all has to go together, you know. Money is not everything; but your personal ability most important; your character, you know. When I was in the service, they gave me everything I want because your record most important behind you. You don't have to be rich to feel good. You know I'm 87, I'd be 88 pretty soon. You know my buddies, some all gone. One of my friends in the bank told me, he said 'Mr. Yee, you are going to live a long, long time before we all gone' [laughs].

**YW:** We hope so...

**LY:** I said I hope so; but I think...you always treat your fellow man honest; everything open; discussion, you know. Don't take your own opinion, just open up, let everybody have opinion, majority go. After that, no hard feelings, that's the way you can conduct. One of the bank directors asked me, he said 'Mr. Yee, you don't have college education, what do you know to do all these things?' I said 'you know I learn from the bottom, by experience, by things I went through'. Experience you know, business deals, all those skills I learned through experience, you know.

**YW:** So you said when you just opened the bank...the economy wasn't great at all. So how did you guys deal with the economy? Did you have any...?

**LY:** It's pretty bad. Sometimes it's hard to deal, like the people who built shopping centers. They put one third down or whatever, they want the banks loan them money. Okay, the project...it was empty. No people really rent them, so the owner lose money, so the owner lose money, give back, foreclose, give back to the bank. The bank could not sell it. Then you have piece write-off; you got two million dollars you got to write off. Every time you write off, you lose that much capital. You see, it's real hard for the bank operation if you fail a big loan. That's the reason today a

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

---

lot of banks close on account of that. See, you don't have the cash flow, you know. Yeah, the bank doing business have to be really careful these days. I mean any time, but especially now it's harder than ever. Because your business not there; the people want to pay you but he doesn't have enough business; that's a real...that's just the ways today, I don't know when they are going to be better, you know, yeah.

**YW:** So your bank in particular back then, did you any special um rules you put in place to help mitigate the situation?

**LY:** Oh yeah; we got all these regulations.

**YW:** Do you remember any of them?

**LY:** Yeah, you see when you—when you...make the loan, the loan officer the loan to you; you got a loan company to look at the loan. They investigate it, see if he owns a piece of property for collateral; you go see the real estate companies, the title companies, make sure he got this piece of realty. If he own the building, you make sure to get an inspection of the building worth the money. Sometimes they overvalue. Like four million dollar, worth about one million. So you got to get an appraiser over there to check it, see what kind of money before making a loan to him. After the committee come back with a report from the loan officer, this committee have to look at these package; see they got about four or five in a loan committee, you know to look and see that the building's good, the potential's good, economy good before he make the loan, you know. See sometime the economy drop down, change, you can't help it. But the procedure you have to follow, one by one to make it qualified.

**JC:** What were the major cli—client...in the bank?

**LY:** Major...they in the restaurant business, grocery business, in apartment business.

**YW:** Was it...uh...mostly in the Asian American community?

**LY:** Yeah, mostly Asian American. You know Asian American of course include Indians, India; a lot of Indian people come too, you know. Yeah, quite a few customers. But like I tell you, the economy bad...good, it's okay; when the economy dropping down, you got to be real, real careful, make sure they got plenty collateral before you make the loan. So we are lucky; we turned around; yeah, we almost...they got us. You know they closed about fifteen, twenty banks in Houston; [bank name], big one, all closed on account of that.

**YW:** And the bank...I think the Asian American National Bank was...it changed its name to uh the Concord Bank? And then later it merged into a larger bank right?

**LY:** Yeah; see, uh...the Concord Bank changed its name, the Concord Bank...that's when the Concord Bank...the bank in...want to buy us up, that's when we sold it. They now...the Concord Bank they sold to uh... to uh...another group...now the East West Bank owns it now; the East West Bank own it now. But we sold it in time; we all get back the money; but the economy good, I think we sold it '04 or something...

**YW:** ...so just in time before the crisis...

**LY:** ...sold it about one or two year before this happened. They closed the other bank; they didn't know, they had too you know. You know the commercial...the commercial bank of something take over, they lost a lot of money you know. You see, but the thing is, if the economy good, everybody makes money, but if the economy is bad, you got a big loan on someone, then you—you in trouble. See, we lucky sold it just in time. You know they spend one thousand dollar policy...uh...stock, we get back almost four thousand something. So those old lady owned one thousand shares stock, they saw me coming, she so happy; she said 'Mr. Yee, I thought I lose that money; now I gain more money, I'm so happy', you know. I said 'yeah, I'm so happy for you too ma'am'. You know all the old ladies, you know. They said we almost gone you know; she said 'yeah, almost gone'. You know we lose four, six months you know two million dollars, we already lost one million. They said 'if you lose half more, we'll take over'. The FDIC2 takes it over you see. But we turn around; we turn around. I don't know how we did it, but we turn around [laughs].

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

---

**YW:** [laughing] So did you—did you have experts...did you consult with the experts on how to turn it around?

**LY:** [laughing] No, no experts; it's just timing, lucky, you know. You know people sometimes...sometime no matter what you know, sometimes you are lucky, it go along, you know what I mean? If you hit it right...just like stock market; you hit it right you make money, you hit wrong, you lose. That's it; sometimes you feel that way you know. But life, everybody have to go through that age; everybody, young or old. You got up and down, up and down. As long as you go more up than down you okay [laughs]. Life... [Laughs]...yeah

**YW:** [laughs] very true. So is there any other similar community banks or...during that time? Were there any other banks that's similar to you?

**LY:** Yeah. They opened Metro Bank, you know Chinese American bank; later on they opened quite a few you know. But each one done pretty good you know, in Houston. Of course like in Houston you know people in Houston, even Anglo-American, everything, they pretty good...I mean...uh...pay off the bank and everything you know. They still have pretty good confidence you know. But sometimes it depends on the economy too, if economy bad you know...they couldn't afford to pay, that's where you have problems. But Houston consider pretty lucky compared with other cities because we have energy; oil in here helped Houston a lot.

**YW:** How did the...'cause we were talking about the economic crisis both in the '80s and other times...did that affect your other business as well? You restaurant business, for example?

**LY:** Oh yeah; it affected it too. Yeah, it affects you...you know even today, you know affect the restaurants business now even on Bellaire. A lot of change already; you know, the economy is not that good now. I don't know when it's going to turn around. Yeah, it's...just holding, that's all; it's not that good and not that bad; it just hold on now the economy. You know, I hope things get better, but eventually they do, they will. But sometimes you got to take time, you know like you opened a business for so long, if you don't have business, you cannot afford to pay the bills, that's the reason. You own too much debt. That's the reason, you are going to loose all of your business; sometimes you can't hold for too long. But I think the economy in Houston it'll come back. We still got natural resources in Houston, natural resources. So we got oil, we got gas, you know we got all kinds of material in Houston. We are going to survive.

**YW:** How umm....

**JC:** You said...when you are forty-six, you had no money in your pocket, what happened at that time? When you said...like...when you had no money in your pocket? What happened to-to your business or?

**LY:** Well, you just work harder and try to cut the corner; you know like open a business, like you got fourteen people work, you maybe cut down to ten or something; to cut down your...your wages...to cut down your expenses and keep yourself out you got to cut down the help, you know.

**YW:** Was that the restaurant business or was that because of the bank?

**LY:** No it's all business. The bank...the bank we...we had the same personnel, but the thing is we were real careful to make the loan. Make sure they had good collateral, make sure everything good before we make it—make it top...loan officer left many...you get to look at top...you know you got four, five people in the board there; you got to be real careful to make the loan. If it's good you make it, if not just deny it. See, you have to do that. Make sure your investment is good; and good collateral; main thing they got good collateral.

**YW:** So what were the wages like back then? When you are opening your um barbecue place, you said you hired a lot of African American ladies, how much did you pay them?

**LY:** At that time around \$50/65 a week, at that time; back in 1960s, 1970s.

**YW:** [thinking] so right now we want to... [addressing JC] unless you have any questions about this...we can go into finally the exciting war stories you have now. So um we found online that you jointed the army in 1943, when you are twenty-one years old. And then they sent you to Illinois for training?

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

---

**LY:** Yeah, Springfield, Illinois; that where we got the signal corps training; you know signal corps. After we finish, the headquarters in Washington D.C. tell us we are going to join with the 14th Service Group; that's the Chinese American way to go back to China, to defend China. That's the reason we from Springfield, Illinois, trained in Patterson Field, Ohio. That's to get my basic training and technical training in Patterson Field, Ohio.

**JC:** How long was that?

**LY:** It's about one year training before we were oversea.

**JC:** So you were trained as a mechanic?

**LY:** Mechanical flying engineer; you know in other words, the whole plane, the engine, they take the part and put back together...about the fuselage and everything functioning on the airplane. Even if they need you as a co-pilot, you can do it. But by yourself, you don't have enough experience. You know you training a pilot, about four, five year training before you become a pilot. See, a navigator; see, we don't have that much training; we only trained for one year before overseas; they need us.

**YW:** So the pilots were training over there too?

**LY:** Pilots training too. Patterson Field, Ohio that's the Army...Air Force headquarter! Headquarter in Patterson Field...the headquarter!

**JC:** How did they, like how did they determine where you go?

**LY:** They...they depend on training...you in mechanic, pre -flight engineer, whatever, they give you spare training; when you finished with quarter five top percent they will put you in there for, you know, for...ready for overseas. So they looked at your record your background your time your get your way, you know—we got probably about one year training altogether. That's in Dayton, Ohio... Dayton in Springfield, Ohio between...

**JC:** Is it because you are a Chinese so they sent you to China?

**LY:** Yeah, part of the thing, because we are Chinese American, during the time, General Chennault enlisted some Chinese Americans to help him on the base operation. You see, our group of Chinese American half are from China, and half are native born; we half and half. So we made this 14th Air Service Group, connect with the Fourteenth Air Force; so we tried to help each base running in China. A group of people take care of base operation—take care base operation, they have other American unit, you know—help American each unit. [YW tries to ask a question]. See when we in China, we got about two thousand in our group, fourteenth service group, but each one we divide up. As soon as we hit Kunming, we all divide up; some go to Xi'an, some go to Lohekou, some go to Qiyang, some go to Luliang, every base. They took care all the base operation.

**YW:** How many bases did your guys have?

**LY:** quite a few base in China. Some of them I didn't even know. They called secret base. Sometime they won't let you know. When I stationed they sent me from Xi'an to Lohekou—you know where Lohekou is?

**YW:** No.

**LY:** It's a small place in the north part of Hubei; it's a secret base. In other words, three sides enemy occupied, we in the middle; real dangerous place. We go there, no mess hall, no barrack, you on your own; yeah, that's how tough it is; front line.

**YW:** Did you receive any enemy fire during that time?

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

---

**LY:** Every night, bombing; every night, they shoot at us every night [laughs] ... for six months...but we got twelve of them in Lohekou, each four different houses, different barn, so he killed one, these four survived, kept it all separate, between twenty miles, each one, so we stayed separate, so they won't kill us all at one time [laughs].

**YW:** So they did that with the planes too right? Spread them out...

**LY:** Oh yeah.

**YW:** ...not only the personnel, but the equipment...

**LY:** You see the United States Air Force, Army, they got real good organized. Don't kid yourself, we got the best organize. You know they dropped out the money, every month, so we got money to spend, okay. But the clothing they only dropped out every four five months because you can wear the clothes you see [laughs]. So—so we stayed eight month, but you know, finally we lost the base. We lost the base finally—we almost got captured.

**YW:** Really?

**LY:** ...because it was raining, raining, raining...our fighters can't go out there. The Japanese kept advancing and advancing. They were only about 30 miles from us all the time you know. Anyways, so they finally come in. We kept the last plane to get out. When I get out, I was scared; I didn't see nobody in the street or anything. The C-47...the colonel used to tell me 'when you are in an emergency, give us about a half hour, we can get you out' you know. So he gave me a secret number, you know, secret code. He got it, we didn't have but an hour to put...so when we fled away the Japanese already occupied. If we were fifteen minutes late, we all got capture.

**JC:** that's happened in Lohekou? ...where did that happen?

**LY:** It's in Lohekou.

**JC:** Lohekou; so where did you fly to?

**LY:** We fly to Liangshan; Sichuan, Liangshan... [writing Liangshan in Chinese characters on a piece of paper]...

**JC:** So by the time uh you were serving in China, were you be able to speak Chinese?

**LY:** I speak Taishanese. But sometimes I couldn't make them speak Cantonese so I write down; because I come 15 year old, I know Chinese, you know; if I couldn't make them understand I write it and they understand. You see, they talked different dialect over there; you know Taishan, all different dialects. So all the time, if I couldn't make them understand, I write on a piece of paper and want him to do this and that you know...

**JC:** So did you interact with local people?

**LY:** Not too much. Like sometime, I... whenever we got something left in the mess hall, sometimes I take to the orphanage, you know, give to the children you know, that's all... Some...you see...you in the training all the time. You be alert all the time, you got to stay in the base, the only time you can go around is the weekend; sometimes you got a couple hours out that's all, otherwise you got to stay in the base you know for all the emergency and everything.

**YW:** Was there any Chinese support troops, ground troops nearby the airfield you were in?

**LY:** Yeah. [reflecting and writing thoughts on paper] ...Li Zongren...you remember Li Zongren?

**YW & JC:** Li Zongren? Yes, yes...

**LY:** Li Zongren...he and the other groups they take care of all the airfield for me...safety around us you know, they patrolled the air base; of course we got the MP [military police] too you know, both side. But when I was stationed in um India...I was about eight months in India...they call...the Calcutta Airbase...we supply the gasoline from um

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

---

India to China. You know those fifty-barrel gallon gas...put fourteen on the C-47 over from India to China. I was stationed in India about six months before coming to China.

**JC:** So...did you fly over...?

**LY:** Over the Himalayas...

**YW:** You flew over that?

**LY:** Over the Himalayas...

**JC:** That's very dangerous.

**LY:** It is. We lost many planes. You see sometimes the Indian government they have the map...sometimes not accuracy...like twelve thousand square feet they put down about ten thousand. So if you put ten thousand, the plane will hit the mountain. It's real dangerous. You got to fly higher, you know they say. We carry the gasoline from India to China for almost five months before coming to China, come to Kunming. You know those fifty-gallon barrel? Forty of those on a C-47; carried those gasoline from Lijiang valley over to Kunming.

(01:00:00)

**JC:** Lijiang, is that it?

[**LY:** yeah, Lijiang.]

**YW:** Um...So you mentioned that when they were short of people you also served as co-pilot, so did you fly any combat missions?

**LY:** I didn't fly combat missions, but I fly the cargo [tapping table] from um India to China; I fly the cargo. Sometimes these flying cargo worse than the mission, because you got a hundred octane gasoline, one bullet and it'll kill you. All the gasoline will explode; real danger. Worst thing to me... [laughs]... you got forty fifty-gallon barrels you know. Yeah, I served as a co-pilot at that time.

**YW:** So did you encounter any resistance while you were flying the cargo in the air?

**LY:** I don't have no problem.

**YW:** No?

**LY:** No problem...sometimes hit the air pocket, the airplane dropping but we get used to it. You see Mr. Wang, when you are young...you don't scare especially when you fight for United States, fight for China. You are not scared at all. For me it's a real honor to help both sides of the country. I tell the group, you know, it's a real honor, I told them. So the colonel always trust me whatever to do. He said, 'Mr. Yee you go to frontline'. I said 'Yeah, I get killed in the front too' [laughs]. He's still living, 92 years old.

**YW:** Really?

**LY:** Yeah, he's American, still living, 92 years old. He sent me Christmas cards every Christmas, I send him back. He's in a nursing home now, but he's still pretty good, 92 years old.

**YW:** So when you were flying were there any Japanese planes?

**LY:** Yeah, they got a couple that tailed us but we lucky, we got escorts that knocked them out. You see when we fly over the Himalayas, you always...they got a P-51...you know General Chennault the Flying Tigers, they always help you, escort planes, to protect you. Anybody attack you they fire at them already; they want the gasoline to go through. So we are real lucky; but they did shoot down two, three of us, in our group.



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

---

**YW:** Really?

**LY:** Oh yeah... took down three, four group

**JC:** The time you fly from India to Lijiang, and then...uh...were you in touch with local people?

**LY:** Local...yeah...when I was in Kunming, a lot of people from Canton, they escaped and went to Kunming. You see I left China when I was 15 years old; 18 I was in the service...so I remembered a lot of those people come from our family escaped to Kunming. When I went to the store, oh man, those guys saw me in an army uniform, they recognized me; oh man, they recognized me. So I said—I said, ‘you know we need this and need that escaping there’. One guy I used to go to school with he said ‘I need a watch’, you know. He said, ‘I like go to school’. They have a college in Kunming. He said ‘I need a watch bad’. I gave him a watch, he’s so happy you know; and I gave him some old shoes, old clothing, and everything, in Kunming. [showing YW and JC a picture of him in military uniform]

**YW:** So that’s you...So did you...did the Chinese people over there know what you were doing? Did the Chinese people know what you were doing...what you guys were doing?

**LY:** Sometimes; we were not supposed to let them know.

**YW:** So it’s a secret mission, the whole mission?

**LY:** It’s military secret; you can’t tell them what you do, nothing. This is army secrecy.

**JC:** So you were not able to uh get in touch with your mother and brother?

**LY:** No, no, can’t tell mom. But one guy, you know my mom and my brother still in Mainland China...one guy I used to go to school with him; he told me he said ‘Lewis, your mom, your brother are starving to death’ because all of Canton, the Japanese occupy. Our side, you can not send the money in, like American...he said ‘your mom and your brother are starving to death’, he said ‘they need money’. I said, ‘oh my’; I looked at myself, I was stationed in North Africa and then India, but I saved a little money. At that time I got six hundred American money on me, \$600. So I told him, his name was Hong, I said, ‘Hong’, I knew him real well, I said ‘these \$600, you and I go to Chinese store’; the Chinese storeowner I know her, you see in Kunming. We go to the Chinese store let the lady be a witness, ‘I got \$600 in here, okay’, I said, ‘this owner is going to keep the \$600, when you go to my village to see my brother, give them the three hundred; when you come back, show me the picture, any document that my mom and my brother received the money, you get the three hundred’. He said, ‘I can do it’. I said, ‘how long are you going to take?’ He said, ‘Maybe three weeks’. I said, ‘You got to come back in three weeks now; in four, five weeks, I will go to Xi’an!’ He said, ‘I come back’. He promised me. I said, ‘When you come back, the \$300 waiting for you’ [laughs]. So he’s real happy. Sure now, within three weeks, he came back. He got my mom’s picture, my brother’s picture, they were real happy. He said, ‘Lewis, I’m so glad that’...my brother wrote the letter... ‘you still alive with the American army’; really happy when they received the money. I said, ‘Hong, you get the three hundred from there’. So the owner, the owner of the store, he said, ‘Lewis, you give too much money, \$300, too much money; you should give him \$100!’ I said ‘No, if I give him a hundred, I lose five hundred’. You know why? During the time of war, if he not honest, he can escape with the money. How can I say?

Now, I give him half and half he feels all [speaking in Chinese] obligated (良心—conscience); the conscience of the Chinese (中国人的良心么). That guy gave you half already, what can you say? So he got to do his duty. So he said, he remind me, ‘If I give him less money, I can loose all!’ In times of war how are you going to find him? In time of war, he might get killed, I might get killed [laughs]. You see, so the lady said, ‘you made the best investment.’ I saved my mom, my brother for only \$300. Finally not too long and the war was over.

**YW:** So they were able to use U.S. Dollar?

**LY:** Yeah, they use U.S. Dollar all the time in Kunming because inflation up and down, you know. You know sometimes go change...so in America, they use American money but they have a seal and a number [(or could be

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

---

'serial number']), oversea money. How much oversea; Uncle Sam operate real, real neat. They know how much spend in China, how much spend in...they have a record.

**YW:** So U.S. currency, the U.S. dollar, basically served as a substitute for the Chinese currency, which was the inflation is making it going up and down right?

**LY:** Yeah; during that time they changed, but we still get the American currency on payday. Yeah, straight American...in—in—in North Africa now, I stationed in North Africa for four, five months, we got Rupee...I mean in India, we got Rupee. In—in North Africa we got franc; you know French franc? So in China we got United States money.

**YW:** [tried to interject a question] Okay, so you didn't use the Chinese currency at all.

**LY:** No, didn't use the Chinese currency; because fluctuate so up and down you know. You know Americans, they operate real intelligently, they know what's going on, on the Mainland; they know what's going on, you know, because of the inflation in China up and down.

**YW:** So you mentioned North Africa. Did you...were you doing the same thing in North Africa?

**LY:** No we...in North Africa we were the...waiting for convoy to cross the Mediterranean Sea and then we hit India, see we wait for the convoy. You see during that time 1943 the German submarine in the Mediterranean Sea real active, so we got a big convoy. The ship you know like a fifteen, twenty, they give us protection; air force protection and navy protection before we cross the Mediterranean Sea. That's reason why we had to wait a few days in North Africa to get a group of people before we cross the Mediterranean Sea to go to Suez Cannel, Persian Gulf, then hit Bombay, India.

**YW:** So you couldn't go through the Pacific route because the Pacific war is going on right?

**LY:** No, no; you know the army, they real intelligent; we got two thousand Chinese Americans in our group; half of them go through the Pacific, half go through India in case one got sank these group can take over! We got a group go to the Pacific, go to Australia; we got a group go to Atlantic Ocean...so in case the enemy get one down, this one survives. See, they don't put all together [laughs].

**YW:** Put your eggs in different baskets.

**LY:** Yeah [laughs], different baskets! They operate real intelligently; the Army operate real intelligent.

(01:10:00)

**YW:** So you all met up in India?

**LY:** All end up in India; from India all divide up...no, from Kunming, our headquarters is in Kunming, General Chennault...yeah in Kunming, from Kunming we all divide up.

**JC:** So when you first go to China you were first in Kunming, then where did you go?

**LY:** I go to Qiyang, Qiyang airbase, Luliang, then Xi'an, then Lohekou. That's the main one, Lohekou.

**YW:** Were you doing different jobs or mostly...?

**LY:** Pre-flight the airplane; you know check the airplane every day, running up, check the instruments, wheel qualify, landing gear, you know all that stuff you know. Of course now in... [reflecting] ...in India they were short of co-pilot, we do as co-pilot.

**YW:** Also we read online [laughs] that you once negotiated with a local peasant to deliver three hot meals a day for I think a dollar per troop for your ten men squadron for a month?

**LY:** That was in Lohekou...

**YW & JC:** Oh okay...

**LY:** In a front base you know. But you know, they didn't know how we do that, the one Chinese from Canton, they talk our language. He said, 'I saw you got people coming in here, can we do the cook for you?' I said 'Yeah, you can'. I said, 'How much it cost you?' He said 'twelve people cost one dollar a day, I give you three meals'. You know soup, lunch, and dinner, three meals for one dollar. So I tell those boys, 'before you go to work, put one dollar in my office because I'm going to pay the boy every day [laughs] ...to buy the food. If you don't put the dollar there, you won't get no food' [laughs]. All the guys drop one dollar before they go to work you know. So and another day by nine in the morning they pick it up. But those things...I don't know the Chinese...Cantonese, they know how to fix the food you know [laughs]. You got the two vegetable, one meat and rice, you know, it's pretty good.

**YW:** That's really good during war time...

**LY:** But anyway, I got to tell those boys, I said 'you know, we come to China, really lucky because we fight for our mother country and we also fight for the United States'. Whatever differences we have, we got to put all in one piece, to defend these two countries. You know, so I tell whatever we do, whatever we work, we never get tired. 'Don't ever complain', I told them. Sometimes work, sometimes sixteen, eighteen hours, never complain. You know, check those airplanes, make sure they are in good condition. But I know one gentleman, he's a...he's in uh Taiwan, his name is [saying the name in Cantonese] Wang Shuming, he probably...he was with us in Lohekou, but he was with the Chinese Air Force; the (compressed?) Wing; they got P-40, we got the P-51 you know. So anyways, they get along fine you know, so I told him, he asked me he said, my colonel asked me, he said, 'Sergeant Yee, why you got so much guts, so much ambition? You are not scared of nothing'. He told me. I said, 'Sir, you know what, I just got two arms, one for China, and one for United States. I never get tired; never get tired. And I always love this country, no matter what happens because we are fighting a good cause—democracy. And the whole world some day going to be peaceful, you know, some day, that's where we are aiming the goal'. Whatever the difference, people always come first, you know. He said, 'When we come back, United States, I send you to Air Force school make you an officer, make you a general!' I said, 'No, no sir, I'm going to be a private citizen. That's the best title'. I said, 'Don't want no more war'. I said 'war is too costly, no more. I'd rather peaceful living my life, raise my family'. I told him that you know. So anyway, the luck was good to me when I opened the business, go down, but I make money later on. I sold the bank, every hundred dollar, I make five hundred dollar.

**YW:** This was in 2004 when the bank was merged into the East West Bank?

**LY:** No we sold it.

**YW:** Wow, that's a pretty good deal.

**LY:** We sold it and it go down [everyone laughs]. You see, whatever you do, everything, the Chinese [speaking in Cantonese]...planning by the people; when you success, sometimes the 'up there' help you [finger pointing towards the ceiling]. Provide that you did good deeds for the community; whatever you do, honorability; treat...just like I tell my son, he's MD over West...Hospital. When he graduated in his class, they got four or five Chinese Americans in medical school. They invited me. They said, 'Mr. Yee, give the people, the interns...' I told him, I said...got four, five Chinese American including my son, University of Texas... I said, 'When you become a doctor, you are cream of the crop, the best. But when you become a doctor, you use your best ability to treat the patients, regardless rich or poor, young or old. Money is not everything. God gave you talent to become a doctor, you use the talent to treat the patients, rich or poor. If they don't have no money, let them go, somewhere you are going to get (pressed?),' I told him. 'Second, don't ever violate the law, when you are a doctor. Unlawful prescription, don't ever do that. Third, don't ever greedy, to make money fast. They come to you. When you do good, honest ability, they come to you'. The professor of the university, he said, 'Mr. Yee, when you talk in front of these graduates, you don't know how much I appreciate it; you better than me'. He's a professor [laughs]. I said 'No, that's common sense'. So my son became a doctor, practices in Houston. He first opened an office in Alief General Hospital; not there no more; they got three doctors. Two come from Canada and one him, and another one, four doctors; a little hospital. The other

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

---

two come from Canada...Medicare, they cheat the government. They found out, kicked them out. So my son told me, he said, 'Dad, I remember what you told me—honest, good. I remembered that'. Now, he got a place in the West Medical Center...West Houston Medical Center, Dr. Yee. [reaching for his pocket to find his son's business card]...

**YW:** So that's his card?

**LY:** Yeah, keep the card. Five doctors...keep that...let me give you one, too [addressing JC].

**YW:** Thank you, thank you very much.

**JC:** Thank you.

**YW:** Very nice, thank you very much. Um okay, so going back to the...your war experience, um can you tell us more about life over there?

**LY:** In China?

**YW:** Yeah, in general...

**LY:** Oh yeah, when I was in China, I was stationed in Xi'an, in northern part of China. I used to go to work with about three miles from the airbase; we have a—have a tent up there from three miles. We got to go to Xi'an before they hit the airbase. It was cold in the day at that time. You know Xi'an is a cold place. Every morning I come by, people starvation, they are dying in the street, they froze to death. In...I saw with my own eyes, I said 'oh my goodness, this war is terrible, there's all these people, you know, starving in cold, freezing to death', I never forget it. Every morning I come to the airbase I pass Xi'an before hit the base. See now, Xi'an now became one good city now today, real progress.

(01:20:00)

But I never forgot those days, people starvation; all over, even in Chongqing, in...when we were in Chongqing, all of the people starvation too, out of food and everything. People hungry everywhere in...when I was stationed in...Kunming, even in Xi'an, I tell the mess sergeant and I tell the colonel, whatever food we got left, and whatever clothes we didn't use, we got drop in those people over there. He said, 'Yeah, we got a lot of army clothes'. You know jacket, everything. 'And I want you to take them to those people'; I said I will. But only one [problem], you know in the United States...they have the insignia...United States Army...you got to take the button off. Tell the mess sergeant to take all these buttons off. They can use their own button. Only you can't use United States insignia, you know, even the refugee. So I said okay, the shoes and everything I drop off to them every time. So one time, I went to Qiyang, from Kunming to Qiyang to pick up some ice cream...

**YW:** There were ice cream?

**LY:** ...yeah, in the headquarter! Ice cream in Kunming...the headquarter they got ice cream. So one day I go to pick up the ice cream, the mess hall sergeant told me, he said, 'Sergeant Yee, you go pick up ice cream'. The colonel gave me the permission to go, you know, and come back. So when I drove into Kunming, you know, I saw past the missionary, the Catholic missionary, they got all the sisters hitchhike to go to Kunming, to try to get a free ride. I was on a weapons carry-on, carry the weapons, it can sit eight people; it's not the truck, it's not a jeep, it's a little bigger than that. It seats eight people. So I got four people in their seats, I still got four empty, you know go to town. So those sisters hitchhike, four of them came to me; I said, 'Okay, we pick you up too'. So when we went to Kunming, I said, 'Sister, be here at four o'clock now, don't be late now, if at four o'clock you don't come, you'll miss the ride'. These boys already know four o'clock in Kunming, we go early eight o'clock and come back four o'clock. So I picked up the ice cream and everything, picked up those four people and the Sisters too...the ice cream was sitting in the middle, packed with dry ice you know. So one of the Sisters asked me, she said, 'Sergeant, I feel cool here.' [laughs] I said, 'What you got?' I said, 'Ice cream!' She said 'Ice cream?' She got two Chinese nurses and two French, come from Europe; two French ladies and two Chinese Sisters. She said 'you know we left France about eight, nine years, didn't eat ice cream, we like ice cream' you know. I tell myself, I said, 'my goodness, those

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

---

Sisters ask for my ice cream!' [laughs] I said, I told them myself, 'yeah, I got to let them have it because they didn't have it for so long, let them have it', I talked to myself. So I rejoin the car you know, when I stopped at the missionary, the Sisters, they said 'we'd like to have the ice cream sergeant?' I said, 'My ice cream?' They said 'Yeah, can we have it because we haven't had it for so long'. So I tell those four boys, you know with me, I said, 'You help to take the ice cream to the missionary, give it to them!' You know, so those guys unloaded the ice cream and gave them to the Sisters. So the Sisters were really happy. She said 'we didn't eat ice cream for so long, we appreciate you' and everything you know. So I come back to the car, I said, 'You four now be a witnesses now, I'm not black market to get the money now. First thing, I didn't do it out of my own will—I think the government doing a good thing', you know we give the... 'so I didn't receive any money now, you see now, you be a witness'. So they said, 'Yeah sergeant, we take care'. But we come back to the base, all the boys want the ice cream [laughs]. So first thing, I'm going to talk to the colonel, you know the commander always...I said, 'Colonel, you know what, I used the ice cream to give to the Sister in the missionary. These four guys were there, they are the witnesses, I didn't black market'. You know that the colonel tell me? He shook my hand, he said, 'sergeant, that's the best thing you ever done! That's the best foreign policy!' Good foreign policy [everyone laughs]...

**YW:** [laughing] Ice cream diplomacy!

**LY:** Ice cream diplomacy! That's the best relation... [quoting the colonel] 'those boys too fat anyways, they didn't need ice cream, they are going to eat Jell-O!' [everyone laughs] 'They are going to eat Jell-O! They are not going to eat ice cream!' I said, 'Thank you sir'. I got out of the hook. Those boys told me that's the best thing you ever do, help those people, you know. So I tell the mess sergeant, he patted my back, he said, 'sergeant, good, make them Jell-O' [laughs].

**JC:** So when the time...the time you were serving in the army...does the American Army cooperate with the Chinese army or Chinese air force? Did you cooperate with them?

**LY:** To talk with the Chinese?

**JC:** Like...did you like cooperate with other Chinese army, Air Force?

**LY:** No, we don't cooperate with them because you see we have to take order from the headquarter. Sometimes you can meet people, sometimes you can not; that rule you have to follow. You know sometimes you got to talk to the Chinese officer whatever, you have a mission, have permission from the headquarter, you can do that. After a while, you couldn't talk at all with them about the policy to each other. You have to get permission, yeah, get permission.

**JC:** So you directly respond to your general or...

**LY:** What do you mean?

**JC:** Who did you respond to?

**LY:** Well, I have my officers, commanding officer. He's a colonel. He's the commander of the squadron. Each squadron has one commander. We got to talk to the commander no matter what we do. Makes sure he said okay before we do, otherwise we can't do that you know; unless you got you got a special order.

**YW:** Is there any other experiences or war stories you want to share with us?

**LY:** [laughs] War story, yeah...I was in Lohekou; like I told you, Lohekou...

**JC:** Which year?

**LY:** Lohekou...you know...

**JC & YW:** [repeating the question] when, which year?

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

---

**LY:** nineteen forty... '44? '45 the war's over... 1944. 1944 I was in Lohekou. We lose that airbase. In... I sent a wire to headquarters in Liangshan... they said airplane will be there half an hour for American personnel only, to pick up, you know to pick up twelve of us only. So one, two soldier told me, he said, 'Sergeant Yee, we got two nurse, Chinese nurse, they helped us, can we pick them up also in the airplane?' I said, 'Well, the captain gave me order [American] personnel only'. So I said... he said, 'Sergeant, we can't let the enemy capture those two ladies. I don't know what they are going to do with them, so we are kind of worried'. I said, 'Okay, in case you died, you put those ladies in the duffle bag, put her in there... [Phone rings]

(01:29:10)

*At this point, Mr. Yee's daughter Mamie called to inform Mr. Yee that she has arrived to pick him up from the interview; the recorder is stopped. Mr. Yee only had time to finish the above story before the interview drew to an early conclusion.*

**YW:** [turning on the recorder again] Alright, sorry for the interruption.

**LY:** That's in Lohekou, in Lohekou, so... we... the airplane coming in so we tried to put the American personnel only but these two nurses we got to take care of them. So I tell the boys, I said, 'okay, if the Japanese capture them, I know what they are going to do. Just put them in the bag, pack it in, put her in there, open a hole, make sure she can breath, you know, don't suffocate, make sure they can breath'. Put the two sisters in a duffle bag, carry to the cargo plane on a C-47. So all report I said, 'Sergeant, you go over there and talk to the pilot, so I can put the duffle bag with the two ladies one in each bag on the airplane'. So I did, I put them on the plane. So when we arrived... go back to Liangshan, I said 'you unload now same thing, go talk to the pilot, then you unload those two ladies, be sure don't suffocate them'. They said, 'Okay, we take care'. So we arrived from Lohekou to Liangshan, he unload the plane, those ladies get out to safety. The boys said 'thank you sergeant for what you did for us' you know. So okay, so two months later, we were in [place name—Jijiang?], the war's over. He and the two ladies, they got married [everyone laughs]. I said 'that's the reason now'. He said 'yeah, you see what reason.' I said, 'Yeah, now I see. But you didn't tell me the true story, you almost got me in trouble' [laughs]. They got married.

But anyway, it's enjoying to talk to you because you know in WWII, when I was serving in China, I said I am real proud and honored to serve in China especially between American and Chinese, real proud. So anyway, the VA hospital, ten years ago they invited me speak. They put my picture in front of the hospital and all the dignitaries came in to hear me speak, you know... and one guy asking, he said, 'Mr. Yee, is he a major or colonel in the army?' I said 'no'. He said, 'staff sergeant, but we call him a general!' [laughs] So Mr. Wang, Ms. Chen, anyway, when you do something right, whatever you do, you do the right thing, upstairs will look out for you, I believe that all the time. You know, whatever you do, whatever, money not everything; people got good, honest, and very good character. It'll go a long way, I tell you. See, you know in my generation, back in those days, we went through a lot of hardship—depressions, wars, war, war... see, if you survive those things, you pretty lucky. A lot of people not lucky like me, they don't come back, especially those people that served in Europe in WWII; some on the Pacific islands; all didn't come back, lose a lot of people; America lose a lot of good people during the time of the war.

**YW:** Thank you very much Mr. Yee for talking with us today.

**LY:** Mr. Wang, Ms. Chen, okay, enjoyed talking, you got my number, any time you want to interview me I'd be honored to come to; no problem.

**YW:** All right, thank you very much.

**LY:** But sometimes, I'm 87 now, I don't know how far I can go [laughs]

**YW:** I'm sure you have plenty of time sir, I'm sure you have plenty of time.

(01:33:26) [The recorder is turned off; the interview ends]