

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Wea Hwa Lee

Interviewers: Yuanzhuo Wang, Pin-fang Wang

Date/ Time of Interview: July 2, 2010

Transcribed by: Yuanzhuo Wang, Pin-fang Wang

Audio Track Time: 01:58:00

Edited By: Sara Davis, Priscilla Li

Background:

Mr. Wea Hwa Lee was born in China's Yunnan Province in 1948. After the communist takeover of Mainland China, Mr. Lee's family first moved to Burma and then to Taiwan (Republic of China) where Mr. Lee graduated from the National Chengchi University in 1969 with a degree in Diplomacy. In 1971, Mr. Lee first came to the United States to attend school in San Francisco, and then moved to Beaumont, Texas where he attended Lamar University and received a Master's degree in Political Science.

After working in the restaurant business, Mr. Lee decided to start a Chinese language newspaper in Houston while applying for permanent resident status in the United States. After working briefly on the *Southwest Chinese Journal*, a community-oriented newspaper serving the Chinese American community in Houston, Mr. Lee started his own newspaper the *Southern Chinese Daily News* in 1979. Soon after, Mr. Lee started to expand his business into printing, banking, internet news media, and finally digital television, becoming the founding Chairman and CEO of the Southern News Media Group, the mother organization of ITV International Television, Southern Chinese Daily Electronic Journal, Southern Technology Information Network, Houston Chinese Yellow Pages, USA Printing, the Southern News Publishing Co, and the not-for-profit International Trade Center of Houston; the Southwestern National Bank and Nevada National Bank are also affiliated organizations. Apart from the original *Southern Chinese Daily News*, Mr. Lee's Southern News Group also owns the *Atlanta Chinese News*, *Boston Chinese News*, *Chicago Chinese Times*, *Dallas Chinese Times*, *Seattle Chinese News*, *Washington Chinese News*, *US Asia Today*, and *Austin Chinese News*. Mr. Lee is also very active in the community, serving as the President of the International Press Club of Houston, the Chairman of the International Management District, as well as a board member of the Houston Urban League and the Harris County Hospital District. Mr. Lee also sponsors an annual International Festival in Houston. In 1989, Mr. Lee attended business management classes for executives at the Harvard School of Business.

Setting:

Mr. Wea Lee's interview was conducted by Pin-Fang Wang of Rice University and Yuanzhuo (Yuan) Wang of Swarthmore College 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. Wea Lee as an Asian American living in Houston.

The interview lasted approximately two hours in total with each of the two portions lasting one hour approximately.

The first portion of this interview took place in the afternoon of Friday, July 2, 2010 in a conference room at Mr. Lee's Southern Media Group headquarter building located at 11122 Bellaire Boulevard. Before the interview began, Mr. Lee led the interviewers through a tour of his headquarters building which included a warehouse that houses papers and printing equipment, a loading dock where finished newspapers and other products are loaded onto trucks to be dropped off at their respective distributing points, a digital press-setting room where samples of various foreign language publications that Mr. Lee's USA Printing company print can be seen on a shelf, and a television

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

studio where Mr. Lee and his colleagues produce several shows for his ITV International Television (KTBU). While touring the printing facilities, Mr. Lee told the interviews about his ‘one-stop service’ business philosophy in which the editing, press-setting, and printing of the newspaper are completed at the same location to increase efficiency while reducing dependence on outside support. Various photographs, award certificates, and samples of Mr. Lee's different newspapers were seen framed along the corridor walls in the office area. During the tour, Mr. Lee repeatedly emphasized the positive impacts the advancement in technology have had on his business through the years as exemplified through the ever increasing speed of printing and press-setting.

The second portion of this interview was conducted during the afternoon of Saturday, July 3, 2010 in a conference room on the second floor of the International Trade Center building located next to the Southern News Group headquarters at 11110 Bellaire Boulevard. As before, Mr. Lee gave the interviewers a tour of the second floor of the International Trade Center which includes consular offices of several Latin American and African countries, a International College, various representative offices of businesses and professional or business associations, as well as two common areas and a kitchen for hosting events and forums.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

WL	Wea Lee
PW	Pin-fang Wang
YW	Yuanzhuo Wang
TL	Tracey Lam
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

YW: Good afternoon Mr. Lee, thank you for taking time outside of your busy schedule to speak with us today for the Houston Asian American Archival Project. The focus of our interview is going to be on your business and labor history in Houston. My name is Yuan, I go to Swarthmore College in Philadelphia; I'm an intern for the HAAA Project.

PW: Hi, my name is Pin-Fang, I go to Rice University and I'm also an intern for the HAAA project.

WL: Thank you, thank you for coming by.

YW: First, do you want to tell us a little bit more about yourself? Your background...

PW: A little bit about your childhood, where you grew up...

WL: Uh, I came to this country about 35 years ago from Taiwan. I went to graduate school, you know. I remember in 1970 uh...that's uh a lot of... [secretary enters the room] ...a lot of uh, a lot of the student want to come to America, but at that time Taiwan is a very poor country, you know. I mean it's kind of difficult so either you come over...you

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

know...a student—as a student you have to immediately uh you know work to support your tuition and also go to school so, in that time, a lot of young student come to America who were looking for opportunities. Yes, so uh basically I did the same thing. So I come to America I went to uh Texas...I mean the Lamar University in Beaumont. I got my master degree. Later on I went to Harvard Business School for short course study. So I start my business in 1979, June 16 in Houston, Texas...newspaper business.

PW: Could you tell us a bit more about your parents and how they helped you to come to America, maybe?

WL: You know, uh my parent left China in 1950 after Communist took over, so really...in that time, we really never thought about come to America you know until after I went to college in Taiwan so of course, uh in that time Taiwan is face a lot of difficulty, not just domestic, but internationally, so a lot of people, the young people, just really want to look for opportunities to seek, to seek a better life in America. So my parents probably never thought about supporting me to come to America, I don't really think so until I made decision...try to make my own decision to come to America, yes.

YW: Um, would you like to talk more about your—maybe your education experience in Taiwan? ...because you went to the National Chengchi University in Taiwan...

WL: Yes, I went to school...that's one of the top school, you know, especially we studied diplomacy, so uh most of my uh you know, uh classmates, you know mostly went into politics, you know. Of course the uh...a lot of young people in that time they thinking America is new land for opportunity so after they graduate most of them...if you could graduate from top university, most of them probably want to come to America, the same thing like China today, you know, if you graduate from Beijing University, Tsinghua University, you probably have a lot of people looking for to come to America.

YW: So what—you said a lot of your friends went into politics because they studied diplomacy, what makes you—what made you go into the business route instead?

WL: Well actually I come uh after...after I got my master's degree...from, from Texas Lamar University, so I decide to stay here, so when you stay here you need to have a green card, you know, you have to, you know make a, make a reason to stay in America so even I remember way before uh...in Vietnam War, whoever...foreign student if you get a master's degree, they give you a green card right away because they want to send you to Vietnam maybe, you know. So uh when I graduated, it's late 70s, so such opportunity disappeared. So one day I went to see a lawyer and said, 'Hey, I want to stay here, what can I do?' He said, 'You just start a Chinese newspaper because nobody could do it'. So that's the reason I start my newspaper business because I need to make an excuse to stay here, get the Green Card.

(00:04:56)

PW: So did he give you that idea or did he push you to do—start the newspaper here, or was it kind of...

WL: He didn't push me to do it but he said 'If you study political science, who going to hire you to do anything which is a lot of people qualify'. You see, our immigration law...I mean, you have to be very unique at what you are doing...some job people cannot perform locally, that's the reason, probably not too many people could make a newspaper, you know, Chinese newspaper. That's the reason the lawyer suggested to me we probably could start this newspaper to get a Green Card. The same thing today, you have to be outstanding in order to be...to get into the profession...then you qualify for—change your status, yeah.

YW: Did you have any previous experience in publishing?

WL: No, I was like you, I have an intern(ship) at a radio station in Taiwan when I was in college, that's all. I never did work for any other newspaper at all. Yeah.

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

YW: So what was—what opportunity did you take to come to America? Is it the scholarship or is it the—did you come as a scholar or...?

WL: No, as a student, F1 student. I should say 90% of us come here as a F1 student! There's no other kind of visa you can get. They don't give you a tourist visa, or something, you have to be as a student or you jump the ship, you be a seaman you know, you come by a ship, that's the only two ways you can come to America at that time, you know, yeah.

YW: Did you...when you were applying for the visa, were there a specific school in mind?

WL: Well, not really. First I went to...I applied...I went to San Francisco; I stayed there for about a year. But in that time, California tuition is very expensive. I mean higher than Texas. You know um, late 70s in Texas, Texas is a rich state. If you go to graduate school, they don't charge you tuition; you know, I mean everybody qualify. I remember that time a lot of foreign students came to Texas because we don't have to pay tuition at the graduate school, you know. That's the reason a lot people come, yeah.

PW: So how did you support yourself when you first came to San Francisco?

WL: Uh you know, we, we, we...we did all kinds of work, you know. We worked in the restaurant as waiters, busboys, you name it, everything. When we were in uh hometown, we never really go to the kitchen but certainly we changed our lives, we have to do everything at the restaurant because in that time, I think the...I remember if you become a waiter, probably you can make well, maybe \$20 a day, you know, in that time in Taiwan probably, you are making...if you are a teacher, probably you make in a month about \$60. You see how is that different? So, I mean...the, the, the regular people, the worker, they're probably making, you know, I should say less than \$100, U.S. dollar a month. But we can make it here less than a week. That's how the exchange rates are different. So we have to do a lot of all kinds of work, all kinds of work, you know. Of course, this is something that gave us a lot of experience in our lifetime, you know, I mean we could really get into a lot of labor work. Yes, yeah.

YW: I read from the article I found this in an article on the internet, when you came you brought about \$500 with you, what did you spend the \$500 on?

WL: Well, you know, in that time, when you, when you get a student visa, I mean certain school, you have to go to a certain school otherwise you are going to qualify for ... so by the time we pay all the tuition, probably in our pocket we only have \$500; you know, that's the way, you know, everybody, not just me...a lot of student from Taiwan in that time say it's the same way so I'm writing a book about my uh my experience in America, how this country you can start from scratch, you know everybody, you know there's a lot of stories, not just me, you know. So um we talk about \$500 in the pocket, how you going to be manage your school, how you going to fight for your future, you know, I mean...that's something you know I think still facing a lot of young people today, you know. I just want to say don't give up, the hope, that's the only country in the world, you know, give you such a opportunity, you know. So that's probably the story I try to tell. I'm going to publish in Chinese, English, and Spanish. I'm writing my story about how to start a business, you know, how to face a lot of uh challenges, overcome the uh the government rules, you know, I mean a lot of things. I think if, if, if people come to America probably they don't have to repeat our mistakes, you know, to, to see how we can have like a short cut.

(00:10:12)

PW: Um, I want to clarify when you said you came here and went to San Francisco you did a lot of different jobs and got a lot of different experiences, could you clarify what kind of jobs you took and what kind of experience and wisdom you took from that?

WL: Well, see the...during the daytime you go to school but on the weekend you have to work. You know I, I used to work as a kitchen...in the kitchen, as a kitchen help, in San Francisco, Fisherman's Wharf. I did wait, wait on the

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

table, you know, in the Chinese restaurant...all those labor-intensive jobs we are doing you know. I mean, that, that is something financially...immediately could we could support our, our, our...life, our...you know, to pay tuition, you know, those things. But I didn't stay in San Francisco that long because certainly I have the opportunity to come to Texas. You know, again, one of my friends opened a restaurant in Beaumont, Texas, which is about 80 miles from here, Houston. Beaumont is the city...I think the uh the first oil well discovered in America. They have, you know...so I remember we went to Beaumont, Texas not because of school at that time because of work, in the summer time.

After the summer certainly I find out there's a school in Beaumont, Texas called Lamar, you know! That's the reason why I stayed in Beaumont to finish my Master's degree. My wife also got a Master('s) degree in Lamar, which is uh...she get education Master degree, I get my government, political science...this coincidence, you know, I found out there's a school in Beaumont, you know, uh after summer work, yeah.

YW: You mentioned the—you went to Beaumont because of a friend that opened a restaurant there, how did you meet this friend?

WL: A friend in San Francisco; you know in that time, I tell you, we have in San Francisco...you know...one of the uh, one of the thought I have was that when I stayed in San Francisco, if you work through the Chinatown, the people speak Cantonese, the people speak...of course most people speak Cantonese, I mean, you can ride the cable car, you can go to...I mean everywhere is oriental people. I found out if I come to America, if stay in San Francisco, probably I have no chance to learn that much English! That's why I was thinking maybe I should move out of San Francisco. Of course, San Francisco is such a beautiful city, you know. I mean, that's another reason, you know, I try to leave San Francisco to go somewhere else maybe don't have that many Chinese, I have to learn more English, you know. That's the reason. My friend said, hey, we, we have that restaurant opened up in Beaumont, Texas. You know in that time, when you go to highway I-10, Interstate I-10, there's a lot of people picked the city, such like Beaumont, Port Arthur, you know like a small city like Baton Rouge, you know all those small city, they opened restaurants, they make a fortune! At that time, really in the South, there's not that many Chinese restaurants you know. So this guy come into Beaumont, opened a restaurant, I mean certainly, you know, the people said, oh, this is great, we could...a lot of southerner, they never tasted Chinese food. That's why what made those people really very, very worthy because the restaurant they opened, good, good business. Of course these days completely different. Yeah yeah, yeah—

YW: So when you first came here, did you speak any English at all?

WL: Well, I could speak some, but I could read of course, we could read because we studied it in school but we never had to chance to really speak English. That's another reason I did the uh...the people don't, don't disappointed because you come to this country because you know like a, like a...native tongue is not English, but it's okay, you know, we learn. You see a lot of politicians even like uh Governor of California, state—former Secretary of State Kissinger, all of them came here, they still have an accent, it's okay. This is what make this country beauty, you know, I think they people come this country because, you know, they want to look for opportunities. When you visit Europe, you see a lot of European countries they went down because they don't accept new immigrants. They might you know, you look at a lot of European countries they just, you know, don't have that kind of, you know, thing like America we have so uh learning language you know is very important but don't be uh—hesitate to talk, to, to, you know...like these days, people know...we, we, we are from somewhere but uh it doesn't interfere or discourage our you know participating to a lot of function, you know, yeah.

(00:15:24)

PW: So at Lamar University what did you study and how...

WL: Political science...

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

PW: ...and how did that help you at all in to start a new business? Did it?

YW: Well, you know, uh...in college, you know, I...studied diplomacy, you know, of course uh you know, that time if I couldn't make it or if I cannot get a Green Card, I might go back to my country to, to, to continue my career so I never really...never thought about change to another field, you know, yeah, that, that is probably the case yeah.

YW: So was there an option open for you to go back to Taiwan?

WL: Oh yeah, definitely, definitely, definitely. A lot of my friends went back to...they become high diplomat or business...you know, I mean one of the success stories of course in Asia, way you know before China opened the door, Taiwan is one of the...they called the uh...dragon... [YW: tiger] ...tiger...dragon...the reason is the same thing happened in China today, a lot of educated people from America, they went back to Taiwan to start the uh the business, you know, get these new ideas, so made the nation prosper, so uh this is something you know still going on; you know, I mean they learn something from western countries to build—come back home to build their own business, you know, yeah.

YW: Um, did you—when you first came here did you have any network of friends, relatives, etc. to rely on?

WL: No, well, I had a couple of friends but I do not have any family at all when I come to America. Of course uh you know this is something...you know...very, very interesting...at that time not that many Chinese at all, you know, not just uh relatives, Taiwan relatives, Houston, there's uh very few Chinese. They don't have such a big Chinatown; it's completely different story, yeah, yeah, yeah.

YW: So, who helped you in the early days?

WL: I help myself, nobody else. We are going to look for a job we got to knock on the door, you know, I mean go to restaurant, they love to be uh...you know we working with them you know. I mean, you know, really...you have to be solve your own problem, you know what I mean? Yeah. I think basically you have to be independent, in other words, you know what I mean? Yeah uh...

YW: So as a student abroad from Taiwan, did you...did the...maybe the consulate in San Francisco or in Houston, the Taiwanese consulate give you any support or help or anything?

WL: Well, time to time, but we really don't need that kind of support I mean basically...what we do...I mean, you know, if you go to school, you work at night or weekends, you know, you just proce—I mean it's not that many uh...disputes or we need them to help us, you know, I mean, we as a student very simple life, very simple life, you know so uh we don't really have chance to participate in a lot of activities because you have to go to school, you have to work, you know; I mean like any, any other young people you know. Yeah. So we okay, yeah.

PW: Did you face any prejudice or...?

WL: Definitely! Let me tell you this. Uh late 1970s, of course you know we, we look at the American history, civil rights, civil rights bill passed about 1964.

(00:19:14)

I really uh...here's the thing...we as Asians, we really appreciate what, what the Black community do for us ...like Martin Luther King, they fighting civil rights for us. You know, I was in San Francisco in that time, of course you know San Francisco is uh I should say maybe half of them Asian, you know San Francisco. So when you come to Texas, in that time, the people going to always ask you uh, where's, where's your restaurant or where's your uh dry clean store, you know I mean the people have an idea all the Chinese probably...they, they must be related to restaurant or the dry clean store. But if you look at it today, you know, we, we, we opened a bank, we have a lot of big...I mean completely different concept so prejudice, we, we should not say they are prejudice...but the people

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

have the con—the idea that you come to this country, you must be laborer. You see a hundred years ago, a lot of Chinese come to build the railroad, so those people settled down in Houston, in San Antonio, in San Francisco; that's a sad story. Let me, let me tell you this, for instance, in San Francisco you might say this Mr. Lee, okay English Lee, but actually he's not Lee, he probably be Chu or something. They are using somebody's certificate you know at that time, so you might be say Mr. John Lee, but actually your last name probably Chu, you know. So this a lot of ...we do not have immigration law, so the people just cannot come to America as a, as a legal immigrant, you know, they have to come some way, you know. So prejudice definitely, you know in any way I mean, but uh it's okay because I think we just have to remember uh, in this country, if you be successful, you need to work harder, if you become successful, the people are going to respect you, you know. I mean, we don't care what they say, see like we, we...running the bank, we start the Southwestern National Bank; I organized that bank thirteen years ago you know, group of us, we hired a lot of uh people there non-Asian to work for us you know. I mean we, we run the business, you know, we had a lot of things, I mean these days are changing, you know everything's changing. This is uh something we never thought about 37 years ago, yeah, yeah.

YW: So when you first...well first of all, was there a Chinese American community in Beaumont when you were there?

WL: No, no; we had about fifty- fifty Chinese student that's all, we do not have any [laughs] so-called 'community.' Even today probably they have more than only two hundred or three hundred people, you know.

YW: So how come you moved to Houston?

WL: Well, Houston is next to the biggest city, you know, right, Beaumont. So at that time, it was booming in Houston because of oil you know, energy related business you know. And then when I come over here, we have some Chinese here you know, so probably that's the, the ideal place let me start my own Chinese uh newspaper business; you know, less competition right? Less competition.

YW: So you went to—you came to Houston knowing that you are going to do something related to the newspaper...?

WL: No, not really. When I come to Houston, I stayed working in the restaurant... some restaurant to continue survival, but until I make decision I want to stay in America, then I talked to the lawyer, they said you need to start a Chinese newspaper in order to get a Green Card, then I make decision to stay here; make decision to make the newspaper. This is a big change; you know I mean. If I'm not get into the newspaper business, I probably still running the restaurant or do some other thing, you know, real estate I don't know, hotel, you know, we don't know, but changed my life, you know. But no complain, no regret, you know. The business we running is very much related to the uh...everybody, everybody. We think it's the right decision you know, the business I like to do, the business I could depend survival; you know it's very important, something you do you don't like, you know, that might be totally different thing.

PW: So, to put this in perspective, did you go to Harvard before you started or did you come to Houston first?

(00:25:01)

WL: No, no ... after I came to Houston; yeah, I went to Harvard for, for a year to went to executive school, executive education school...

YW: ... your EMBA?

WL: EMBA, yeah...they call the uh...we learned a lot of things. You know I think the...one of the things Harvard Business School does is that we have a lot of case studies you know. I went to Harvard 19 uh..... actually 89, it's pretty late, yeah. But I learn a lot uh...you see most of the uh...my classmates were already in business, you know.

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

We, we learned a lot of things from different kind of case business study things, you know, how to make your business expanding, you know, we...I think it's a...very, very helpful in my late business. That's why in last thirty years, I be able to expand my business nationwide, you know, nationwide. I think the uh...the idea is Houston of course is a great city, but if you only depend on Houston, you know probably, you know that's not enough to expand your business. That's one of the idea after I went to school, I was thinking how can we expand our business. If you can duplicate your... at the same business you probably cut down your cost, you know, you are more...you can compete in different market, you know that's the whole idea, yes.

PW: So did you meet anyone there that you still communicate with now who kind of helped you expand your business?

WL: Yes, yes...yes, we have an alumni list which they have e-mail contact you know, still a lot of people they are very successful...in their, you know, their own business, or working for Fortune 500, you know. We also have a lot of classmates from overseas, from Singapore, from Indonesia, they become...the officer...government officer in the country. I think the, the whole idea is that we be able to exchange the uh the idea, you know, when you become certain level, for instance management level, a lot of times, you are difficult, you have to talk to rest of people. If you are in the same management level, you will face probably the same kind of uh issue, you know, we could discuss. By the time you know uh...this global economy, you know, especially in Asia, they always want to learn how American...to manage the you know big corporations, you know. But my company, of course considered a very small company. But uh I learned a lot of things from, from some other my classmates, you know, to make it work. I mean...everything work like you know...but still...there's a lot of thing I could benefit from them, you know because I learn from their story...tell their story how to manage personnel, how to manage finance, you know, all those things; yeah, very interesting, yeah.

YW: Did you notice any Asian Americans in your Harvard business class?

WL: Yes, yes, yeah, we have quite a few from Indonesia, from Singapore, you know, they are all top people, you know, they already in government service for so many years. It's not just like a coming for the, for the degree, you know- they are more mature people, you know, yeah.

YW: So going back a little bit to your uh...when you first came to Houston; did you receive any help from the Chinese community already here, like older generation of people when you tried to start the newspaper?

WL: Yes, yes... I tell you what; I have this uh...the gentleman called...Mr. Lee to, Mr. Lee to...

YW: Gene Lee?

WL: Gene Lee, yeah...

YW: I actually interviewed him...

WL: Okay...Mr. Lee is uh...my uh...like my uncle thing, you know. Of course in that time, you know, we, we went...because I'm a Lee you know, we have the Lee's Family Association right here. See actually, Lee's Family Association, we, we gave them a free office next door... [laughs] you know, in my International Trade Center. Mr. Gene Lee run the, run the uh printing shop...printing shop, you know...he said he want to try to start a newspaper, so I, you see...get back to the story, when I come to San Francisco, there's a Lee's Family Association in Grand Avenue in San Francisco.

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On the fourth floor, I started making newspaper for them...you know yeah, you know newspaper. At that time, we are using typist, you know, once a month, maybe quarterly. So after I graduated from Lamar, uh I mean I come to

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Houston, they say, oh, they want to start a newspaper, so I said, 'Oh, I know how to do that,' you know. So that's why we start this called *Southwest Journal* or something, but we have four partner, you know, four of us put in a little bit of money. But you see, the thing is that, you know, every month...you know we do every month like a community, bilingual...but I cannot survive, you know, I can't...you know...I mean, you know...that's why I told them that...uh... you know I need to be starting maybe weekly or something you know. But they not necessarily agree on my...my, my, my suggestion, that's the reason I start my own newspaper, on the weekly. When I start it, I do it weekly. One year later I do twice a week, okay. So I need to make sure economically I could survive you know, not just for the community service. I mean used to... that paper is just for community service, you know, I mean...as my, my, my career, I need to do my own, that's why Mr. Gene Lee, we've been working for maybe a little more than a year, I did...with the...make the newspaper for them monthly magazine something like that, yeah; called *Southwest Chinese Journal*. After that I left that newspaper and started my own newspaper, yeah. So at that time Houston...we uh we don't have that many Chinese, mostly old timer, you know, with old timer, they came here you know many, many years ago, like Gee's family, you know, I mean all of them you know, like to see that some newspaper you know, could publish in Houston, yeah. [Address YW] So you interview Mr. Gene Lee, he's the pioneer, yeah, yeah he's the pioneer. He still running the stationary store, you know, his printing shop, you know, yeah, yeah. There's another gentleman past away, his name is Mr. Shen [speaking in Chinese, clarifying the surname's Chinese character (it)]. He put out the newspaper called *Chinese Voice*, *Chinese Voice*, yeah, this uh gentleman by the time he passed away he's probably 90 years old. I think the—he's really something; he using handwriting, you know, to publish the paper. This is just a hobby you know; it's not really depend on for the ... for make for living. My case, I need to ... [laughs] make a career, make a...you know...yeah, that's a little bit different, yeah, yeah.

(00:31:34)

PW: So did Mr. Lee help you start off your own when you decided to branch out from his?

WL: Uh yeah...kind of, kind of...you know we...worked together...they just do it once a month, you know we do it once a week, you know, it's a little different uh you know. I really think a lot of old folks like uh Mr. Shen the lawyer, Mr. Wu, all of them is uh our group to start that newspaper—*Southwestern Chinese Journal*. But mainly that paper is just for community service, like a non-profit, yeah. It's not for profit.

YW: So your paper, how was it different in the way that it's for profit?

WL: Because we are a weekly newspaper, yeah...we, we, we depend on advertising...you know, I mean we need to...to, to, to looking for sponsor, make survival, you know. I think the uh non-profit and profit probably make a lot of difference. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

YW: So was there a lot of Chinese business that advertised in your paper?

WL: Yes, yes...that's why second year I bought my own press, my own press—printing press.

YW: I think you said it was \$250,000?

WL: Yes...

YW: So did you have to borrow money or come up with other capital?

WL: Of course, we borrowed money, yeah, borrowed money from the bank you know, I mean. Have good credit, you know, there's a...the bank is going to write you the loan you know. I mean at that time \$250,000 that's a lot of money. I mean not too many people willing to take that kind of chance you see. When, when I start publishing my newspaper weekly, certainly business booming so I try to put out twice a week; the printer said, 'Hey Mr. Lee, I'm sorry, I only can give you Wednesday press time'. You know, I mean what am I going to do? Our paper was so

small you know. So the only way we could do it is to get our own press, you know see how...how we can make our own [laughs].

(00:33:38)

That's the reason I have to go out to knock on the door looking for printing jobs. That's the reason I get into the printing business, you know. So currently I print about 100 newspapers, so a lot of uh publisher with me for many, many years. You know, I try to treat them right, I know the small papers hard to survive. I mean we...we hardly to raise the price you know I mean, they be with me for many, many years, like *Indo-American News*, Japan newspaper, been in the market for many years. So like, like you open a restaurant, if you do not have a kitchen, that's a problem; you know, I mean you cannot cook. The same thing like we do not have a studio like a television station, how are we going to produce our show? That's why I always think if you want to be on the winning side in any business, you have to control whatever you can do you know. We don't have to depend...oh you have a restaurant, kitchen somewhere... somebody else's kitchen, you are going to cook and bring back the food? I mean, that will make, make, make it impossible to compete you know, to compete. So, that probably the...some reason, majority reason I get into the printing business because I have to print my own newspaper. [laughs] Yeah.

YW: Did you have any partners when you first started the business?

WL: No...

YW: Just you alone?

WL: 100%, still today, 100%; maybe I'm going to go uh IPO one day, or PPM you know; a lot of my employee with me for many, many years; actually I, I'm thinking that, you know, we need to issues some stock, that's why I'm doing now you know. I try to—a lot of employee mostly my senior staff with me for more than twenty almost twenty years you know; I need to give them something when they [laughs]...when they, they are retired. But, our business you know even economy downturn, but our business is still okay, the reason is still we have a lot of new immigrants coming, they need to depend on our newspaper to, to find something. You know I mean you see our classified ads; we have six, seven page, very effective. If you advertise, the people will call. So I think this is a major, major service to new immigrants, you know the people still only read Chinese. But if you look at the rest of the western publication, you know, they go down, the reason is the people watching Internet, right? Called new media, you know! That's make it different, yeah. But uh, we are very special, you know, our newspaper is very, is you know...Chinese language newspaper is a little bit you know different from mainstream, mainstream, yeah, yeah.

YW: How does it differ?

WL: The difference is we have different readership! As I say, we have to keep on new immigrants coming to this country, right? So uh...especially from China these days you know. I mean new immigrants from China, from all over the world, they read Chinese from Vietnam, all of them read Chinese, you know, they still have to depend on us. Also we are on the Internet; we are on website, we, we...you know...you could read any way you want to, you know, yeah.

PW: And so if you just give out your newspapers for free, if they are for free, so how...have you seen the ads change from when you first started to now?

WL: My paper always free; everywhere, ten different cities. I started this concept; the people love me; hey Mr. Lee, why are you giving your newspaper for free? Ah man, today, the few understand—the more readership, more effective on your advertising right? I mean you say I'm going to sell 50 cents, 1 dollar, how much could you collect? You know I mean, of course the people want to subscribe they have to pay postage, you know for sure. But if the people read your paper and say I—my circulation is 10,000; 10,000 people reading my newspaper right? I mean everybody read it. So this concept...I was...Spain, Madrid...that's the largest newspaper, it's a free newspaper, daily

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

paper, in Spain, they are making lot...a ton of money. See the people, you know these days so many media things you can hook up—internet...uh you know I think who are going to pay you to...really? That's the reason my philosophy so successful in major cities; I mean Dallas, Chicago, Washington D.C., my paper's number one! The reason is that we give out free, we give out free [laughs].

(00:38:20)

So if the people also can read on the website, so all the PDF file, you know, you could open up; so the people probably cannot pick up my newspaper, but they can see...after midnight, everything's on the uh on the internet, you know. Of course, television will be something else, you know. Television is this kind of media probably not going to be obsolete maybe within ten to fifteen years, you know what I mean? Television is something you put in your home, uh even though...so we call new media okay—television, Internet, cellular phone, uh you name it; all of them we are going to be on. Pretty soon we are going to be on Internet, internet; so the people could really simultaneously watch our show you know, watch on... Second of all, we are going to be on the, on the ... cell phone [holding up his iPhone], you know. So, our media business, you need to be uh cope with whatever happens in the market. So, you see, if they want to read my newspaper, I have a full product; my salespeople are not going to go, if you don't advertise on TV, maybe you interested in on my newspaper; or you can advertise on my yellow page; or you could do some printing. I could print your business card, right? So this is a group, one way or another, we definitely going to be hook with you, doing some service for you, right? Restaurant, oh we could put in your menu, we can do your television thing. So there must be package deal; if you just have a newspaper, it's tough; let me tell you, it's tough, right? I mean some television guy could come in and there going to be cut down piece of pie from...whatever you have. So my, my, my philosophy is get everything ready, right. You could be on Internet, everything. So our yellow page is on Internet, you know, on the...all the advertising you know. The people want to say, 'Hey Mr. Lee, I want to advertise your yellow page'. Okay, no problem, next day you are on the internet. So end of the year we are going to print out as a book, as a reference. So if you want to change, for instance your restaurant want to change, we change it immediately on the Internet. We don't have to wait until the book coming out...so all... 'Mr. Chang, give me your money because the air already here'; you don't need to do that, because everything's on the Internet. You have to go back, you know.

(00:40:40)

PW: Just for um informational purposes, how much do you usually charge for an ad or for how much...?

WL: Ad? It all depends on the color and inches. You know, I mean could be...we have...if you classified ad, for instance, they could be every day probably \$150/month, you know; could be one week, be, you know, maybe \$70; you know, it's not that big amount; the people could afford, you know. Uh displace ad, the whole page ad, if you are on a contract probably \$480, you know; color page about \$800; it's not that out of line you know, the people could afford it. Like my television ad, uh thirty seconds it's \$118 per spot, you know, we do all the production you know. I mean if the people already become our newspaper client, so we charge them less than half; you know that's the way we look at that. Of course these days the economy in downturn you know, but uh we, we, we try to manage...we survive you know. I don't want to say I dominate the market but a lot of people if they want to advertise, first thing they think about it's our newspaper okay. See we have so many newspaper line up on the street, we have ten newspaper on the street, you have to be on the top! You know everything you do have to be on top! You know, what else, you know, competition, you know, competition, yeah.

YW: So how did you think kept your newspaper so competitive over the years? I mean it's been thirty years...more than thirty years now right? How did you—why do you think other papers can't catch up with you?

WL: ...thirty years now, thirty years... We always think of things in advance! You see when the Internet come out, I'm the first guy to put my news on the internet! You know what I mean? Digital television come out, I'm the first one on the market! Right? If you be the first one [bangs fist on table], always be better, somebody can follow your

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

step. You know I'm saying that like...like a CEO, I have this television Internet—I mean the digital television, everybody watching; mostly family watching. We have, you see, we have news from Taiwan, news from Hong Kong, news from Mainland China; who else doing that, right? The Chinese television station they don't air something from Taiwan, Taiwan television don't—but we make everything combination. Plus, most importantly, we have local news, local production, those things.

(00:44:02)

We have eighteen talk shows; we interview a lot of people who's who—let me tell you this, the mayor, the county judge, all of them be here so many times! You know why? Not because of Mr. Lee, but because television! Right? I mean of course I'm not in the Comcast yet, you know I'm not in the Comcast yet, but pretty soon, we do a little bit petition—again this—see when we have emergency time right? We don't have any broadcast in Chinese; I'm going to be the first one in the Comcast. Sooner or later they are going to let me in! Right? Not because how good is my program but they need to have a Chinese language speak on the television; Oh they have Spanish, they have English, of course, you know. So I look at the—our future is very bright because we have our own audience we could manage. I have more than two thousand customers under my database, current customer, you know. So they either advertise in my newspaper, either advertise in my Yellow Page you know; that's the way I build. I have a call center, call center I hire the intern; they make phone call every day, you know, so they make open another Yellow Page. 'Hey, you want to advertise?', you know, that's the way you need to keep on marketing and you know if you, if you don't marketing, who's going to know...before you walk in, you don't know I have this studio right here, you know something. But you have to keep on marketing your product! Or else you'll be dead, you'll be dead, you know, especially in media business, you know. It's tough, but you know that's the way we look at the competition. Man, there's very, very heavy competition in any city—Chicago, Washington DC, Atlanta, Georgia, you know everywhere. But we, we keep on top because we, we know how to cut the cost, you know, get one use could be used in ten different cities, you know. This is a—so the same thing on television, we try to build and...in different cities. I hope one day we could become network, network Chinese television [laughs], that's why we keep on testing in Houston. We want to make sure everything smooth then we could probably next city go to San Francisco; we can go to Los Ang—I mean the Dallas, Chicago, Washington DC, you know, maybe we become Chinese Telemundo, we don't know. I hope [laughs]. You know, but this is really unique opportunity! Never before, how can you get into the television business before. It's ... impossible that's billion-dollar business. You see I have three signals, that's NBC, CBS, ABC; one day the Channel 2's general manager he come over here and said, 'look, that's your signal, that's my signal, it's the same one, what's the difference?' [laughs]. But I said, 'you guys are billion-dollar business!' We, you know, I mean he laughed you know, but he—we understand the world's changing, technology is really helping a lot of small guys like us to get into the some big business, you know, talking about media, television, internet, used to, it's impossible, impossible. Timing is everything sometimes; if you don't catch that time, you'd be so behind, you'd be wiped out. If I didn't do television, somebody come in to do television, man, I tell you, they are going to steal my advertising for sure [laughs]. But you know, you know, you know you have to set the strategy, you know see how we can manage you know, but uh, again, this is a something you know...yeah.

YW: So how did your strategy change over time? Were you expan—of course at first you were focusing on the Chinese community, but later on I know that you expanded out into more than...um other ethnic groups, Houston in general; how did you go about doing that, meeting new people?

WL: I have to actually physically I have to...stay there for many months. Let me tell you, I'm in Seattle for two years. I'm in Washington DC for six months. Actually I don't know nobody, you know. Of course I have...this another thing...I have a big family, I have six brothers and sisters; uh you know most of them in my business you know. Like my brother, he's in Chicago you know, so we, we always have to go visit city by city, you know really start from scratch you know. But we have our business model. Okay we work in this restaurant in Washington DC, 'look, this is our newspaper in Houston, you look at it, well, it's good, price cheap, you know why don't you advertise?' And then we have to go door to door, every city, like fighting the battle! [bangs fists repeatedly]

YW: Even now?

WL: Now...now of course we don't have not that many city to go now, we already...you know, but all the cities we go it's really, we need to really stay there to...to look for network and local things. It's not such thing as say I just go over to publish the paper. So we've been, we've been in Washington DC for twenty years, Dallas, everywhere. We've been almost twenty years, you know, almost twenty years.

(00:49:54)

So—but we are using the same business model because Chinese readership it's about the same readership, the same kind of taste, news, you know, the local news, we put the picture, man, community picture, big one, the people love it, you know that's why. That's the way we look at it you know. Of course we still have a lot of national papers that we compete like [naming newspapers in Chinese—*星岛 (Xingtao Daily)*, *世界 (World Journal)*], you know those things, but they are carrying big news, we carry small news! You know, I mean, if you look at my, some of my book uh my book right here, they have some introduction of you know. But, you know, you have to get in touch with the local community, you know, otherwise, they are going to be, you know, yeah, yeah...

YW: Is that how you expanded in Houston as well?

WL: Houston, yeah, we started early as 1979 of course you know, we, we— this is our base [taps fingers on table for emphasis], our headquarter you know, yeah...but one other thing I want to uh really emphasize the community service project, International M—International Trade Center and International Management District which I chair the committee. International Management District is from Highway 6 to Beltway 8; that's 12 square miles; we created this called... Governor Perry signed the bill, okay. I try to see how we can create the ... like a tourist spot for the city of Houston. Symbolize I do, something like I'm going to build international park, I'm going to build those [speaking in Chinese—就像那个深圳的那个'小人国' (like that 'miniature kingdom' park in Shenzhen)], you know something, you know...to represent the different countries, you know those ... I want to build an International Gate; we are going to do a lot of beautification in this area. We went to have somebody recognize Houston have international district to come in to shop, to come in to eat, to come in to invest, you know, all those things. We have a 1.2-million-dollar budget, which is generated from the local uh landlord you know, commercial landlord. See, I think this kind of uh—that's why I sponsored this African Summit on February 22nd with Rice University; of course, again on October 25th in China. So I think this is very important uh as a, as a... as one of the local community member we need to look at what can we do for our own community, you know what I mean? As a, as a business stand point you know...I think that would be next year this time when you come, you will see a little bit different, on this area. That's why I devote a lot of my time to try to see change in this landscape in this area. You know use to...I don't want to say the bad name but seems like all the school went down, you know the school district, the people, you know, move out, you know. We need to rebuild this area, you know. I mean we need to rebuild as an international city, international district, you know; that probably I really going to be working on...

YW: Are you receiving any support um from other people as well? Are other people enthusiastic?

WL: Oh yeah, we have board members yeah...once a month we have a meeting right here, of course. This is a whole community event. We are going to create called Green Center, Green...you know uh...Go Green District we call...you know what I mean? We are going to set out our own recycle center here. So we are going to teach people how to use solar panel, you know all those things, you know. Because I learned a lot of things from China when I visit China, you know, all those uh solar things, you know, yeah. I think this is something... excuse me, let me make a phone call...

[Mr. Lee's phone rings and the recorder is paused]

The first portion of the interview ended with Mr. Lee's phone call. Mr. Lee informed the interviewers that he has to tend to another appointment and offered to continue the interview at some other time. It was decided that the

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

interview will continue the next day at 3 pm in the International Trade Center next to the Southern News Group headquarters when Mr. Lee will also be able to give the interviewers a tour of the building.

[This is the beginning of the second portion of the interview)

YW: Thank you Mr. Lee for coming back to talk to us today...

WL: Thank you, thank you.

YW: [Addressing PW] Um okay...do you want to start with a question?

PW: Yeah, uh yes (?) so you've taught-told us a lot about the International Trade Center. And we just wanted to know how you came in contact with a lot of the diplomats who have come through here and a lot of the people who use office space right now.

WL: You know, ITC is called the International Trade Center. We started this project about three years ago. You know the uh, this is one of the uh projects I think is uh we as the media company want to do because uh the main thing is to do the promotion on the, the whole idea. Uh way back to about five years ago, we started with this called International Management District. Uh several year, we went through the House of Representatives. Finally, we get the approve. The government—Governor Perry signed the bill creating this district. This is a, the special district for our area so that we can be—manage our own future. In other words, we created this district—we have a...we have some budget from local commercial landlords, you know. So each year, we probably have a 1.2-million-dollar budget. This budget we don't have to give it back to the government, so we can use it as our own as a district.

(00:52:51)

So, I happen to be chair of this committee, so we have uh 12 board members managing this district of 12 square miles. Of course, basically we try to help local businesses to get, you know, say... a lot of traffic to come into this area. So, in that time, I was thinking about trade should be very important part of this district. Uh, after I built this building—it's a total of about 22,000 square feet, a two-story building. So on the first floor, we lease out completely, or you know...it's fully occupied. On the second floor, it was empty for 11,000 square feet, so at first I thought, what am I going to do with this whole space? So, I come up with this idea that we go talk to the uh Commerce Department, which they have a local office. I told them that maybe we could team up to create some trade for this area. So, one of the guys in charge on the trade center said, 'Hey Mr. Lee, we're not going to give you some money to come in to do improvements.' I said, 'Don't worry; I'm going to put out from my own pocket to do it, you know!' 'Okay! Then, we can talk.' You know, so finally we got an MOU with the Department of Commerce. So, I'm the one who's going to be totally financially responsible to remodel the whole 11,000 square feet. But, the deal is that some of the Commerce Dept.—I'll tell you where they're going to move to...our facility—you know, to create the traffic, you know to help local small and medium sized businesses. Of course, the last couple of years, Houston experienced a lot of uh business difficulty. You know there are a lot of small businesses. So, they need to have a market to overseas, export to overseas. That's the whole idea. So, we, we start this project and we team up with a lot of uh local small and medium sized businesses—more than 4,000 of them is under our...our, our—not our membership but our, our database. So, for instance, if we want to export our product to Colombia, so we're going to invite Colombia Consul-General come to ITC and then talk to them how we can help a lot of local business export to Colombia, export to Canada...any, any country. So, last three years, at least 25 Consul-General [have visited] our ITC to talk about trade. That's the reason we've been able to invite that many uh the, foreign diplomats, including our last February—I mean this year February 22nd, we have six ambassadors from Africa com[ing] to ITC to talk about how we can team up to export to Africa. That's the whole story. Of course uh, you know, I mean, we are still working on a lot of projects, including October 25, we're going to work with Rice University on China Summit... Texas-China Summit. The same thing we're going to help these small and medium sized businesses to knock on the

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

door of China. How to export to China, not import from China, I mean export to China, that's the whole idea...so we've been able to team up with a lot of foreign diplomats. You know, yeah.

PW: So, did you contact these Consuls-Generals yourself, or do you have help through the, um, Chamber of Commerce?

WL: No we have our own staff right here, we have our own staff here, yeah you know I've been in business for 30 years. My private business like television, newspaper uh my reporters know all these people, so we don't have no problem to contact these foreign uh foreign delegation or foreign-plus on ITC we have our own staff to do all these things, yeah ground work. Yes, yeah.

PW: And you talked about... you started with a budget? Could you tell us more about the budget and how you got funding for this?

WL: Okay, the funding is that uh basically uh we have two ways to fund this place. Our budget is about \$400,000 a year on running this ITC. So, mainly we collect the rent. You know, the rent like uh the people who want to lease this place. We have, uh, Wi-Fi hook up, telephone line, everything like an executive suite. We charge the people to stay here. Second of all, we do a lot of functions, for instance gala. You know, that's basically our income. Of course, you know, last three years, it's not enough, you know but you know we still try to see how we can make it balance, you know. Of course uh, I'm the—personally, I'm the one who, you know, subsidize all this budget, you know...yeah. But, it's okay. But, that's the original idea. But, we're getting there, after we have a couple more gala. I think we will be—the people are gonna be aware of what we're doing here. More and more people will give us support. You know.

YW: So, how do plan to maybe expand this...?

WL: Okay....We, we. Here's the thing. A-a-a-as you probably know, in this area, you know, we need to create a lot of activity related to the education, related to the arts. That's why we're going to have this art exhibition. We're going to have an art class, teach the people how to paint.

(01:00:00)

Uh, we're going to have a cooking class, he have ikebana, you know...flower arrangement, all those things. We try to create the whole area related to education. So, the people want to learn, especially in the Asian culture, they probably going to walk in here and they're going to have a lot of opportunity to learn whatever they want to learn here. Uh, also, I think the uh—continuously, we're going to do a lot of gala, after China. We're probably going to go the Middle-East, go to Central America or to—I think as a business model wise, I think our goal is to the uh—to build a business model to, to continue support Houston as well as Texas to looking for business around the world. Uh, using as a summit, so called summit basically about business, looking for business. Uh, that's the way—not just benefit for the local business but also financially probably beneficial to ITC to survive in the long run. Of course we need to hire more people to work in ITC but we need to look at our budget, you know. If we have more income, then we could be, you know, getting more service to the community. Yeah, yeah, yeah...

YW: Um...now going back a little bit to what we talked about yesterday...or do you have...?

PW: I actually had another question about...

WL: Okay, sure go ahead.

PW: Um. You talked a little about your International College. Could you tell us a little bit more about that, the people who teach here and the primary use—you said the primary clientele were students from overseas who wanted to come...

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

WL: Yes, this international college run by Mr. Harris. He used to run the ELS program in the Houston Baptist University. He run this International College but most of his students is uh come in here as a, as a English...ESL. ESL. This is the first step, but in the future, our goal is to really uh have the, have the—some training cause for those people could get into the job market, in other words. You know, for instance, in the future probably we are going to create some kind of a- computer is a basic thing you know or maybe in banking industry they might need some teller, you know how to be a teller, you know those things. You know, career things, because economy is tough a lot of people they go back to school either they—you know, most of them want to look for a job, you know. So, we uh we think the uh trade, for instance, the finance part, you know that probably we gonna be you know really concentrate on to teach the young people how to get into the job market you know. Yeah.

YW: All right. So, going back to what we talked about yesterday about how you started the Southern uh News Media Group. Um, can you refresh our memory on how you first um got the capital to start the company and did you have to go out and look for equipment, and where did you start the business at first?

WL: You know, you know. Way back when I start my own newspaper, originally I have only one office. You know, I mean uh we depend on somebody to print our newspaper, you know. You do your own writing; you do your own setting up, advertising. It's a one-man show you know. I mean until my newspaper grow a little bit bigger then we could hire some help you know. As I told you, two years later, we, we, we, we uh...bought our own printing press. You know, that's the way I think this is a major step to start my business after I get my printing press. You know, uh you know like, as I mentioned to you, like you open a restaurant and you have your own kitchen, you know, you can cook you know. When you have your own machine, you know it's more pressure, you know, I mean financial pressure, you know, I mean you have to make a payment, you have to you know a lot of things. Uh, that's where we started, you know. So first couple of years really uh quite simple, you know. I mean, we don't really involve that many you know activity or things, but after two years, after we got this uh machine running, that's a really totally different ball game, you know. You know, for my business you know. But uh if we uh remember, you know, all these things, 20-some 8 years ago, probably that's the right decision I made to get into the uh you know, the printing thing...in bigger way, you know. Otherwise, uh probably we going to be just limited to that area. We can never expand you know. Yeah, yeah.

PW: Um. So, what—what do you consider the most challenging issue you had to face in starting your business?

WL: You mean in the future or past?

PW: In the past.

YW: Like when you were just starting the business.

WL: Well, uh everything...everything, right?

PW: Everything?

WL: I mean, when you in business world, uh you, you face all kind of challenge right? Because you have to uh you know meet your personnel, the payroll, the eh....it could be any of these challenges, you know.

(01:05:01)

So, you know, for give an example. For instance uh, if you buying a house, right, if you build the house from the ground, you know where, where is the panel going to be, where is the ground. But if you just walk in and buy a new house, you know, you really don't know how the house is built. So my business, we build from ground, so we know every bit of it you know. I'm talking about in the newspaper business you need to write the news, you need to know how to get advertising, you need to, you know, meet your payroll...everything. So, this is something—very good experience for, for a lot of people starting from zero, you know from the ground. You know, that makes a difference.

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Uh well, maybe some people say I'm in the newspaper business probably he just bought a newspaper to run a newspaper. It's a little bit different, so we went through all these uh processing. That probably made a lot of difference, yeah.

YW: Did you model your business at first after something that's already in existence or did you have to, like you uh hinted at, did you build everything from scratch?

WL: Built everything from scratch. Actually we do not have anything to follow. You know, right?

YW: Right.

WL: If you say, I open a restaurant, probably you have a restaurant to follow, but in that time, 30 some years ago, you don't have nothing to follow in the newspaper... Chinese newspaper business, you know. That probably make a you know difference. Yeah, yeah.

YW: So when you first started, what kind of people were you looking to hire? Or, did you have any kind of people in the Asian-American community here that fit—fitted your um skills?

WL: Well, actually when we started—actually, uh me and my wife were the one who make a team, you know? Of course she is study education. She get, she get the master degree in special ed, you know? She, she eh—both of us get into the uh you know I mean business until we expand, then we hire different people to help us. But that's about two years later. You know? So, when you start in the first two years, you have to do everything, basically. You have to deliver the paper, you have to go to press room, you have to, you know, do everything you know? That's the way you have to be. Yeah, yeah.

YW: So, two years later when you started hiring people, were there enough people to hire in the community?

WL: Yeah, I think so. They still have a lot of young...that graduate from—or some people, you know, they have experience. Yeah we could hire a lot of experienced people to help us. That's the only way you can make it roll you know, I mean. Any field, you need to have a professional, people who know how to handle. You know, yeah.

YW: Were they initially Asian Americans?

WL: Yes, yes. Mostly Asian Americans, of course, of course.

YW: So later on did you hire more um people from other ethnic groups? When you expanded?

WL: Yes, yes. We have all kinds...of course these days we're running television, printing, you know...I should say half and half—half Asian, half non-Asian. Yeah, yeah, that's right, yeah.

YW: Okay.

PW: Um. So you were talking about how you and your wife first started as partners. Does she still continue to help in...?

WL: Yes, yes, yes. She's still working in the company. Yeah, yeah. I think this is also her interest, hobby to be a part of it. You know yeah, you know I don't know. A lot of people get into the news media business; you know I mean... because we facing—everyday we're facing a new story. So, what else more exciting than news media business? So when you get into, you probably going to like it for your whole life unless you're really tired of it. You know, I mean, you know. Yeah.

YW: So, how did your clientele change over time? How did the composition of your customers, the ads change over time? Was it initially focused on the community and later on other businesses started doing ads in your newspaper?

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WL: Advertising. Uh, advertising is of course if our main source of income. I think the uh, my newspaper uh other media...you see like uh classified ads for instance, we probably 30% of our income is from classified ads. Classified ads is something the people uh really looking for the job, job looking for the people. Any newcomer come to Houston or any city in the—that publish the newspaper, the first thing they look at is the classified ads. You know, if you look at a lot of Hispanic markets, so many classified ad newspaper so successful because you know employment ad, you know, right? So, I get idea, I want newspaper, not just classified, just partial portion, very small portion. Like weekend, it's probably 80 page...classified ads only have like 6 page. So, rest 74 page we have 50% is content, something you can read you know, not just *Greensheet*, you know what I mean? That's what made our paper so successful. They not just look at classified ad, they can looking for world news, local news, community news, who's on the you know on the—what's going on.

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Those things really what people looking for, you know. So, my advertising keep on gaining momentum because a lot of new immigrants come in, certainly, especially after the 80's. Wow. A lot of Chinese immigrants come in, you know...although in those days, maybe we gonna be, something not gonna be working...but after '80, China open the door you know totally changing our business. So, today I should say 60% of readership is from new immigrants from China, you know.

YW: So, um I'm more interested in the more of the composition of the ads. Was it more—initially more ads in one particular industry and later on as new immigrants came in, they diversified their business so you started to see more ads in other businesses as well?

WL: Yes, that's true. Mostly of course some restaurant business the most, you know. Now we have so many ads: real estate, insurance, you know all kinds of—even the classified ads. You're right you know. So, more and more banking for instance. We have six Asian banks in—100% of those people are our customers. We have uh a lot of computer company, wholesale from Harwin St. This is more diversified, like a, like a—not like it used to just in restaurants. But these days, Asian business is more diversified in any kind of field. Yeah, yeah. That's true, that's true. So gives us a chance to expand our advertising area too. If you just limit it to restaurants, then we cannot get that many page of newspaper to publish. You true, that's right. Yeah.

PW: So another successful part of your news media group is your printing company right? Your USA Printing, and you als—you serve a lot of different languages in newspapers. How did you come in contact with those people?

WL: Well, a lot of publishers...we've met for many years. Let me tell you, in the publishing business, it's a little bit different from some other business. For instance, if you publish your paper, say weekly, the printer is your partner. If you don't have a good printer, like my experience, then people don't want to print for your delay, then you be out of business. So my business is as long you do a good job or right job, the people gonna repeat-unless they out of business. So, all those people will come out—come back, on a weekly basis...they may become on Wednesday, Thursday...they have to come back, unless they say I no longer going to print with you. So my philosophy is that I don't care if this job is small or big, even small like 3000, you know, I still doing for them because I have an experience, my own the big printer will not care about all this small publication, you know. But, we care! That's the reason we can keep on accumulate a lot of uh new customers uh you know, to come back. Of course uh, you know here's the thing. The price is also a major reason, you know. Sometimes, you know to make decision on publisher...how you're going to do it. But I should say a lot of uh small papers could survive because of us, simply because of economic reasons, right? I mean, if they walk in and say Mr. Lee, I want to print 3000. If I say no, they'd be out of business, because I, you know—but I never say no, you know? You know, I know this kind of economy, a lot of small community how they could afford that kind of volume? It's impossible. So, my philosophy is working. You know, we might, we might make a very small margin but we will keep our machine running, you know, that's, that's basic. The machine is expensive machine. You need to keep it running, you know, that's the way? So...you know a lot of publisher might appreciate what I'm doing for them, you know, yeah.

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PW: How might they reciprocate? In...for your care and your helping them in starting their own business. Do they reciprocate in any way?

WL: Uh, well, you see, here's the thing, I hate to say a lot of newspaper in and out...you know ou—, you know, some—somebody could be surviving, somebody, you know, they might only survive for six months you know. But lately, uh what we do. We organize a new organization called International Press Club, International Press Club. We already have more than 40 media together you know because I think a lot of small publisher including us, you know we need to work together as a, as a unity, group to target two reasons. Number one is uh meet the press.

(01:15:00)

You know, a lot of us, go to the mainstream to talk to the—a lot of VIP people; we need to meet you. Second of all, we need to work together to work on advertising, you know. For instance, if we go to some big company. Maybe if I write the letter, maybe they don't care. They say, 'Mr. Lee, you know you in Chinese paper...Asian.'

But if we have 40 then make a big difference, you know? That's why we need to turn around some of our thinking to work together to, to, to grow—to survive in another sense, especially in this economy slow down. This is one of the contributions that I think we have to the, uh, a lot of, a lot of media because we have the—the ability to organize this thing, to work together as a group.

YW: Okay. So, when did you start to see competition after you started your business?

WL: Competition every day, everywhere. You know we, in Houston, only uh Asian publication probably newspaper around, probably including Chinese, Vietnamese, more than 30 of them, 30 of them. Of course uh in order to compete you have to be on top, you know? Yeah. You have to be on the top. So, my newspaper should be on the top. You know, so the people want to advertise, first thing they call me, call my newspaper. You have to be on top of printing. I want to printing, maybe Mr. Lee be our—but in order to cope with all this competition, you need to build your foundation, you know, infrastructure, you know? Somebody...they cannot do but you can do it, you know, something like that. Competition is good, you know. I mean, if you don't have competition, everyone going to sit there, nothing will happen. Which is uh competition is to build all those economy you know running... you know China for instance have competition. Young people, oh...we want to make money, everyone want to make money. This is competition, you know. I mean, used to, everybody get the same pay, everybody—you know doing the same. So competition is not a bad thing, but in the long run, you have to be—keep it strong, you know you have to be—find a way to survive, to cut your costs, efficiency, you know all those factors will be—will be uh major things on how you can compete in the market. Yeah, we have a lot of competition, every day, every day. Yeah.

YW: Is there uh—do you remember a time when um other Chinese language newspapers in the community started to pick up?

WL: Yes, you know we have big national newspaper from Los Angeles. Let me tell you, in America, that's—we compete with the one of the uh *World Journal* from Los Angeles, you know, we compete with the *Singtao*, we compete with the, you know, some other local. But seems like I'm the only local, native one newspaper that survive nationwide; you know because uh *World Journal*, they're from Taiwan, you know, the *Chinese News* from China. All, all—they have a different background. I'm a—we are the only guys born in Houston, Texas. You know, that's a big difference. So uh they facing a lot of problems because uh all this competition with the internet, you know, everybody you know they are—they are cutting down, you know including the *Washington Post*, you know, I mean. But, uh, I consider I'm a local newspaper, I report on local—heavily on local, you know we do classified on local. You know, that's some advantage we have other than global, national newspaper. Yeah, that's another reason we need to get into television, we have to get into Internet, you know. You need to incorporate all this new media we call it, right? ...to be survive. If you keep on doing, just putting on the print, you know one day you know we're going to be obsolete or wipe out you know? Yeah, yeah.

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PW: So I know you started out your business with printing and newspaper, so what gave you the idea to expand to television and to yellow pages and such?

WL: Yes, uh I think the uh, as I mentioned before, the uh—way before 20 some years ago, when the internet came out, you know, I mean I remember that uh we, we've been ahead of everybody get into internet, our news. Uh you know in many years, actually when you look at the building I built next door, 10 years ago, I already ready for television business.

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I built high ceiling, the reason is that I want to be in television business, but never did have the chance, you know. The technology won't allow me to do it because analog, when you open the TV you can't get a signal unless you doing the cable, but how you going to be in cable? I mean, NBC is a billion-dollar business, they have all...you know. Until last year, June 16, we began digitize our television channels all over United States. You remember the government give you a little bit converter box so that you can see the TV. That probably, that's the... you need opportunity—the biggest chance we have starting our last June 16, we began 24 hour, 7 days a week television station. I've been waiting for ten years, you know what I mean? It's not something happen like, like uh one year ago, it's been 10 years ago I been foresee, I'm going into the television business. But finally we did it, we did it. You know, our television program will be seen by a lot of Chinese families, we have local news, we—pretty soon we're going to have 60 minutes—I mean television, I mean live talk show on the, um, on the television. So this television thing will really...let me go to next step of media business, you know. I'm not going to just depend on the print media, you know I'm going to be—get into the television, uh you know, or internet of course. That's another thing. So, again my goal is that—my vision is that to build this television network in maybe next many years in different cities. So my dream is that we can—I can have at least six or seven city networking my television thing, you know...maybe we should be able to do something differently, you know, because television. You know these days electronic things, uh Internet is electronic, is uh much, much easier than Houston, right? I mean we could produce one show, put on the rest of the country, it's not that big deal. Again, there is competition too. If we didn't start earlier, someone come to compete with us. You have to be start earlier so when you getting strong, the people—can gonna challenge you. This is free enterprise. Everybody could be coming to challenge you. You know? That's why my goal is that to get into next step to be in television business, to be electronic, to be yellow page, all those, everything be on the internet, called new media, you know? That's the whole idea, you know we're going to get into it, yeah.

PW: In your television, you have a couple of—you said you have diverse array of shows, you have shows from China and shows from Taiwan. How do you get license to use those shows?

WL: We pay for it, royalties.

PW: Okay.

WL: We pay for, all the shows we pay for. You know we have to...this is uh something. Also, the uh...as I mentioned, most important part is our local news, local news, that of course, we do not have that much ability to do a lot of local talk show yet. My—our goal is to in the future we're going to broaden our news coverage, to talk about the issue with the uh general public, you know general—I mean, we as Asian Americans we have a lot of issue never heard about, you know. People don't pay attention to us until now we have television. We could invite mayor, county judge come to in front of the television camera ask him a lot of question. They care because the camera is uh you know, the television gonna care right away. You know? So uh, this is one of the area I feel very, very good about what we can do for our community. At least we have a direct communication with all these politicians. Yeah.

PW: Could you clarify what you mean by issues, or give us a couple of examples?

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WL: Issues, very simple. You know, I mean, it could be uh discrimination right? Could be education, could be uh you know a lot of uh issue we never ask the mayor...for instance why uh, uh you know we don't have enough share on the uh—a lot of things, hiring the people, you know, why we, we, we don't have that many Asian working for the city for instance. You know all those issues is our issues because we are the tax payers, we need to be uh—have equal treatment for any other organization. All other people say, oh you Asian probably already better off, you have a high income, but we still have a lot of people that's not high income. They are suffering, you know, you know what I mean? All those things, so we going to incorporate all those topics into television. We have a lot of good host like Elsie Wang, she used to be Asian Chamber President, you know. She's a good interviewer, you know bilingual you know. We could put on the television.

(01:25:01)

This is a lot of things we could do now, not like we used to, yeah.

YW: Do you hire your people locally?

WL: Yes. Mostly locally, definitely, definitely, yeah. We, uh, we have a reporter locally. Of course you know we are not big enough yet to carry...to, to, to carry that many topic but we're starting slowly. As soon as we get on the live talk show, probably that's going to change. Yeah, yeah.

YW: Um you spoke about giving the opportunity for city officials, etcetera, politicians to communicate to the Asian community through your television channels etcetera. Before your um television channel came into existence, how did the politicians in Houston communicate with the Asian community?

WL: Uh through the newspaper interview, but it's so limited right? Because some newspaper, they don't read Chinese for instance. But on television, we could speak bilingual. You see, I have this uh—last November, all the four mayor candidate come to our studio to have a debate, you see, this never happen before! You know they come into our studio and have a debate with each other. You know, could be talking about some other issue but at least in front of our audience. You know what I mean? We have a—this is a very important thing because that way, immediately all these politicians could pay attention on our issues. Yeah.

YW: So, you also started uh the Southern... Southwestern Bank at some point? Um and you mentioned at the event in China you spoke about in order to have a successful newspaper business, you had to have some kind of business backing it up. So that's the reason why you started the bank. So how did the bank come to complement your business?

WL: Okay. We, we start this bank about...13 years ago...actually wait it's 16. You know uh, I have a group of us, four of us organize that bank from scratch. You know, uh, banking is very important business in America of course. Uh, who else can let you come in to...somewhere to start the bank? Only America can do that; if you go to China, go to Japan, there's no such thing... you going to start the bank right? I mean you know. But this is the beauty of this country you know, when you start the bank you don't really put out that much capital. The reason the government want you to start the bank is service to community, so we, we, we, we organize this bank with, uh, the—very little money, you know, of course...you know until now we have a holding company. We own two banks—one is in Las Vegas, called Nevada National Bank, one's the Southwest National Bank.

YW: Okay. How much capital did you raise initially for this, for this bank?

WL: Eight million.

YW: Eight million? Okay.

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WL: But today, our asset total is about over \$400 million. Of course, we're still a small bank, but we service the community. I think the, uh, if you talk about the uh the business, banking is something you can go straight to your community to help community people. You know create the um the business. Uh, when we start this bank, you know we never thought about how Houston economy going to go, you know thing. Of course, in this day, economy's in downturn, but we still doing okay, the reason is we only service to those small business you know. We're not big enough to go to sub-prime issue or we don't have those issues, you know? I mean, this is very important. So, even today, we're still making money, a money making bank. So, uh, the people invest \$200,000 thirteen years ago, everybody become millionaire today. Everybody become. Of course it's been 13 years, you know. In other words, our value, you know. Okay. So it's pretty good, it's pretty good, you know. Yeah, so the banking business is a highly regulated business by the government you know? I mean, not because you have money, you can open a bank, you know. They check your background and everything.

So we are very proud. This is one of the very important community service thing, you know. Like we have one credit union, Lee's Credit Union, Lee's Credit union, I give them a free space. Of course Lee's Credit Union is much smaller; same thing they function as a bank, you know. So, uh, on, on the banking business, uh you know, uh, it's something, uh, you know, you look at it in America. Banking uh...you know the people see you a banker they pay a certain respect right? Banker may be little bit related to you have money! [laughs] Yeah. But, uh, I should say in Houston alone we have six Asian banks in this area.

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Our combined asset, probably I should say should be over 3, 3 billion...3 or 4 billion, which is pretty good size you know...very good size, you know. The reason we can keep this area still growing because all these community bank helping the people, you know? So, uh, in last many years, our, our bank in this area really, really doing something the people never thought about, you know. A lot of people from Los Angeles from Orange County, they come here they need the capital to start their own business, more restaurant; that's the way we look at to help the local people, yeah.

YW: When you first started, how many Asian banks were servicing the community?

WL: About, uh...four; about four already. Yeah, see, a lot of them have been here for more than 20 years, 20, 25 year. Yeah...I'm talking about community bank, not including the Wells Fargo those; yeah...

YW: So, what kind of business do you lend money to the most? What's your major clients?

WL: Okay, Okay...we lend money to the people who want to buy the shopping center, want to buy a hotel, a small hotel, open a restaurant, you know, car, real estate, everything. We're consumer oriented. You know, I mean all kinds. Uh, you know, anybody can be our customer, yeah.

YW: When you first started the bank did you have any professional bankers with you?

WL: Oh, yeah, yeah... We hired professional people to manage the bank. We as the board members, board of directors, we set the policy but we have uh professional, uh, people running the bank of course. Yes, yes—the management team.

YW: Did the management team come from within the Asian community or did you have to go out there and find qualified people to...

WL: No. Our president is non-Asian you know. We have a lot of Asians, mostly you know loan officers, you know teller, or you know...especially loan officer they, they, they—partially because they more understand what's going on the community. You know, sometimes you have to know people in the community, you know, yeah. That's what make it a little bit different you know. If you work in a lot of big bank, the first thing they're going to look at is

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financial report, you know credit report, tax return, you know a lot of things. You know, we, we understand a lot of Asian people probably, they do not have that much complete financial thing, but they, they in good faith, they in good credit, you know. That, that, that's the reason these small banks could still doing business you know? Yeah.

YW: And how did you, you and your partners come together at the beginning? What was the occasion for you guys to come together and start this bank?

WL: This was many years ago, about 20 some years ago. We were in the same board member on Golden Bank, that's Texas First National Bank many years ago. And then of course I left that bank and you know that time we only have a small piece of uh stock holding, you know. So, we left. I left about 1991. So many years later, I met my colleagues at the same seat of the board, so I said why don't we start another bank? That's the reason we, we said maybe you know, we could, we could—we have a little bit experience in the banking business. Those days, since 1989, uh for three years we sit on the board of that bank. So many years later...you know that time Houston was experiencing a very bad economy in the mid-'80. The [...] is empty, you know. So we left that bank until we—I met him uh many years later and said, oh maybe we should start another bank. That's how we started. Yeah, yeah.

YW: When did you start going into the banking business? 'Cause you were pretty focused in the printing business, when did you start thinking about going into the banking industry?

WL: Well, the banking is that we have a board member to organize. We really don't go day to day, you know. We hire somebody to do day to day. We just set the policy, we just raise the capital, all those things. We really don't need to spend that much time day to day to watch it. Otherwise...without sleep you probably cannot do it. So, it's a policy the government wants you to set, say this is the board member, you set the policy, let the management team to run the business, day to day business, yeah. So we don't want to interrupt day to day business. We—who they hire those things. What we do want to know...can they make money for us or not? [Laughs] We need to read the report. Yeah.

YW: How did the bank complement? Because you sat on the board of the bank, how did the bank complement your printing business?

(01:35:03)

WL: We get the dividend right? If you make money you get dividend. You see if you're on the board they pay you [...]. Of course we get paid, you know.

YW: Was there any other way that maybe the...your industry—your business in industry helped your printing business or like your...

WL: No, no, no, no, no, no! That's a two different things. This is a very straight line we draw. If I borrow the money from my bank, we treat it as anybody else, even more stricter. Because the government don't want you to get the money to—and you use the money to do your own business. That's what happen in a lot of Asian countries. You know, oh you open the bank! All the money coming in so you do. [Laughs] No, no, no! No such thing. This is the-something uh very strict for the government. They, they look at all the paperwork. You know, I mean, they, examine all the paperwork, yeah. That's why the uh...make this country banking system more healthy than the rest of the world. I think this is a very important point. Yes, yes, yeah.

YW: So, did your previous reputation doing business in the Asian community help uh your bank grow? Cause you already have...

WL: That's right. That's right. That's right. Definitely, it's a...its a help. Mainly the uh whoever we borrow the money to, uh, a lot of people probably already my client in the newspaper you know. We could refer to our bank but in the meantime, we will, we will know how this guy doing you know, I mean; how his credit, you know? I mean

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sometimes uh in the banking business you know if somebody—some wealthy people probably they don't pay you back. Some poor guy, they work like hell to pay you back, they want to keep their credit! You know, credit's the name of the game, you know. A lot of time, you look at the credit score, if uh say less than 550, we throw away, we cannot! You know we cannot just can accommodate those people who don't have credit! You know, they don't pay you back! You know, how you, how you going to be dealing with that? So credit is the key, you know yeah. That people have the credit is the key. Yeah.

YW: What's maybe the major credit need for the community, the Asian community here that you serviced?

WL: You know, we need a lot of uh people want to start the business when they have...say I want to start the restaurant for instance. You know, we don't have enough collateral, you know, restaurant, restaurant, if close down restaurant probably that equipment probably cost you \$200,000 to remodel the restaurant. When the restaurant close, probably you have to pay somebody to move out your equipment, right? So this is a major issue in our community. If the people don't have enough collateral or real estate something, they cannot get a loan from the bank. We cannot make a loan. If we make a loan, the government will come in to criticize, say Mr. Lee why you make this loan? This guy don't have enough credit, you know. They going to blame on us. So, I think the uh—when the times are good, no problem, you know. People, you know, have money to pay you back. But when the, when the times are tough, they are not going to be able to, to pay you back. So we really need to have uh some back-up, you know, to see how we can help more people to start their own business without having a lot of down payment, you know, in other words. You know, yeah. So, SBA will be one of the route the government guarantee loan; we do someday. You know, SBA come in and say, oh you're guaranteed for 80% or some other you know thing, or somebody co-sign, or something you know. That may be some solution. Otherwise, even we want to make a loan sometimes we get criticize from, from the OCC. They are very strict, you know, yeah.

Probably that's all the questions you want to ask me huh? Any others? [laughs]

PW: We wanted to move on to your community involvement. You were also involved in the International Medical Center and the Harris County Hospital District Foundation, could you tell us a little bit about your role?

WL: Okay. Let, let me, let me give you a several...my non-profit involvement. I give you a little bit more list of what I'm in. I'm on the Interna-, International Management District board. I'm a chair of that board Okay? I'm in the Harris County Hospital District Foundation board member. I'm on the, uh, Houston Urban League board member, you know, which is you know...that's a Black you know organization. I'm on the International Festival Foundation board. I'm on the Asian Society board. I'm on a lot of boards. You know, all those things are non-profit, all those things non-profit.

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Of course my biggest challenge these days is the International Management District because I'm head of this district. I try to be changing the perception of how people look at Houston. I mean, simply, the people come to Houston to visit. Houston is you know uh oil, energy, cowboy, those things, but they don't know, we are the most diversified community in America. If you look at the Alief School District, you know? So many students from maybe 100 country, you know. We, we are diversified, so we want to create this International District as a, as a...not just as a tourist spot to show the people how we work in this community. Two things I'm working on. Number one: I, I try to create this called International Park, as I mentioned to you, International Park; it's very important. We have different country which have representative...see, in Houston, we have so many sister city associations. They have a lot of things they could do in the district. They could set up garden, you know in Portland, Oregon, they have this beautiful Chinese garden thing, but we don't have none, I mean zero in this area. Second of all, we try to create more opportunity, job opportunity for, for a lot for people, probably create some city guarantee job for a guarantee project, you know? We could build some... some of the um amusement park or something. I was talking to one company in China. They have London show, you know light show... light... light show, beautiful, you know. They are, currently

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they're on Toronto, Canada, you know? They could, they might, they might build some base in this area, amusement park, you know something creative. Uh, we, we definitely identify a lot of culture thing. You know, we have so many temples, you know we have so many you know culture related thing, you know. We want create a little bit pamphlet, on the website, you know let the people know what we can do for International District. Of course, this trade center will bring a lot of who's who come to this district to talk about business. You know to, to conduct business, to be business to business. Uh, after China summit, we're going to set up called China Business Information Center right here. So continuously, you know... the you know... I think if you look at that, if-t he Houstonian, all the Houstonian have the same thinking as I do, right? Everybody chip in a little bit, we'll make this city great! That's what happen in China. I was telling the guy, if you go to China when you sit down at dinner table, after dinner the guy say hey Mr. Lee I give you, I give you some land, you want to invest in an account, right? I mean, this is something really drive the all Chinese economy keep on growing, you know. But, our politician don't do that. They come to Houston, mayor say sorry, I don't have budget to buy you dinner. So we need to change, we need to change. I keep on telling the...we need to learn a lot of thing from China. How this government officer really mobilize the people coming to be part of this economy activity! Yeah, you know. That's why we try to see if we can set up this type of model in our district. The people come in, we are going to say hey, you want to do this, you want to do that? Something, you know. That's why my goal is that—to see we can be one of the force to drive on this thing. Yeah. So, you know. Non-profit, you know things, organization is great. You know, great! But sometimes, doesn't help that much. You know, yeah, the people just want you to keep writing the check.

YW: How did you get on uh the board of so many organizations? Did you have to go...or did they come looking for you?

WL: Yeah, they come looking for us. Most of them, they come looking for us. Also the uh...China has the CCPIT, in Chinese 中国贸促会. That's the largest trade organization. Last month I receive the letter, they want me to be on the board, the board in China, you know. I surprised...why, why did they want me, because the probably find out something I did for Africa Summit, you know. You know who was on the board? All those big guys: Li Jiacheng (Li Ki-shing 李嘉诚), you know, Huo Yingdong (Fok Ying Tung 霍英东), all of them on the board. That CCPIT is a...since 1956...that's uh actually a government organization. They organize so who's who around the world, all the Chinese. You know, they are the first one who went to China to invest, you know, 中国贸促会...that's the biggest...yeah. So, I'm proud to be part of this board member, but uh maybe I could bring some who's who come to Houston. [Laughs] To do, you know, to see what...you know, yeah.

YW: Just out of curiosity, with your Taiwan background, did you encounter any trouble when you are doing business with the Mainland Chinese?

(01:45:03)

WL: No. I don't think so. I don't think so. Yeah, I think...China and Taiwan, these days relationship is you know very cordially. So, I'm Chinese...uh you know I was living in Taiwan but I was originally Chinese. This is a politically very sensitive issue. But, I don't see any problem because we're here, you know, we just try to best interest for everybody. That's most important. Yeah, yeah.

YW: And, also within the community did you notice any difference maybe in like how each group functions? Do they do things differently, or... ?

WL: Yeah, yeah I know but we have a lot of organization that's different groups like from Taiwan they have...organization...China, but we, we as a newspaper person, we, we, we...we contact both you know...whatever news. We, we as I told you, my readership 60% uh Chinese from Mainland China. We even have one simplified Chinese newspaper, you know...简体字报, you know, yeah. So we're okay, we're okay. You know, we, we think this is a very, very important uh opportunity for all of us to work together as a, as a, as a Chinese as a whole. So no problem, no-no problem...

YW: No problem?

WL: No problem. Yeah. A lot of our workers from China, you know we have no, no problem; yeah, no problem.

YW: Okay. Um...also just kind of a general question, because you mentioned also the economic downturn both right now and also in the 1980 after the oil shock. How did that impact your business and how did you put into measures to deal with the problem?

WL: You see, you probably...you probably don't see that many people running the same business for 30 years, right? In this country, average business, after 5 or 6 years either you go IPO or you sell it to somebody, right? So, my business been experience good time and bad time, you know? But as a newspaper media business, you know, that's a neutral thing you know because I don't see...of course when the economy really go down, it will affect our advertising revenue, but as I mentioned, our paper is a little bit more unique than some other paper because certainly we have so many new immigrant come in, okay? That will make up you know a lot of things. So, uh, I should say that the- when, when you in the downturn, you probably need to be little more conservative, to watch out what you are doing or spending your money. When the good time, but don't even spend too fast, you know, I mean, you have to be you know in the banking business, most of the bankers very conservative you know. They don't want to lend you know money to somebody and you don't get it back, you know. So my, my philosophy is that you know when you in the tough times, you know, you, you, you know don't really...you have to watch more closely on what you do budget wise, you know. So we, we, we still you know still okay for many years of business...30 years of business. You probably know how to handle a lot of things you know. But again, you know, I have a very good team to help me to manage that many departments. Each department has own managing team, you know, otherwise cannot oversight everything. You know. Good personnel will help you, you know to, to manage a lot of things. Yeah.

YW: Did you notice any...how the downturn impacted the business around you? Do you have any recollection of that?

WL: Oh yeah, yeah. You know, I mean like um. I remember 1980, you know, you know...everywhere is for lease sign, a lot of real estate foreclose, you know I mean, you know. This is a sad, of course since then Houston become-you know in that time we were dependent on 16%, 18% on energy business. Since that time we change our call, you know what I mean? But these days, for Houston, the reason better than the rest of the country is because we have a very unique business, like uh energy business, you know so uh that's why make a little bit different. If you look at the Middle East, you know...I mean Midwest, you know, all those areas, you know, you know they will be suffer more than Houston, you know.

(01:50:02)

PW: Well, since you've been so successful in everything that you've tried to accomplish, what do think distinguishes you from other Chinese American businessmen in the area?

WL: Well I'm not saying I'm so successful, but I think the—one of the things, I think I feel, uh...every night before I go to bed, I think the one thing is that I came looking for something next day interesting to do. You know, I mean, I never lost interest, you know, because in newspaper business, you know, I still writing my own column. I do everything everyday differently. I mean, the, the most important thing we proud of is that we do quite a few non-profit things for this community. You know, a lot of people might have a lot of money, they're so wealthy but they never thought about to, to spend their energy or money in the non-profit way. You know what I mean? This is why...we want to see all our, you know, our community people need pay more attention on the non-profit organization to help the people, you know. A lot of people need help, you know what I mean? When you become certain stage, it's not, not you know...making money is very important but that's not only reason you are on, on this earth, you know to do that. So, I think that my philosophy is that unless you really better off, you know otherwise

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how can you have the ability to help somebody? So you have to build your own first, you know...I mean, otherwise, it's just empty slogan, you know what I mean?

So ...! Uh think in last 35 years I came to America, I mean we start the business or whatever here. We think this country is very few country in the world could provide anybody opportunity, right? So one day if you make something from...because of the opportunity here, so you should pay back to you know to this society. So, that's my philosophy. So, uh more and more young generation understand we need to be getting into politics, we need to be getting into... you know this is a good sign, a good sign. Like my daughter, my son, they're all born here, they got good education. You know, this is something I don't think everybody have such an opportunity, you know what I mean? China, look at China. China is booming but if you look at rural area, a lot of still have young kids, they, they just, you know, don't have equal opportunity, you know. Yeah. But uh, I think most important thing is...I always remind me so you know if whatever you can do...you know just try your best- try your best, yeah, to see if you can help some other people. You know. Yeah.

YW: And, I think I have one more question? Um did you—, I'm wondering, did you notice any differences in the way Chinese and Chinese Americans conduct business versus other groups like Caucasian people conduct business in your business dealings, did you find any subtle differences, things you had to be mindful of?

WL: Yes. You know, uh, I've been paying a lot of attention, because- maybe because in the banking business, I've been looking at a lot of loan application. You know if you look at the uh Houston; if you look at a lot of big supermarket, it's owned by Chinese, Vietnamese, you know basically the Chinese. The reason so successful you know because two reasons: hard working is a basic; second thing is that they have a big family. You know...I mean, you know, when in the tough time, they don't have to make a payroll. Right? You know what I mean? [Everyone laughs] How you can beat on that? The people help each other...they don't have to come to the bank. Maybe everyone put down \$50,000 cash, you know, 10 of them have half a million dollar and you start the business, right? We call...hui [来会] I don't know how you know...so the people just could organize, mobilize them. So trust, uh credit is a main thing. You know the people borrow the money from bank, they pay back. But a lot of people they don't, they don't think that way. Oh, I'm going to go to fancy place, open big store on Westheimer. Business no good, they close down, they bye-bye. That's it. I mean a lot of Chinese American or Asian they make it survive. If a restaurant don't have business, husband and wife could be the cook right? They're going to make it survive. So, this is something the character, is make a, make a big decision. So we need to in this country, we need to have more and more new immigrant come in to support all this activity going on.

(01:55:04)

If you look at a lot of European country they go down, Greece, all those countries...hey, they have no new immigrant. Right? Not like America, still have a lot of new immigrant. I should say, uh, 70% of these days...small business, small business I'm talking about...is owned by new immigrants. So, that will tell you why a lot of Asian Americans they can survive, because this is the only chance they have. You know, yeah.

PW: Do you feel like we missed anything that you didn't tell us?

WL: [Chuckles] Well, I've been talking a lot, but no, basically you know that's all. So this—this how many people you going to interview?

[NOTE: Here Mr. Lee asks a couple of questions about our usage of the material and about the Chao Center. He informs us that he will be donating copies of his newspapers for the past 30 years to the Chao Center and hopes that it will 'summarize' what the community has done over the past thirty years. Mr. Lee also expressed his appreciation to Rice University for giving him the opportunity to participate in various programs and hosting his China summit. He said he will continue to work with the school of business and continue his regional themed summits. Please refer to the original audio recording for exact wordings]

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

WL: Well, one of the areas that uh I still want to say that uh I'm really appreciate in my whole life I come to America, become an American citizen. I think this is uh the right choice I did. You know, I think the uh—if after I college graduate, if I didn't come to America, of course my life will change in total. You know but uh...I'm not complain...My, my, my, my whole career, you know we still fighting, you know a lot of new things will happen, especially in the new media...talking about television. We hope that uh one day we could be getting better, you know I mean more service to our community and nationwide, that's our goal. I hope that we will be...in my whole career will be, will be, will be with the print media and electronic media, that's the whole plan. We're working on. Yeah.

YW: Thank you very much for talking with us...

WL: Thank you...

(01:58:00)

Interview Ends