

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Beck Gee (BG)

Interviewer: Daisy Gee (DG)

Date of Interview: 1980s

Transcribed by: Ariel Heiblum

Audio Track Time: 28:52

Interview Summary:

This interview of Beck Gee dealt with his life, starting with his birth in China, his time living in various parts of the US (especially Houston), his time in military service, his education, his family, and his religious and political practices among others.

[0:00:22] DG: How long have you lived in Houston Mr. Gee?

BG: I've been here since 1936, right after I came back from the service.

DG: Where did you live before?

BG: Before I went into the air force I was living in Mississippi.

DG: Where were you born?

BG: I was born in China, in Kwangtung province.

DG: When did your family move to the United States?

BG: Actually I came here by myself when I was nine years old to join my grandparents.

[0:00:01.7] BG: When I also was pretty willing that is.

DG: Where did you live before you came to Houston?

BG: In New Orleans

DG: How long did you stay in New Orleans?

BG: From 1931 to 1934. Actually, I didn't come to Houston until after the war. From 1931 to 1934 I lived in New Orleans and then from '34 until 1942 I lived in Mississippi.

DG: What did you do in Mississippi?

BG: I went to school for a little while and then I mostly worked for a relative in a grocery store.

DG: Why would Chinese go to Mississippi?

BG: I don't really know for sure, but it seems that Chinese are spread all over the country. Most of the people in Mississippi, the Chinese people in Mississippi were running grocery stores at the time I was there.

[0:01:55.6] DG: Then you moved to Houston in what year?

BG: I was drafted into the service in 1942, and I was in the service for four years, and I came to Houston in '46, the early part of 1946.

DG: How did you get here?

BG: I was, you mean by what method, I came on a bus from my discharge in Mississippi. I was discharged from Ken Shabby (??)

DG: Who came with you to Houston?

BG: I came alone, and Joyce, his wife, in June of the same year. She arrived from England.

DG: Why did you come to Houston?

BG: Because there were quite a number of Gee's here, at the time. I came to join relatives, cousins.

DG: Can you name a few of them?

[0:02:43.0] BG: You know, uh, actually I came to Mr. Jee Jim Toy (Martha Wong's father) Ju Vin Kwon, and there were Ms. Bow Quan a lady from Mississippi, and then Ms. Eugena Ton and her own from Mississippi, and then there's the George Gee family from Arkansas, and then I think (...) (?) Gordon Gee, and then Harry Gee, Harry Gee Sr. that is.

DG: Did you have Chinese friends here at that time also?

BG: No, such as friends. The reason I came here was because of the Gee's rather than friends.

DG: Who did you stay with when you first arrived?

[0:03:32.8] BG: I stayed with Miss Virginia Kwon (?) while helping in a grocery store.

DG: What were your first impressions of Houston?

BG: Well, it was just a large, growing city and it seemed to show a lot of promise.

DG: What was it like for you? the town?

BG: It was just big, and I felt like, my wife and I felt like we preferred to live in a city rather than a small Mississippi town.

DG: Do you know how many Chinese lived here at that time?

BG: No, I'd have to just guess, but perhaps 1500 to 2000.

DG: Do you remember any major problems because there were so few Chinese here at the time?

BG: I personally didn't encounter any problems.

DG: What kind of job opportunities did you find when you first arrived here?

BG: I found a job at Gideon's (?) Photography and I stayed with him for six months and then I opened my own grocery store.

DG: Were there many Chinese grocery stores at that time?

BG: I don't know an exact number, but it seems most of the Chinese people in Houston were making a living from grocery stores, from operating small, corner grocery stores.

[0:04:52.7] DG: Were there many Chinese restaurants?

BG: Not as many as there are today. In fact I don't remember any at that time.

DG: Can you name a few of these businesses?

BG: (?) Kwon and then there's a Kwon Luk in the middle part of Houston, on Samson street I believe, and then there's Lennon's on Roar, LIMS on W Dallas Street, and then there's a Gee Family store on Lyons Avenue. And I believe there was (...) on Jensen Drive that was operated by Albert and Jane. And then the Gee's on Market Street, that's Josie Gee's family store on Market Street, and members, all the members, but I can't remember the names at the moment.

[0:05:44.1] DG: Did you know a Chinese person working for an American company at that time?

BG: No, I'm only (...) Charlie. He was a good architect but he was the only person I knew at the time

DG: How did you find your first job here?

BG: I went to the employment agencies, and they fill in the job beginnings.

DG: After you quit Gideon, you opened your grocery store.

BG: Yes, I stayed with Gideon for six months and I opened my own grocery store.

DG: Where was the grocery store located?

BG: I was in the heights on Whitman Street, a small, corner grocery store, and we stayed there for many years until I decided to take a job.

[0:06:43.2] DG: How did you get to and from work at that time?

BG: Well because we lived behind the store so I didn't have any traveling to do.

DG: What year did you say you arrived in Houston?

BG: 1946

DG: Can you name some family that came to Houston from '46 to '50?

BG: I think in 1948 the George Bo Linn about 1948. I can't remember other people. I'm sure they arrived but I can't think of any at the moment.

DG: How about some family that came 1950's to 1960's?

BG: I can't think of any names right off.

DG: From 60's to 70's?

BG: I should've got it (?)

DG: 1970 to now, what class of Chinese are coming in more than ever?

BG: ...the rural immigrants to the city of Houston, but there are more Chinese who seem to be well educated people and professionals, the engineers, the doctors, and so forth.

BG: Walked to Taiwan, the Taiwanese

DG: Where were you, or who did you marry?

BG: I married a girl when I was in the service in England. She was (?) her mother was English and her father was Chinese.

DG: Where were you married, and when?

BG: We were married in 1944 in England, in Birkinghead, England.

DG: How many children did you have?

BG: We had one son.

DG: Where was he born?

BG: Our son was born in Hong Kong in China.

DG: What is his name?

BG: His name is Steven Albert Gee.

DG: Tell me about his education.

BG: He is currently going to University of Houston, major in business.

DG: Where did your parents come from?

BG: My parents never came to this country. They stayed in China. I came here to join my grandparents, who are both dead now.

DG: Are they still living?

BG: Both my parents are dead.

[0:09:36.1] DG: What were your grandparents names?

BG: His name was Gee Hen. H E N you spell it. My grandfather mhm.

DG: Do you remember anything about them?

BG: Not a great deal. He was an laundry man in Louisiana. He had a laundry.

DG: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

BG: No

DG: What are their names? Oh you don't have any.

BG: Not that I know of.

DG: Why did you stay in Houston?

BG: Because we liked living in Houston.

DG: Where did you go to school? Did you say?

BG: I went to school, grade school, in New Orleans and very briefly in Mississippi. I didn't have any high school, then I went into the service, and I came back to Houston and I went to a prep school in Houston, and the rest of the time in the University of Houston, and I achieved the (?).

DG: How many years of school did you go?

BG: I had about 5 years of grade school and then I took the GED test to get a high school equivalency, and then I had two years at the University of Houston and two years in the Professional Life school.

[0:11:15.7] DG: Did your parents have any kind of education?

BG: My parents when they came to this country they had some education, living in China.

DG: Do you know anything about your grandparents' education?

BG: (?) my momma said she didn't have any education. My grandfather had whatever education was afforded to them at that time.

DG: Why didn't your grandmother have any education?

BG: They didn't believe in educating the girls in China.

DG: What do you remember about your school days?

BG: My school days in New Orleans? Not very much. I can still remember the area where I went to school in the French quarters, but it's nothing different from any other grade school at that time.

DG: How do you feel about the quality of education in Texas and in Houston?

BG: Well unfortunately I haven't kept in touch with it since my son graduated from grade school and high school. I feel that there is a need for improvement.

DG: What kind of improvement?

BG: I personally believe in a better use of the education facilities. I would like to see a twelve month school year. And I would like to see a better quality of teachers. From some personal encounters with friends with children, conversations with friends who have children going to grade school and listening to some of the complaints that level of teachers, quality is not as good as it should be.

[0:13:10.4] DG: Was your educational opportunities as good as your son's? Was it better, or worse?

BG: I think it's just as good, it's just that I didn't take advantage of it. I didn't have the opportunity to take advantage of as much as my son has.

DG: How can you stress the importance of education to your son?

BG: Actually, with our son we didn't have to stress too much because he seemed to know the value of education without us impressing on him.

DG: Did you encourage him to enter a profession?

BG: Yes, we certainly did.

[0:13:51.6] DG: What is your religious preference?

BG: We are Protestant. We've gone to the Chinese Baptist Church.

DG: Is your religion the same as your parents'?

BG: Umm...

DG: What were your parents?

BG: My parents were Buddhist I suppose as a lot of people in that area of China would be.

DG: Has your son followed your religion?

BG: He is also a member of the Chinese Baptist Church.

DG: Did you go to church regularly?

BG: We have until recently. We have not been attending in a week, but we do try to go regularly.

DG: Are you a member of the church?

BG: Yes, I said previously I'm a member of the Chinese Baptist Church.

DG: Do you contribute financially to your church?

BG: Yes.

DG: Are you actively involved in church activities?

BG: No, at the moment no.

DG: What church do you think most Chinese in Houston belong to?

BG: The Chinese Baptist Church.

DG: Do you think the Chinese born members of the church still maintain some previous beliefs and customs from the religion they now belong to?

BG: I would haphazard a guess that some of them must do.

DG: Do you vote?

BG: Yes.

DG: Did you vote in the last city elections?

BG: Yes.

DG: State elections?

BG: Yes. We vote in all the elections, except the primary.

DG: Do you go to political meetings?

BG: No.

DG: How about party meetings?

BG: No.

DG: Have you ever run for public office?

BG: No.

DG: Can you tell me why not many Chinese run for public offices?

BG: No, I can't. I suppose the number of Chinese in the city of Houston is such a minority that those who want to run do not feel that there would be more support.

DG: Would you encourage any prominent, qualified, capable Chinese to run for some kind of public office?

BG: Yes I would.

[0:16:16.4] DG: Do you speak any other language besides English?

BG: A sort of village Cantonese that I learned as I was growing up in China.

DG: What language or languages did your parents speak?

BG: Cantonese

DG: How about your son?

BG: He speaks only English.

DG: Did you attend any schools to learn other languages?

BG: No.

DG: Did your parents put any emphasis on speaking the Chinese language?

BG: No, because that problem didn't come up since I came to this country.

DG: How did you learn English?

BG: By attending American schools.

DG: Did you have any problems learning English?

BG: No.

DG: What do you do in your leisure time?

BG: Joyce, my wife, and I enjoy bowling. We bowl in a league. And I'm a hobby photographer. I take pictures for fun. Go out on sketching (?) trips, occasionally go to the beach.

DG: Do you attend any classes now?

BG: No.

DG: You already told about your hobbies, are there any other hobbies that you have?

BG: No.

DG: Do you socialize with your neighbors?

BG: No.

DG: Do you socialize with your working associates?

BG: Rarely.

DG: Do you socialize with your relatives?

BG: Also on occasions.

DG: Do you belong to any community clubs that are mostly Caucasian?

BG: No. The only club that I belong to that's Caucasian is the bowling league. They're all Caucasians. We were in the Chinese cup for a (?).

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese club or organization?

BG: I belong to the Chinese American Citizens Alliance and the Chinese Professional Club.

DG: Do you know who started the Chinese Professional Club?

(?)

BG: His name is K. T. Chen, the first president of the CACA.

DG: How about the Chinese Professional Club?

BG: I couldn't remember who. The Chinese Professional Club was originally called the Chinese Intercollegiate Association and it was started in the University of Houston around the year 1952. It was supposed to be only for students who were going to college. Now, as the students graduated, it gradually developed into the Chinese Professional Club.

DG: Are you active in business now?

BG: Not in any business. I went to a business.

DG: What is your present profession?

BG: Commercial artist. I had been working for a department store called Battestein until two weeks ago I changed jobs and now I'm working for (?)

[0:19:49.9] DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?

BG: Occasionally.

DG: How often?

BG: Not very often. Maybe once a month.

DG: For what occasion?

BG: To buy Chinese groceries, and sacks of rice, and cook specialties.

DG: Do you ever go to the Chinese theater?

BG: No, I haven't been yet.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese opera?

BG: No.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

BG: Not very much.

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese culture?

BG: Um, not really.

DG: Do you think the future Chinese younger generation has lost some of their Chinese culture?

BG: Yes.

DG: What kind? How?

BG: I don't think they're that interested in traditional things that the Chinese, the parents have.

DG: Do you think they ought to uphold some Chinese culture?

BG: Yes I think they should.

DG: Which one especially?

BG: Well, I can't state an explicit one, but I think that some of the old traditions should be kept up. I can't think (?).

DG: Have you travelled to China?

BG: No, I haven't been back since I came to this country.

DG: Do you have any future plans to go back?

BG: I would like to go back to visit. Yes.

[0:21:29.1] DG: Would you like your son to visit China?

BG: Yes I would.

DG: Why?

BG: I think it would be good for anybody to visit the Orient.

DG: Do you have any relatives in China?

BG: No, not that I know of.

DG: Do you read any Chinese magazines from China?

BG: I cannot read Chinese.

DG: Do you maintain any Chinese traditions or customs?

BG: No.

DG: Do you celebrate any Chinese holidays?

BG: Uh yes. Chinese New Year.

DG: Any other holidays?

BG: No.

DG: Does your son maintain any Chinese tradition or custom?

BG: No.

DG: Are there any Chinese customs you have abandoned that your parents strictly observed?

BG: I can't think of any.

DG: What Chinese customs do your Chinese friends observe that you do not?

BG: I really can't think of any.

[0:22:41.4] DG: How many Chinese would you guess live in Houston now?

BG: I would guess from 10 to 15 thousand.

DG: Do you view the Chinese as an ethnic group in Houston?

BG: Yes.

DG: Do you think the Chinese are closely knit?

BG: I think so.

DG: More than the other minority groups?

BG: I can't speak for the other minority groups.

DG: I mean, the Chinese more closely knit than others?

BG: I wouldn't say that. I think that all ethnic groups are about the same in Houston.

DG: Do you see political divisions in the Houston Chinese community?

BG: (?)

DG: Yes.

BG: No.

DG: Do you see changes in political support among these divisions in the U.S. of opening relations with China?

BG: I see very little. I do see some, but very little. There are few people who are probably (?).

DG: What Chinese traditions and customs is most important to you?

BG: Well, if it's just gonna be condition (?) I like the Chinese way of raising children. They make the Chinese, they make a family unit the first unit of government where anybody in the family unit abides by the law.

DG: How were you disciplined when you were young?

BG: I was spanked. It was the order of things.

DG: Have child rearing techniques changed since your parents' time?

BG: In some families, but not in all families.

[0:24:33.9] DG: How do you discipline your son?

BG: When he was younger he got spankings. But as he grew older we tried to explain to him, teach him how to use his own judgment.

DG: What did you do in your leisure time as a child?

BG: I played with other children on the school ground, school playground.

DG: What kind of toys did you play with as a child?

BG: Oh, roller skates and BB guns.

DG: What kind of toys are your favorites?

BG: To have that now, is that what you mean?

DG: Same time

BG: That's what you mean, as a child?

DG: Yes

BG: Guns and skates and bicycles.

DG: Your favorite?

BG: Mhm

[0:25:30.4] DG: Do you see your childhood as much different from your child?

BG: Yes. The children today, including our son, was given more than I received as a child. More material things.

DG: Have you noticed any change in family size in the Chinese community now?

BG: From when I was a child?

DG: Yes.

BG: I don't think so. I don't think the Chinese families have changed there. They're still having as many children as they used to.

DG: Do you think there's some kind of problems that Chinese coming to Houston now can expect to encounter?

BG: I'd say so. Yes.

DG: What different and new problems do you think the boat people could expect to encounter?

BG: The boat people, who are considered to be Vietnamese people. They have the same problems. The lack of education that you can expect if you don't speak the language. Perhaps that would be the biggest problem. And not to be trained, to being paid immediately. (?)

DG: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

BG: No. I sure would like to think of another thing (?) but I can't.

DG: Do you suggest any other prominent, respected Chinese in Houston we should get on tape for our oral history study?

BG: I would like to suggest you talk to Harry T. Chen who is an attorney.

DG: Do you have any documents that you want to use to support our oral history study?

BG: I don't think I have any documents. I don't know, maybe some old photographs taken when I first came to Houston.

DG: What do you think led to the impressively large population of Chinese in the Houston area?

BG: A lot of people come into Houston. Houston is growing not only in the Chinese community, but in all the other communities too. I think that the growth of Houston could be a big attraction. Job availability and even perhaps ____ perhaps reallocate the company because we have such good possibility.

[0:28:34.7] DG: So I guess that's all. Thanks very much