Interviewer: Daisy Chan Gee
Interviewee: Henry Gee
Date: 1980
Track time: part 1- 30:44, part 2- 23:04
Transcribed by: Katarina Slobodova

Summary:

Henry Gee, a retired resident of Houston, talks about his own experiences living in both small towns and big cities in various southern states of the United States. As an American-born Chinese, he reflects on his values and lifestyle in relation to Chinese culture, as well as those of the Chinese community in Houston in general.

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Audio file part 1:

DG: How long have you lived in Houston?

HG: Since 1939.

DG: Where did you come from?

HG: Tucson, Arizona.

DG: Where were you born?

HG: Arizona territory. No, Tucson, Arizona. [joking] At that time it was a territory.

DG: How did you come?

HG: I was on my way to the East Coast. Had a job there and I stopped over in Houston to visit relatives.

DG: Who did you come with?
HG: By myself. [adjusting microphone]

DG: Why did you come to Houston?

HG: I just stopped over. I was on the train. I stopped over to visit relatives here in Houston.

DG: What are your relatives names?

HG: I have a brother in Tucson, Arizona.

DG: In Houston.


DG: You have any friends in Houston?

HG: Yes I have some friends!

DG: Who are they?

HG: Oh golly, you know...[laughter] just about a lot of people. Oh, Louis Yee...oh I can’t think. Jimmy Ray Lee. Eddie Chou. CT Sue. Spencer Jo. Stephen Ng. How many more do you need?

DG: I just wanted...who did you stay with when you first came to Houston?

HG: I stayed with my relative.

DG: You never did tell me your relatives.

HG: Oh. [adjusting microphone] Not close relatives, the Gees: Albert Gee and Sammy Gee.

DG: Where did they live at that time?

HG: They lived on Milam or Louisiana. Louisiana, I believe. There was an old house there.

DG: Do you remember what your first impression of Houston was?

HG: I liked it very much. It was a fairly big city, but yet the environment and people gave you a small town atmosphere.

DG: You said you came in 1939. At that time, in your opinion, how many Chinese were here?
HG: Oh, roughly 300.

DG: How many families were here, in Houston?

HG: Two or three. Let’s see...the Chans and Siew Way Chu family, and this family over on Lorraine Street...Mary...I forgot who they were, and the C Tou family.

DG: That would be...4 families?

HG: Mhmm.

DG: Did you have any major problems when you first came here?

HG: I had no major problems. Like every young man, money was always a problem. [laughter].

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

HG: Well I immediately, almost immediately, went to work in this restaurant. They were having a squabble and so they asked me to stay over for a couple of months to help them out.

DG: Oh. How did you get your first job?

HG: Well, my first job was through these people. They were – they had this restaurant on Main Street, and they were having partnership problems so they asked me to help them while they straitened this thing out. That was my first job in Houston.

DG: At that time were all the Chinese in Houston in some kind of business?

HG: Not all the Chinese. There were several grocery stores and several restaurants and then there were Chinese workers in all of those establishments.

DG: Do you remember the names of any of those grocery or restaurants?

HG: Well, restaurants, Golden Bowl – I mean uh Silver Bowl, Main Café...that’s all I can remember. And then grocery stores were the Yik stores: Guang Yik, San Yik, Bow Kwang, and uh, what are the names? I forgot. Oh Sang Lee Grocery.

DG: Do you remember your first job in the U.S.?

HG: I was born over here in the U.S.

DG: I mean...
HG: Oh my first job was a...let’s see...what was my...oh! I threw newspaper papers for three or four months. That was my first job. And then when I grew up and went to high school I worked in a grocery store after school and I worked in a bakery, and I also worked in a restaurant, various kinds.

DG: When did you get married?

HG: I got married November 1940.

DG: Who did you marry?

HG: Martha Lam.

DG: Where? In what city were you married?

HG: Richmond, Texas.

DG: Is she Chinese?

HG: Yes, she's Chinese.

DG: How many children do you have?

HG: We have 2: a boy and a girl.

DG: Where were they born?

HG: They were both born in Houston, Texas.

DG: Can you tell me something about their education?

HG: My girl, my daughter, the oldest one is went to the University of Houston and has a master’s in psychology. My boy at the present is attending U of H and he’s a senior there.

DG: You didn’t tell me what their names are.

HG: Oh. My girl’s name is Kathy. My boy’s name is Michael. Kathy is 30 years old and Michael is 22.

DG: Where was your wife born?

HG: In Mississippi.

DG: Where did your parents come from?
HG: My mother –my mother and father were both born in California. My father in San Francisco. My mother south of San Francisco.

DG: Their names?

HG: My father was Gee Yiew and my mother was Bessy Lam.

DG: Are they still living?

HG: No.

DG: Do you remember your grandparents names?

HG: My maternal grandfather was named Lim Goon. Lim Goon. G-O-O-N. And my maternal grandmother’s name was Jess. I have no – I don’t know the name of – the names of my paternal grandparents.

DG: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

HG: I have a brother, a younger brother. He’s approximately 6 years younger than I am. He lives in Tucson, Arizona.

DG: Why do you stay in Houston?

HG: I like the...everything around here, except the of course the climate. [laughter]

DG: How many year of formal education did you have in Tucson, Arizona?

HG: I went through high school and I went through to one semester of University of Arizona, also located at Tucson, Arizona.

DG: Do you have any schooling in Houston?

HG: No. No schooling in Houston.

DG: How many years of education did your parents have?

HG: My father had no formal English education. My mother had 4 or 5 grades of English.

DG: How about your grandparents?

HG: I don’t know about my grandparents.

DG: What do you remember about your schooling?
HG: I was the only – in grade school I was the only Chinese in the whole school. It was 95% or 97% Latin and probably 2…and the remainder were Anglos, and 1 Chinese.

DG: Do you have any opinions about your educational opportunities as compared to your children's?

HG: Well, in the old days we didn't have the opportunities that the younger people have now. Money was tight in those days, and there were no – none of the scholarships available that are available now, and to be frank, our parents and grandparents, Chinese, didn’t believe in too much more education than high school.

DG: What are your feelings about the quality of education in Texas?

HG: Very good. Very good. Considering the odds that they – the problems they have against them. I don’t see any – much need for bilingual education.

DG: How about in Houston?

HG: In Houston? Very good. I think it's very good.

DG: What improvements are needed?

HG: More neighborhood schools. I don’t think busing is needed. More languages. More foreign languages in school.

DG: Do you feel the Chinese in Houston feel the same way you do about education in Houston?

HG: I think they do because almost every Chinese kid wants to go on beyond high school.

DG: What is your religious preference?

HG: I was born a Catholic, but at present I am a Methodist.

DG: Your parents are Catholic. Is that…?

HG: Mhm. Yes.

DG: What [inaudible 2 or 3 words] about religion about your children?

HG: My boy is a Catholic and my daughter is a Methodist.

DG: Do you go to church regularly?
HG: No, m’am. Not regularly.

DG: Are you a member of that church?
HG: Ah, no.

DG: Do you contribute financially?
HG: Oh yes. We send a little donation yearly.

DG: Are you actively involved in the church?
HG: No.

DG: Okay. Do you keep any of your old religious customs?
HG: I don’t know what you mean by that. Old religious customs?

DG: Religions. [inaudible comment]
HG: Well, yeah. No, there’s – being a Christian means all the things that go on at Easter and Christmas and all of...

DG: What is your attitude towards your family's religion? [inaudible comment]
HG: No, that’s why we’re here in this country. I don’t care what they believe in, as long as they believe in something. We’re here in this country. We have all the religious freedom.

DG: Do your ancestors influence your religion now?
HG: No.

DG: Do you feel the Chinese here in Houston share your beliefs?
HG: Religion?
DG: The way you think about religion.
HG: Yes!

DG: What church do you think the majority of the Chinese in this area belong to?
HG: I think the majority belong to the Baptist church.
DG: Do you think they brought any of their previous beliefs and customs into the religion they now belong?

HG: No, ah, yes and no. You have to remember that the Chinese bring their old traditions, their old customs, and they live the way I’d like to live. I like to get the best out of every culture, whether religion or whatever. Any civilization. I like to get the best out of everything. And I noticed the Chinese do that. They take the best out of everything and enjoy life.

DG: Do you vote?

HG: Oh yes, yes.

DG: Did you vote in the last city election?

HG: Yes.

DG: Did you vote in the last state election?

HG: Yes.

DG: Did you vote for the presidential?

HG: Yes.

DG: Do you go to political meetings?

HG: Occasionally.

DG: Party meetings?

HG: Occasionally.

DG: Have you ever run for office?

HG: No.

DG: Do you plan to go—to in the future?

HG: No.

DG: Do you speak other languages?

HG: Yes.

DG What language?

DG: Does your parents speak any language other than native language?

HG: Yes, they spoke English and some Spanish.

DG: Your grandparents?


DG: Does your children speak several languages?

HG: No, they’re – all they speak is English.

DG: Did you attend any special school for languages?

HG: When I was a kid they had Chinese schools after the regular English school and I went to a couple of those. And one time for a year we were in a mining camp and one of the ladies there tutored us in Chinese. The lady’s husband was a cook in the camp and they tutored us in Chinese.

DG: Does your father emphasize learning Chinese?

HG: I don’t remember that. I don’t think so.

DG: Does he want you to know how to speak Chinese? keep your Chinese language?

HG: Well I imagine he would’ve if he were alive now. He’s been dead since 1940.

DG: How did you learn English?

HG: I didn’t know much English until I started school. Primary school. My main language – my basic language was Spanish. And after I started school in the first grade, I began to really learn English.

DG: Did you encounter any difficulties learning English?

HG: No, it was – a child has no problem learning any language. Just expose him to it. They’ll learn.

DG: What did you do in your leisure time?

HG: Right now I’m retired. I read a lot. I watch some TV. I help out in the yard a little bit. I help friends, that need a little help. Any little thing. I’m just enjoying my retirement.
DG: Do you attend any classes?

HG: No.

DG: Do you join any clubs?

HG: No.

DG: What are your hobbies?

HG: No hobbies exactly. I had my hobby days when I was young, and now nothing outside of being with my family.

DG: Who did you see most often, socially?

HG: My – oh I see my neighbors. I see my in-laws and the whole family gathers at our house here every Sunday so that’s – and then we go to dinners and weddings and socials like that.

DG: What do you do with them? [pause] Do you meet with neighbors?

[20:25]

HG: Yes, we have a civic club, a very good civic club here in our neighborhood, and so we have a meeting every month or so. There’s always something going.

DG: Who lives in your home now?

HG: My wife, my mother-in-law, and in the garage apartment I have my boy and his wife.

DG: In the past who lived in your house – your home?

HG: Well, my daughter lived here and before my father-in-law passed away, he lived here.

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese clubs?

HG: I belong to that Chinese Merchants Association: On Leong.

DG: Anything else?

HG: No.
DG: CACA? ¹

HG: No.

DG: Do you belong to any community clubs?

HG: No, just our civic club here.

DG: How often do you have a meeting?

HG: Once a week –uh, once a month!

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese organization?

HG: Well, the Chinese Merchants Association: On Leong.

DG: Are you active in Chinese business here?

HG: No.

DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?

HG: Yes, I go there once in a while. I do—we go there shopping.

DG: How often is that?

HG: Oh, maybe once a month.

DG: Any other occasions you go to Chinatown?

HG: Well, when there’s a banquet or things like that. There’s the Chinese theater down there, that we haven’t been to yet, but...

DG: Are you interested in Chinese opera?

HG: No.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

HG: Oh yes, I like—I love Chinese art.

DG: Any other things Chinese you’re interested in?

HG: Oh, I like the people. I like Chinese people. [laughter]

¹ Chinese American Citizens Alliance
DG: Are there any gaps in the Chinese culture in Houston?

HG: The only gap I can see is that we’re not looking after the young ones. We’re letting them get away and becoming too Americanized, even though I was —I had that same problem. I was too Americanized.

DG: Have you ever been to China?

HG: Yes.

DG: When?

HG: In...I was 19 years old, 19 or 20 years old. I was working —going to school in California and I asked my boss to let me out for the summer, because I wanted to go see what my village looked like, so he arranged for me to work on Dollar Freighter (?) from San Francisco, and I got to Hong Kong, and there I went to Canton and then from there I went to the village, but I only spent one night there. Then I came on home.

DG: Do you have any future goals of going back to China?

HG: Oh yes. We’d like to go see Hong Kong, and go into Red China, just for a visit of course. [laughter]

DG: Would you like your children to visit China?

HG: To visit, yes.

DG: Why?

HG: Oh just to give them an idea of their background.

DG: Do you have any communication in China? Anybody in China?

HG: No, I don’t have any...

DG: Do you have any relatives in China?

HG: Yeah, I’m pretty sure I have, but I don’t know who they are.

DG: Do you get any newspaper from China?

HG: No.

DG: Do you maintain any Chinese traditions or customs?
HG: No. I follow if—like there are certain things, like a Chinese wedding, old customs that you do, so I go along. We have of course the dinners during the New Year season. I love those things.

DG: Any other festivals?

HG: No.

DG: Any other holidays you celebrate?

HG: No.

DG: Does your children maintain any tradition or custom?

HG: No, not Chinese. They are strictly Americanized.

DG: What customs have you abandoned that perhaps your parents strictly observed?

HG: No, not—no customs that I can think of. My parents were not very Chinese.

DG: Do you think this is true of other Chinese in the Houston area?

HG: Some. In fact most of the old timers would observe all the old Chinese customs.

DG: Are you aware of any customs that your Chinese friends may observe that you don’t?

HG: Uh, no. No, they, well, the first month of dinner for the child when they are a month old, you know, they have that dinner for them with the chicken and eggs and all that. We have never observed that.

DG: How many Chinese do you think live in Houston now?

HG: Well now we get into a big thing. I think you have to separate the Chinese into the Cantonese, the Taiwanese, and the—and then among the Cantonese you have to separate the native born and the foreign born, and of course lately there have been a lot of northern Chinese from Red China here now. So it’s hard to say whether we have 5,000 or 10,000 or 20,000 Chinese in Houston.

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

HG: I think our—you know they can accomplish more things than ethnic groups much larger. I think—of course they’re not as progressive as the Japanese are. I think
the Japanese get into the American mainstream much quicker and much better than the Chinese do.

DG: Do you think the Chinese are closely knit?

HG: Yes, I’d say roughly 75% of the Chinese here are closely knit.

DG: Compared to other groups, minority groups?

HG: Yes, compared to other – no. Oh yes, yes, I take that back, yes. I think they are closer knit than most other ethnic groups.

DG: Do you think the Houston Chinese view themselves as a group compared to the other ethnic groups in Houston?

HG: View themselves?

DG: As an eth-

HG: As a group?

DG: Mhm.

HG: Yes! I think they do. I think they do, that they view themselves as an ethnic group. Whether you want – like it or not, you’re already labeled an ethnic group.

DG: Do you perceive any political division in the Houston Chinese community?

HG: Oh there always has been. There always has been political division. That’s democracy. You have to have opposition – opposing parties.

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

HG: No, ah I don’t think there’s any – I think most Chinese favor – now let’s get – like the Taiwanese group don’t favor the friendly relations with Red China, I don’t think, but I imagine the Cantonese group here in Houston favor that, because I think they realize that we need a buffer. We need a buffer between Red China and the rest of the world.

[30:44]

**Audio file part 2:**

DG: What social values do you think remain most important from Chinese tradition to you?
HG: Social values...the respect of the elders, of your elders, respect of your parents. Honesty and truth.

DG: What social values do you think remain most important from Chinese tradition among your Chinese friends?

HG: Honesty. Honesty is a main thing that remain from the old Chinese.

DG: How about the other Chinese in the Houston area?

HG: I think they all view the same –have the same values.

DG: How do you think you were disciplined?

HG: Ah, I think –if you mean parental discipline-

DG: Right.

HG: Yes. I think we had very good –Chinese are –discipline their young very very...good.

DG: Why do you think?

HG: Oh that goes back now, way back to the old...well, the Chinese, the family is traditionally is the number one thing.

DG: How did you discipline your children?

HG: Mixture. Discipline was very lax, but they were –they’re good kids. They grew up.

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

HG: I read a lot. I played sports, even as a little kid. I did all those things. I hunted a lot, because my neighbors, and especially my grandpa –my grandfather, they were very –they liked to hunt.

DG: Do you perceive any changes in conception about child-rearing from your parents time?

HG: Yes, yeah. In my day, you were home more than at present time. Present time there are so many outside things that take the children away from the house.

DG: What kinds of toys did you play with as a child?
HG: As a child, I played with homemade baseballs, with a homemade baseball glove, and a homemade bat, and we made our own little wagons. We found wheels somewhere, and made our own podmob –cars. Things like that.

DG: What are your favorites?

HG: My favorite was sports.

DG: Do you see your childhood as much different from your children’s?

HG: Yes, quite a difference because I was raised in a small town. Things are different from, like say, Houston here. In the small town where I was raised, we could go a mile or two and we were way out in the country and we could do a lot of things that you can’t –here in Houston you’d have to go 50 miles to do.

DG: Have you perceived any changes in family size in the Chinese community?

HG: It seems to me that the Chinese families are getting smaller. Don’t you think? I don’t see any families of six or seven or eight kids here in Houston. I mean this –in the past 20 years.

DG: And how about child spacing?

HG: We have to learn a lot about that spacing. [laughter] We know families that have one almost every year.

DG: [inaudible 2 or 3 words] towards the last questions here. Looking at your own experience and adjusting to life in Houston, what similar changes or problems do you think Chinese now coming to Houston can expect to encounter?

HG: We had the problems. In our day –when I came to Houston there weren’t very many, actually there weren’t very many doors open. The only things that the average Chinese could do was in a grocery store or restaurant, or own one or manage one or work in one. And now a days if you have the training and the education and –there’s almost –the sky’s the limit here.

DG: What special problems do you think perhaps the Boat People could expect to encounter?

HG: The Boat People? Oh the Boat People, the main thing is language, the English language. Once they get over that, I notice that they all are hard workers. They won’t have any problems once they get over the language. And another thing about the people, they should work on their names. There’s no way you can identify them. They should do like we do, like for instance my name is Henry, and I keep my Chinese surname, and I have a Chinese name, but these Boat People, they should do the same thing because you know, you see the names in the paper and they don’t
mean a thing. You can’t separate them. You can’t identify them. You don’t know who is who. You can’t pronounce them in the first place.

DG: Okay. Is there anything at all that you would like to add to this interview?

HG: Yeah. The Chinese has a big future here in Texas, not only in Houston, but all over. And the young ones, the main thing is training. Learn a skill. Get your – regardless of what. If you’re going to be a ditch-digger, be the best one in town.

DG: Do you think the flow of Chinese to Houston influenced the basic American attitude toward the Chinese?

HG: I don’t see any basic anything now. But you – in the old days maybe, among certain people, but I noticed there are no doors that are locked. Doors are open. It’s just what – like anything else, if you speak the language, you have certain skills, you can go anywhere.

DG: Can you tell me or name some outstanding contributions that Chinese-Americans have give to this community, Houston I mean?

HG: At present there are a lot of Chinese doctors. Medical doctors, dentists, professional people, engineers of all kinds, lawyers that have contributed a lot, and I believe that they can contribute – once they begin to get into the civic thing like right now I think most people, or most of the younger Chinese live to themselves instead of getting into the mainstream. Of course us old-timers, we were too busy trying to scratch a living out, but now these younger Chinese, they have all kinds of opportunities. In fact, I don’t know why more are not in politics.

DG: Do you know any other prominent, respected Chinese in Houston you think we may want to get on tape for our oral history study?

HG: No... well, Charles S Chan. He’s been here long, and he’s involved in a lot of things. Ed. Ed Chen. He’s involved in a lot of things. No. They just...

DG: Do you have any documents that we may want to use for our oral history project?

HG: No, outside of my birth certificate and things like that. Those are vital statistics, but I don’t have any – I never was a keeper of things like that.

DG: Well, this is all and thank you very much for your cooperation. We appreciate it.

HG: You’re welcome, very welcome.

[10:38]
[10:38-23:04] blank tape