

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Yingchao Yi

Interviewers: Tianlong (Kevin) Yi

Date/ Time of Interview: April 2, 2013, at 9:00PM

Transcribed by: Tianlong (Kevin) Yi

Audio Track Time: 00:49:34 (HOURS:MINUTES:SECONDS)

Background:

Yingchao Yi was born in Shenyang, China on 9/9/1965. He is the second youngest of four children. He has two older sisters, and a younger brother. Yingchao received up to a high school education and entered the workforce immediately afterward. He started off in a printing company and then was transferred to a winery. His son was born in 1991. In 1995, he had the opportunity to go to America with his sister-in-law's husband. After working as a busboy at a bar and fast food restaurant in Houston for a couple of months, he decided to stay to earn some money to bring back home. However, he was offered another job as a welder, and the company also offered to help him get a permanent visa to stay in the US. He decided to also apply for his wife and child to come to Houston. They were reunited in 1997. His wife gave birth to a baby girl in 2000, a dream come true for him, as China does not allow more than one child. He worked as a welder for 10 years before changing jobs as a public maintenance man for the city of Houston in 2011. He now resides in Pearland, TX.

Setting:

The interview focuses on the themes of labor and capital, so Yingchao's working experience were extensively discussed. We discussed about the multiple jobs that he has held since coming to the US as well as how he has changed as a person after living here for 16 years.

The interview was conducted in Yingchao's home in Pearland, TX. The interview took 50 minutes to complete. His life story as a working class immigrant gives a perspective to this archive that it might be lacking. Furthermore, his story is the quintessential example of how the American Dream is still alive.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

Kevin Yi (**KY**)

Yingchao Yi (**YY**)

KY: Hi my name is Kevin Yi. I'm here with Yingchao Yi, my father, for this interview for the Houston Asian American Archive. This interview will be conducted in mandarin, for the sake of my father, who is not very good with English. "So I want to ask you, what was it like growing up? How was your childhood? What was it like growing up?"

YY: I lived in northeast Shenyang. When I was a child, my family circumstances were not that good. It was very difficult. As kids, the thing we loved doing the most was swimming in the Yun River during the summer and sledding on homemade sleds on the river when it froze over during the winter. We were very happy.

KY: Did you guys make those sleds yourselves?

YY: Yes, we found wood and discarded saw blades and made our own tools and sleds.

KY: What was your favorite thing to do during your free time?

YY: My favorite pastime was soccer. We all found an empty field and then split into two teams, and played soccer. That was my favorite sport.

KY: Can you tell me about the city of Shenyang? Was it very modern or was it small? How was it?

YY: Shenyang is a heavy industrial city. It mainly produced machinery for factories. For example, machinery equipment, blowers, and large-scale generators. It's not considered a large city. In China, it's considered a medium sized city and not very modern. But in my childhood memories, it had a lot of Japanese-style infrastructure because it was once conquered by Japan, so a lot of the remaining buildings are Japanese-style buildings.

KY: So how has Shenyang changed since your childhood? What are the big changes?

YY: I went back three years ago. Overall, the change is huge, mostly the city's infrastructure. There are a lot of high-rises and large bridges. Importantly, there was an increase in personal vehicles. Traffic felt quite crowded. The air quality was not really ideal.

KY: Good. What was your first job in China?

YY: After graduating from high school, I found a job at a printing factory as a printing worker. I worked for four years, at the printing factory. Afterwards, I transferred to a winery named Shenyang Shi Lao Long Huo Winery. It was a very famous winery in the northeast. I worked as a welder and welded pipes.

KY: What is your highest level of education?

YY: High school graduate.

KY: High school graduate...good good. How were you in school? Did your parents push you to do well in school and foster this moral?

YY: Yes. Ever since I was small, my elementary school grades were excellent. I was in the top three in the class. In middle school however, because of I liked to play a lot, my grades fell and my rank dropped. So after graduating from middle school, I didn't test into a very ideal high

school. In high school, everyone liked to play, so my grades got worse and worse. In the end, I just found a job after graduating high school.

KY: Good. Let's talk about your family history. Our family name, the Yi family name, does it have any stories to tell why we have this name? Also naming kids, is there a tradition?

YY: Our family name is part of a minority group in China and is rare. The surname Yi doesn't really have a story, but I only know our family is part of a minority group, the Manchus actually. When it comes to naming, my paternal grandfather's generation's names all have the character "guan" in the middle of their name. Then my parents' generation's names all have the character "bao" in the middle of their name. This way, it's very easy for the next generation to differentiate between their grandparents' and their parents' generation. My generation all has the character "ying" in the middle of our names. That's why whenever we see the character "ying" and it's a boy, we immediately know it's my generation. When it came to girls, I only remember my sisters middle character was "li." So it was very easy for people to differentiate generations. But the generation below me, we didn't exercise those naming traditions because it's more liberalized and open now.

Juan You (Spouse): Yi Yingchao? Where's Dalong?

KY: I can cut this part out. So my next question is, so this naming tradition, is it followed over China or is it just our family? Or is it a Shenyang thing?

YY: At the time, all of China was like this. Every household had their genealogy with a couple generations listed above them.

KY: Okay, good. Now what kind of jobs did our family members hold?

YY: Our family's working situation goes like this. My paternal grandfather was a farmer. My father was a city worker. My mother was a farmer. Now in this generation, my sisters hold different specialty jobs through their studying and university. My oldest sister works for the government. My second oldest sister works for a Shenyang chemical plant.

KY: Good. Now let's talk about culture and what traditions does our family want to preserve. Just speaking on behalf of our family, what holidays do we celebrate? American or Chinese?

YY: When it comes to Chinese holidays, we've preserved the traditional lunar calendar and new year. The most important holiday is Chinese New Year. We also have our August 15th celebration. In America, we mainly celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas, these two big holidays.

KY: I see. What is August 15th exactly?

YY: It's a...holiday where all family members meet up. Mooncake Day. We as common citizens call it Mooncake Day. August 15th right? The moon is round then.

KY: Which holidays are the most important?

YY: For us Chinese people, Chinese New Year is the most important.

KY: Okay. What about American holidays? Which of them are important?

YY: For American holidays, I feel like Thanksgiving is the most important.

KY: Thanksgiving.

YY: Mm

KY: Why do you think so?

YY: Because the meaning of Thanksgiving is that we have been shown grace. It doesn't matter who gave it to us, we must reciprocate and give thanks.

KY: Let's talk about why you immigrated to the US. Why did you want to come to the US?

YY: Uh, at the time, it was an incidental opportunity. My sister-in-law's husband introduced me to a friend who said we could go to the US to conduct a purchase for hospital supplies. He wanted use to go check out the equipment first. It was through this, going through some paperwork, and getting a visa that we arrived in the US. Once we came to the US, we came directly to Houston because the hospital supplies headquarters was in Houston. Also, my older sister was also in America, and I wanted to see her. After our inspection of the hospital supplies, we saw that these supplies would not be able to be sold in the China market nor used in Chinese hospitals because the cost was too high. And so, our purchasing goal was not met, but we didn't want to go back immediately because we still had a period of time that we were allowed to stay in America. So we decided to stay short term and earn some money before going back.

KY: What did you bring when you came here?

YY: I brought some Chinese farmer products for my relatives and long time friends.

KY: How did you feel when you first came to America?

YY: Yes. When I left China, I only wanted to just earn some money and go back as quickly as I could because I still had a wife and a very small child back home. He was around four at the time. I really missed home and didn't have any plans of staying long term.

KY: How was the trip here? Did you encounter any difficulties?

YY: I didn't experience any coming here, only that I felt very excited when the plane took off. I also felt nervous because I was going to a new country that speaks a different language. I knew that was going to cause a lot of difficulties and obstacles so...but no exceptional hardships on the way here.

KY: Who did you come with?

YY: I came with my sister-in-law's husband, and a translator I guess. Yes, a translator.

KY: Okay. What was your first impression of America when you arrived?

YY: After stepping off the plane and out of the airport---we got off at Los Angeles---I thought the city was very modern and the air was very good on our way to our hotel.

KY: Did you have any memorable experiences when you first came to the US?

YY: Uhh...do you mean when I first came to America?

KY: Yes, right when you got to America. Maybe the first couple of weeks.

YY: Oh. No, there wasn't anything too memorable. But I did feel that everyone was very friendly. Every person I met, whether I knew them or not, would say "hello" to me. I felt very amazed.

KY: Yeah...you won't feel this kind of warmth in China.

YY: Correct. In China, strangers won't greet you.

KY: Which city did you settle in when you first came to the states?

YY: Initially, I stayed in Houston. Then I found a restaurant job.

KY: Why did you choose Houston?

YY: Because our hospital supplies headquarters was here and my sister was also here. I worked for three months in Houston, and then I went to New Mexico with my boss. He's Taiwanese and his home was in New Mexico. After he sold his restaurant here, we followed him to New Mexico, Santa Fe.

KY: Can you tell me the story again?

YY: I worked at a restaurant for around three months in Houston. Then I followed my boss to his home in Santa Fe. It was restaurant work again. After working for around two months, my sister-in-law's husband really missed home and didn't want to stay here anymore. He wanted to go back to China. So the two of us drove back in one drive, which was about 15 hours. Yeah, we drove for 15 to 16 hours. I will never forget this memory because we didn't know any English. When we got to McDonald's, we didn't even know how to order a hamburger. We didn't sleep during our 15 hour drive. We just drove straight back to Houston. On top of all that, our car was really old, an '87 Nissan. It was very old. Now when I think about it, I still get scared because with such an old car, what if it broke down on the highway? We didn't even know English. That would've been very troublesome. However, we were very lucky and made it back safely to my sister's house.

KY: Mm. You mentioned just now that my uncle wanted to go back home. Why didn't you want to go back?

YY: Because at the time, I wanted to earn some money first and then go back, maybe in a year or half a year, but once I stayed, a company hired me to be a welder. They said they could also help me to get a visa to stay here. It was in this way that I came to stay here, to pursue this job. After about 16 to 18 months later, I applied for my wife and son to come to the states to visit relatives. By that time, we were separated for about 20 months now. Then my wife and son came to America, and we were finally reunited. At the time, I felt very excited and happy. It was in this way that we settled in Houston.

KY: During that 20 months of separation from home, with your wife and son next to you, how did you feel?

YY: Very lonely. I felt very lonely. I wrote a letter to my wife every single week, because at that time, calling them was very expensive. One minute was \$1.30, US dollars, so I could only call once every month, and I could only talk for a very short amount of time. Most of my time was spent writing a letter a week. I missed them a lot.

KY: Okay, let's discuss your job experiences in the states. Can you tell me the jobs you held in the US?

YY: My first job was...at an American bar and fast food restaurant. The boss was Taiwanese. My job was a busboy. I didn't know a single word of English at that time, which resulted in a lot of funny memories. For example, when people asked me for cups, they would say large ones, small ones, and medium ones, but I didn't understand them. So they had to bring out three different sized cups and told me which was the large, the medium, and the small cup. They would tell me every time which cup was which. So that became a funny memory.

KY: How much did you make at your first job?

YY: My first job was what I just told you, a fast food restaurant and bar. It was located at NASA. The work was very hard, and the hours were long. Because I wanted to make more money so that I could return to my wife and kid's side, I went to work at 10 am in the morning and worked until 3 am at night. I didn't have a car, so I had to walk to work. I started walking at 9 am and walked for an hour to get to the restaurant. It was May at the time. I remember it very clearly. Houston is an exceptionally hot place. In May, it was already 86 degrees F in the morning to 90 degrees F. After walking to work, my body was soaked, and I wasn't used to the food because there was no Chinese food. I could only eat hamburgers. I had no choice. In order to be full, I even had to eat hamburgers. Work hours were longer because I wanted to make more money, so I worked for 16 hours.

KY: Mm. You just mentioned that you wanted to work more so you could earn more money and go back home faster.

YY: Yes, yes.

KY: Did you have a goal? Such as, “I want to make this much money, and then I’ll go back?”

YY: Yeah. At the time, I wanted to earn around \$30,000, which meant working for three years. Then I would go back. China was not very wealthy at the time, so \$30,000 in China could buy a taxi. So I wanted my own taxi, and it was a pretty good job. The pay was also pretty good.

KY: Mm mm. What was your next profession?

YY: After my wife and kid came to America, I held a welder job. It was also through the newspaper that I found this job. So the boss was from Mainland China. We worked together for about 10 years until 2011, when I left this company.

KY: So this job was the longest one you’ve had in America.

YY: Correct. 10 years to a person can seem very slow.

KY: Did you like this job? Were there any good things that came from this job? Why did you end up leaving in the end?

YY: Because our job was to supply restaurant equipment to new restaurants. It was essentially just welding work. There wasn’t a ‘if I liked it or not’ kind of attitude. It was for survival. Our language wasn’t good, so we could only work in Chinese companies. Also, this job’s hours are shorter, so I could go back and take care of my home. It wasn’t like the restaurant job, where the hours are long, and I had to come home at 10pm. Comparatively speaking, this job was much less stressful and had shorter hours. As for why I left the company, it was also an incidental opportunity. My second sister works for the city of Houston. She found some plumbing and public maintenance man positions. It just so happens that I was familiar with those two jobs. Even though my English was bad, the work was still pretty easy. So I went to go apply and try out for the job. I ultimately got the job. This was in 2011, August. I went to the central headquarters that day and became an official employee.

KY: Mm. Do you like this job? Or did you like your other job more?

YY: I still like this job, because it’s the city government. Their benefits are better. For example, their retirement plans, health insurance---most importantly health insurance. Because we live in a society where a lot of things can happen, having health insurance as a backing gives me greater peace of mind, especially since everyone in the family gets health insurance.

KY: Okay. What was the hardest part about adjusting to American living?

YY: The hardest was probably language, which was a huge obstacle. It makes for funny memories.

KY: Like what?

YY: For example, when my wife and my child first came, we went to the supermarket to buy ice cream. At the time, we didn't understand English. We went to the refrigerator section and picked out what we thought was a tub of ice cream. However, when we got home, we realized it wasn't ice cream but was actually a tub of butter. It was frustrating but also funny.

KY: Yeah. I remember that too ha, ha. Who helped you the most in America, especially with your language barrier?

YY: I will never forget my second sister and my brother-in-law who helped us the most. Every time our family receives bills or letters, we would always bring them to my sister's house for them to translate. So my sister and my brother-in-law helped me tremendously. I'm here today because of them. I will never forget that.

KY: How is your relationship with your sister? Is your relationship good? What about when you were growing up?

YY: My sister and I, she's my second sister. She's older than me by three years. She came here in 1991. I came in 1996. When we were smaller, our relationship wasn't that great. We argued and fought a lot. However my sister was extremely fair and smart. She loved to read. It was all because of her that I was able to come to the US. After coming to the US, we help each other out. She helps me read my letters, and I help her with household tasks. So our relationship has improved significantly since we were kids.

KY: What are some similarities and differences between living in the US compared to China?

YY: The biggest thing is that in the US, there's much less time to meet up with friends, because everyone's busy. In terms of diet, there's no big difference, because there are a lot of Chinese supermarket, where you can buy a lot of Chinese produce. So in terms of diet, there's not much hassle. Living conditions in America are more comfortable. There's more room here and the air is better. Traffic isn't too crowded. I'm also not worried about food safety.

KY: Do you feel like you're comfortable talking to people in Chinatown? Does it feel like you're in China?

YY: When I'm buying stuff in Chinatown, it doesn't feel like I'm in America. It feels like I'm in China. However, there are still some things about Chinese people that bother me. For example, shouting in public and some people spitting on the ground carelessly all make me feel uncomfortable.

KY: Are you a US citizen right now?

YY: No I'm not.

KY: Do you want to become a US citizen?

YY: For now, no because I still want to retain my Chinese nationality.

KY: Why?

YY: Because I guess still have those patriotic feelings. We're Chinese right?

KY: Right now, you've already lived in the US for 16 years. Do you feel like you're Chinese, American, or somewhere in the middle, Chinese American?

YY: I feel like I'm somewhere in the middle. In terms of lifestyle, I still follow a Chinese lifestyle. However, the way I think is very different from my friends and relatives back in China. For example, the way we approach a problem and the way we talk is very different from them, so I feel like I'm American in some of those ways. So I guess I'm in the middle.

KY: Do you know when you started to change the way you think and become more Americanized?

YY: It's because I don't frequently keep in contact with other Chinese individuals. Even when it happens, it's usually with Chinese Americans, so the way I think is simpler and not like the complex ways that Chinese people in China interact with people, such as not trusting each other. For example, my workplace has only Americans. Their way of thinking is very simple and straightforward unlike Chinese people, who can make veiled and ambiguous statements. So I feel like there are differences in the way I communicate compared to my friends and family in China.

KY: So you feel like in your heart you're Chinese or American?

YY: In my heart, I still feel like I'm Chinese.

KY: Do you still keep in touch with relatives back home?

YY: My parents are my closest relatives in China. I typically call them once every two weeks. I also have an oldest sister and a younger brother. I call them occasionally. Not too often though.

KY: Since you came to the US, have you had a chance to go back to China?

YY: I went back three years ago.

KY: How was it? Were you accustomed to it?

YY: The change was drastic, and it felt like a earthshaking amount of change happened, because I went back after 13 years. I couldn't even find my old home. Also, peoples' quality of life increased by a lot. Every family's life is pretty good, and most families have their own personal car and live in spacious homes. I was amazed in this regard.

KY: Did you notice a change in the people?

YY: In the month I spent in China, I was not accustomed to talking with them, because after running some errands, I noticed that people's attitudes are too great. They're all very stiff, and there's no trust between each other. Everyone also has a temper. Maybe it's because China's workforce is stressful and fretful that is causing everyone to have an abnormal mentality.

KY: If you had the chance, would you retire in China?

YY: I would occasionally live there, but I don't want to live there long term. I think I'm too used to America's lifestyle.

KY: After living in the US for 16 years, which traditions and morals do you feel like were retained and which ones did you not care about?

YY: In terms of children, I require that education is number one. Hardworking. That's a Chinese virtue. Frugality. Working hard in school leads to good grades, which leads to a good job. This is all Chinese people's "desire to see son turn into dragon" mentality. For myself, I don't want to be lazy. I need to save money but I shouldn't be overly stingy. I shouldn't waste things. But in America, kids don't really care about these morals, so I don't require too much of these morals of them. However, one point is, they must be honest and kind-hearted. These we must retain. Doesn't matter where, we need to retain our traditions and virtues.

KY: Which traditions have changed to American culture?

YY: In terms of lifestyle, we don't eat the heavily oiled dishes that Chinese people usually eat. The important thing is for the dish to be fast and simple. We can also be more receptive to American food, such as pizza and hamburgers. We can be more receptive to those.

KY: Do you feel like preserving these traditions is important for the next generation?

YY: To them, it's probably not that important, and I don't want to force these traditions upon them. It's a modern world. Everyone has their own life. We can't possibly force these old-fashioned traditions on them. As long as they're following their own lifestyle and not doing anything bad, that's good enough. I don't require too much. For example, Chinese etiquette, there's just too much of it.

KY: Do you feel like preserving language and culture is important?

YY: Preserving Chinese language and culture is very important. From the standpoint of this world, China is becoming more and more powerful. If you can retain your mother tongue---well not mother tongue for the younger generation---I think it will be very important for them. I would hope they would retain it.

KY: So you feel like it's important for one to identify as Chinese?

YY: Correct, correct. I feel like it should be this way. Even if you were born and grew up in America, you are still Chinese in your bones.

KY: After you decided to stay in America, did you feel like you were pursuing the American Dream?

YY: I came to America. I worked hard. My wife and kids are here. We struggled through life in the first couple of years and persevered. My oldest son is graduating from college and going to medical school. Most importantly, when my wife came over, we were able to have another child. This is very important, because it's not allowed in China. Now, my daughter is 13 years old. She's very cute and brings us a lot of joy. And through our hard work, we've purchased a house. The location's also good, and the area's pretty good too. From our own perspective, we've already achieved our dreams, or the American Dream.

KY: Last question, in these 16 years in the US, have you ever felt any racial discrimination?

YY: In this regard, because we lived in a predominantly Asian neighborhood, everyone was Asian, so no, we didn't experience any discrimination. Ever since starting work in 2011, I have experienced any discrimination from anybody, even though all my co-workers are all American. Occasionally, I'll have trouble with English, so there's an obstacle with communicating with co-workers as well as supervisor, but no discrimination. Everyone's very nice.

KY: That's all the questions. Thank you

YY: Check and see if you recorded it all. Don't be dumb and somehow forgot to record hahaha.

[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]