

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

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Interviewee: Chao Chiung Lee

Interviewers: Victoria Eng and Arthur Cao

Date/ Time of Interview: May 28, 2013, at 10:00 AM

Transcribed by: Victoria Eng and Arthur Cao

Edited by: Sara Davis (7/20/17)

Audio Track Time: 2:00:48

### Background

Chao Chiung Lee, more often referred to as C. C. Lee, was born in Hainan, China in 1949. He and his parents fled to Taiwan from Hainan Island in February, 1950 as the People's Liberation Army approached. He graduated from Tunghai University with a B. A. in Architecture. After two years of mandatory military service in the Republic of China Army, Mr. Lee enrolled in a graduate program in architecture at Washington University in St. Louis with a \$5000 scholarship. Upon finishing his Master's degree, Mr. Lee first worked as an architect in training in Springfield, Missouri. He moved to Houston, Texas in 1979, and worked for Lockwood Green Inc. as a project architect. In 1983, he quit his job and started his own company, STOA (Superb Team of Architects).

Under Mr. Lee's leadership, the company has become a major player in the architectural industry in Houston, Texas. Recently, after several major mergers, STOA is increasing its global influence by setting up offices and franchises in China, Vietnam, and Nigeria. C. C. Lee became a U.S. citizen in 1980, and he has been living with his family in Bellaire, Texas for the past twenty-four years. An active participant in the Asian American community in Houston, Mr. Lee served as the president of the Houston Asian Chamber of Commerce. He is also the current president of the Houston Chinese Chamber of Commerce, U.S.-China People's Friendship Association, and the Houston Feng-Shui Institution. C. C. Lee considers himself a Confucian, and retains many of his Chinese habits, such as playing mahjong and drinking tea.

### Setting

The interview focuses on the subjects of labor and capital, in particular, how Mr. Lee came to establish his own architectural firm in Houston and the personal beliefs by which he runs it. He outlines his beliefs through Chinese proverbs, the achievements he and his firm have accomplished, and the challenges he has faced throughout his career as the founder of one of the few—if only—Asian-owned architecture firms in Houston.

The interview took place in a conference room of STOA Architects Inc. over the course of two hours.



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Interviewers

Arthur Cao is an undergraduate student at Rice University majoring in Civil and Environmental Engineering. He is from Fuzhou, China.

Victoria Eng is an undergraduate student at Rice University majoring in Electrical Engineering. She is from Houston, Texas.

Interview Transcript

**Key:**

CCL	Chao Chiung Lee
AC	Arthur Cao
VE	Victoria Eng
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop; speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughss, sighs, etc.)

**AC:** This is Arthur Cao.

**VE:** And this is Victoria Eng.

**AC:** We are here today, on May 28, 2013, in the STOA Architects to interview C. C. Lee for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history interview project. So, Mr. Lee, can you start off by talking about—telling us a little about yourself?

**CCL:** Okay, thank you, Art. [has a drink of tea]

I was born in 1949, November, in Hainan Island. 1950, February, my parents moved to, uh, Taiwan, and I was born in that big, so-called big transition time, in the modern, uh, China's time. Uh, I was born in China, brought-up in Taiwan. I came to the State in 1974, I went to the graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis. Uh, I graduated in 1975, December. Then, I moved to Springfield, Missouri. And then I got my first job there. I stayed there five years. I got my license. Um, and I got, uh, all my goal in my life was achieved [laughs]. Uh, Ch—Chinese has the so-called 五子登科<sup>1</sup>, okay. And that f-five goal I all achieved when I was 30 years old, okay.

<sup>1</sup> Chinese proverb. Literally means, 'Five sons succeed in civil service examinations' Originally used to express the hope for one's children to succeed. Here, it is modified to include the five elements of success that all end with the character 子: a son, a wife, a house, a car, and a graduation hat.



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儿子, 妻子, 房子, 车子, 帽子<sup>2</sup>, okay. Five—five, uh, goals. It's got a house, got a job, got a wife, got a son, and got new degrees. So, I said, 'Holy cow!' And, 'what, what should I do?' [laughs] I was thirty years old, okay. When—I got my license that year, too. So, and, we got brand new house. I got my son, and I got, uh, me and my wife both got, got good job. Two new cars. Life is set. And, uh, Springfield, Missouri is a small town. It's about one hundred people's uh town. And it's a nice place to retire, really. However, for a thirty-years-old, I felt I must, can do something else, right? So, I told my wife we need to move. She was not happy, no [laughs]. I told her that we got to go to some bigger city to have, uh, a better future for our children all that. So—so, 1981, and we moved from Springfield, Missouri to Houston.

I was working for a bi—uh, big company, uh, and had a good time. And we design all the school project in Saudi Arabia. Then, 1983, I was crazy enough. I told my wife said, 'Well, I think I'm ready. I want to open my own shop.' And, uh, and I quit my job on the 1983, April 30. My wife was not happy at all again, [laughs] because she just gave our second baby's birth on April 6. And my daughter was born in 1983, April 6. I told her, I said, uh, 'Let—let me try it.' I said, 'if I don't make it, I can always find a job. If I cannot find a job, I can always work in a Chinese restaurant.' I said, 'Don't worry about that, I assure you, you are not going to get starved.' Well, you know, and, uh, woman, and wife is more conservative, especially you got the children, family. So she told me said, 'Well, now you are not, uh, only uh live for yourself now. You—, uh, you have two kid, you got a wife, you got a family now.' I said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I know that.' However, I don't know why at that time, I got a burning desire. I just want to try—try my own. And that was, uh—naive. And have bland face to myself. I just say, 'Hey, I'm good. I can make it.' So, without anybody in town, I just quit my job and start my own, okay. And, uh, and start to send out all my flyer to the builders, developers in town. No answer.

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So I pick up the phone to call them. And the secretary will block it, okay. Well, because we are, uh, so-called foreigner, right? And when you call and people can tell from your a—accent. So, so, I cannot even get through the secretary, okay. So, [phone rings] I thought about it, uh [phone continues to ring].

[recorder paused to take care of the phone]

So, I said, wait a minute. How can I get into the door to see the guy? If I can not see the boss, how can I sell it, right? So, that was the first lesson I learned. The so-called accessibility. And we are not, have the equal accessibility, because you don't know people. You don't have connections. So, how—how can you get your foot into the door, right? So, uh, so if you don't

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<sup>2</sup> Chinese: son, wife, house, car, hat.





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have accessibility, you don't have so-called opportunity, right? So the number one I learned is how you can figure out a way to get into the door. That take some, uh, luck, and also some, uh, hard—hardworking. One day, I was driving on the street. I saw a sign, for sale sign, and on the corner property, 'For sale, DIA construction and development company.' I got an idea, so I called the phone number. I said that, I said, 'I'm the potential buyer,' okay. I said, 'I want to talk to the owner.' The secretary, 'sure,' and I get in. Well, I was not completely uh untruth because I do have a friend was looking for, uh, the possibility to buy some property to build some mini-warehouse. So, I called the number and the girl said, 'yeah, yeah.' And so, the girl transferred the phone to the owner. And the owner said, yeah Mr. Lee, come over. So, so, I got my portfolio, my slides, prepared and in my briefcase. And I went in to see guy.

Well, that guy was Mr. Dennis Austin. Young guy. At that time I was thirty-three, he was only, like, twenty-nine. Young guy. He's a very friendly guy. We talk. He said, 'Well, Mr. Lee, what do you want to do?' I said, 'Well, we are thinking about to build some mini-warehouse.' Suddenly, he become very friendly. He said, well, you know, we are the good builder, and we can build for you, all that. So, so, conversation starts very friendly. He said, 'By the way, what do you do?' I said, 'Well, I'm architect.' He said, 'Well, someday, I'd like to see your work.' I said, 'Hey, just by chance, I got my work here.' So I pulled out my slides, my portfolio to show him. He saw it and he said, 'Well, I like it.' He said, uh, good job. So, when I was leaving I told him two sentence change my life. I said, 'Hey, Mr. Austin, if you want me to be here seven o'clock in the morning, I will be here. If you want to be—want me to be here ten o'clock in the night, I will be here.' And he pat my back, and he said, 'I like your attitude. We will do business.' Okay, so I shake hand, and I left. So, one week later, Thursday afternoon about three thirty, he called me. He said, 'Hey, Mr. Lee. I have a potential tenant here. And, can you come over now?' I said, 'Sure.' So, I went there and he has a shopping center. He has a five-thousand square foot. A restaurant tenant was planning to lease the space. So he called me over, we sit down, and we schedule out the plan and all that. And, uh, that, uh, and the tenant said, 'Yep, that is what I want.' Then, that, uh, Mr. Austin asked me said, 'Well, Mr. Lee, can you have the drawing done by Monday?' I said, 'No problem.' [laughs] Okay, that was like a Thursday afternoon. It's already five o'clock. I said, 'No problem.' So, so, I went back, I jump on it, I work through Friday, Saturday, Sunday. So Monday morning, I got fifteen sheets drawing done, okay.

Monday morning about nine o'clock, I put that fifteen sheets on—on his desk. He was so impressed. He said, 'Gosh, I never saw anybody work so fast.' He said, 'By the way, Mr. Lee, where is your office?' I said, 'Well, I still use my own house.' He said, 'Come

over.' He said, 'I gotta plenty of office, uh, room here, and you can pick one.' And he said, 'Free—free of charge.' I said, 'Wow.'

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I know that time that was my break. So, I take a deep breath, I told him. I said, 'Hey Mr. Austin, can I think about it? Can I call you back tomorrow?' He said, 'Sure, sure.' [laughs] So, so, I was so excited. I know, that was my break. So, I wait till the second day's about ten o'clock. I called him. I said, 'Hey, Mr. Austin, I decided to take your offer.' He was so excited, and he got the whole office set up for me, okay. So, since that time on, every time he got a potential tenant, he said, 'Okay, come in, talk to my in-house architect.' So, that's a mutual benefit, right? So, so, that's how I got a start. It's with his connections I start to build my, that, uh, my business, my network, okay.

So, uh, that lesson teach me is, you have to work hard in order to be successful, okay. However, only work hard doesn't guarantee you successful. And you have to have a break, so-called luck. However, the luck has to be created by you. Okay, if you don't create, and you don't have luck. Think about it. And because there are full of opportunities all surrounding us, somebody can see it, somebody cannot see that, okay. That sign on that property was there for a long time. When I saw it, I got an idea, I called them, right? So, so, I bet there must be more than ten thousand, thousands people saw the sign, and on a daily base. So and that—that lesson I learned is first, in U.S., Houston is a very, very open-minded city. If you are willing to go for it, you will always have opportunity. However, you have to create your own opportunity by visibility, okay. Okay, that, I'm the—the—the firm believer, visibility enhance opportunity. Especially, our business is a personal service business. You have to let the client know you. The client has to like you, okay. So, when you do the marketing, you do the sales, you really don't sell nothing but yourself. Yourself, your own personality, okay.

So, Chinese had this old saying, '一命, 二运, 三风水, 四基阴德五读书<sup>3</sup>.' The first one is 命<sup>4</sup>.

命 is fate. Second one is luck. Third one is feng-shui. Forth one is do the good deeds. The fifth one is d—diligent, okay. So, the first two. The fate and luck, is beyond our control, okay. That's called the heaven factor. Feng-shui is called earth factor. The last two: do the diligence, uh, diligence and do the good deeds, that's under your control. That's called the human factor. So, and if you can only control two, and, that, out of the five, your chance of successful is might be limited. And you got to have luck or you have to have the feng-shui knowledge. So that's why and that, uh, I teach feng—feng-shui course to—to people is trying to help them to enhance their chance to be successful, okay. So—so, if you have feng-shui knowledge, and you also control human factor, if you also got the luck, and you have a four out of five. So, then, and your success is secured, okay.

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<sup>3</sup> Chinese proverb: first fate; second luck; third feng-shui; forth accumulate *yin* karma; and fifth study.

<sup>4</sup> Chinese: fate or destiny.



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However, no matter what, you have to work hard, that's number one, okay. Uh, 这个, 成功一定要努力, 努力不一定会成功<sup>5</sup>, okay. So, that's why I'm saying, it's, uh, and in my last forty years journey here, I learned is, uh, is, if you want to be somebody, you got to understand yourself, to know your strength, your weakness. You have to know your passion is. Actually, the fate is your own habit. Your own personality create your own habit. Your own ha—your own habit create your own fate, right? Think—think about it. And if you don't have a good, effective habit, you cannot be successful, okay. And, especially I learned is, uh, life is, our life or journey is to experience. We are spiritual being. We are not human being. We are spiritual being has human experience. We are not human being have spiritual experience. So, we are the true time traveler. Our body is just our rented apartment, for this period of time. The body will decay. The soul will travel, so we are the true, uh, uh, uh, time traveler. And, uh, I believe reincarnation all that. So, so, the purpose to come to this life is our soul require a pacific—specific experience. So, this life, and I'm a Chinese American's experience. My next—next life, who knows. I might be, I might be Egyptian, black, white, Hispanic, and because our soul require different experience to elevate our spiritual growth, okay. So, and this take me forty year search.

And, and because when I was twenty years old, I was in the Tunghai University in Taiwan, is a Christian college. We are all required to study world religion, Bible, that. And in the class, when I was Junior year, I was challenging my professor. I said, 'Sir, one thing I cannot figure out.' And he said, 'Ask.' I said, 'Sooner or later, we are going to die. Why don't want to die now? Why have the desire to live as long as possible?' I said, 'If I know I come in this world empty-hand, I'm going to leave this world empty hand.' I said, 'Why bother?' He said, 'Good question.' [laughs] So, he wanted me to study Bible one-on-one with him the whole semester, the—the second semester in my Junior year. And we finished the whole New Testament. And finish it, I told him, I said, 'Sir, Bible is good book.' I said, 'It's good teaching. It's all good. However, I didn't get specific, uh, enlightenment, because Confucius already said the same thing five hundred years ahead.' Or, uh, uh. So, he told me that's fine. He said, 'Time is not right for you yet.' He said, 'You continue to search. Uh, the God, sooner or later, God will find you.' So, since that time on, I studied a lot, uh, lot of religions, and—and all philosophies about meaning of life, all that.

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So, through the last forty year search, I finally realized, every religion's same. We all talk about the same God. And specially, and as architect, and there's not doubt about there is a mastermind created the whole universe, okay. Can you tell me the whole universe just happen by chance? No, there's got to be some being laid out, just like a restaurant. You gotta hire architect to lay out the plan to have a—a very effective, functional layout. So, so, the restaurant can run it very effectively. So, the restaurant can be profitable. However, once the restaurant finished, the design was finished, the building's built, the architect turn the key to the owner, and architect left, when architect no longer involved

in the operation of restaurant. So the same thing for me, the god create the whole universe. The god has design and plan for you, but once, and he got the plan tell you, what your life should be, and god left. God give you the key. And you know what the key is? Your free will. God give you the key, the free will. And you can decide you want to follow

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<sup>5</sup> Chinese: Success requires hard work; hard work doesn't guarantee success.





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God's plan or not. Oh, if you don't want? That's fine. That's your business. So same—same thing. To be in the business, you are continuing exploring your own potential. You're continuing realize God's plan for you. You never stop thinking, searching, learning because it is endless, searching, learning, okay.

So somebody said, 'Oh, I made it, and I want to retire. I want to enjoy life.' And I always think about, always question myself: what exactly means retirement? Think about. Life is beginning of death; death is beginning of birth, okay. And birth and death, okay. 生就是死, 死就是生<sup>6</sup>, okay. So, so, the whole process really is not end. Think about it. People lost because they don't have a clear definition, meaning of who they are, what they want to achieve, and in—and in their life, okay. And, uh, and everybody is a leader in a certain level, okay. A leader is a person knows who he is, where he want to go, and how he can help the other people to achieve their goal. That is the definition of leader, okay. And in my life now, and I'm old is, sixty-three. And in my business career, life is never a smooth riding. It's always up-downs, right? And it's, and it's you always challenge yourself. And through the last forty years' growth, I finally formulize my own philosophy.

And I'm a spiritual person. I'm not a religious person, okay. I can go to church, mosque, temple. It's all fine with me because that is a communication space for human being and god. That's it, okay. The format, the ritual, is really—is human-create. God didn't create religion. Human create religion. Think about that, okay? So, I formulate my own philosophy. I crystalize it to be two words: challenge yourself. That's it. Think about it. It's everyday, if you want to feel happy, you need to challenge yourself. You work hard at it. When you reach it, and you can be really have a sense of self-realization, happiness. However, the moment you reach it, it is emptiness. So, then, then, then you have to continue force yourself to search the sec—second goal, right? [hitting the table with one hand while talking in a chopping motion] So, that's why I thought about it, and, uh, I challenge myself what is STOA going to? Okay, and, that, uh, rather than continuing challenge myself, reach to emptiness, go to another one, challenge myself, reach it, another one, [the chopping motion again] I said, 'Wait a minute. Why not I just create a very high goal, that's beyond my reach in my—this lifetime?'

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So, so, that's why I create STOA, and I want to create STOA dynasty, okay. I told my son, uh, what. My son is Victor. He is thirty-three years old. He is, uh, in the urban planning background. So, he, he just joined me on the May 1. And my daughter, Yvonne, she is thirty now. She is, uh, majored in the architecture, too. So, so, I share with them. I said, 'Kid. My goal is want to create something beyond my reach in my lifetime. I want you folks to carry on this torch and this vision.' And, uh, to build a dynasty, it will take minimum three generations. It takes three generations to build a

long-lasting, sustainable, uh, business, okay. So, and I am a very patient person. And I'm not looking for instant reward, all that. I told them. I said, 'And I commit myself to build this foundation for you. And, STOA is my first son. And I got to find somebody

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<sup>6</sup>Chinese: To live is to die; to die is to live.



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can take care of my first son first.’ I said, ‘Although you are my children, however, if you cannot take care of my son, my first son; if you cannot share the vision, then, then I’ll have to find somebody else.’

So, I—and I’m not a traditional Chinese parent, is create the wills, the company and let children take over. And I, I’m not necessarily agree that, because traditional family business concept is: your children, they are the owners. However, the modern cooperation, you have to separate the ownership and management. Owner not necessarily are the good managers, okay? Yes, and you can own the company share, but you don’t have to run it. And you can always hire somebody more capable than you to run it. So—so, that’s why, that, uh, traditional way, Chinese say, ‘富不过三代, 穷不过三世<sup>7</sup>.’ And that, uh, what that saying is: it’s very seldom in the Chinese family business can last more than three generations. Very seldom. Because the second generation still can see, the founding generation’s hard-working value, work ethics. However, the third generation, because they didn’t see it, so they didn’t appreciate the founding generation’s vision, value, effort. So, the third generation on, it’s very easy to not appreciation the value, the same goal and vision, okay.

So, so, in order to assure STOA dynasty can continue, and we have a very unique philosophy here. And I will say STOA is a very unique firm. And I create this entity, and with a very unique, uh, vision. And the name of STOA is, uh, is a very unique name, okay. STOA is, superb team of architects, okay. That is, we want to make ourselves feel and we are the superb team. Team—emphasize working together, towards the same goal. Uh, STOA is also ancient Greek colonnade. When, you talk about uh and that, uh, ancient Greek, uh, forum, and, uh, farm market, and they have the—the colonnade people doing the business under the colonnade, okay. Also, STOA is a source of philosophy called stoicism. When you say somebody is very stoic—; stoic is from—from stoa. The teaching of stoicism is very similar to the Chinese teaching, the Confucius and Daoism, that emphasize, uh, discipline, control your desire, have high moral ethics and standard; uh, work hard, uh, follow the nature’s order, live a very simple life.

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And stoicism doesn’t promote you to live a very lux—luxury life. It’s very simple life, okay. Uh, one thing is very important is the emphasize: individual should sacrifice your interest for the group’s benefit. That is the essence of teamwork. 牺牲小我, 完成大我<sup>8</sup>, right? So, uh, and stoicism is very rigid teaching. Actually stoicism is foundation of the whole Roman civilization. And they are based on the teaching of stoicism, okay. Yes, later on mod—

modified it. Same thing here. And STOA in the twenty-first century, we have to use stoicism as foundation, but modify it to fit it

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<sup>7</sup> Chinese: Affluence never pass three generations; poverty never pass three lifetimes.

<sup>8</sup> [Chinese: sacrifice the individual to achieve the group's goal.]



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into the modern's way, right? So, base on, that philosophy, and we—we always encourage people, to challenge yourself, is constantly push your envelope, and to surprise yourself, okay. Yes, and when I mean challenge yourself, I mean surprise yourself, okay. And surprise yourself is more—more appropriate. Always surprise yourself, okay.

For example, when I was, uh, in 1999, I grow my company to a medium size. I was too big for small job, too small for big job, okay. I was stuck in the middle. I said, 'Gosh.' And, uh, 'How-where and that, uh, what should I do?' So, I talk to the people. People said, 'Well, you don't have experience, and you don't have this particular project track record.' I said, 'Well, if you don't give me the opportunity, how can I get the track record?' They said, 'Well, it's not on my job. Ah, well, will you get experienced some else. Then, then, you come in back.' I thought about that. I said, 'Gosh, that is very cumbersome, right?' So, okay, I got this challenge. I figured out how to solve it, and I just buy the track record. So, I was the first minority architectural firm brave enough to get out of my bucks and go buy firms. So, consequently, I bought four firms. And my first—first office I purchase was in Portland, Oregon, 1999. We are a small firm. And, I just saw on the magazine, that said, 'Northwest Practice for sale.' I got an idea. Just called them. I said, 'Are you in Seattle?' They said, 'No, we are in Portland.' I said, 'Where is Portland?' They said, 'Oh, Portland is only three hours south of Seattle.' I said, 'Okay.' So, from the day I called them, on the June 17, 1999. I closed the deal by September 17. Three months, okay? Okay, I don't have consultants. I just use common sense, the business sense. I got the deal done, okay. So, use that experience, I consequently bought one firm in Pensacola, Florida; one firm in Houston; then, 2007 I bought another firm in Pensacola.

So, though this merge and acquisition experience, I learned something, too. Actually, everyday you learn something, okay? Uh, to have a long distance management is difficult, even you got partners. It doesn't work. Because especially our business. Our business is a personal creative business. People got ego, okay. If you are not there, sooner or later your partner will feel—they don't need you, because that is their effort, their connection, their per—personal relationship. So, that's why I elevate my company to the third level.

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First is the entrepreneur level. Second level, I start to do merge and acquisition. Then, the third level I start to franchise my company, okay. I was the first architectural firm



actually do the franchise. Uh, when I was sixty years old, and I told my wife said, 'Well, honey. And I feel bored.' I said, 'I want go back to school.' She said, 'You crazy?' She said, 'All your friend, your classmate is already retired.' So, when I was sixty year old I went to Harvard, for one-year program. It's called advanced management development program, specialized in the real estate. That is a very good program. I learned a lot there. When you are in sixties, you go back to school to learn is different when you are in twenties. It's a totally di—different set of mind, okay? In that



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program I learned a very important concept, called the red ocean, blue ocean concept. And the professor shows two slides. First slide is a red color water, full of sharks. They call it red ocean. The second slide is Hawaii scene, nice blue water; one shark. And the professor ask, 'Which market you are in?' Everybody point the red—red ocean. He said, 'If you are in the red ocean, you gotta figure out how to get into the blue ocean, right?'

The fifty thousand dollars answer—and I spent fifty thousand dollars—the fifty thousand dollars answer is: two way. One is you create a new business, new service, new product. You are the first, and like iPhone, iPad. You create a brand new market for yourself. The second way is you do as Wal-Mart did seventy years ago. Wal-Mart went to the rural area. And they don't compete with Kmart, Sears. They go to small towns, set up small grocery stores. When they are strong enough, they come back to the urban centers, knock out Kmart, Sears. So, I thought about it. I said, 'You know, this is a great strategy.' 中国人讲: 孙子兵法<sup>9</sup>, right? That's a great strategy, okay. And, we are small, and we cannot compete with those big boys. So, so, that's why, um, I—I told my staff, my children this. We are looking for long-term, okay. Look at that. Wal-Mart take them seventy years, okay. Grow, okay. So—so, when I got that idea and I start to look for my market. Houston market, U.S. market is a very competitive market, especially we are in a matured society now. So, we are not in the fifties, sixties, in a rapid growth, the country-building mode. And we are in the matured phase now. The mature phase means, yes, we still have project, but we are no longer have those mega-project. Compared with China, India, all developing country now. They have mega-need. They have mega-project. I thought about that. I said, 'You know, the opportunity is in the blue ocean market. So, what I'm doing here to fight in the red—red ocean market for?' So, that's why I start to look into the blue ocean market. However, how—how can I do it? And I start the, uh, Shanghai office 2005. It was a partnership. However, that doesn't work very well, either, because and I am in Houston, and the—the market in China, in Shanghai. And, uh, and my partner is running the show there.

**(00:40:04)**

First three years we are lo—losing money. So there's no problem. The fourth year and we made money, so I got a nice check. And I was happy. But she was not happy, okay? [laughs] So, fifth year, she wanted to, buy me out, okay. Because she felt, 'I'm doing all the work here, right? And you are sitting in Houston and doing nothing and got the check, right?' So, this teach me also a very valuable lesson, too. Every relationship is a fair trade. F-A-I-R, fair trade. Include marriage. It's fair trade. And if one party don't feel

that is a fair trade anymore, that partnership, that relationship won't last, okay. My learning is every relationship got to be fair trade. 将心比心<sup>10</sup>. And you have to put yourself in others' shoes to see what they see the partnership. So, so, I

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<sup>9</sup> Chinese: What the Chinese called The Art of War.

<sup>10</sup> Chinese proverb: Walk in others' shoes.



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found out. I said, 'Well, the current structure doesn't work. Even beginning you and you invest your money and effort, later on, if you are not there, soon or later, you will be squeezed out because your partner doesn't feel you put your fair contribution, right?' So, then, based on what I learned at Harvard, the blue ocean concept, and, the—my experience in Shanghai, and also, Pensacola, too, I have to let my two junior partner in Pensacola go because after six years, they felt that is their effort, their contribution, and they don't feel the relationship is a fair trade. And, and, although I own seventy-five percent of the company, and, but they still feel they are running the show, okay? So, based on this experience, and I thought it. I said, 'You know, maybe the best way is to franchise it, okay. I don't own your company. I lent you my branding, track record, experience, resource. I support you to grow, but I don't own one—your company.' So, that will be much feasible way of partnership. Franchise is also a form of partnership. So, you have your own company, and I don't own, and—your company share. However, I help you to grow fast. So, our slogan is, 'We help small firms to grow fast.'

So, when I got this idea three years ago, I—I talk with a friend. He is a Vietnamese engineer. I ask him to find some small firm in Vietnam that I can sell my franchise to them. And he said, 'Well, I'm interested.' I said, 'Oh, really?' So, so, so, my first sold franchise is during a lunch. We talked. I sold it, okay? I don't have anything, okay? I don't have brochures; I don't have slides. We just talk about idea, and he like it, so he bought it. So consequently I sold, uh, four more. I sold one in Hangzhou, one in Xi'an, and two in Nigeria. So, now I'm looking into the Panama, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and the Malaysia, okay. Then, my goal is by 2020, I want to have twenty locations, okay. So, and this summarize my whole business—business career here. It's how I grow up in a tough time in that big transition time in modern Chinese history, moved to Taiwan, come to St. Louis, go to Springfield, come to Houston, then, how I grow from Houston to a—to a global company, okay. That, uh, we are the only Asian-owned design firm actually have—for have a global prices.

**(00:45:16)**

And, that—that—the whole philosophy is based on surprise yourself. That's it. Never end to surprise yourself; always challenge yourself. Yeah, when I first, uh, present my franchise idea at Harvard—because by the end of the year we have to present our own thesis project—and I present my PowerPoint; I said, 'I want to create this dynasty.' And all the professor said, 'Well, it doesn't work.' I said, 'Why not?' They said, 'Because you are a personal services business, and you are not like McDonald's, Burger King that you have a standard product, tangible product.' I said, 'Hey. And if you shift your paradigm. That is exactly why you need franchise—because it is a localized business.'

And you provide a global image, global resources, a family. Everybody can share the global resource. You help your local partner stronger. And you can help them to compete in their own market better. That's what franchise for. It's to help your family members stronger. Without cost them arm and legs, because you share the knowledge and experience. So, I, so, personally I think, and this idea work, and proved to work. [inaudible one word] I only sell





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them on per—personal basis. What—I am not yet to—to reorganize it as a corporate, uh, way. And we are more based on personal contact way. And, that, uh, and I'm not strong enough. And that, uh, and once I'm strong would—I would be, and, like Wal-Mart. When I got twenty offices all over the world, I will coming back, to Houston market, to U.S. market, and to surprise all those big boys. They will say, 'Wow. Where is this STOA coming from?' Right? So, so, that's why, and I'm not, uh, actively promote—let—the big boys knows, and, what I'm doing, okay? Keep low profile, I go out. And once I build the whole family structure right, I'm coming back. I'm going to knock out Kmart and Sears here. Okay, that's fun, right?

So, for me now, life should be fun. However, when I mean fun, it's not going place fun. Fun means, and you assess where you are. You decide where you want to go. And you lay out a plan. You follow your plan. And if you reach it, it's great. If you don't reach it, that's fine. Say, Chinese old saying said, '谋事在人, 成事在天<sup>11</sup>,' okay? And because hard working doesn't guarantee you success. However, the life, the process count; not the result count. The process count. Think about it. There is really no so-called result—because result is just the beginning of another result. It's constantly evolving, okay. That I start from zero, I grow my company to a medium size, and I got the result, but that result beginning how I can grow my company by merge and acquisition. Then, when I get into the third level, I reach my dream, goal in U.S. Now, I want to go to global, and I want to create a global dy—dynasty. Then, my fourth goal is, when I got my twenty locations, I strong enough, then, I'm going to coming back, to knock out the [laughs], the Sears and Kmart here. Uh, Wal...uh, yeah. Uh, Kmart here, right?

**(00:50:03)**

So, so, you constantly have a challenge for you. So, life is fun. If you don't have challenge, and life is stall. Well, that is why I always challenge my staff. I said, 'You got to constantly review yourself.' It's that: who are you, where you are, where you want to go. If you don't know what you are doing, you just surviving; you are not living. Uh, you know, when I was thirty years old—and one time I went to, Kansas City. And there is a very famous museum called Nelson Art Gallery. And one time, they have a famous show, and I drive from Springfield to Kansas. I wait in a long line. I saw there is two saying on the—the top of the building. It's well said. They say, 'It is real,' R-E-A-L, 'that we survive, and it is ideal,' I-D-E-A-L, 'that we live.'<sup>12</sup> So, we need to have ideal. We need to have the dream in order to live. And otherwise, we are just like—just like animal: dog and cat, same thing. We just survive, okay. So, so, that why and I always challenge my kid, my

staff. I told them, 'I don't want you to survive. I want you to live. And you got to find yourself.' And that—and that's what I learned. It's, uh, we are all God's children, and there is no difference. Human nature is same. And no matter if you are black, Hispanic, Asian, white; all same. Human nature is same. So, that in order to be a good businessman, in order to be actually

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<sup>11</sup>Chinese: planning depends on human; succeeding depends on Heaven.

<sup>12</sup>Original quote, 'It is by the real that exist; it is by the ideal that we live.'



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to be a good person, you got to understand human nature. So think about it. And what is human nature, okay. I think is—the key is—is we got to aware our surroundings; is every event, every person we meet, we can always learn something from it, okay.

所以—所以—

所以说中国人有一句老话 said, ‘万物静观皆自得, 处处留心皆学问<sup>13</sup>’: That, that means, and you have to pay attention to your surroundings. You can learn from everything. So, 孔

孔子讲的, ‘三人行必有我师<sup>14</sup>,’ right? So, so that you can learn from everybody. And, the good behavior, the good part, you can learn from them. The bad behavior, and you have to learn how to avoid it, right? ‘见贤思齐’ 嘛, 对不对<sup>15</sup>? So, my—my current assessment of my life is, uh, is have a good time, okay. Is challenge, and, uh, life is not supposed to be easy, okay. When you got to maintain a very balanced view, balanced mind, peaceful mind. And that to see every event happen, that always have reason. 中国人讲的, 不是中国人, 因果论. 这佛家讲的<sup>16</sup>, okay. And the law of casualty; the cause and effect. Everything always have 因跟果<sup>17</sup>. So, and if you want to know what you were in your previous life, and you just see what you are experiencing now, because current life is a—the result of your previous lives’ cause. So what you are doing now is a cause of your future life. So, so, so, that will give you a very, uh [pause], good way, a rule, how you behave yourself. It’s—nothing happen by chance, okay?

**(00:55:16)**

If this life, you are constantly encounter challenges, difficulties, don’t complain. That is the result of what you did in your previous life. So, what you are doing now, you have to behave yourself well because you don’t want to suffer in your future life, okay. That is a Buddhism teaching. However [short pause], and every [short pause] theory, teaching, and they became lost. That means they have some merit. The truth is all same, [short pause] okay. So, that—that is a basic overall view, and of my life, my business, and, uh, ah my philosophy. And I’m a firm believer, you are who you are. You define who you are, okay. Now, as Asian American in Houston, uh, I will say our challenge, is as same as black, and Hi—Hi—Hispanic. I think, uh, comparable speaking, Houston is a much open market. Its people are more open-mind because we are really is a international city. We got, uh, people all over the world here, okay. Uh, however—however, for the minority business to grow as Asian business, yes, we are not in the most advantageous position because business is made by people. And, and especially for us, and we are not home-growing, okay. [short pause] And we are the so-called ‘transplant’. 就我们是移植过来的<sup>18</sup>, okay. We don’t

<sup>13</sup> Chinese: so, so, so, the Chinese have an old saying that goes, 'The ten thousand things in the world, when observed peacefully, are all self-satisfied; if you pay close attention, knowledge is everywhere.'

<sup>14</sup> Chinese: Con-, Confucius said, 'Three men walking, (among them) must be someone I can learn from.'

<sup>15</sup> Chinese: 'Upon seeing someone capable, think about how to be like him,' right?

<sup>16</sup> Chinese: the Chinese said-, no not the Chinese. The theory of causality. This is from Buddhi-, Buddhism.

<sup>17</sup> Chinese: cause and effect.

<sup>18</sup> Chinese: we have been transplanted here.



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have root here. 就我们的跟不在这里, 对吧. 所以, 所以说<sup>19</sup>, for us, we have to work very hard to— to grow our own root here. So, that's why, and that, uh, and I work day and night, okay. Breakfast meeting, lunch meeting, dinner meeting, Sunday, it's constantly. And they, and this become a habit. Constantly meet with different people, constantly let people know who you are and what you are doing. And that, uh, never ending process, okay. Uh, as Asian American, because we are very small population in Hou—Houston, so, trying to compete for the public resource, we are not as strong as black and Hispanic community. We are not, uh, visible. So, yes, and some—sometimes, and especially our business, and that, uh, we are pursuing that public sector job. Most of our work you can see here. We do the city, county, airport, uh, school, college, the public sector job. Public sector job, we are competing with, and all the big boys. So, uh, fortunately, the public sector job, they have, uh, so-called the participation goal for—the minority firm. However, as a subcontract for a prime firm, and you ba—basically, you're just like a tool. And, you are not driving—and you are not the driver, okay. So, how you build up your strength, and you can compete in this so-called red ocean market.

**(01:00:10)**

I think going through the traditional way to grow is take too long. See, it take me thirty years to build—to build—to build this foundation, but still it takes another two generations, okay. That, uh, and especially the timing too. Uh, see like the fa—famous Ch—Chinese architect I.M. Pei. Okay, and uh, frank speaking, there are thousands Chinese architect as talent—and—as I.M. Pei in U.S., but he was in the right time, right place. Okay, and he was in the New York City right after World War II, and the whole country building. So he was in the right time. However now, and the whole economy coming down, we are not in the right time, right place in U.S. However, how can we take advantage of U—U—U.S.? The U.S. still has the global respect. If you are U.S. firm, you go to the developing country, people pay respect. So, how you can take advantage of this? You are the U.S. firm. You help lo—local party compete in the local market.

Okay, so that—so that is my current, uh, thinking and that approach is how can I help first. The local market can still grow slowly, but emphasize in—in the global market. So, that is why my plan is to bring my son back this year, my daughter back next year. And let them to run the Houston office, and I will have time to expand the—and in the global market. Okay, so everything got to—to go through the process, and you gotta be patient. The most—the most small firm fail is they are not patient. And—and in order to be successful, you got to be persistent, patient, okay. And also I learned when you are at the most successful time, busiest time, that's the time you need to be specifically, be careful.

盛极必衰, 否极泰来<sup>20</sup>, okay. When you are at the top of the mountain, the only direction you can go is go down. And when you are at the bottom of the valley, the only

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<sup>19</sup>Chinese: Our roots are not here, right? So, so-

<sup>20</sup>Chinese: When prosperity is extreme, decline is sure to follow; when chaos is extreme, stability is sure to follow.





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direction you can go is go up. 所以说, ‘胜不骄败不馁<sup>21</sup>’. So, and all my growth in the U.S., in the Houston market, I learned the more I grow, the more life experience I get, the more I appreciate the Chinese teaching, the Confucius teaching. Excellent teaching. Oh yeah, so, and that’s what I feel, all the Chinese generations like my son, my daughter, I told them said, ‘You need to read some Chinese philosophy, Confucius and Daoism, and you can be more appreciative, and who you are. We are very lucky as Chinese living in U.S. Okay, we have the benefit of both sides, the both sides. Okay, you have the traditional learning, but you live in a western society. You can also see how their civilization based. And, you can compare, or you can handle the issue much better. Okay, 各有所长<sup>22</sup>, okay. We need to—to complementary to—to each other. Okay, is that it? So now you got any questions? [laughss]

**(01:05:21)**

**VE:** Yeah, um, so you mentioned that it’s very important to know yourself—

**CCL:** Mm-hmm.

**VE:** —to be a leader. So I guess going way back, how did you know that you wanted to study architecture?

**CCL:** Uh, well you know, I bumped into architecture pure by chance. And because in Taiwan system, when you graduated from high school, you have to take a National college exam. It’s a unified test. You fill in your choices, options, on the different departments of the different university. You fill in. Then your score will match with which, that, uh, field. So, and then my score, I just meet into the architecture department. I don’t have the slightest idea what the difference between architecture and civil engineer. I don’t have the slightest idea. And well, I guess it’s, uh, fate. And we do have the so-called fate factor there. I just bumped into it and that I consider myself is a born architect. It’s so easy for me, uh, so I, well, and I must be, uh, blessed. And I must’ve did something right in my previous life [laughs].

**VE:** [laughs]

**AC:** You were born in 1949—

**CCL:** Yeah, yeah.

**AC:** —in Hainan. And the—the Communist Army took over the island—

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<sup>21</sup>Chinese: So, the saying goes, ‘Never take pride in victories; very dispirit in failures.’

<sup>22</sup>Chinese: Each has its advantages.



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**CCL:** Mm-hmm

**AC:** —uh, Haikou to be specific—

**CCL:** Yeah, right.

**AC:** —in April, I think, 1950.

**CCL:** Mm-hmm. Yeah, right.

**AC:** Um, what was the circumstances, when—surrounding your family when you were born?

**CCL:** Well, you know, when my parents came to Taiwan, we were very poor. We don't have nothing. [laughs] Okay, yeah seriously. My—and my mother told me they left Hainan in 1950's February, and I was like, uh, only four months old. And, uh—, and we have to—, and my mother has to wrap me with her—a—blanket, put me on top of a big cargo box. And then they got an arm—a crane arm—and take the box out and to the boat. The boat is very high, right? Well because my parents had—had—to climb 这个绳梯<sup>23</sup> and this, uh, the rope, climb up to the, uh, boat. Okay, they cannot hold me to climb it. So, yes, I was [laughs] hanging over there [not clear], and my mom—mother—said gosh, if I got—wind blow it—or if I go down to the ocean, it's gone! There's no—, there is no way to save me. Yeah, because, uh, because at that time, everybody wanted to—everybody want to get on the boat. I say, chaotic moment, yeah. So, then we come to Taiwan, well you know, we don't have anything. So my father finally found a teaching job in a high school in the middle of Taiwan. And then we moved over there, and then my father found—found another teaching job in Taipei, so then—so, so I was in Taipei when I was six years old. So then, that, uh, I was grow up in Taipei.

**AC:** Your father is from Henan, and your mother is from Hubei.

**CCL:** Yeah, right, that's right.

**AC:** How'd they meet?

**CCL:** [sigh] Let's see. I heard it's, uh, my father went to Hubei College, where they met at the 湖北农学院<sup>24</sup>, yeah. Yeah, okay, at the Hubei College.

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<sup>23</sup>Chinese: This rope ladder.

<sup>24</sup>Chinese: Hubei Agricultural College.



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**VE:** Um, did your mother ever work in Taiwan? Or did you only...?

**CCL:** Yes, my mother, she is, uh, a teacher at the grade school. And my father, he was a math professor, and in a college in uh Taipei.

**(01:10:16)**

**AC:** Were they connected to the, um, republic government? Because they went—they ended up in Taiwan instead of staying in the mainland.

**CCL:** Uh, they are not necessarily connected with the Kuomintang, no. They just, at that time, they are young too. They are early twen—twenties, so—and they just don't want to be under the Communist regime.

**VE:** Um, did you meet your wife in Taiwan?

**AC:** Yes. I was, uh, okay I was in college. She—she—she was in college, yeah. In Taiwan, yeah.

**VE:** And—

**AC:** Your name is 李兆琼 [lǐ zhào qióng].

**CCL:** Yeah.

**AC:** 琼<sup>25</sup> as in Hainan?

**CCL:** Hainan, yeah. See in Chinese, we have a family name, our mi—middle one, 兆, is our 辈分<sup>26</sup>, is our generation name. And all my sister, my brothers all got the same thing. Yeah, okay, I am 李兆琼<sup>27</sup>. The third character is my real name. And that is—and we use the place that we were born. So me's 李兆琼. 那我的妹妹叫李兆林<sup>28</sup> because she was in Yunlin [云林], Taiwan. 那我的弟弟叫李兆玄<sup>29</sup> (?<sup>30</sup>). Okay, yeah.

**VE:** Um, where are your siblings now? [Mr. Lee raised his eyebrow, showing he did not hear the question clearly] Where are your siblings?

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<sup>25</sup>琼 is the abbreviation of Hainan Province.



<sup>26</sup> Chinese: Generation name.

<sup>27</sup> Chinese: Chao Chiung Lee (name of the interviewee, translated using the Wade-Giles system of romanization).

<sup>28</sup> Chinese: Chao Chiung Lee. And my younger sister is called Zhaolin Li (translated using the Pinyin system).

<sup>29</sup> Chinese: My younger brother is called Zhaoxuan Li (translated using the Pinyin system).

<sup>30</sup> Interviewers were not sure about the last character of the name of the younger brother.



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**CCL:** Oh! They're all in Houston. Yeah.

**VE:** Oh.

**CCL:** And my sister is—she was—she was an accountant. My brother just retired, and he moved from Dallas to here now. He—he is a PhD in the Statistics. Yeah.

**AC:** Did they come here because of you?

**CCL:** Yeah. Well, because my family and my mo—mother is here too. Yeah, so my mother, my younger sister, brother is all here.

**VE:** How did you choose, um, Wash U when you were deciding where to go for graduate school?

**CCL:** Oh, Wash U? Well, just by chance too. [laughss] When I applied, one school on the east coast, one school on the west coast, one school in the middle. And the—Wash U gave me scholarship, so hey! I'm coming here. [laughss]

**AC:** There was a two year gap between you graduated from Tunghai University and—

**CCL:** Oh, okay, yeah. And in Taiwan, every boy needed to go to the military services. So, I graduated in '72, I have to go to army for two years. So, so, '72 to '74 and I was in the army, yeah.

**AC:** You served in the army.

**CCL:** Yeah, that's right, yeah.

**AC:** Uh, and that time the relationship between the mainland and Taiwan is still a little tense.

**CCL:** Mm-hmm.

**AC:** Did you—were you in combat? Did you experience any sort of conflict?

**CCL:** No, no. And, that—we are based in Taiwan, so basically just a typical military service, yeah.



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**VE:** How much were you paid? [Mr. Lee made a gesture showing he didn't hear the question clearly] Um, how much were you paid while you were in service?

**CCL:** In service? Oh, it's cheap! Gosh, I cannot remember. It's so little, we cannot [laughs] we just meet—I would say just a—a minimum payment. Yeah, so, we don't have any expense anyway. With that you live in the military base twenty-four seven, so yeah.

**VE:** Oh, were you already married by then—

**CCL:** No, no.

**VE:** —or did you marry after?

**CCL:** Yeah, and I met, I actually—I met my wife in a party when I was in the military service. Then, I came to St. Louis, then she followed me, and we were married in St. Louis. 1974's Christmas. Yeah.

**VE:** And your son was born in Missouri?

**CCL:** Yes, yes. My son was born in Springfield, Missouri, and my daughter, she was born in Houston, yeah.

**(01:15:05)**

**AC:** How did your parents ended up in, um, Hainan?

**CCL:** Oh, uh, well, you know, and at 1949, the Communists is taking over slowly, so they move from Wuhan to Hainan, teaching. My father was teaching at Hainan University, okay, as a teaching assistant or something, yeah.

**AC:** Do you face any discrimination in—when you were in Taiwan because you are 外乡人<sup>31</sup>?

**CCL:** Yeah, yeah, a so-called a 'mainlander?' No, and in Taipei, it's very—it's Mandarin-oriented, the—the time. So I remember, at that time, we cannot speak

Taiwanese and the government is very heavy uh handed. It's no Tai—Taiwanese-speaking in Taipei, yeah.

**AC:** But later on, when you moved to Taichung, did things—did things change?

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<sup>31</sup>Chinese: Outsider (a name used to describe those who fled to Taiwan with the nationalist government from mainland China).





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**CCL:** [takes a drink of tea] Not too much. Well because, and you know, Tunghai University is a Christian college. And we have our own—own campus, everybody live on the campus, so you—you really don't have too—too much interaction with the—the general public, yeah.

**VE:** When you were in, uh, Springfield, you said that you wanted to move to a bigger city. That's what you told your wife.

**CCL:** Yeah.

**VE:** Why did you choose Houston?

**CCL:** Well because [laughs] so, so funny. And she wanted to move to San Francisco, and I said, 'No, I don't like San Francisco' because I don't like earthquake, and because I remember when I was young, like, six years old, in Taiwan, I forgot, 1945, uh, 1950? I think it's '54, '55, they have a big earthquake in Taiwan. And I was very small, and that I—that was like uh, in the mi—in the middle of the night, and the earth was just shaking like that [swinging hand motion]. And so. Whoa! So I told my wife, said, 'let's try Texas' because it's a sunshine place. Because middle-west is cold, and in the wintertime it was very cold, yeah. So I found—found a job here, so hey, so I come—coming down to Houston, yeah.

**VE:** What was the first neighborhood that you lived in when you first moved?

**CCL:** We, uh, let's see, my first job was at North Belt, and we were at the northwest side, and my—my first house in Houston is at Inwood uh Forest, yeah. So at the end of Antoine there, yeah. So then, '89, and we built—we built our own house in the city of Bellaire. So now we already live in Bellaire twenty—twenty-four years now.

**AC:** Can you describe the demographic composition of your first neighborhood?

**CCL:** At that time it was pretty good. Well, and most is Caucasian, some Asian. Then, through the years, then the whole area changed. Now is mostly black com—community now there.

**AC:** How about your community in Bellaire?

**CCL:** Bellaire is good. Bellaire is more mi—mixed, uh, and upper-middle class community. And, we got very diversified neighbors there. And, uh, Bellaire is becoming more professional-oriented com—community now. It's doctors, lawyers, architects, CPA live there. So, school is good, yeah.

**(01:20:06)**



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**AC:** Do you remember, um, the price of your first house in the northwest?

**CCL:** That was cheap, I forgot. I think it was like \$75,000. Yeah, that was '83, yeah.

**AC:** How about the house in Bellaire?

**CCL:** When we built it, our cost is like \$250,000. And then now I would say about three times now. I would say min—a minimum about three-quarter million now, yeah.

**AC:** Did you design it?

**CCL:** Mm-hmm. [drinking tea] It's so funny. It's we—at the beginning, we are not thinking about built for our self. We were thinking about to build to sell. And after we build, my wife said, 'Well, that's not too bad.' So we, we end up living in by our self.

**AC:** And at the time you built uh the house in Bellaire, did you already found STOA?

**CCL:** Oh yeah, yeah. See, I found STOA in 1983 and start my house in 1989, yeah. So, so, so it's already six—six years.

**VE:** At home with your, um, family, what language do you speak?

**CCL:** [Took a drink of tea] Me and my wife, we speak Mandarin. And me and my children, and we speak English. [laughs] Well, and when my kid, when they are young, and I send them to the Chinese school, so, yes, they can speak, understand Chinese. However, now they grow up now, I speak Mandarin to them, they will answer in English, so that means is they can understand the Chinese but they cannot uh but they cannot speak as well, yeah.

**AC:** Did you make any attempt to—

**CCL:** Uh, so funny, ABC [American-born Chinese], okay, uh, when they are young, it's okay. But when they go to middle school, high school age, that teen—teenage time, and I think they got some confusion of their own identity. So at that time, they refuse to touch anything related to China, Chinese. However, once they go to college, they turn around, and they want to learn Chinese. When my son, actually at UT, he took two semester Chinese course. So he can read uh basic writing, all that. And my daughter can—she can

Speak Mandarin much better than—than my son. So she can handle some basic conversation, yeah.

**AC:** Did your daughter also go to UT?



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**CCL:** Uh, yes, she went to UT two years, then she want to major in architecture, so she came back to U of H. Then, she got her under—undergraduate at UH, then she went to my old school, Wash U, so she got her Master's there.

**AC:** What about your son?

**CCL:** My son, she [laughs], well my son is quite a story. He, and well, he got two—two degree. He got a Bachelor degree in political science from U of H, then he also got the—a Urban Study degree from UT, yeah, yeah. So, so now I want my son to run—to run the school [corrects himself], STOA, the business side. My daughter, she is a good architect, so I let—let—let my son handle outside and my daughter can handle inside, yeah.

**AC:** He, uh, your son's degree in urban design, is it a Master's degree or—

**CCL:** No, ba-Bachelor's degree.

**AC:** Bachelor's degree. So he spent eight years doing both degrees?

**(01:24:50)**

**CCL:** He actually spent nine years. [laughs] Well, that, uh, well, you know the boys, they go to U—U—UT, and they have a good time there. When my son was stayed there seven years, cannot graduate, I said, 'Coming home'. So he—so he came back to U of H. I think he stayed here—I forgot one year or two years—and he got the degree in U of H. Then he go back to UT, stay there one more year, and get uh—, and he—his another degree from UT, so, yeah. So, I think he total spent maybe ten years [laughs]. Ten years got two—two bachelor degrees.

**AC:** What was the tuition for—, [Mr. Lee made a gesture showing he did not hear the question clearly] do you remember the tuition for both your children?

**CCL:** Tuition, well that was cheap. It's only like 7,000 dollars per year, yeah. And, public school is cheaper, yeah.

**AC:** So it wasn't a problem for you, financially?

**CCL:** Nah, yeah.

**AC:** You mentioned earlier that your—one your earliest projects was a restaurant. Is it in Houston?





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**CCL:** Yeah, yeah, at Antoine and Little York. Yeah, okay, that was in a shopping center, yeah.

**AC:** Does it still exist?

**CCL:** I think it's gone, way, way gone. [laughs] It's thirty years ago, yeah.

**AC:** Um, and you said Houston is an open-minded city.

**CCL:** Comparable-speaking.

**AC:** Comparably-speaking.

**CCL:** Yeah. [laughs]

**AC:** I was going to say you were rejected by secretaries so many times.

**VE:** How—

**CCL:** Well see, my, it's so funny, most intellectual people, they are more open-mind. The more lower-class people uh and the blue collar people are more prejudiced, yeah.

**VE:** How did you feel when you got rejected by—through all those phone calls?

**CCL:** Well at that time I was not, uh, I was not, uh, too much concerned about, uh, prejudice and discrimination. I'm more concerned, how can I—how can I break the barrier, okay. I'm a more forward thinking guy, okay. If I meet a challenge, I will focus my energy how I can solve it rather than complain. A vivid example, recently we are pursuing that HISD Mandarin Chinese school. And, we are the only Chinese architecture in town knows about the feng-shui, all that, and we feel that that job is perfect feat for us. And we can create a very unique Chinese environment for student. You know, we lost that job to a big firm. I was surprised. And in fact, everyone was surprised. So a lot of people calling me, and trying, trying to convince me to protest, to complain it. I said, 'Hey.' I said, and that, uh, 'My point of view is, that is HISD's loss. It's not my loss.' I said, 'It's a shame and where they somebody lucky enough in Houston has my type knowledge and experience and they cannot take advantage of it.' I said, 'Hey, that is HISD's students' loss, it's not mine.' So yes, I don't complain. I say, forget it. I go—well I go to the next one, okay, yeah.

Yeah, I think as an Asian-American business in town, we are, most of the time, we are in the back of the bus. Okay, that is—that is reality because we are not strong enough and our—and we don't have strong political power, okay. In order to build that, you got to have



**(01:29:58)**

generation's effort.

I think it's our problem is traditionally, Chinese people don't want to involve into the public services, okay. We always and want our kid to be doctor, engineers [laughs], lawyers. They don't want them to get into the political arena. However, in fact, the government is the biggest buyer. The government is the biggest client. And if you cannot control, share, the public resources, you miss, I will say 80% of the pie, okay. So that—so that's why, and I told my son, I said, 'hey Victor, and you need to get involved, learn how to play the game,' because most—most Asian politicians doesn't—well doesn't realize the underline of public services is to redistribute the government resource, is the contract. Okay, well you can see every major company in the U.S., every major company, they are survived on the government contract. GE, GM, all that, they start, well, like Chrysler, they start on the government contract, okay. So, an Asian generation—younger generation—got to realize in order to advance, to help the overall Asian population in the future generations, we got to have our brightest involved into that political process. And we need to have more council member, mail commissioner, state rep, senator, governors, all that, and we got to have more people on the table. And if we don't have it, then, when they are dividing the pie, we are not in the picture. That—that is a reality. And you can call it prejudice or discrimination, whatever the name is, the reality is if you are not sit on the table, you won't get that piece of the pie. That is a reality. So, rather than complain it, and I think we need to educate our younger Asian American kid, get involved. If you are not involved, you are not there. Okay, so they, vivid example, HISD so far, all the contract, all design contract, gave to white, black, Hispanic, women. No Asian. Even the Mandarin Chinese school, they give to a white, big firm. Okay, okay, they want to complain? I just don't care. Because you don't have political muscle, you cannot leverage it. So what's that, I would say I'm the only—I won't say I'm only—I would say I'm the first Asian architects actively involved into the public arena. Trying to share a small piece of the pie, okay.

**(01:34:13)**

**AC:** What is your political affiliation?

**CCL:** Well, [points at certificates on conference room wall] you can see, Governor Bush, Governor Perry, appointed me on the State board, so I would say I am a liberal Republican—

**VE:** Hmm.

**CCL:** —conservative Democrat, okay [laughs]. I think that, uh, I think it's, uh, traditionally speaking, that Republican philosophy is similar to—to an Asian philosophy. We want to self-sustain ourself, and we don't want to rely on the government help. That is the underlying of the Asian philosophy.



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So, however, I don't agree with those extreme Republican, like the Tea—Tea Party's approach. I think it's, uh, I think it's way too, uh, too right, okay. Yes, we have to promote self-reliance, but we have to also help some people is less fortunate. Okay, you got to understand human nature first in order to expand into the social issues. And we are not—because—the definition of human nature is the combination of divine spirituality and animal instincts. The human society, when you reach to the higher level, you have more spirituality rather than the animal instinct. When you are in a particular situation, your animal instincts will take over. For example, when you are—when you are in the battlefield, and you gotta survive. When you are in the survival mode, animal instincts govern, and you gotta survive first, or you have to kill to survive. However, once you are in the higher society, and your divine spirituality take—take over, okay. So, so, that's why, and in the more advanced society, in the more developed society, like the U.S., U.K., people are more cultured, sophisticate, more polite. When you go to—go to Nigeria, [laughs] okay I went there twice, it's more animal side because people are trying to survive, okay. And you see those—those people's living condition is just like—it's just like a dog, seriously. And you talk about value to those people, that is not their concern. Their concern is they need food for the next meal, right [laughs]? So, so that's why I think politically I am a fiscal conservative, uh, but I also can see the government has certain responsibility to bring up the less fortunate, uh, human being, our sisters, brothers, up. However, we got to teach them to be self-reliant, okay. We cannot let them to be totally reliant on the government program either, okay. 中国人讲, '救急不救穷'<sup>32</sup>. We can help you when you are in need, but we cannot support you forever, right? Yeah.

**AC:** So you are not a Republican or a Democrat?

**CCL:** Well, when I vote, I vote as Republican, okay, yeah.

**VE:** When did you become a citizen?

**CCL:** Gosh, [laughs] let me think about it. I think it's '79 or '80, yeah. A long time ago, yeah.

**AC:** How did you become a citizen?



**CCL:** Well, see, at that time, it's easy. When you got a Master's degree, what I remember, gosh, I got my green card, it's like, uh, six months? It's very fast. Yeah, at that time, yeah, if you got a high—high degree, you got it. It's easy. Now, and I think that, uh, we are [laughs]. See, a society need to grow. You need new idea, new creativities. Yes, you can bring in the lower—lower educated, the skilled people, and society also need it too. However you also need the higher educated people to balance it, to lead it. And especially twenty-first century, it's the brain power

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<sup>32</sup>Chinese: The Chinese saying, 'Help those in emergencies, not those who are poor.'



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competition century. And whoever win is, uh, [laughs], well, is your creativities win, okay.

**(01:40:31)**

**AC:** When you taught feng-shui at Rice, who were your students?

**CCL:** Most of my student is, uh, they are professionals: lawyer, doctor, nurses, and some re—re—re—realtors, okay. And, uh, and I found out, it's very interesting, most educated people are interest in feng-shui. Most female is more interested than male. It's strange [laughss], yeah.

**AC:** Were they mostly Asian?

**CCL:** No. Actually, my class, 90% are Caucasian, yeah. And Asian people, very few. Most Asian people are the ABCs, they are not from Taiwan and China. Well maybe they all think they already know feng-shui [laughs].

**VE:** Did you learn it as part of your, like, curriculum in Tunghai—

**CCL:** No, no.

**VE:** —or did you learn it yourself?

**CCL:** Yes. And in fact, forty years ago, when I learned feng-shui, it's so funny, my whole intention is I want to criticize feng-shui, okay. Because Tunghai is a very westernized college. And we were amazed is a client want to have a feng-shui master to review architect's design. And we said, 'Gosh, that is ri—ridiculous. And why you want to have a superstitious, uh, aspect?' So my whole purpose want to study feng-shui to criticize it. However, the more I study it, I found out, hey! Feng-shui got something is right. Feng-shui really is—feng-shui is actually architecture. Architecture is feng-shui. The difference between feng-shui and architecture is architecture also—uh, feng-shui also dealing with invisible dimensions, how the energy flow. 中国人的气啊。Qi is a very Chinese. Uh, the feng-shui and the acupuncture, herb medicine, and martial art, is all dealing with qi, so yeah.

**AC:** Would you call yourself a Confucian?

**CCL:** Yes. Yes, uh, yes I am a,,, ninety percent [laughs].

**AC:** What is that ten percent?

**CCL:** Yeah, yeah, well I think it's really—really the great teaching are all same. The truth is only one.



AC: You said—

CCL: See—

AC:—you said you believe that there is a master design.

CCL: Yes.

AC: That there is a God.

CCL: Yes.

AC: But Confucian didn't talk about God. Confucian talk about Heaven, 天. Do you think they are the same?

CCL: Well, what I think, uh, I think Confucius is a very smart person because at that particular time, and he doesn't want to involve into this kind of religious uh pursuit. 他说, '不知生, 焉知死,<sup>33</sup> right? So he, and uh, Confucius is a very pragmatic person. He—he more emphasized in the so—social stabilities. And he's more concerned how to give people a peaceful, uh, life because at that particular time, 春秋战国的时候<sup>34</sup>, it's almost at war. So he—so—you know every religion, every philosophy start at their particular time, particular—the environment. At that time, China was in the war and war—war stage, so he's more focused on how to help people live better, uh, well-being ra—rather than search for the high level's meaning. Think about it, yeah. The time, the time factor, yeah.

**(01:45:22)**

AC: Do you think Confucianism is a school of philosophy or religion?

CCL: I think it's more—it's more philosophy. You know, religion is also a kind of philosophy, right? Yeah.

AC: You've—you are the president of the Feng-shui Institute of Houston, and uh, what is your involvement? What is your—

**CCL:** Well, when I first taught at Rice 1999, and all my students, and we feel that we need to have a continuing study. So, so, we form that, that group and we meet four times per year. And what we do is we have quarterly meeting, like second Saturday morning ten o' clock we

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<sup>33</sup>Chinese: He said, 'If you don't know about life, how are you supposed to know about death?'

<sup>34</sup>Chinese: During the Spring and Autumn period, and the Warring States period.





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have a host family and open up their house or office so the whole class went there to see the house, everybody provided their own insight, and we can discuss the feng-shui issue. We can discuss the potential solutions, so everybody, uh, can learn from—from the real case, yeah.

**VE:** Interesting. I actually wanted to go back to Wash U because I feel like—

**CCL:** Okay.

**VE:** —there is more to learn from that.

**CCL:** Sure.

**VE:** Um, so you should that you got a scholarship from them.

**CCL:** Mm-hmm.

**VE:** And that was how—that's how you decided to go there. Do you remember how the scholarship was?

**CCL:** Gosh, I forgot. [laughs] I cannot remember. I think it's like \$5000?

**VE:** Hmm.

**CCL:** Yeah. I forgot, it's either \$2500 or \$5000. Yeah, at, at that time, that was—that was—a pretty good money, yeah.

**VE:** Uh, who did you live with? Or did you live with your wife during that time?

**CCL:** Beginning, and I—and I teamed up with my friend in a apartment, then and my wife come over, I forgot, November? And we have to move out, and we rent a, it's so funny, at the top of a movie theater. And it's a furnished apartment, one room, okay? It's a efficiency type. Furniture, utility paid. The monthly—, the monthly rent is \$94 per month.

**VE:** Was there an Asian community at Washington University?

**CCL:** Uh, very few, very few, yeah.

**AC:** The friends you team up with, at the beginning, were they Asian?



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**CCL:** Yes, right, yeah yeah.

**AC:** They were—were they all from Taiwan?

**CCL:** Yeah, yeah, yes, and they all from Taiwan, yeah.

**AC:** Are you still in contact with them?

**CCL:** Yeah, I still contact with couple of them, and, uh, most people graduate and they left, yeah, okay. So far I only have two classmate stay in St. Louis. And most go to New York, San Francisco, or Taiwan, yeah.

**VE:** How does St. Louis compare to Houston?

**CCL:** St. Louis is a very laid-back city. It's very old city. It's a, I would say it's very cultural city. Uh, people are polite, and uh but it's not as aggressive as Hou—Houston. My first time I felt I was different, the first time, is when I was in Springfield, Missouri. Me and my wife go to the shopping mall and we want to buy a drink. And we wait in the line, and when we down the line, the server doesn't want to serve me. And the server asked the guy—guy behind me, said, 'can I help?' And the guy said, 'He—he's ahead of me.' Then he said, [harshly] 'well, what do you what?' I said, 'whoa!' [laughs] I said. Yeah that was, I forgot, '78? '77, '78, yeah. I said whoa! Yeah, so yeah, that, that was the first time I felt and I was, uh, I was mistreated. Very first time, yeah.

**(01:50:27)**

**AC:** What was the ethnicity of the server?

**CCL:** White teenager, yeah.

**AC:** What about the people behind you?

**CCL:** White—white guy too, yeah. So, I think it's, uh, it's really based on how you brought up, okay. If your family is more—more educate then, you will be more open. If you grow up at a blue-collar family then you are more on the prejudice, yeah.

**AC:** Do you see the Asian network grow in America?

**CCL:** Here?

**AC:** Yes.



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**CCL:** Yes, yes. Definitely growing. However Asian—we are not united. So, I am the first guy—I am going to put a fundraiser for Ma—Mayor Parker’s reelection campaign, uh, June 10. And I am putting, called ‘Asian Alliance,’ and I put eight ethnic Asian community together. Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, Indian, Pakistanian, who else? Bangladesh. Total eight ethnic group, and we are going to put a function together for Mayor Parker. You know, it’s amazed to me, and it’s the first time we ever have a all the Asian different communities bound together. And in before it’s everybody doing their own fundraiser. So, so, I think the future is we need to have more Asian communities together. And when we can unify our voice, and we have more leverage. And we have to learn how we play the game.

**VE:** So with, um like, starting this Asian Alliance, and you also, like, you’re the president of the Feng-Shui Institute, and you even sent your kids to Chinese school, so you’re obviously very involved in the Asian community here.

**CCL:** Mm-hmm.

**VE:** Um, were—, did you feel that it helped when you first moved to Houston—, or have you always been involved with this Asian community here?

**CCL:** Oh yeah, yeah. When I was the past president of Chinese Alliance Club. I was, uh, 中华公所主席<sup>35</sup>. I was, uh, Lee Family Association’s president, I was the past chairman of Asian Chamber of Commerce, and Asian American Architect Engineer group. Now I am the current president of Houston Chinese Chamber of Commerce. So yes, and I am still involved, uh, however I would like to have younger gen—generation take over, and because uh I think uh it’s time, and we should have the second generation pick up the torch, yeah.

**VE:** Oh, um, so when I was looking at the different projects that STOA had—

**CCL:** Mm-hmm.

**VE:** I saw there was the George R. Brown Convention Center—

**CCL:** Mm.

**VE:** —the Hong Kong Super Mall—

**CCL: Mm.**

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<sup>35</sup>Chinese: President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.





**VE:** —um, the Warwick, which we can see from the Rice campus—

**CCL:** Yeah.

**VE:**—and the Mudd Lab on our campus.

**CCL:** [laughs] That's right.

**VE:** So, uh, can you just tell us, just like, what is, um, maybe a favorite project of yours, or even just a particularly, um, important one to you?

**CCL:** [deep breath] Hmm. Let me think about it. [laughs] So, so many. I think, uh, the most visible one will be the Teo Chew Temple in Chinatown, and you know it's on Bellaire and Tur—Turtlewood. You know that yellow roof, and that Chinese temple roof. That—that one—,and we did phase one, phase two. And it's a very traditional Ch-Chinese—Chinese design, okay. Then we did that, uh, now called the Golden Bank, okay. Go—Golden Bank is on Bellaire and Ranchester there. Uh that one is the first, uh, Chinatown landmark building we design is to—want to create a modern Chinese architecture. It's called modern Chinese bank. So the building got to look modern, [sound of camera shutter] got to look Chinese, also need to look like a bank.

**(01:55:51)**

**VE:** Mm-hmm

**CCL:** So that—that's a challenging one. Uh, George R. Brown, yes, it's a very unique one. Uh, Terminal D, and it's the Mickey Leland building. Also, we finished that, uh, U of H's uh Welcome Center, yeah. [sound of adjusting camera setting]

**VE:** What do you do in your free time? Since we've talked about your professional life so much.

**CCL:** Well, I play golf, and I play mahjong game, [sound of camera focus] so, that it. [laughs] [sound of camera shutter] Read, yeah okay I like to read, and I like to think. Well, I try traveling a lot, and I can have some solid time, and I can have uh some, uh, meditation time [sound of camera focus] too, yeah.

**VE:** We actually saw on the STOA website that you did horse paintings.

**CCL:** Oh yeah, right, [sound of camera shutter] that's right.



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**VE:** Do you still do that?

**CCL:** No, I really didn't have too much time now. And, I was doing a lot when—when I was younger time. Uh, yes, and I am pre—I'm pretty good on that, yeah, right yeah. [sound of camera shutter]

**VE:** Uh, did you learn as a child or did you learn in college?

**CCL:** Yes, when I was very young, I think when I was like five, six years old, and I like to—and that, uh, doodling of the sketch, all that. I just like horses, I don't know why. I just—for—for me, I got a special attachment to horses. So, may—maybe in my previous life [sound of camera focus] I was warrior or something, yeah. [sound of camera shutter]

**VE:** And going back to architecture, and, obviously you have experience with art, do you see architecture as an art or do you see it more as a science?

**CCL:** Architecture is more leaned to the art part. Yeah, we are not a rigid science side.

**VE:** [to Arthur, who was taking pictures at the time] Do you have any more questions?

**AC:** Let's see—what is your favorite building, anywhere, designed by anyone? [resume picture-taking]

**CCL:** Hmm. That is good question. [laughs] [sound of camera shutter] Uh, actually when I was in Taiwan, I visit with a building, called the Sacred Heart College in Tamsui, next to Taipei. It's on a mountain, was designed by a very famous architect from Japan called uh, Kenzō Tange. What that building—is very simple building—white—white stucco building. However, he really catch the light, and you know some famous architect said before, architecture is a machine who catch the light, okay. And, uh, that building is he create a very dramatic space. [sound of camera shutter] It's very dark corridor, and at the turn he create a courtyard. It's very bright, and it have a strong [sound of camera shutter] uh, con—contrast. Then he only have one pine tree, and in the courtyard—[sound of camera focus], the white wall—[sound of camera focus], it's a beautiful space, yeah.

**AC:** How about your own project?

**CCL:** My own project? Uh, well I share, and uh, sorry about that I forgot your name!  
[laughs]

**VE:** Oh, Victoria, yeah.

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**CCL:** Okay, Victoria. Yes, I will say not yet, okay. I don't think I will have my most famous job yet, okay. I think it's coming. However, I think from the feng-shui point of view, I would say the temple is good; Golden Bank is good, yeah.

**VE:** I think—

**CCL:** So is that it?

**VE:** I think we've had, yeah.

**CCL:** Very good! So thank—thank you for your time, yeah. And it does take two hours, yeah. [laughs]

**(02:00:48)**

**[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]**



