

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

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Interviewee: Jone Yen (Tommy) Ligh  
Interviewers: Connie Wang (Junior); Chris Johnson (Sophomore)  
Date/ Time of Interview: June 12, 2013, at 9:30AM  
Transcribed by: Connie Wang, Chris Johnson  
Edited by: Chris Johnson, Patricia Wong  
Audio Track Time: 1:17:46

Background:

Tommy Ligh was born in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province in China in 1927. Mr. Ligh moved to the United States with his father in 1937, settling into the town of Richmond, Virginia. Some years later, Mr. Ligh entered the military, serving in the United States Army Corps until late 1946. Soon after his move to Houston in 1951, Mr. Ligh became employed as a draftsman at Anderson Greenwood & Company, an organization that performed subcontract work for major airplane companies. In 1989, Mr. Ligh began his own valve company, named 'Valve Concepts Inc.' Selling his own patented designs, Mr. Ligh operated the company for ten years. Currently, Mr. Ligh serves on the Board of Adjustment in the City of Bellaire.

Setting:

The interview largely centers on the subjects of labor and capital, seeking to create a thorough narrative of Mr. Ligh's life experiences. A large focus of the interview was given to the various occupational roles held by Mr. Ligh over the course of his life. The interview was conducted in the home of Mr. Ligh in Bellaire, Texas.

Interviewers:

At the time of this interview, Connie Wang is a Rice University undergraduate student majoring in English and Art History and minoring in Business. She is originally from Lake Forest, California, and was raised by Taiwanese immigrants.

Chris Johnson is currently a sophomore at Rice University, majoring in Linguistics. He is from Houston, Texas.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

TL	Tommy Ligh
CW	Connie Wang
CJ	Chris Johnson
-	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**CW:** This is Connie Wang.

**CJ:** And this is Chris Johnson.

**CW:** And we're here today on June 12th, 2013, in the home of Tommy Ligh, um, to interview Tommy Ligh for the Houston

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

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Asian American Archive oral history interview project. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, to begin?

**TL:** Um, I was born in, uh, China. Canton, China. I came to the U.S. when I was about nine years old in 1937. And, I came with my father. Uh, my father first came to the U.S. in 1911, as a young man, about sixteen or eighteen. And then he went back to, uh, China. He made three different trips. And, uh, I think the first trip back he was old enough to get married, and father one daughter, and he came back to the U.S. to work some more. And his, uh, second trip, um that's when uh, when he fathered me and my, um well—my sister is older than I am. There are five of us and I'm in the middle. The first child he fathered was the eldest sister, the second time he went back was my second sister and myself. And the last time he went back he fathered another, uh, daughter and son. I think the daughter was born in uh, must be '36, 1936. And the youngest brother was born in 1937. Right. Then, um, actually he was born after we came back to the U.S. We arrived in April of 1937. And my younger brother wasn't born until later that year. And, uh, it took 40 years' span for all five siblings to come to the U.S. I was the first one in 1937, my second sister came in 1947 as a war bride. Uh, war bride – the American ex-GIs after the war, they called them war brides. War brides come from Asia, they come from Europe, mostly Europe I guess. And, um, in 1952, my mother came over. 1953, my younger brother came over. 1964, my younger sister came over. And 1977 my oldest sister migrated, uh, to US, and lived in Chicago where his oldest son was at the time. And, um, I lived in uh Richmond, Virginia when I first came over in 1937 for about uh, two years. And then my dad moved to Norfolk, Virginia, and, um, I left uh Virginia about 1949 I think, went to Baltimore and worked for a couple of years. And I came to Houston Texas in April 1951. And have been here ever since. Well. What else would you like to know? [Laughs.] Because I have some history.

**CW:** Um, yeah. [Laughs.] What was your father's job that took him back and forth between China and the US?

**TL:** He owned a, um, a restaurant. A Chinese restaurant. The first in Richmond, Virginia. It was called, uh, Lido Garden. L-I-D-O, Garden. It was on the corner of, uh, Broad Street and Third Street, on the second floor. Back then, it was popular for restaurants to be on the second floor.

**CW:** And was that where you worked first? When you were in Richmond—that was your first job?

(4:35)

**TL:** No I was too young to work then. After we moved to Norfolk, when I was going to ah, junior high, uh, I was old enough to, uh, wait the tables in the restaurant. The restaurant in Norfolk was called the Oriental Restaurant. On the corner of Granby – G-R-A-N-B-Y – Granby Street and College Place. At that time it was the heart of downtown. It was the busiest corner in all of Norfolk. But now, downtown of Norfolk has moved away somewhere; I don't even know where. [Laughs.] When I, when I mentioned my first job waiting, then it was during the war. The restaurant was so busy, uh, because Norfolk was the, uh, I think it's the largest naval base in U.S. And of course, during the war there were a lot of soldiers in the surrounding camps, whatnot. So the restaurant was very very busy, and the waiters, they'd get so tired, when they see a young guy like me — there were about three or four of us, about the same age — whose fathers worked at the restaurant, and so they would grab one of us to substitute for them on the weekend so they can take a break, you know. [Laughs.] So, that's what I call my first job. [Laughs.]

**CW:** So, you said that over a span of 40 years, that's how long it took for all your siblings to move to the U.S.

**TL:** Yes.

**CW:** Was it a conscious effort for everyone to migrate to the U.S.? Or did it just sort of happen?

**TL:** I — I think there was a conscious effort. Um, may — maybe except for my oldest sister. Cause my brother-in-law had a nice position in Hong Kong, he was the, what uh, the Chinese manager of Northwest Airlines. Uh, and they only migrated to the U.S. when he retired from the uh, airlines. And I guess because they have four kids, they were all in the U.S. anyway. They were scattered. The children were all between—well actually the youngest son retired back in Hong Kong — they

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

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have a daughter in Florida, one in California, in the San – , in the Chicago area. And the youngest son in Hong Kong. [Laughs.] But my oldest sister, she passed away, two or three years ago. And my second sister passed away, uh, February of this year. So there's three of us left. I'm the oldest of the three.

**CW:** Um, what was your childhood like when you first moved to the US?

**TL:** Well, uh, at first, in Richmond, uh , of course, I was sent to school, and I think because of my age, I was put in the third grade. Uh, I believe it's the third grade. And uh, in Richmond, Virginia. I think the name of the school was Madison, um, Elementary or whatever they called it back then. And, um, 'cause my father had to manage the restaurant, he hired a black lady to walk me to school and from, and uh, in her spare time she worked at the restaurant, in the kitchen. And then when we moved to uh, Norfolk—it must have been less than third grade because—my memory, you know, have too many years, gets hazy. I thought I started at the third grade in Norfolk but maybe not. Anyway, I went to elementary school in Norfolk, the name of the school is Robert E. Lee Elementary School. I remember that. As kids, uh, as restaurant workers' kids, we were supposed to help out in the restaurant. Little kids, uh, obviously young one, the eight, nine, ten, eleven, uh, all they can do is help in the kitchen. Like peeling onions, potatoes, uh, chopping this chopping that, grinding pork, uh, hand crank. [Laughs.] Uh, help making, um, rolls, for the dinner, by rolling, all kind of things. [Laughs.] And then in the spare time, we, we uh – I think I mentioned to you there were 'bout four of us in the restaurant, about the same age—we'd just, uh, walk all over Norfolk doing different things. Um, I remember—you know the, what's it, two-gallon ice cream containers, about this big around, this tall [makes approximate measurements with hand gestures] and has uh, aluminum rim around the top— so when the containers are empty, we take the rim off, this round, and you—you, ah, Korean or Chinese?

**(11:06)**

**CW:** I'm Chinese.

**TL:** Chinese? Okay, you may remember, the Chinese boys, they—maybe you haven't done it, but, in China I've seen it. They have a stick, and a little hook at the bottom, and they push these rims around, all over the place. That's what we did. We pushed those rims all over Norfolk. [Laughs.]

**CW:** Did you ever feel, while you were in Norfolk, you were a distinctly immigrant family? Or did you get along really well with the children at school, or did you fit in really well, or –

**TL:** Yeah, we didn't have any particular problems. Uh, we fit in very well, in both Richmond and Norfolk. Well, in Virginia, we could attend the white schools. And I heard that in Mississippi — certain areas of Mississippi — the Chinese were not allowed to attend white schools. They had to go to the black schools. But in Virginia, we went to the white schools. Uh, we got along fine, except back in those days, it's more — well back in those days in the locale, I guess, discrimination, and the little kids are the ones, uh — I don't know if influenced by the parents or by other kids, but walking — I, I don't know if I put it down in the response or not, but sometimes, we'd walk down the street, going home from school or something, and the kids would yell out, "Chink chink China man sit on the fence, tryin' to make a dollar out of fifteen cents!" That's what they chanted, you know. [Laughs.]

**CW:** Wow, and you remember the exact rhyme, too.

**TL:** [Laughs.] Well when we had heard it so many times, it's, embedded in your brain. But other than that, we could go anywhere we wanted to.

**CW:** And it says you were at college for two years on your questionnaire?

**TL:** Yes.

**CW:** Where did you go?

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

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**TL:** That was in Norfolk, after I finished high school. The, uh, at that time, it was a division of VPI and William and Mary. Uh VPI, Virginia Tech? Um, you've heard about Virginia Tech, in recent years, about the shooting. William and Mary was a junior college, a two-year college, and that's where I attended. And I only finished one year there, because, uh, I wanted to study architecture at that time, and uh, I don't think either William and Mary or VPI had an architecture school. University of Virginia had a school of architecture. I applied there and they turned me down. And my dad was not very supportive of me, of getting higher education. Um, I found out just in the last, what, two or three years, after he passed away — I heard it from my younger, uh, brother — that he told my younger brother that, "Oh you don't have to go to school, just stay in this restaurant with me and, uh, we'll be okay." But, I'm glad my brother didn't listen to him — this is, uh, in recent years — but uh, my brother has a Ph.D in Mathematics from Texas A&M. [Laughs.] And the other year I got in college was going to night school University of Houston when I was working. Working, having a family, going to night school, was pretty hard. And, uh, last semester I went, I had a double whammy. I had to take one of the English course, and somehow I picked English literature or something. It was — to me it was like Greek. I didn't pass that. Okay. The other class I took, it was a breeze. It was machine shop, cause I was going for a Physics and Engineering degree. Machine shop was one of the required courses. And while I worked, I noticed — I mean, I'm in there all the time. But the professor got me and another student mixed up. He gave my grades to the other student, and the other student's grade to me. I'm the only in the class that knew anything about machines. So I went to the professor afterwards, and uh, he said us two mixed up. He switched the grade. But still, you know, that's — I said, that's enough. [Laughs.]

**(16:41)**

**CW:** And at the time of the night school you had your own family?

**TL:** Yes, I was married at the time. Married, uh, let's see, that was in — you know I had, had a boy and a girl at the time. I uh, I went to night school when my brother, when my brother, when he first came he was in Norfolk, with my uh, father and mother. And when he finished high school, I think it was '57, so uh, we brought him down here to go to school. I think he first went to UH as well. So, either the same year or a year later I felt, why not go back to school, to night school, so, I went for about maybe two or three years. So I had, uh, total of sixty hours credit.

**CW:** And, just to be clear, before night school, you were in college for a year? Or...?

**TL:** Uh, first year of college was in Norfolk.

**CW:** Okay.

**TL:** And then second year equivalent, second year I was here in Houston night school.

**CW:** So when did you get married?

**TL:** 1953.

**CW:** And where did you, or how did you, meet your wife?

**TL:** Uh, I met her at church. Should I show you pictures now or later? [Laughs.]

**CW:** [Laughs.] Probably later.

**TL:** Okay.

**CW:** We'll take whatever you have later, but for now the recorder can only pick up what we say.

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

---

**TL:** Right. Uh, my first wife had a sister, that uh, lived in Houston at the time. She and her husband had a grocery store in Houston. I think they came, uh, let me back up. My wife's family, they were all, all her siblings were born in Augusta, Georgia. And uh, one of her older sisters, two sisters actually, married to people that lived in Texas, uh, San Antonio to start with. And, uh, the second — not the second the third — third sister and her husband had moved to Houston in 1950, I believe, a year before I came. And, the grocery store. And my wife, first wife, she uh, she was a registered nurse. When she finished I guess her sister in Houston said, "Come on down!" You know. "Houston is nice!" and so forth. So she came down here and worked in the, uh, first in the old St. Joseph's Hospital, and uh, she started attending the Chinese Baptist Church. At that time it was downtown, where George R. Brown Convention Center is now. Um, so we met there. I think in '52, I think she came down in '52. And then we were married in August of '53. And our first child and son was born in 1957, and our daughter was born in 1960. I think I was going to night school through '61 or '62, something like that. Did that answer your question? Okay.

(20:44)

**CJ:** Um, so you mentioned that your children were in '57 and '60. Um, so at home with them did you speak Chinese, did you speak English with them, or how did that work?

**TL:** Well, let me put it this way. Most kids that are born in a Chinese family, they have grandparents, uh, that came from China, live with them. And the grandparents will only speak Chinese because they don't speak much English, or even the parents, if they came over in their old age, they will always speak uh, Chinese. But in my case I came over at such a young age, and my wife was born here, you know, even though she spoke uh, Chinese -- her dad taught Chinese back in Augusta, Georgia. In the beginning we tried to speak Chinese to the kids. But once they enter public school, it's English only, right? Then it's difficult to communicate in Chinese. I think you probably find this in most of the Chinese families, under the circumstances that we grew up. So my kids, today, they may understand a few words in Chinese, but they don't speak Chinese. It's all English. And we speak English to them. Maybe occasionally we would speak a Chinese word or two or something like that, but for all practical purposes it's English.

**CW:** What do your children do for a living?

**TL:** Uh, my son, now, works for a company called Wesco, W-E-S-C-O. He told me that it probably stood for Western, Westin, W — Westinghouse, you know, the electrical company. Westinghouse. Could be. I forgot. Well, anyway, he's a buyer, uh, the whole company, that's all they do. Major companies in Africa, the Middle East, oh, particularly the oil chemical companies, they need something, they would send uh, an email, or a fax, whatever, to my son's company, saying "we're looking for da-da-da-da-da" [enumerates a list of bullet points in the air with his finger] and uh, the people, at my son's company, they go out and, uh get quotes for these various items, and then send the quotes back to the client. "Do you want it? We'll buy it for you. If not, no." So if they want it, then, uh, they would place the orders. And the products would go to a, uh, freight forwarding company. They never see a thing. All they see is the paperwork. So that's his current job. Latest job.

He graduated from, uh, University of Houston. I guess I'm the only one that don't have a degree. [Laughs.] And my daughter, she, uh, she finished high school a year early, and went to HBU. And, um, then she got a degree from HBU. Then she became the youth director at our church, Chinese Baptist Church, for, I forgot how long, couple of years or something like that. And then she went to uh, Dallas Theological Seminary, DTS, in Dallas, and got a Master's in Biblical Studies.

(24:57)

**CW:** When did you start attending church?

**TL:** About a month or so after I came to Houston. And somebody told me, because I was single at the time, someone said, "Hey, there's a Chinese Baptist Church here in town, a lot of young people are there." [Laughs.] Great!

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

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**CJ:** It worked out. [Laughs.]

**TL:** Yeah, and uh, yeah there were a lot of young people there. And they were very friendly to me. And I was baptized, in uh, I forgot when. I think it was around August of 1951. I went to retreats with them, and things like that.

**CW:** So did you attend any churches when you were in Virginia?

**TL:** Uh, no. No. Mm-mm. When I got married in '53, I was ordained as a, uh, deacon at our church. And the Baptists having the big convention in town, uh, the SBC [Southern Baptist Convention]. You know about that? Yeah.

**CJ:** Um, so the church that you're a part of now, the Chinese Baptist Church, that's the same one that you've been with for all of these years? Is that right?

**TL:** Right. Yeah, we used to be downtown, like I said, but in 1975, we moved to our current location. I think you interviewed Bobby Moon yesterday, right? At church?

**CW:** Somebody did, I'm sure.

**TL:** Wasn't you?

**CW:** No, we have different teams.

**TL:** Okay, I thought it was you. [Laughs.] Maybe another team.

**CW:** Yeah. Hmm. So, did your mother also work?

**TL:** No.

**CW:** Did she come to the U.S. as well?

**TL:** In 1952. Yeah she never learned to speak much English.

**CW:** Okay. [Music from other room starts playing in background.] And how do you think Houston has changed since you've gotten here?

**TL:** Houston?

**CW:** Mm-hmm.

**TL:** Well the city has definitely changed quite a bit. When I first came, I arrived on a train. And from a distance, I saw, what, uh, the Gulf Building. That was the tallest building in town at that time, 34 stories. I think the building still exists. Now it's surrounded by much taller buildings. And people were very friendly. It was different from Virginia. Uh, people were friendly, and uh, at that time, there was not much crime. I knew some friends, they never locked the house. Just leave the house, leave it unlocked, they were professor at UH as a matter of fact. And uh, I think there might have been times when I parked a car downtown to go to the movies or something, maybe I didn't lock the car either. But now you don't dare do that. So a lot of things have changed. The city has grown, much much in population. Uh, the number of building, freeways, things like that. The 610 was not built when I first came, the uh Loop 610. The, the Gulf Freeway had, uh, just been completed. But I think that was a project of Texas, they've been working on it since I've been here. [Laughs.] The freeway—keep doing this, keep doing that, I think it's training grounds for engineers or something.

**CW:** Do you think the racial dynamics in Houston have changed since you've gotten here?

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

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**TL:** Um. Yes, somewhat, but not to the detriment. Uh, I think when I came, there were about five hundred Chinese in Houston. And, um, majority of them were in the grocery business, a few restaurants. There were no Chinese laundries. Whereas back East, there were laundries and restaurants, no grocery stores. [Laughs.] And not in Norfolk, anyway, or Virgin—uh Richmond.

**(30:16)**

I think with the influx of people from New York, California, it's changed, a little bit. Uh, not quite as friendly as it used to be. There's some awful drivers on the freeway. They'll cut you off, and do all kinds of things. We never did that. See, back in Virginia, when—on the two lane road, uh, we had those back there too —and you had to pass somebody—uh, not two lane. Two lane, one-way, so, on the inside lane, you're supposed to pass on the left-hand side, right? Back in Virginia, you'd honk-honk, and they'd move over and let you go. I remember here, one time, we'd honk-honk, and the guy would never let you move. That's—[Laughs.] Maybe that's the Texans or something—think they're driving cattle.

**CJ:** Um, so, inside of Houston, what was the first neighborhood that you lived in?

**TL:** When we first got married we lived in uh, an apartment. Um, just east of downtown. Polk, P-O-L-K. I don't remember the address, but it was across the street from a junior high school, across the street Stonewall Jackson. I don't know if that school is still there now. If it is, it's a very old school.

**CJ:** And um —

**TL:** Oh yeah there was some discrimination, I remember now. When we tried to buy our first house, that was in Spring Branch. Was it Spring Branch? Uh, not Spring Branch. Oak Forest. When Oak Forest was just starting out, uh, so we put a contract on the house, and a few days later, the salesman called us and told us, "Oh, apologies." He knew someone else who'd bought the house before we did. Yeah, okay. And then, second attempt was to buy a house in Sharpstown. Uh, Sharpstown was just starting at that time. So, we put a contract on a house in Sharpstown, and unbeknownst to us, our best friends at that time put a contract on a house right next door. [Laughs.] And, the mechanism they used back then, and maybe to some extent nowadays, in order to buy property you had to join the country club, and you had to be accepted. Of course, we were not accepted in the country club, therefore we couldn't buy property. So there was twice, we were thrown out. And uh, the third time we finally got a house, uh, near where the subdivi — uh, it was a subdivision called Larkwood, L-A-R-K-W-O-O-D. It's the corner of Bissonnet and, uh, Fondren, now. But that was a bad deal. Um, it was a corner house, there were about fifteen corner houses. All the foundations went this way [makes a caving - in motion with his hands]. And I did a lot of investigation in—from aerial maps. You can see this drainage ditch, straight going down to, um, uh, what was the Bayou — Braes? Braes Bayou? Whatever bayou. What the developer that brought the property, is—the property straddled the ditch, so he didn't watch the ditch to go through the property, so he re - routed the ditch around the property to go this way. [Makes a "U" in the air with his hand.] So they filled in the ditch, and it all became corner lots. But they didn't fill them properly, so the foundation went fssh. [Laughs.] That's another long story. But we got out of that one. We went — I think we were there two, two years. After we got out we moved to, uh Westbury. And we lived in that house for twenty - six years. That was at the —5531 McKnight Street, if that makes any difference. Lived there twenty - six years and then we moved to, uh, out West -- Westheimer and Dairy Ashford. On the street called, what was it, Ashford Pine. Ashford Pine Street. It was a fairly new subdivision at that time. And, uh, even though I was working, uh -- I had a real estate license, and so did my wife, and because of her showing clients different houses, she fell in love with some houses out there at Ashford Pine. [Laughs.] And, uh, that's why we moved there. We lived there for, what, eighteen years, from eighty, '83 to 2000. So we been at this house since January 2000. After I retired.

**(36:28)**

**CW:** Oh, you said you had trouble getting into certain neighborhoods, like purchasing a house there. Well, did you ever have any trouble while in a neighborhood? Anything, discriminatory, or any prejudices?

**TL:** No, not while we were in the neighborhood. Uh, in the old days, we were accustomed to knowing all the neighbors, but then in some neighborhoods, it seemed like they don't want to know you. They're not troublemakers, but they're not as friendly. For example, I don't even know the name of the neighbor three doors this way [points in the direction of down his street]. Uh, I don't know three doors this way even though I took them to the hospital, last week, when the tanker truck over turned on the freeway. And, blocked traffic. Traffic was swelling all over the neighborhood. I went out and I saw them, a couple, with a five - month - old baby. They happened to be visiting their cousin there. And, uh, I saw them about ten after nine in the morning, and he said the baby had eye doctor at nine o'clock. At the Houston Medical Clinic. And I was supposed to go, go to my friend near Conroe to go work on my project. But I took them to the hospital instead, took the kid to the hospital. And waited with them. So that was my good deed for the, for last week. [Laughs.] But I don't have any trouble with neighbors. I may not know them, but I don't have any problems with them.

**CW:** Did you say your wife and you both got real estate licenses?

**TL:** Mm-hmm. We both, uh eventually got broker's licenses. I gave up my license in 1953, because I uh, was running my business, Valve Concepts, and uh, I really didn't like the real estate business, we were in the residential business. And because my wife's clients, most of them were Chinese, and the, they work late, and I remember one time she had to go to the client's house, in, at night, after their restaurant closed. And, our two kids back then were kind of young, either very young teenagers or what. And I didn't want my wife to be going out by herself, so we left the kids at home, which I hated. And, uh, most of the work was done uh, by my wife anyway, at least for real estate, so when uh, my license was going to expire in '93. I just gave it up, 'cause the requirements went up so much higher. And, uh, I didn't want to spend the time or money to do that, when I'm really not interested, I'm more interested in running my valve business. Which was sold worldwide, through a representative, uh through manufacturers, reps.

**CW:** So which year did you give up your license?

**TL:** '93 was when it expired.

**CW:** And your wife, she stayed in the business?

**(40:07)**

**TL:** Oh, she — she. Uh, she died a year before. She died in September of '92. Uh, treatment for breast cancer.

**CW:** And so, that was your first wife you said?

**TL:** Mm - hmm. Then, uh, my second wife, she lost her husband through, uh, cancer as well, in 1988. And we both go to church, so I knew her well, she wasn't a stranger. So, my first wife and I had a boy and a girl, and she and her husband had a boy and a girl. [Laughs.] Yeah, she's volunteering at M.D. Anderson this morning. She volunteers three days a week: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. And I volunteer on Fridays, primarily. She's been doing that for about 18 years at M.D. Anderson. And I started in January, 2005. So this is my, what, ninth year.

**CW:** So you would say you feel personally motivated to go volunteer at M.D. Anderson, then?

**TL:** Well, I was treated for prostate cancer in 2003 at M.D. Anderson. It was discovered early, so, I just had radiation treatment, that's all. I'm also on one of the commission - city of Bellaire. Currently, I'm on the Board of Adjustment. I was on the Board of Adjustment from 2000 to 2006. That's three two - year terms. After three terms, you have to step out for at least one year. So, after that, I was on the Building and Standards commission for three years. And, uh, I took about two years off, and last year, I got back on the Board of Adjustment. Cause I was busy doing stuff at church.

**CJ:** So, how did you originally get involved with the Board of Adjustment?



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

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**TL:** Well, when we first moved here, in January 2000, shortly after that, there was - each year, around early springtime, there were announcements that they were taking applications for boards and commissions and so forth. And I thought, "I need to get involved in the community that I live in. I don't want to be in the shell." Get involved and give back, whatever. So I apply, and I got appointed - you have to be appointed. I was the chair of that committee the last two years, and the Building and Standards, I was the vice - chair.

**CW:** Can you describe what your experience has been, or how it's been with the Board of Adjustment?

**TL:** The Board of Adjustment - we only have meetings when we have a case, a case meaning somebody coming into the community, or somebody that's lived here wants to do something that the - an ordinance that's not allowed. They first go to community development, the building department. If they turn them down, then they appear to the Board of Adjustment. The Board of Adjustment is a quasi - judicial body. If the applicant is not satisfied - if we turn them down, then their only recourse is to file suit in district court. The city mayor, or whatever, or city council can't do anything. If we grant the exception, of course they're happy. If they're not happy, then they have to file suit in district court, and settle it from there. The first six years, it was quite active. We had meetings almost every month. We meet once a month. But since I've been back on this time, we've only had about three meetings since last July. [laughs] Maybe people have come to realize that we're pretty tough - we don't grant exceptions too often.

**(45:10)**

**CW:** Hmm, and so rewinding a little bit, what was your first job in Houston?

**TL:** I was, when I left Baltimore, I was heading west. You heard the saying, "Go west, young man, go west." The only reason I stopped in Houston was that my sister came to Houston the year before. They moved down from the state of Maine. [jokingly] Pretty cold up there. My brother-in-law, when he was in WWII he had some friends that lived in Houston. I guess they said to come on down. On the way, out west, I stopped in Houston. And my brother-in-law was looking at the want ads one day and he said "Oh, here's a company called 'Anderson Greenwood & Company' looking for a draftsman." So, I went for an interview. And only two weeks after I came to town. At that time, Anderson Greenwood was located at Hobby Airport in the international guards gymnasium. Because and Ashman and Gaunt (?) was fighting in Korea, the Korean War. So, Anderson Greenwood, the three founders worked at Boeing Airplane Company during the war. Two of them were Houstonians, Anderson and Greenwood. And the third one, his name was 'Slaughter'. And they didn't think the name 'Slaughter' should be on a company name for an airplane company, so they just used 'Anderson Greenwood & Company'. Slaughter was from Austin. And, they all worked at Boeing, so when they came down, they started an airplane company to build small, personal airplanes. Got a cute design. But when the Korean War came along, they couldn't get aluminum, because it all went toward the war effort. So they started doing subcontract work for the major airplane companies.

When I came on the company, they were doing subcontract work for what used to be Convair. [spells Convair] I think now, it's part of General Dynamics or something, doing engineering work. And if you've ever seen an old time aircraft joint, it can be fifteen feet long. Maybe at least three feet wide and fifteen feet long. So I went for this interview, and Mr. Greenwood took one of those drawings and spread it out on the conference table, and asked me if I thought I could do that and then draft it. And I looked at it kinda and said "Alright, I don't think I'd have any trouble." The only drafting I had was in school, in Junior High and the first year of college. Y'know, there's not much too it. So Mr. Greenwood said, "Why don't you come in for one week's trial?" They're gonna hire me for one week's trial. Well, I was there for 34 and a half years. No one told me that I could stay; they just didn't run me off! [laughs] One week's trial at \$200 a month back in 1951, and the first year, every two months, they gave me a \$20 raise. Maybe they felt sorry for me or something. [laughs]

**CW:** So, that was good pay for the time?

**CL:** [jokingly] I guess not, because they kept raising me. [laughs] So, from a draftsman on one week's trial in the

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engineering department, eventually, I got to be a project engineer. And in 1977, I think, they asked me if I wanted to go into the sales department, because I'd designed a pressure-reducing regulator that wasn't selling too well. And one of the board members that told me, he said one board meeting, they were talking about scrapping the product because it wasn't selling. There was nobody in the sales department pushing it. So, this board of director said, "Why don't we let Yen try and sell it since he spent so much time on it?" So they asked me if I would to go to the sales department. I was ready - I was so tired of engineering department at that time, and my boss wasn't very kind to me, so I decided to move over.

(50:31)

And first I was in charge of selling the pressure - regulators, and then in charge of what you call the low-pressure products. My highest job at Anderson Greenwood was Director of Technical Sales, and that was a few months before I decided to take early retirement. Because, see, Anderson Greenwood used to be a family-owned business- family run. Anderson and Greenwood are brother-in-laws. As a matter of fact, that Anderson is a nephew of M.D. Anderson, so they're good, good people. But later on, as the company grew, they brought in outsiders. So the last one that they brought into the sales department. I said "I'm not gonna work for that guy." So, I was qualified to take early retirement, so I took early retirement. And a month later, I went across town to work for another valve company. And that valve company was for the birds! Anderson Greenwood, because they were aircraft engineers, they were high - tech people, y'know, good stuff. The company that I worked for across town, those people never had a thought in their mind. They're always copying somebody. Copy this one, copy that one. I never copied anything! I mean, I design things, I create things, y'know? So after two years, I resigned from that company, and started my own valve company. And I had it for 10 years before I sold it. I started it in 1989, it's called "Valve Concepts Incorporated". And the projects we sold were my designs, patented designs. And in 1998, I sold it, 'cause another company wanted to expand, and one way to expand is to buy some more companies. I didn't want to sell— wasn't ready to sell, but my daughter and my wife said, "You need to take time out to smell the roses". Hey, I'm having fun, y'know? I was 70 at that time. I didn't start Valve Concepts until I was 60. It was a big gamble. Some people said, "Why do you want to do this at age 60?" [laughs] You can lose everything you had. Well, maybe, y'know. But I like challenges. I thought with the engineering experience I had at Anderson Greenwood, plus nine years of sales experience working with Manufacturer's Reps, I can pull it off, y'know. And we did. We did well.

**CW:** Again, backing up a little bit, you said you had some tensions with your bosses at Anderson Greenwood & Company. Um, what were those like?

**TL:** Well, one boss, the one I worked for the longest time, he was in charge of patent applications. And one time, I had a design that hasn't been perfected yet, but it was getting close. And, but, he didn't apply for a patent. And 2 - 3 years later, he told me, he got a patent on it. With his name on it! See, prior to that, he put my name on one of the other regulators as co-designers. But this one, he didn't. And he was crazy enough to tell me that he got a patent on it with his name.

(54:53)

And then, there were other things that I said, "Uh, let's apply for a patent." And he and another fellow were somehow involved in patent applications. And they looked at it and said, "Well, I don't think it's patentable." They're not the ones supposed to decide, the patent attorney's supposed to decide. And that's what I mean, y'know. They don't want you to go any further. Well, I got 15 or 16 patents. All the products at Valve Concepts were patented. There were three basic types of products, and I got patents on all of those.

**CW:** Um, originally, you said you wanted to be an architect?

**TL:** Mm-hmm.

**CW:** Did you mean that you wanted to go into the engineering side of things, or did you want to go-

**TL:** Design, designing. I think about that time, the St. Louis Arch, I don't know if it's built yet or not at the time. But that

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### Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

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kinda inspired me somewhat, reading about the architect who designed it, the St. Louis Arch. And I have a good, what do you call it - not imagination, I can visualize a lot of things in my mind. I'm doing a project right now, a home project - an airplane simulator. For the grandkids. And for myself. [laughs] It's not quite ready yet, but it'll be fun when it's finished.

**CW:** Oh, you also said something interesting before, when you were recounting a dialogue between you and the people that you worked for. You called yourself 'Yen', um...

**TL:** Oh, yeah, that's a funny thing. When—my official name is Jun Yen Ligh. My brother's name in Chinese—the pronunciation is Jun Hong Ligh. So, I used 'J. Yen Ligh' hoping that he would use 'J. Hong Ligh'. But he didn't. He used Steve Ligh! [laughs] And, when - before that, when I came over, I came over under a different name that I didn't like—it's Kwok Sun. Y'know, in the U.S., it's hard for Americans to say Kwok Sun without raising an eyebrow or something like that, y'know. So, I changed it to Yen. So, because my official name is 'J. Yen Ligh', when I went to Anderson Greenwood, I never told them that my nickname was Tommy. And the way I got my nickname was way back in Richmond, I had a friend, several years older than I am, that took care of me a lot of the times. At that time, we still had the name 'Jun Yen' - I mean Kwok Sun. So he brought out a baby name book—a book for baby names, said, "Why don't you pick out a name for me?" [laughs] At that time, I had a classmate whose name was Tommy. I said, "I think I like Tommy, y'know." So, I became 'Tommy'. But, at Anderson Greenwood, I never said I had the nickname Tommy. So people started calling me Yen. As a matter of fact, the first time somebody walked up to me, called me Yen, I almost ignored him. I'm not used to it. So I never told anybody at Anderson Greenwood my nickname was 'Tommy'. So they called me Yen all this time. So, all the Caucasian people called me Yen, all my Chinese friends called me 'Tommy'. [laughs] So, that's how it came about. I changed name when I became a naturalized citizen. When you become a citizen, you have the right to change your name to anything you want. I could be 'John Smith' if I wanted to, but y'know, I kept my surname and just changed my given name.

**(1:00:00)**

I became a citizen in - on November 1st, 1946, in Puerto Rico, where I was stationed when I was in the military.

**CW:** And what was your experience in the military?

**TL:** Not good. [laughs, coughs] Excuse me. Military discrimination is different, I think, from other kinds of discrimination. The war with Japan ended in - September the 2nd when they signed the instrument. The fighting was over in August, but I think it signed on the 2nd, I think. I went in on the 15th of September. The war was over, so, officially, I was classified as being in the Cold War. And, since the war was over, afterward, they don't need all these soldiers. So we were discharged early. I was discharged in September, I mean, December '46. So I was only in for about 15 months. Now, one of the worst discriminations that happened to me was, I was trained as a radio operator. I was in the Army Air Corps. It's not the Air Force yet, at the time, it was called the Army Air Corps. I took radio training in Scott Field, Illinois. And then I was going overseas, stopped in - forgot the name of the base - West Palm Beach, Florida, where we kinda regrouped, and then flew out to Puerto Rico. From airbase in Puerto Rico, the GIs were reassigned to different places. And at the base, I heard that a - you heard of Schengen Island, in the middle of the Atlantic between South America and Florida. The U.S. has a base there, a weather station or something. Because it's so isolated, when you are sent there, you only stay for six months at a time, and then they put you out. And another place in the Bahamas, it's called South Caicos Island. It's even smaller - one mile long, half mile wide. If you're sent there, you only stay for three months. There's nothing there to do, you know. So I told the captain, I said, "I'd like to go to one of these places so I can save money, y'know". And he said, "No, you don't wanna go there, I'll let you stay here". So I stayed in Puerto Rico. And so, we were moving barracks, moving from one barracks to another - two or three story concrete barracks. And being a young guy, conscientious, and one day I was making up my bed, and before I finished making up my bed, a lieutenant walked in with two or three GIs that he's collected. And he said "You, you, you, what're you doing here? Come with me." Y'know. So he pointed at me to stand and wait with him. At that time, I hadn't finished making up my bed. So, out of self - conscience, goodness, while he was gone, I went back to try to finish making up my bed. Aahh. That's disobeying an order. So, he punished me by sending me down to the kitchen, to clean the kitchen which is supposed to be, I guess, harder work. Y'know, in the military, they don't want you to think. They say "I think for you, you're not supposed to think." That's one case—Puerto Rico.

**(1:04:33)**

Coming back for discharge, we landed back in the same barrack base in West Palm Beach. So, they always wanna keep GIs busy. So I was on KP—you know what KP is? Kitchen Police. So KP, they sent me to the kitchen, and one of the sergeants in the kitchen told me to pick up this large mat—take it outside and clean it. And one of his counterparts happened to walk by, and said—look at me and look at the mat and say “That guy can’t possibly pick up that mat!” You know what the first guy said? He said, “I don’t care, I want him to do it.” [laughs] Y’know?! That, that’s the kind of stuff in the military.

**CW:** Okay, are there any events in U.S. history that have really impacted your life?

**TL:** Events?

**CW:** Yeah.

**TL:** Oh...Can’t think of anything specific now. I’m sure there has been - has to have, after all these years. I can’t think of anything specific that’s a real, real impact. My - back in the old days, the reason my family was still back in China - my mother and her siblings - is that the immigration laws did not allow my father to bring somebody over under his classification as a merchant. And another fellow, Daniel Bronstein, from Augusta, Georgia, I don’t know if you heard of him or not. He got his Ph.D. by writing a 240-page dissertation on the early Chinese in Atlanta, Augusta, and Savannah. He’s the one that threw my name in the hat for you guys to be here today. What was I leading up to? Oh yeah, he said he didn’t understand why my father was—had the merchant classification. But that’s a different story. So, I became a citizen in 1946. My father did not become a citizen until about ‘49 after the war, when they changed the law. So after that, that’s why my dad was able to bring my mother and brother over. But my sister came over as a war bride, and the oldest sister, oh, she brought my youngest sister over. [noise at door] Must be the mailman or something. Anyway, I don’t know if you consider that an impact on my life or not. I remember where I was when President Kennedy was assassinated. I remember where I was when Armstrong landed on the moon - when he stepped foot on the moon. I was working at Anderson Greenwood when I heard the news about President Kennedy’s assassination. I was driving down Westheimer when the radio news said Armstrong stepping on the moon. [laughs]

**CW:** And do you ever visit China?

**TL:** Twice. The first time was 50 years after I came over. I came over in 1957. The first trip back was 1987. I went on a tour, there was a three week tour of nine different cities in China. And the second time was only 2008 or ‘07 on another smaller tour. Only five cities. But they were all in the northern part. Like Beijing, Shanghai, Wuxi, Hangzhou, and I forgot what the other one was, it was five cities. Whereas the first time, we went all the way to Xi’an, saw the terra cotta soldiers and stuff like that.

**(1:09:56)**

On the first trip back, I found my old neighborhood through a cousin. He was born and raised in Guangzhou. And I first met him in Florida in 1985 - I met him. See, his mother was my mother’s—wait, lemme see—it was another generation—no, his grandmother was my mother’s sister. So, at that time, I think we were already - no, we didn’t go until two years later. So I contacted him and said we were going back to China for a tour. And he happened to be in Hong Kong when we went there, and he was single at the time, he was going back to Guangzhou to look for a wife. So, I told him based on our schedule when we’re going to be back in Guangzhou, and this was the address of our old house. So while we were gone, he located our old house location. And so when we came back after the tour to Guangzhou, he took us there, so the house has long been gone. I don’t think it was destroyed during the war, but somehow it’s been demolished. But at least we found the street and address. I took the pictures, the address is still the same. Number 31 Kaimieng, Number 3 Road. I still remember that. [laughs]

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**CJ:** So out of curiosity, either on the trip when you went back or any other point in time, when you talk with other native speaker s, do they tell you that you have an American accent now or anything like that, or...

**TL:** In China?

**CJ:** Mm-hmm - do they tell you that your accent's at all changed from being an American for so long?

**TL:** No, nobody's said anything to me. There were times when I'd call people on the telephone, and they thought I was American.

**CW:** And so, you've been in America basically most of your life. So, but have you still ever felt that you've had an incident of discrimination, or prejudice, or anything? Whether in the military or at work, or, just y'know around the community?

**TL:** Well, those are things, I think I mentioned when I was a kid in Richmond. Norfolk, primarily - that type of discrimination from other kids, and in the military, I mentioned that. And in work, I mentioned that. So those were the discriminations that I have experienced. Discriminations of different kinds, y'know. One kind is racial discrimination at work, there's I don't know what you call it, jealousy. What was the other one, in the military it was - military justice. [laughs] If there's any justice. Oh, yeah, and while I was in Puerto Rico, the station chief put me in for promotion twice, and twice, some lieutenant turned it down. So, that's another type of discrimination.

**CW:** Alright-

**TL:** Anyway-

**CW:** I think we're about wrapping up unless Chris has any extra questions.

**CJ:** No, I can't think of anything else.

**CW:** Really, I just wanna ask, what do you consider your [coughs], sorry—greatest accomplishment?

**TL:** My greatest accomplishment... On the business side, it's having a successful business, on the family side, it's having a family that we all get along well. No fussing and fighting. And I think I have settled into the community well. I do volunteer work, I'm involved with the community, and I go to church. [laughs]

**(1:15:06)**

And I'm a mechanical designer. Not by training, but by just, I mean, not by education, not by going to school, but my experience at Anderson Greenwood. And it's probably a God given talent. 'Cause when I was in middle school, in Norfolk, I was in the Boy Scouts, and I wanted to build this model airplane. It was this 16-inch wingspan. It was just a standard model, standard model airplane that I'd purchased. But I wanted to do something better. It was a model of a P-40 airplane. I put miniature controls in the cockpit. See, P-40 landing gear, the wheels are like this [gestures] , the first action is they turn, and then they fold in the wing. So in the cockpit, I had two little things, at first, I pull the string and the wheels do this [gestures], I pull another string and it goes like this [gestures]. And I put a joystick in there, and pull back, and the elevators would go up - anyway, I upgraded the elevators, the rudder, and the flaps, and the landing gear. And the way I did that was, at night when I'd go to sleep, in my mind, I'd think "How am I going to do this? I'll do this way, I'll do that..." And when I'd come home from school, I'd work it out. And I made a model like that. So, my airplane simulator that I'm working on now, it's gonna be big enough for me to sit in, even. So it's gonna have a joystick and you pull back, and it'll pitch up, pitch down, roll left, row right. And foot pedals, that will yaw left, yaw right. That's all the motions of the airplane. But then I'm gonna install a Nerf gun. So the kids are will have to aim the airplane at hanging targets and shoot the Nerf gun. [laughs] So, that's what I do.

CW: That's amazing! [laughs] Well, we're out of time, but thank you so much!

TL: Okay.

**(1:17:46)**

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