

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

Interviewee: MR. RAYMOND GEE

Interviewers: ANNE CHAO

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Transcribed by: ASIYA KAZI

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Background:

Mr. Raymond Gee is a successful self-made businessman. He was born in China and immigrated to the U.S. when he was about ten years old. He was in San Francisco for about three years, and then came to Houston to work in his brother's grocery business. In this interview he reflects on his life and on his business success.

Setting:

The interview was conducted at the Golden Palace, 8520 Bellaire Boulevard, Houston, TX 77036.

Interviewers:

Dr. Anne Chao graduated from Wellesley College and received her Master's and Doctoral degrees from Rice University, where she currently teaches as an adjunct lecturer in in the History Department, focusing on the field of modern Chinese history. She is the manager of the Houston Asian America Archive, as well as Adjunct Lecturer in the Humanities at Rice.

Interview Transcript:

Key

AC	Anne Chao
RG	Raymond Gee
RC	Rogene Gee Calvert
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

RG: To do is, how you know how much a price is. You want to do something; how do, how do you do it? So. You still uh asking how much it costs. You don't know, so you don't have to say to your work. So you're paying five dollars, ten dollars. They give you change, and you pretend you know. Don't say you don't know that people railroad you, you know?

AC: Yeah.

RG: [inaudible] give you change.

AC: Yeah.

RG: You say, 'I don't know what you talking about.' They will cheat you. So you got, got to use your head. They call it 'street smarts.' [laughs] Don't forget. Everybody get off, mostly anyway, in New York, and San

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Francisco, uh and then Los Angeles. But San Francisco is the main one; New York the second one. They're all, they're all pretty close together.

AC: And your grandparents... You were saying that your grandparents—

RG: No... I had nobody here. I'm here by myself. [**AC:** Wow.] How can you, a child... I am ten years old when I came over here. You know how I make my living?

AC: [indicates 'no' with sound]

RG: With 'cha siu bao.' The mother I have in California, uh she got five, six kids. Uh she cooked the food leftover—when I got out of school, those uh—everything is cold by three or four o'clock. So I worked, worked shining shoes. You know, shining shoes, ten cents.

AC: Wow, a pair of shoes?

RG: A pair of shoes. So, I just get enough for me to eat food. I don't have uh money to buy a shoebox. A friend of mine, he bought a brand new one so, he left the box and I said 'Hey, let me use this thing. I will split it down the middle with you.' You got to be honest, don't be, 'Oh, I'm gonna make this money.' Some—a lot of people do that by keeping the benefits. Six months after I finished, so I buy my own. I give him the deposit, I pay him for everything, so I don't—the Chinese don't got to owe nobody nothing.

AC: Sorry, you mean the shoebox?

RG: Yeah, a shoebox.

AC: How much was the shoebox?

RG: You have someone make it; of course, you don't have nothing, but got to start off with something. You've still got to buy the polish, only one polish lasts you a long time.

AC: Right, right, right.

RG: So, I shined shoes out there, sold newspapers, uh picked up—busboy—you know, picked up stuff. I do everything to make a little. Wash windows [laughs].

AC: You had a Chinese mother in San Francisco?

RG: It's not a mother.

RC: A paper mother.

AC: A paper mother. But you—at least, you stayed in her house?

RG: Yeah.

AC: Oh. But they didn't take care of you?

RG: They charged me for—

AC: Room and board?

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RG: Nobody going to take care of you like you take care of your own, okay? But I was charged for it and I had to pay back.

AC: Wow. So you paid back—

RG: We all got a hard time. So.

AC: Yeah.

RG: But never be unhappy, because we had the opportunity to come over here. You know right now, right now today—do you know how hard it is for the Chinese to come over here?

AC: Yeah I know it's very difficult, yeah.

RG: You know where they are now? They went to Africa, South America. Hot. [inaudible] They all can't come over. They want to go to Mexico. A whole bundle of people come over to be locked up in a church. You would be surprised that there were Chinese in there all the time. Chinese can afford to pay... A lot of people are still trying to come over. [**AC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.] This is the way they go—go to Mexico. It costs you—uh how much it cost?—It don't cost like coming to U.S. Mexico drop all, you go there easy. The government of Mexico encourages people; they pay the government so much money. [**AC:** Oh really?] It probably costs them uh maybe ten or fifteen thousand dollars.

AC: To come to Mexico?

RG: Yeah, to come to Mexico.

AC: Today—you're talking about today?

RG: Today, today.

AC: Oh wow, wow. So it costs much more, like thirty thousand, to come to the United States from China?

RG: No, no, to come to U.S. Cost forty, fifty thousand dollars.

AC: If you can come.

RG: Yeah, if you can come. See, nobody has got money.

AC: Yeah.

RG: Whoever come over here has to got support over here, to pay so much down payment, then he will work it off for him.

AC: Wow. How long does it take to work off forty, fifty thousand? A long time. Especially, washing dishes and, yeah.

RG: Not only that, you've got guilt towards the Latin people. The Wetbacks. They don't have a lot, the Chinese or Asian. To bring them over, they've got a home. Help you find a job. Mexican people, they all ride little bicycles. They have family. I'm into cashing the check. They work all kind of dirty work, so they have a more harder time than the Chinese, I guarantee you.

AC: Right, right, right.

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RC: Where was your brother when you came? Was he unable to take care of you, or get you?

RG: No, I stayed out there for three years. His wife didn't come over here after I been here, then he sent for her. See, the difference between my father and me is... uh...my grandfather is a schoolteacher. A lot of people write letters. They don't understand. Uneducated. A lot—that's why I don't understand that, because I never go to school. I went to school for three years. But uh woman and the girl, never get a chance. They always take care of the boys first. And uh anyway, uh my father—farmer, so he in turn uh he in turn make enough money. He's a laundry in San Francisco.

AC: Your father?

RG: Yeah.

AC: Oh he was a farmer in China, and he came over?

RG: Because my fath—my grandpa know how to read and write. Hey, they have...they to go to U.S., you'd sign up, not—you'd go to Guli—do you know coolie?

AC: Coolie, yeah.

RG: You'd come in at that and when he saved up enough money to buy a place for my brother.

AC: Oh I see.

RG: Then my brother came over here and sent my father back home. Otherwise, I wouldn't born. He was too old. A lot of people don't have a son. They all like buy son. They never buy a woman; they always buy a son to carry on the legacy. Right now, half of our village, all the sons too old—you got money, you buy sons, you don't have no money, you wipe it out. You understand?

AC: Right, right.

RG: S uh—

AC: So your father went back, and then your brother came here?

RG: He already retired. He brought my brother over here so said, 'I'll take care of the family.' He sent my father back, and that's how my brother and I were born. See...that's what—if he wait a bit longer, my mom would have been too old, she would be sixty years old. So I say, well! [laughs]

AC: So then you came over, then your father and mother stayed in China?

RG: Yeah, everybody stayed in China.

AC: So that's why you stayed by yourself.

RG: Just my brother over here. Just my brother.

AC: Oh that's Henry, your brother Henry. And was he also in San Francisco?

RG: He was in San Francisco first.

AC: First. And then when you got there, he left.

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RG: And then and this guy, I tell you what... [unfolds paper]

AC: Wow.

RG: See, this is a scholarship.

AC: Wow. The Standard Loose Leaf Extension Service Standard Reference Work. Um 1923, my goodness. Wow. So, C.Y. Chu—that's

RC: That's one of the elders.

AC: Yeah but how is he related to Raymond?

RC: Well, the village. He said that they were—they lived in the village across from his.

AC: Oh my goodness.

RC: So that's what I said. When they came first, C.Y. and Wantu, they, they helped people like Raymond, my dad, his brother, to set them up in business.

AC: Wow. Can I take a picture of this? Okay I will—we can put it in our archive.

RC: Yeah put it in.

RG: See look at those money. [**AC:** Yeah this is—Hong Kong money right?] A lot of money. People collect them.

AC: Yeah this is very valuable.

RC: ...Now, how did you end up with C.Y. Chu's stuff?

RG: Because Calvin Coolidge, died.

RC: Coolidge died?

RG: Coolidge, Calvin's brother.

RC: Yeah, I know Calvin.

RG: His—his house got fourteen dumpsters of trash. Big dumpster. Fourteen. He kept everything. Calvin, Calvin said 'I don't want this,' so I helped him clean all of this. I said, 'Are you sure you don't want this?' He said no.

RC: You took his stuff.

AC: I'm so glad you took this.

RC: Yeah so did you hear how he got it?

AC: Yeah, fourteen dumpsters? And all of the stuff that—[**RC:** Well, this is the son.]

RG: Look at that—1918.

AC: What is this? C.Y. Chu—'I hereby stand...' —

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RG: He got a scholarship here.

RC: He got a scholarship.

AC: Oh wow. Wow my goodness.

RC: Those days, they were very educated.

AC: Yeah, he went to Berkeley College, I understand. That's what your book said.

RC: I believe my book.

AC: Wow. I'm so glad you kept this. One day when you um... In our Rice University library, people give us things like that, and we put in boxes so it's acid-free...so it won't decompose. One day, when you don't want to take care of it anymore, we can help you. We can put it in a box for everyone to look at.

RG: Well yeah.

AC: Well you keep it now, but when you're ready. I'll show you what we do. You know Gene Lee?

RC: You know Gene.

RG: Three thousand dollars. I said, 'My goodness!' How in the world did you get that much money? People so broke.

RC: ... American Trust Company. So who was—oh C.K.—is that C.Y. Chu? Who is Chu Gao Ji? Who was this?

RG: He not dumb.

AC: This was the guy?

RG: C.Y. is the man that do business. Okay. People would give him... you understand?

RC: Right. So did my dad and Henry pay—

RG: They all worked for him.

AC: Right, when they worked for him.

RG: Well they worked for him. But they learned—your daddy go one way, my brother go one... Everybody's gotta learn somewhere...

RC: Right. So did they still have to pay it, then?

RG: Everybody has got to pay. You might not pay right there, but you worked out a cut... How do you think the people opened those *qiao jiu mien*? All of them open buffet? You pay him so much, work it out, take money. How can you do buffet if you don't pay labor nothing? You understand what I'm talkin' about? See, I'm inside, so I know everything: Who go, what go, okay? I meet people—I've just heard people talking. I don't like guessing. This is really good stuff, I tell you. I've learned everything about how people operate, how to, how to go to Mexico and come over here.

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AC: Wow, it's so nice that you kept everything.

RC: Yeah, it is.

AC: Yeah. Thank you. You kept a part of history. It would be gone otherwise.

RG: Yup. [**RC:** He threw away...] Look at all of that big money—look at it.

AC: Bank of Canton. This is money?

RG: No, this is a cashier's check.

AC: Oh, a cashier's check –1937.

RG: This early than that: Look at that.

AC: Wow.

RG: Look at this—this is real money.

AC: [inaudible]

RG: Look at this—this is real money.

AC: American Trust Company.

RG: You know what that is?

AC: For, for life or something, right?

RG: Yeah.

AC: Yeah. This is old stuff.

RG: You'd never get one like that anymore!

AC: Oh this is stock! This is stock for uh—is this C.Y. Chu? Five hundred stocks.

RG: Yep.

AC: All the Gee Family...[Rogene Gee Calvert starts speaking on the phone] This is three thousand dollars...

RG: It's a lot of money.

AC: In those days...He never cashed it. [Rogene Gee Calvert continues to speak on phone]Thank you, you want me to take it to the library? Thank you, that is great.

RG: Yes. For other people to...

AC: We will invite you to the library when this is done.

RG: [inaudible] the scholarship...

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AC: We will put it in C.Y. Chu's stuff.

RG: Better for other people to use it...[inaudible]

AC: C.Y. Chiu...Gene Li. When Gene Li passed away—Heidi Li's Husband—well he died.

RG: I know.

AC: But two months before he died, we did the same interview. And then he gave us all of his papers.

RG: Oh, he did?

AC: So and so they're all in boxes.

RG: [inaudible]

AC: I have pictures of the newspaper he did. So we have all of that in our library archive.

RG: He never had those, though.

AC: No, no. None of this.

RG: I have some more, but they're already gone...

AC: Wow...

RG: A lot of them. Silver dollars.

AC: And why—it's gone? What happened? ... You lost it so many times?

RG: I'm very old. I have lost a lot of my stuff.

AC: Wow oh my goodness. Well thank you so much for this, this is super. ... Oh, the money, right? What are these?

RG: To the Chinese, these are for luck.

AC: Yeah.

RG: Gold brings you luck. I have, I have a brush with Chinese print. You can use that one.

AC: Oh thank you. Wow. This is for the ink, right? Oh my goodness. We can put this in our archive?

RG: Yeah.

AC: Oh, thank you. Okay.

RG: They put in, they put it in, they put it in with the leaves and put mud on that. After so many weeks, we take it out, that's the filter for that. We, we learned.

AC: Wow, well that's good, I did not know you could do that. So this filter... The leaf has all the membranes?—

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RG: You have to get it out—[inaudible]

AC: Smart. Wow—that's smart, so what year is this?

RG: I don't know, it's pretty old.... This is my lucky charm.

AC: This is your lucky charm, your very lucky, very lucky charm. Thank you so much.

RG: You might as well take one this too and put it in there.

AC: oh okay we'll put it... And this is C.Y. Chu's, but this is yours?

RG: Huh?

AC: This is yours?

RG: All of them belong to him. This is mine.

AC: Oh, this is yours. It's two separate ones.

RG: I'm not that old that I have all of this stuff.

AC: [laughs] Okay, thank you. I'm going to wrap this up. Okay...so, can you um so maybe can you tell me just a little bit about um— after you finished polishing shoes in San Francisco, where did you go?

RG: Here.

AC: Oh, you came to here because...?

RG: See. That's for...If you a person, wherever you go, you always smile, thank people, humble with people; people will help you. But if you're a smart ass, nobody [AC: Nobody—] will help you. Now don't think I look so good... I was a thief.

AC: You were a thief?

RG: Hungry. We go to—when a kid gets to school, a bunch of people come. I steal comic book, food that they cook for their kids like spaghetti, like noodles...little box uh... We steal candy, but I pay them back though. You know because I need food. [AC: Yeah.] Uh I stay here for a few years, then went on vacation. I went back to pay all of the people that helped me survive. They said, first, I asked the question, 'Say, hey, is this the same *laoban* [owner] in that time?' and they'd say 'yeah.' I say, 'You don't look like that old' and they'd say, 'That's my father in the back.' So I said, 'Well, you don't know me but I used to take stuff from your place. And I want to pay it back, you know I'm completely good now.'

AC: Wow, nice.

RG: So I gave it back to him. It was wintertime—California, very cold. [AC: Yeah, yeah.] Daytime was really good; mild. Nighttime, you get chills. [AC: Yeah, yeah.] Christmas time, I want gloves so bad and nobody lift a finger. My own cousin complain, waste your time. I had friend bought me a gift. [AC: Wow.] And I always remember people. I have uh Anglo people. I got schoolteachers. I was so skinny. Uh you know, they got milk and graham—uh graham candy—cookies—what they call?

AC: Uh you mean, graham, graham crackers?

RG: Graham crackers!

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AC: And milk, milk and graham crackers?

RG: Yeah. I can't eat the milk, but I ate the graham crackers. Because I was hungry. The schoolteacher pay for her own pocket. I thought it was the school. But I didn't know, [**AC:** Wow.] but she's the only one out of the lot of people who helped me.

AC: And was she Anglo or Chinese?

RG: She was Anglo. And uh but anyway, she uh—she's the only one I never get the chance to thank her. She take me to the circus. [**AC:** Wow.] She's nice. Out of all of the people, then the man there— See, I, I go to school. And I saw him. It was fun to me. I don't want no money; I would take a bucket and pour there in there and scrape that every morning, got clean up. They'd pay him. He start paying me, so he'd buy me stuff. But I went up to him and talked to him, and we all had a nice cup of coffee, talk like the good old times. [**AC:** Wow.] And uh uh to survive, nobody take care of you. You go to the park and take that man do my hair—My hair was so long, just think, two or three years.

AC: Yeah, yeah, no haircut.

RG: They learn over you. They don't got no license. They learn over me, I'd get a free haircut and it would all work out. So you've got to learn how to survive. I stayed in an apartment over there. [coughs] And he felt bad for me, he say always hungry. Told me, 'Hey, go buy you those French.' The six-inch bread. You know the French bread—get two of them for five cents. And I buy bread, put sugar in the bread between. I made it. [**AC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.] People help you. I tell you. I mean, they were minor things, but to a kid, it was a lot of, a lot of things. Uhhh you know, so, [**AC:** Wow. Uh-huh.] after nine o'clock, nobody kids allowed out. No parents. Parents would have to bail you out—not of jail, they just police station.

AC: Yeah, because they don't want you to be out on the street.

RG: Yeah, so I mean uh I got pulled in, so I said, well, they know. But, but before I was shining shoes and going to movie, we—you know, kids run around with kids. One guy buy a ticket, he go to the back door to let us in. [laughs] I mean but one thing I didn't do was—everybody got a group. You go to a group, uh and they bad, broke into people's houses. You know...I mean they got all differen—how lucky I was, didn't run around with the wrong group doing something, but you know...

AC: In the wrong group...Yeah.

RG: I got a break, and then I came over here in 1951, here. So.

AC: So when you came here, you began to work in the grocery store?

RG: Everybody worked at the store. So everybody go play, we had to work after school. [**AC:** Right.] But it's okay.

AC: Which, which grocery store did you work at, when you came?

RG: My brother had a partnership. Uh this store was downtown. And uh so we got to learn how to drive, we got to—. First of all, you have to learn how to do something. You can't just say uh... Well, I was lucky, I got to do meat. At that time, chicken, live chicken. If you buy the chicken you had to kill the chicken [**AC:** You did that, yeah.] uhhh, dress him uhhh...and learn to drive is people—nobody teach me, most people went to school. So we got the delivery truck. You buy five dollars of groceries, a bunch of groceries then. [laughs] So we—I used the same truck to uh...learn to drive you know.

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AC: You were 19?

RG: No, younger than that.

AC: You were fif—wait you were 14 or 15?

RG: Yeah, 14.

AC: Oh my goodness.

RG: In California, only 10, 10 or 12. 13—

AC: So when you came here—

RG: When I came over here, I was about 13 or 14.

AC: Wow. [laughs]

RG: I spent three years out there. You, you learn. I mean, but people uh you know get lucky.

AC: Do you remember the name of the store, what is the name of your brother's grocery store?

RG: It's all torn down by now.

AC: Uh-huh. What is the name?

RG: Hong On.

AC: Hong On. Okay.

RG: H-O-N-G O-N.

AC: Okay. And you said at the time, there were 300—at the time—

RG: The good time all the way 'til the 60's, is about three hundred thirty somethin' like that grocery stores.

AC: And they were also in African American neighborhood?

RG: Almost all.

RC: Gordon was unique. Gordon, Gordon Quan was unique at being in Latin American neighborhoods, the Hispanics. That's unique. [**AC:** Oh so it's unique?] Most of us were in the African American, like fifth ward, third ward...

AC: Right.

RG: See, before uhhhh right now, today, a lot of people out of the stores. If you don't tear up the grocery stores, the taxes so bad... If you have a building, the taxes are real, real high. Right now, you can't get rid of them, 'cause what can you do with a grocery store? No parking spaces... That's why Walgreens opened up and are so big. I had never heard of it. You know, so they sell beds, everything.

AC: Yeah, Target sells food, and supermarkets –

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[talking about the leftover dishes at the table]

AC: So you worked for your brother when you came here; and then, and then what happened afterwards?

RG: Well my sister-in-law—her bad luck caused me good luck. [laughs] ‘Cause she had to move to Arizona. She had asthma. First she got a shot, and then she got so bad that she had to move. She moved out there first, and they were separated for about two years, and said ‘Oh I’ve got to go out there.’ So, he asked me, I had just gotten married to Julia. [laughs]

RC: Oh is that when it was? Oh so he and Julia Ji (?), Julia Jiu—uh the Jiu family, which is Fong Ji—do any of these names—

AC: Mm.

RC: So, they’re another old uh Chinese Family.

AC: Yeah. I’ve seen in the book, some that are J-E-U.

[talking about the leftover dishes at the table]

RC: Um but anyway, he married into the Jiu family. J-E-U.

RG: First thing my mother-in-law said ‘No.’

RC: ‘Cause she—you weren’t good enough—

RG: She said, why don’t you marry a doctor—

RC: She is American. She was Americanized. She was born here.

RG: ‘Cause uh she worked at the store hard and long, and said, ‘I don’t want my daughter to.’ She said, ‘No hard feeling Raymond, I just don’t want my children to...’ I said, ‘Well, it’s not up to me. It’s up to your daughter, if she says yes or no. If she doesn’t want to, that’s okay.’ [**AC:** Yeah, yeah.] But she said yes.

AC: She said yes! [laughs]

RC: And how long were you married?

AC: Yeah! How did you know her?

RC: How long were you married?

RG: Oh! Quite a while.

RC: They had three beautiful children and the—

AC: And the FBI and West Point.

RC: ... And the grocery store. And they bought a, they bought a home that was uh in the Memorial—what’s his name?

RG: Oh yeah. You ain’t gonna see uh an uneducated got a name, a house. Hey I got a house; it doesn’t belong to

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me, but it is still the Gee's house.

AC: How did it become the Gee's house?

RG: Because when we look at that house, uh the man, he had some business in Austin. And this agent told me. He said—he look at me, I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt. He said—he shook his head and said, ‘Well,’ uhhhh he said, ‘are you a citizen?’ I said, ‘Wait a minute, what it got to do if I’m a citizen.’ I mean now, they will sue you.

AC: Yeah, you can’t ask questions like that. In the old days...

RG: Well anyway, I said, well, maybe just lower it down; I can't give it to you, what the devil. You've got nothing to lose, you going to do anyways. He lowered it down twenty-five thousand to seventy-five. That was a lot of money at that time.

AC: A lot of money, yeah.

RC: Well, that was the cars. You're talking about the cars, right?

RG: Oh, the cars.

RC: You’re not talking about the house?

RG: No, the house the same way.

AC: The Memorial, the house on Memorial.

RC: He was talking about buying two Mercedes Benz.

RG: I went—my sister-in-law, uh she was in real estate, she drive a Ford or something like that. You know people don’t like—they want a pretty car.

AC: In real estate, you have to drive nice cars.

RG: So anyway, uhh we went and ask how much—I don't know the difference between a Mercedes or a Ford. I always drive a Chevrolet. You know. A Mercedes—you know, and I ask him. He saw the car and he said, ‘Well, if you want to know about price, I think you go down the street to Ford or Chevrolet.’ I said, ‘Wow, who is this guy here?’ So we went to the manager and we told him to get us anybody, but not that guy. So we purchased two cars, one for my sister-in-law—

AC: Wow, wow my goodness, wow that's amazing. So your sister-in-law moved out to Arizona, then your brother—

RG: ... And then my brother moved out there. He sold me the business.

AC: He sold you the business. Oh that's how you began with your first grocery store—okay. And the name stayed the same?

RG: No, no, no. We sold that. It's different. We built this one over here before we sold it.

AC: Oh okay. So you so your brother sold you the business, and then you moved it to another place.

RG: Yeah. We moved it to Arizona.

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AC: He went to Arizona—so you went to Arizona too?

RG: No.

RC: He bought, he bought, or he built another store somewhere else. He sold that first one. You sold that one? So he started with the one his brother left—uh sold him, [**AC:** Right.] but then he bought a bigger one where he is now.

RG: The store I'm working at over there, I've had that store since 1957. I purchased it from my brother in 1961.

AC: Oh okay, okay.

RG: Do you know how long I've been in business?

AC: Since 1957. Right?

RG: Long time. [**AC:** Right.] We sold the store for—

AC: And when did you sell the final—

RG: 19—what was that? About 15 years ago.

AC: This, this one, the first one you built, you sold 15 years ago. Wow. So, how big is big? I mean how big?

RG: That store is like a house—do you know what a house looks like? [**AC:** Yeah.] Maybe fifteen or twelve hundred. This one here is probably uh sixty by maybe about four thousand square foot.

AC: Big. Really big.

RG: I got... See...I do apartments, houses, washateria, [**AC:** Washateria?] fried chicken. [**AC:** Woah.] I do about 15-20...

AC: Businesses at the same time? Or wow, how do you do it?

RG: How do you do it? That's what I said, how do I do it? See the deal is, I like to...

RC: Wheel and deal. That's what they call it.

RG: Yes, I like to deal.

RC: Wheel and deal.

AC: Smart.

RG: No, not smart. I'm not that smart—I know what I like to do. Okay? First time, I went to the bank. By now, I go to the bank. You have foreclosed houses. We have [inaudible]. But that is my backbone. I bought two chicken places, which Julia got. She don't have to work no more, because [inaudible] only use it for groceries. I was such uh—maybe I talk too damn much, but yeah. Bought two stores, that's how come I got divorce from Julia... You think, you think Julia was going to let me go if I didn't give her something nice?

AC: [laughs] Wait—

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RC: Julia is his ex-wife.

AC: Right, so you, you sold the chicken place and gave her the check?

RG: No, no, no, no, no. I gave her two places. We got money to buy. You run a grocery store... You know, you know her rent? Every one of those months, four thousand something dollars. Two of them only nine thousand dollars. Do nothing.

AC: Oh, so she's the landlord.

RG: She's the landlord. But I have to work! [**AC:** You have to work [laughs]] But she's happy. See, what's so good about me was that I didn't say, you take this. Most husbands take the good stuff and then give to the wife. I gave her the choice—you gonna take this one or this one? She said, 'That store.' Uh this one on Cullen. She said 'that store, the grocery store, is under your brother's name. When we get divorced or I get dead, he gonna kick me out.' So I said, 'Take that one and don't do nothing.' So she decided to take that one so don't do anything. Today, she's happy.

AC: Happy, yeah.

RG: We talk to each other. [laughs]

RC: They're very amiable.

AC: Oh that's good, that's good.

RG: What really uh got me is when she married a younger man. She got money! No, I thought she was going to give my house away, or the chicken place, for something. So I said, 'well' ... but she divorced me, I said, it's for relief. All of our stuff give to our children anyway. Right?

RC: Grandchildren.

RG: Huh?

RC: Grandchildren now. *Grandchildren.*

RG: Oh yeah.

AC: Do you have grandchildren?

RG: Oh yeah.

AC: Oh that's why the school district is good.

RG: What's so good about it, when you have your child or grand kid—'Dad, I'm okay now. I take care of my own.' A lot of people go, 'Give me, give me, give me!' All your children. My son told me that he was so happy, he didn't need me. I said, 'I still need you!' It makes you uh makes you feel good—I did something right.

AC: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, so from the first grocery store, how did you then go into real estate and—

RG: See, I told you, I talk to people and went to Grocery Supply to finance. The bank would not give me a dime. Not even a dime.

RC: Grocery Supply is a very important piece.

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RG: It's an important wholesale thing.

RC: They and they're still around and Mr. Lovett—Lovett, Levlo (?) what's the man's name?

RG: Joe Levitt. [**RC:** Joe Levy.]

AC: Levitt. L-E-V-I-T-T, maybe.

RG: I think they uh, they they—

AC: So Grocery Supply is a big –

RG: All the store. Fiesta store. They own Fiesta.

AC: They own Fiesta.

RC: They own it?

RG: Yes!

RC: Oh that's right, that's right.

RG: They die...

RC: What they used to do, and they still do, is that they are an Aeromart type for 'Cisco. They supply the groceries, so the little mom and pop stores we would buy our groceries from.

RG: Grocery Supply would loan money out. They tell customers, 'We only loan you money for in the grocery business, not other than...' Otherwise, they gonna—you know. I don't want to blab my mouth and cause them a lot of [inaudible].

RC: But it's okay to say that they loaned money to the grocers, right?

RG: Yeah.

RC: Like he said, he couldn't get money from the bank. Most of our parents couldn't speak English yeah couldn't get credit even though they owned their own businesses. But Grocery Supply [**AC:** Would lend—] and they were Jewish-owned, and they were great friends to our, our stores.

AC: I see. And that's how they provided capital for him to expand his business?

RC: Well, that's the part he say, 'Don't say that,' because they're only supposed to lend to groceries. But they you know trusted him and he was able to get other money. See and so Raymond was younger than most—uh 19 years younger than his brother—so my dad and his brother's generation, they didn't speak quite as well. But he was very you know—

RG: Everybody uh before, C.Y. Chu loan money to. Grocery Supply was the one that really helped me. So they got some big business they could use. I don't do nothing for it. They loaned me the money. We fixed it up, and if it good, we don't sell it. We made a lot of money. It don't cost you nothing—every time you sell, you make money, a lot of money.

AC: So what is the key to making the grocery store successful?

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RG: You got to enjoy it; I don't care what you do. [**AC:** You have to enjoy it.] You have to enjoy whatever you do, I don't care how much money you make. If you're not going to enjoy it, you're not happy with it. I'm happy with everything.

AC: So you enjoy it?

RG: I did fifteen-hour days, was never tired. I got so much money. [**AC:** Wow.] But don't forget, [**AC:** Uh-huh.] I don't touch no money.

AC: Yeah. You don't, you invest?

RG: No, I don't touch my money.

AC: Oh, you don't touch your money. I see. Okay, you don't spend it.

RG: No. Some other people did. I have a lady here that is Julia's aunt. We do so much business...Do you know what 'smooth'—you know what 'smooth' is? You count so much money, you lose your identity.

AC: Oh, your finger.

RG: See, see I—over a lot of million, million dollars. [**AC:** Really? Cap?] She is so nice to me, that I've never hurt her. You should see her fingers; they're smooth pieces of skin.

AC: Wow. No ridges. No finger—no ridge uh.

RC: Because it's worn off, from counting money. [**AC:** She's just counting the money.]

AC: So, so when did you—so every business you have started was successful? Right? The first grocery store was successful—

RG: No, you got some bad ones. [**AC:** Okay, okay.] Nobody that good. But it do come out for me very, very good. No Anglo bank. The Chinese bank helped me a lot too... Metro and all that—

AC: ...But they were not here though, in the 1950s, '60s?

RG: No, they were not here. You know, but this Chinatown here—

AC: ... Is new.

RG: California, only a few streets. It's old. New York, same thing. L.A., same thing. Chicago, same thing. Houston is the only one we built thing our. You know the guy at the Hong Kong supermarket? I am so proud of him. I hope he stay and make it. [**AC:** Yeah he's, he's getting competi—] It took thirty-five million dollars to build that thing.

AC: Hong Kong—the shopping mall?

RC: The shopping mall.

RG: Even he don't make it, at least the Chinese have something that we built no we go buy from outside. I don't care if you don't go there. But, I know him too.

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AC: So he's also American-Chinese, Chinese-American? He's from Hong Kong?

RC: He's from Vietnam.

AC: Vietnam? Hong Kong—

RC: He's Chinese-Vietnamese.

RG: Vietnam. But I got a uh strip center right next to Hong Kong.

AC: You have a strip center?

RG: Yeah.

AC: Oh wow. The one the—right across the street from Hong Kong?

RG: No, next to it. It's old, it's old [**AC:** Oh I know—it's across the street, behind, behind Hong Kong—] but a whole block. It's an old one, next to, next to Hong Kong supermarket.

RC: On the Ocean Palace side?

RG: No!

AC: On Corporate Drive.

RG: Not Corporate. Hong Kong.

AC: Oh, oh Bissonnet! Hillcrest and uh—

RG: Hong Kong—Hong Kong—they've got a little strip center beside them. They've got a Stop n' Go, they've got a washateria, they've got an Indian Bakery...got a blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

AC: So that's yours.

RG: Yeah. No, I sold it. [**AC:** You sold it, okay.] I'm a trader—[**AC:** You buy and sell.] buy here, get something better, do that, do that.

RC: That's how you make money.

AC: Wow. Yeah.

RG: Hey. You can work 40 hours a day; you'll never make it. Real estate is where you make your money. You always tell your kids to buy a house.

AC: Ahhh yeah, I hear that a lot—buy a house. Right, and then you sell it?

RG: You always sell it and trade it until [**AC:** You get more money.] You buy a house for your kid's education. Let me tell you about my education. I bought the house and I told you that I sold it in Sugar, Sugar Creek, no, not Sugar Creek—it's a state—

AC: Sugar Land? [**RG:** Sugar Land.] First Colony.

RG: No, no, next to Sugar Creek, across from the railroad track on Highway 90. To buy for house for education.

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And uh the doctor—two doctors, in fact, uhhhh rent my house. I never lived there for one day, not even one day when I purchased it. He said I wanted to lease from you. I said, ohh you want to lease it? I thought he'd stay there for one or two years—he stayed for twelve years. He paid my note for me!

AC: He leased it for twelve years? Oh! [laughs] Oh wow.

RG: He was a doctor. I thought he'd stay there temporarily.

RC: Yeah, why didn't he ever buy a house?

RG: That's what I said. He gave me seventeen hundred dollars. See I bought it—the young one go to West Point, but I didn't need that since, he went to... First, he went to Catholic school. And then after that, I didn't know that uh—what's the name of that thing—DeBakey High School, that's for doctors and stuff—

AC: Science and health, right.

RG: Hey, a lot of people would stand in line to get in there. I got people from Pearland that came all the way out to DeBakey. [**AC:** Yeah, yeah it's a very good—] You paid eight thousand dollars to go. You not in the same thing (?) I said, eight thousand dollars. So I feel pretty lucky. And then he went to Baylor, he gave half price to Baylor (?), he stayed a year and a half. He went to five different schools.

AC: Your son?

RG: My son. Now, he was underage. He go to summer school—I make him go to summer school. He went to St. Thomas, University of Houston, uh Houston Community College. He went to all. I mean five schools, but every summer, instead of playing ball, he go to college. How many kids summer go to school? That's why he was pretty good at what he was doing.

AC: Yeah, and West Point is not easy to get into.

RG: No, no, no. When you get in, you can't take the physical. A lot of people drop out. Thirty percent drop out. Even when you get in, it's not that simple. So, so I didn't need to get a house for my kids to go to school. That's why I'm still over there.

RC: Wait, which son? Michael?

RG: Michael.

AC: Wait, Michael went to West Point?

RC: Michael, yeah. He's at West Point now.

AC: So what are the names of your children? Um can I have the names of your children? Michael...

RG: First Gigi.

RC: G-I-G-I.

RG: And then no and then Mark, the oldest son.

RC: Mark is second.

AC: And then Michael?

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RC: No. Jason.

AC: Jason? Okay.

RG: And then the last one is Michael.

AC: Michael. Wow. Okay, and they all married, right?

RG: No. Not the young one, young one he's only 19.

AC: Oh he's only 19 right now? Okay.

RG: You can't go to West Point—

AC: That's true, that's true.

RC: What about Mark? He's not married.

RG: Huh?

RC: Mark, is he married?

RG: What? [**RC:** Mark!] What about him?

RC: Is he married?

RG: Yeah.

RC: Oh, when did Mark get married?

RG: Well, he lives with somebody.

RC: Oh okay, that counts.

AC: Nowadays, they do that.

RG: [laughs] I can't tell him, because 'You're doing the same thing, you tell me!' ... [**RC:** That's right.] I can't say. I can't fuss.

AC: You can't criticize.

RC: So, Michael is from another mom.

AC: Oh okay. That's great.

RG: Wonderful life.

AC: Yeah wow, but you are very successful; not everybody is successful.

RG: Well, well a lot of us are successful.

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AC: Um and you say you have to enjoy what you do; that's one key to success—

RG: Yes.

AC: ... But I think you can also, you are able to see where you can make money, opportunities. You find opportunities other people may not find.

RG: You know Gene Lee, right?

AC: Yes.

RG: He and I... When the first embassy come to Houston, they have this thing called acrobats, you know those from China. There were about two hundred of them. I invited them all out there. He said, 'How did you get a house like that?' You know Beijing and a lot of places—very small houses. We got a house that is eighty five thousand or some square feet. He said, we give uh a dinner. Clint is a good cook. We import some lobster. He said, 'What is this?' ...We enjoy life and then from there, we entertained a lot people. When I was up there, that was all we did. We got Bush, Governor White; we got Mayor Brown...

RC: Yeah. His mother-in-law lives around the corner from them.

RG: Oh yeah, Bob White's mother-in-law—Bill White. That is her boss one time. [laughs]

AC: Bill White's mother-in-law lives near—

RC: Andrea's mom lives around the corner.

RG: Hey. When you live in Memorial, you meet all kinds of people. [**AC:** Oh okay, okay.] Everyone helping each other. It's beautiful out there. I'm still not happy with—

AC: ... With politics? With what?

RG: Uh. With being finished with my life. I want to enjoy a little bit more. [laughs]

AC: You're not finished. You're way too young!

RG: No. You know what? I went to China fifteen times.

AC: Wow! And have you gone back to your village?

RG: I'm still going back—I'm going in next two weeks!

AC: Oh my goodness, you are! Rogene wants to go back.

RG: Next year, she said.

RC: I know but tell me the name of the village?

RG: Xiang Kiao.

AC: Xiang Kiao. That's different from Tai—it's not Taishan—

RC: It's in Taishan province, or county.

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RG: See. Here, you got money. Nobody knows you. A Chinaman will always be a Chinaman. Over there, I built me a road. We used to have mud roads. So we have a car to drive—now everybody drives. I passed out money—a lot of money, a lot of fun. [**AC:** Oh, that's great [laughs]] I get a lot of respect over there. Oh, 'Laoban, laoban!' [laughs]

RC: Did they name a street after you?

RG: No, they can put that in my father's name. I never go to those kinds...

AC: Do you help build schools? Are you [**RG:** Huh?] are you building schools in the village?

RG: Yeah, they do schools. Not me. They, they—we just built roads and bathrooms, uh bridges... You know, minor things.

AC: So when you were growing—building your businesses here, real estate and grocery stores and chicken franchise, do you go into partnership with the other Gee?

RG: No.

AC: No, not with the other Gee members, but with your own friends, or your own... Do you have partners?

RG: See. My brother came over here. I brought him over here.

RC: His third... His youngest brother. There's three—there were three.

RG: So he don't have to work no more because the business was already built. He just had to run it.

AC: So he's helping you run the businesses?

RG: No. I—they have two businesses when he first came over here. So, we sold the business, so he's doing real well. See the hardest—the hardest part is in the beginning; once you get established, it's easier to run. In the old times, her father and my brother—they do everything themselves, don't trust anybody. You have got to trust somebody. I don't care how smart, how hard... You've got to. I mean—they've got some no good ones. Everybody's good sometimes. You see the problem, try to solve the problem—he helped you, you helped him, but you can't give him little nickels and dimes. If he's worth so much, you have to give him a little bit. So long time you come out better. He's gonna steal for you anyway... [laughs] So.

AC: So you had partners, right?

RG: No, no partners.

AC: No partners? Okay. All by yourself.

RG: That's how I make money.

RC: He had a good wife, a good wife—

AC: ...A good wife who helped him and who was working with him.

RC: ... And a good family. He always brought his family in to help. His brother and his sis—his wife's brothers. So they've always had a family. And that's the other thing about Asian businesses. We depended on our family or extended family to help and I think that's why so many of them could operate.

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AC: Yeah, yeah.

RG: I used a pretty good-sized business I called sponsorship. Uh you got to—I put them in as managers—you better shut that off, I don't want them to hear this...

AC: Okay. Okay.