

EI-503
WILLIAM (FOOK) YEE
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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here at Ellis Island in the Oral History Studio. Today is July 18, 1994, and I'm very happy to be here today with Mr. William F. Yee, who came from Mainland China in 1939 when he was sixteen years of age. Today Mr. Yee is sixty-nine years of age, and he has been in this country ever since.

YEE: Except the war.

LEVINE: Except the war. Okay. Well, why don't we start out by you telling me where in China you were born.

YEE: I was born in southern part of China, and it's seventy-five miles from the capital, Kwangtung. And it's right on the coast on the little place named Toishan.

LEVINE: And what was your birth date?

YEE: The birthday is September 9, 1924.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did you live in the same place up until you left for the United States?

YEE: No. I went to school in Canton. And after that the Japanese invade China and southern China, and the family moved back to Toishan. I went to school in the city of Toishan, [not understood] like a county seat of Toishan.

LEVINE: I see. What was Toishan like when you were growing up? What do you remember about the city?

YEE: Toishan, one time, at that particular period, they call it Little Canton. That means they're fairly, fairly cosmopolitan.

LEVINE: What was the, was there a main industry in town, or . . .

YEE: Actually, Toishan, basically it's a farming district. It mostly was hills and every-- the farmland. And the main income is from the people working oversea, so I'm one of the overseas children left behind in China.

LEVINE: Well, now, was your father overseas?

YEE: My father at that time was already in United States.

LEVINE: Ah.

YEE: By the way, I'm the fourth generations of American. If I count on, my great grandfather immigrated here after the Civil War, in 18, got to be 1869 or '70. At that time he was already here.

LEVINE: Oh. What was your father's name?

YEE: My father's name is Cok Swi Eng.

LEVINE: Maybe you could spell that, just so we have it right.

YEE: Okay. The Swi you put an S, okay? Eng, E-N-G.

LEVINE: And did you know your grandfathers?

YEE: I do not know my grandfather. My grandfather die in Walla Walla, Washington.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

YEE: My great-grandfather went home and die in China. To tell you the truth, they never left behind me a picture what my great-grandfather is like. He's certainly brave, and he went out to Wyoming work for a sheep rancher. And, you know, he even learned a little bit Indian language in those days. And the rancher love him, because all the sheep he shepherd, he never lost one. He was so friendly with the Indian. And, so, that's what he make his living off, like a shepherd.

LEVINE: Now, did you hear about your grandfather when you were a little boy?

YEE: Very, very little. This is from the inquisitive, when I become an adult. I ask my father before my father die, and that's the story I heard. And I did not know too much about my grandfather. My grandfather die after less than two years he immigrated into United States. Die of whatever illness, I don't know. Too young to know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your father doing here when he came to the United States?

YEE: Uh. (he laughs) Mostly labor, manual labor. Work on, uh, on this shop, and work in, oh, a cannery - cannery - cannery from Monterey -- up to Alaska. You see. And so that's how he make a living on the beginning. And later on he went to the home, and got married. My sister was born. After the guy come back a few year, went home again, I was born. And come back and forth, maybe about two, three times, three times, I think. That's about it.

LEVINE: Was it just you and your sister?

YEE: Me and my sister, that's the family, that's the family.

LEVINE: And what about your mother? What was her name?

YEE: My mother is Lam. L-A, actually in Toishan it Lim, L-I-M, you see, L-I-M.

LEVINE: Now is that what you would say her maiden name, or . . .

YEE: That's the family to her, her family.

LEVINE: Her family name.

YEE: Her family name.

LEVINE: And did she have a first name?

YEE: Uh, they don't mention that too often.

LEVINE: They didn't use that, uh-huh.

YEE: No. They don't.

LEVINE: Okay. Um, what was your mother like? How do you remember your mother from the time you were in China, you were a little boy?

YEE: Oh, my God, the mother has got to be the most wonderful person in the world. She's kind, she's caring, full of love. I miss her.

LEVINE: Yeah. What was her personality like, her temperament?

YEE: Her temperament very business-like, always very business-like, and very meticulous. And I consider very smart -- the very smartest woman in the world.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did she work, or was she mainly taking care of . . .

YEE: No, she take care of the family, and account for the land that we rented out, you know, to collect, uh, the, you know, the, uh . . .

LEVINE: Rent?

YEE: The harvest.

LEVINE: Oh, the harvest.

YEE: The share of the harvest. You know, let, because I'm the only man left behind, you see. I cannot till the soil because I was too young. So you give us some money to till the soil and the end of the year they give you part of the harvest, and that's, you know, to supplement our family incomes.

LEVINE: Did you have a lot of land?

YEE: We did not. But, really, it not a great deal of land in our American way of looking at it. And we would have, we'd consider it kind of big, because for five generations we only single, you know, one son carry on for five generations. So what you had five generations ago, all the property and all the land, all the farmland, you keep it intact, see. We didn't sell anything out, you know. We consider it - you are save your five generations, and other people had divided so many, so many divisions, and with you we only had one as a whole, so in comparison we had had a little bit more than our neighbor, you see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, what was growing on that land? What kind of crops?

YEE: Uh, rice, potato, vegetable. And we never let the land to rest too much. We always rotate, and keep it going all year round, because the weather allow you to -- year round.

LEVINE: What kind of foods, what kind of dishes did your mother make, cook, that you remember from when you were young? Anything special?

YEE: (he laughs) Not really that special, because I don't know, maybe I did not really single out any special one, because anything I wish and she cook it for me. And, uh, so, you know, you're only son, so you're probably a little on the spoiled side, which I did not realize at that time. But now you ask, it's very difficult for me to pinpoint which one I loved the best. But basically I loved simple foods.

LEVINE: Like rice and vegetables, or?

YEE: Rice and vegetables. We had meat. We are lucky, in the family we had meat, we had fish. We also have a little fish pond in front of us divided, our fish pond was divided into five families. You have a fish pond, only five families, you have quite a bit of fish, so we're not worried about that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So as the only son, uh, did you have, would you say that boys like you had sort of special privileges, or did you . . .

YEE: The Chinese culture is always man society, and the man always had a little bit more privilege than the daughter. However, in my own

family, I only had my sister. My sister and I had never fought for anything, and my sister get what she want, and I always had what I want. And my sister always take care of me because, you know, I'm younger than her.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Would you say anything about, uh, the society, the Chinese society, in what ways were boys treated differently? Were there any ways that they were . . .

YEE: That's a tradition. That's a tradition, I would say, because, you know, in our -- even in the Western society, in many European country, they considered much, you know, the boy, much, much more than the womans. And today's society, and we still say, you know, the equality of the women, and so on and so forth, but we still have that. I think for generations to come, we have a little to go --little further to go.

LEVINE: We still have it. Uh-huh.

YEE: To make everybody understand of what is, this is really the equality. This is all about.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about schooling? Did you and your sister receive the same kind of schooling?

YEE: Yeah, yeah. We had no different at that time. Because after 1911, Sun Yat Sen turn over the Revolution, the education system had become quite modern, see. So only very, very elite one, family, and they still hire private tutoring for all the little children, which is very, very good. You have the, that if you, like, study a little Latin, so you understand your English so much better.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have private tutoring at all?

YEE: No, no. I did not.

LEVINE: What was school like for you growing up? What do you remember about school?

YEE: Well, school is part of the growing up. I was glad I was in school, you know. So at least when people talk, I understand a little bit better, so I know I'm not rebel against school.

LEVINE: How about religion? Was religion important in your family?

YEE: Religion, we only basically in the villages, you know. It's more of a Buddhist system. Now, Buddhist system, that in its purist form is all-- it's tied in with traditional, you know. It was your worship and ancestry. You respect your elder, and you always you remember, you know, for generations. As a matter of fact, I still, I'm lucky enough. I went back to China. I'll take a family record, you know, all written, on the fifteen generations down to me. I'm the twenty-eighth. My children are twenty-nine. My grandchildren, I come in, my grandchildren, thirtieth generation. I had it written on the family tree.

LEVINE: Wow, wow. So what did you learn from that about your family through the generations? Was there anything that came out?

YEE: Yeah, yeah. That's why the reason I'm here today, because, you know, on the same thing, my children start to think about root. See, after, after, in, you know, life, you know. You have life growing up. You attain to certain plateau of accomplishment. You start to look back where you come from, and you see there's nothing better than as you're elder, how does it begin. And, you know, as long as the elder has a little bit of recollection and record of it. So that's why I'm here, and this is a part of it, of the heritage and part of the root, and that's why I'm here today.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, maybe we can talk now about how was it that you decided, or was it decided for you, that you would come to America?

YEE: This, let's go back a little bit. Uh, a generation ago we went to first, you know, my great-grandfather got here, and my father got here, and my father's generations regarding to America, they feel, you know, especially the early day when my great-grandfather had to live among Indians and also the cowboy and the renegade, you know, soldier, or whatever they did - that's in the mine and so on and so forth, the railroad worker. They treated the Chinese very, very badly. And, uh, they really being persecuted one way or the other, you see? Though I never heard my great-grandfather go home and complain about it. But, you know, the, certainly, you know, his friend and relatives, he had, gone through that kind of experience. They always feel this is the land of savages, uneducated, see, bandits. They never want to settle here. (he pauses, having difficulty)

LEVINE: That's okay. Take your time.

YEE: They always try to get the money here and go home. This process had gone on for three generations until the fourth, come to this place. You're exposed to [not understood] the American -- service as a -- as a whole. And, unfortunate, or fortunate, I get drafted in the army, the United States Army, and selected into the - the air force.

LEVINE: Were you a citizen at that time?

YEE: Because you are a paper son, you are -- you are pre-arranged to come in here. You are, you know, you go through here. You look back to the archive of this, of the Chinese archive, and you will see all the interrogations and everything else that is all documented, and that will tell you the story much better than I can.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, tell me, um, tell me, uh, what were the circumstances that you first came here, that you personally, when you were sixteen years old . . .

YEE: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . came. Why did you come at that time?

YEE: Why did I come? Number one is my father feel if I don't get out of China at that time I'm just in time for the conscription, army conscription, see. Or that, you know, you fight the Chinese, you fight the Japanese, see. If you survive, after that, the Communists, see. So, you know, the best thing is to get your son over here. You want, you know, to continue the family tradition.

LEVINE: I see. So, tell me, when you left your town, and you started on your journey to America, where did you go first, and do you remember leaving?

YEE: Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

LEVINE: Hong Kong. Do you remember leaving home? What was . . .

YEE: I remember leaving home.

LEVINE: What was it like?

YEE: I kissed my mother with tears. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Yeah. And did you expect to go back again, or were you going to come here and stay here?

YEE: You know, it never entered my thought, see? It never entered my thought. You know, when you're young, you go someplace, you establish something, you try to do something.

LEVINE: So did you bring certain things with you? Do you remember what you . . .

YEE: Myself.

LEVINE: Just yourself.

YEE: (they laugh) And the clothing on my back.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. And then you, you went to Hong Kong.

YEE: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And then do you remember the ship? Do you remember, did you have any kind of . . .

YEE: The Empress of Canada, the Empress of Canada, it's a big, big, you know, [not understood] of the ships at that time. I think it's, what, thirty thousand ton of displacement. So it's supposed to be really modern. I land in Vancouver and take the Trans-Canada Railroad all the way to Montreal, and stay in Montreal for a few days, I guess, whatever, to wait for, you know, the connecting, you know, transportation, which is already pre-arranged. I don't know anything about it. I was too young.

LEVINE: And then that brought you where, when you got . . .

YEE: To Halifax. And so we get on a cruise ship. One of the cruise ship, I don't know, I forgot what the heck the - the name was, to come to New York. I want to, looking at the Statue of Liberty I know I'm here.

LEVINE: What was that like? Did you know what it was?

YEE: Oh, sure. We always talk about, you know, in school, you know, mention American history and so on and so forth, and the Statue of Liberty there. And, besides, you hear from, you know, my father and their contemporary went back home.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then, uh, did you go right to Ellis Island?

YEE: Yeah, from there. We landed in, I don't know, one of the pier, then we get off, you know, the tourist went different ways and we went different ways. We come to here. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were there a lot of other people coming to the United States?

YEE: My group at that time was twelve people. I remember very well, because when we up to Montreal, you know, we're free to go into town. We went to see an American movie, a cowboy movie. And he's, well, twelve, but eleven of us went all together as a group. And we all had a little bit of English, basically ABC, 1-2-3-4, you know, we had all those things. But, you know, counting, in Chinese, counting up to ten, then you use ten-one, ten-two, and so on and so forth, twenty-one, and so forth, you can go on. But in English you go up to ten and you start eleven, you start with twelve, and we keep forgotten of those--. And so when you eleven, try to buy a ticket for eleven people, nobody know how to say eleven, you see. So I says, "Get back," you know, "let me go up there to buy ten, you go up there to buy one more." So we got in.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you ever, had you ever seen a cowboy movie before?

YEE: We seen cowboy movie, but with dub-- dubbed with Chinese, you understand? But this you go into strictly, you know. But cowboy movies, shooting, the, you know, the best man wins. So you don't need too much of, you know, uh, brain power to understand that.

LEVINE: (she laughs) That's true. Okay. So when you came to Ellis Island, what did you expect here?

YEE: I don't know what to expect. I don't know what to expect. I expect maybe just go through the papers and so and so forth. I would get out the next day, which somebody did. It didn't happen to me. I was too tall.

LEVINE: Too tall?

YEE: I was too tall for my age. I was sixteen years old, I was taller than most of the Chinese boy. I was not too much shorter than what I am today. See, I'm 5'10", see?

LEVINE: So that was why they detained you?

YEE: I guess so. You know, that's the only way I think.

LEVINE: So once you realized that you were staying here, what were you told?

YEE: I wasn't told anything. It's just, that your number is not up so they don't call you, you see?

LEVINE: Well, now, was someone going to meet you here?

YEE: Someone already met me, you know. My father, I met my father before I come in to the, you know, I met my father after I got off the boat, you know, then, you know, then the immigration officer transmitted into here, see. All I did here is wait for them to call.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how long did you wait?

YEE: I don't know exactly how long, but I counted about three weeks. But the time I set foot here, it was three weeks later that I got out. (he laughs)

LEVINE: And what was it like here? What was Ellis Island like? Could you describe it?

YEE: Ellis Island is a confined place. You know, you are, you have a guard outside of the door of your dormitory, and you stay within the confines of your dormitory. And the, I guess at that time American Red Cross or some volunteer group to come in there and give you art and craft to keep you busy, see. That's what it is. Then the other thing, you had to count finger and count day you visit, every time somebody come in they ask you what is your name. So at that time I don't know. I don't know. Maybe that is the process accepted here, see. But some people come back crying, because they knew what was wrong, or whatever it is. And some people very depressed. I was too young to feel depressed. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Were there a lot of people here during the time that you were staying?

YEE: Yeah. The dormitory almost full. You have womans and, you know, but, you know, the woman stay in a separate rooms, but you're, during the normal time, recreation time, craft time, everything all, you mix it all together.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And, um, was there . . .

YEE: But these are all oriental, I mean, all Chinese. Separate. The Polish, they stayed different sides, the other, you know, Eastern European countries or, you know, Mediterraneans, different area, you see?

LEVINE: I see. So . . .

YEE: They're segregated.

LEVINE: So in your dormitory, were all oriental people?

YEE: All Chinese, all Chinese.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And also was this true for the recreation areas?

YEE: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh. So you were completely kept separate.

YEE: Separate. I think the meal was Chinese meal. I don't remember having hamburger or anything like that.

LEVINE: Did you have rice, vegetables? Is that what it was . . .

YEE: Rice, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And, um, were you treated kindly, or were you, how were you treated?

YEE: I didn't know what an immigrant are for-- to be feel like. I had no idea of those things. So I just, you know, I accepted, you know, I did the day to days, and then let's get out of here, let's get out of here, that's all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Did you have any communication with your father during those, uh . . .

YEE: No, no.

LEVINE: Days? No. Uh-huh. So, um, so you must, how did you feel?

YEE: I don't know. I just numb -- waiting to get out of here. You're already here, and you look at the Statue of Liberty, you look at the (?), you look at the Empire State, tomorrow I'm gonna be there. You see? Tomorrow I'm gonna be there.

LEVINE: Were you fearful at all that you might be going to be sent back?

YEE: Never worry, see. I'm always a possible thin-- positive thinker.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And did you become friendly with any people during that time?

YEE: Yeah, yeah. Then later on, you know, we see either in town, in New York, and so on and so forth, we kept a little going, you see. But, uh, then, you know, everybody - all go-come up - that that's it. That's part of the stepping stone. And to be America first, that's it. You make up your mind, and, uh, you know, to get your share of America. You do something to find your first week in wages. You accept in society instead of fighting it. And, you know, and especially what, you know, instill me that confidence, is the World War Two. It's three-and-a-half year in the air force. That make a lot of difference.

LEVINE: Ah. Okay. Well, uh, I think, uh, before we talk about your life in this country, let's just say is there anything else about your early years in China or the trip coming here that is something that you think about when you think back to your childhood?

YEE: I think I always still think back to the carefree day that you're catching fish on your own fishing line, and that you swim in the clear brook, you know, your swimming hole, and where you learn your first swimming without any, you know, formal instruction. And your elder just throw you into the water and let you survive, see. I came up; I holler at them, I cry, "Why should you try to drown me?" He said, "What are you talking about? You're already swimming. See, if you're not swimming, you'd be drowning." See, this is, you already know, go ahead, swim all you want." That's how I learned swimming, see. The bay, sick bay, sick survivor thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

YEE: It's everything depressing. I had no regret of my childhood. I had no regret of born where I was born.

LEVINE: It sounds like you have some fond memories of, of your childhood.

YEE: That's why I keep visiting them even today. See, I still go back to that land quite often. I had problems, my younger generation, which I'm going to videotape them, and some day I'm going to editate [sic] it, and see what my childhood life is, and where your root is.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Okay, let's pause here. Peter will turn the tape, and then we'll talk about life in this country.

YEE: Okay, okay. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Good.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now on side B, talking with William F. Yee. And we're talking now about finally, do you remember when the day came that you were told on Ellis Island that you were free to go?

YEE: Yes. (they laugh) I was so happy. In fact, I packed fast, you know. Within minutes, I'm ready. I had my bags packed already.

LEVINE: And were you interrogated? In other words what, what was it that you had to go through before you were told you were free to go?

YEE: Actually it's that, the detail, you look at the archive. I want you people be able to get back into the archive, look at the 1939, 1940, you know, in those few years, look at the archives, see what they are interrogating about. See, it's very complicated for me to tell you. But, it, uh, see, they make sure what you say is coincide what they have record on your case. See, such as how many neighbors did you have, what house, what direction your house is facing, and, you know, how many relatives you have, and what gender are they, male or female, and so on and so forth. The archives of our immigration, can tell you a lot more of this. Well, we still are a young nation. Uh, many law regarding the immigration just, and not just, is up to at that time of how you interpret it.

So our country is the first country that has so much opportunity, which is everybody in the world want to rush in. Our government and our politicians, our labor leaders, they were very much concerned about job security. They don't want too many foreigners to come in here to steal their jobs and to lower their way of life. So in many, in Congress a politician come up with a lot of obstacles to block not just Asians, not just Chinese, European as well, see. I say we cannot let, to have an open door let everybody all come in, so they had to have a law. But at that time, that Oriental exclusive law definitely they try to keep the Chinese out. And the only, the only thing between the 19, was it the '24 or '23 that act, enacted.

LEVINE: '24, uh-huh.

YEE: And until the World War Two. The only thing the Chinese can come in here is through a paper son system, paper son. You make up the paper, you create it. Now, also the paper son come into existence, I feel, from my own research, is because the San Francisco fire in 1906, which the City Hall have burned down, and all the birth certificates have been destroyed. Every Chinese alive at that time, they claimed they were born in San Francisco and you had no way to proving it, see. Then after that, you got that citizenship, and you go home, and they see when you have a daughter born to you, you said you have a son that was born. And that piece of paper is worth money, and the rich people, the well-to-do people don't want to sell that paper, because they wanted to get their own son over. See, but the, the social people will sell the piece of paper to someone else that can afford to buy it, to have their own offspring come over here. See, I am one of those offspring that my father happened to win a Chinese lottery and to buy the paper, that's got in here. So the interrogation, I was so successful because I have a good memory of what I'm supposed to say, see. So that's why I'm here today.

LEVINE: I see. I see. And what are you calling that? You're calling it paper son?

YEE: Paper son, S-O-N, son, you know, paper son. Not your own son, but just on paper. But that, it's the only way you can come into the country at those days. So that's one responsible for, you only had fourteen thousand or something like that. The archives will tell you more details than I am, you know. I'm superficial in those areas.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, tell me how you, how, what were the circumstances under which you went into the air force?

YEE: Well, you know, I'm a citizen. You know, just, because, you are -- you're a paper son.

LEVINE: Paper son, right.

YEE: You're a citizen, so, you know, that, okay. And, uh, when the army, you need men, you were drafted. So in 1943 I was drafted in the--drafted into the army, see. From there, you went through the process and everything over in Fort Dix, and so on and so forth. You take your aptitude test, and so on and so forth, and everything else, you wind up in the air force. I don't know why, but I'm in the air force -- from there. Then you go for a cadet training. At that time it is too many cadets, so you -- they cannot, not in enough places at that time, because we were producing the exact number of aircraft per day, I forgot. So you have so much aircraft, and you need pilot, so you're a halfway decent, halfway intelligence, you know, they put you in cadet training.

LEVINE: Now, did you have a command of English at that time? Could you understand pretty well?

YEE: Fairly good. I was here, what? 1949, or 1943. Three-and-a-half years. And you better speak a little bit, you know. I was in high school, so, as a matter of fact, I finished high school.

LEVINE: Was the school very different here than it had been in China?

YEE: No. Only thing the, you know, everything I'm doing pretty well except English and history. I cannot remember the date and the name, because it's English. And, you know, English, especially you are so [not understood], and all those things, you know, the dow [ph] and dyes [ph], and all those things. I asked my cousin. He said, "Hey, what do you ask me for? You know more than I do." So I can not learn anything. So the [not understood]. Are you as good in Spanish, because Spanish has the beginning, you see. So that's the way it goes.

Well, from air force, from air force, then later on, because the, uh, as a matter of fact, just before D-day, my outfit get hot, I had to go to China to help the 14th Air Force to get along with the Chinese Air Force at that time, you know, because in China we were fighting the Japanese. And that American Air Force, 14th Air Force. So they needed, they needed, they put us over there because we had two cultures, and we understand, you know, both languages, and both, different habits, different traditions. So they put us in, uh, the 14th Air Force as a buffer zone, so it neutralized the hosti--the hostility and

misunderstanding between the two air force. And we were assigned to service twelve air base in China. And so we won citations, we won citations.

LEVINE: Were you an all-Chinese division?

YEE: Uh, yeah. Uh, my division are Chinese, in that outfit. They were, at that time, uh, the air force command in Washington issue to all branches of services, uh, to get the, uh, Chinese-American, uh, out, into forming one outfit because, you know, because there's an organization that served the Airf-- 14th Air Force to form a 14th Air Service -- group, see. And, which is about nine hundred eighty enlisted men, and about forty officers. The officers mostly are Caucasian, with a few Chinese there. So, you know, ninety percent Chinese.

LEVINE: How did you feel about being in China in that capacity?

YEE: Eh, different, different. You know, they always thought you're, you're a foreigner, but you told them, "Hey, I'm not," you see. So they, they, I think the government or the air force at that time have a pretty good idea, you know. That's a wonderful idea. I don't know who came up with that kind of idea, to have someone there that knew Chinese, but when they put us all together, we hate it. That remind me of the black at those days, they isolate. You know, they isolate the blacks for, they form the black battalion. I say, "Hey, hey, what the hell is going on?" But basically they want effectiveness, and we gave it to them. And, which, we wind up doing pretty good. The air force archives, they have our (?).

LEVINE: You said you gained a lot of confidence from your years in the air force.

YEE: Sure.

LEVINE: To what do you attribute that?

YEE: I attributed that because, you know, then, well, number one is ourselves. I speak for myself, and this is myself.

LEVINE: Yes.

YEE: See, I remove all the chip from my shoulder. I am just one of the boy. See, if I got shot, I bleed. My color, the blood red, see. So whatever they can do, I can do. And, uh, comradeship, you have comradeship, then you start to understand what he want, what you wanted and so on and so forth. Your common desire is peace and love. That's it. You see, from the past I feel my older generation, they did - did not accept the culture, and that's why they don't want to settle here, see. The reason is because they, you know, I assimilate into and I discover there's plenty opportunity if I reach out to get it. So after my discharge I go out and I reach out and get it, and I also marry a wife that agree with me, and we work as a team. We take a piece of America. Anybody else comes to this port, the desire. See?

LEVINE: Did you marry soon after you got out of the service?

YEE: I marry her while I was in the army in China. I was married by an army chaplain.

LEVINE: And did you know her from before, or did you meet her . . .

YEE: I knew her, when I was in, see, She was a refugee running from the Japanese, you know, uh, in Hong Kong, see. She was born in Hong Kong, when the Japanese invade Hong Kong and the family run back into the interior of China. Now, we, at that time, came over the hump, you know, the Himalayas, from India, you know, to reinforce the Chinese. We could not get the view of the coastline; we already lost to the Japanese. The only way we can get in from the back door. We can do [not understood]. See, at that time General Stillwell opened up, you know, the Burma Road. Our heavy equipment go to Burma Road. Ourselves we following over the humps, see? So that's the . . .

LEVINE: So that's how you . . .

YEE: Then I met her in, in Kunming [ph] that the backward country.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what is your wife's name?

YEE: Catherine.

LEVINE: And her, her family name?

YEE: Chan, C-H-A-N.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, so did you, did you marry right away, or . . .

YEE: No. At that time, you know, there is no tomorrow. Tomorrow I may be dead. If you want to marry me, I won't. Even I marry her she won't, see, because tomorrow I lose a husband. There's a war going on. No, we did not, until after the war. I marry in Shanghai, where the outfit move out in Shanghai.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. So . . .

YEE: She came over by the, uh, army transport.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

YEE: Together. We don't live in the same room, but we're on the same boat.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So then what year was that that you came . . .

YEE: Uh, 1946, 1946.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then no Ellis Island. You didn't have to go to Ellis Island that time. (he laughs)

YEE: You kidding? The American army, with the stripes and everything on. You returned as a hero with a wife. (laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Then what did you do, once you got out of the army and you were here in the United States?

YEE: Well, we tried, at least I tried, you know, to pursue the education, the higher education, take advantage, GI bill of rights. All of a sudden I discover my wife pregnant. No school. Go out there and work. And I established a little business with myself because I was pretty good with lettering, into sign -- make sign, promotion the sign. And, uh, because just, hand lettering don't make money, then I study the, uh, take the GI bill of rights, go in there for neon, create the neon. And I feel if I'm going to monopoly all the Chinese restaurants and laundry with neon sign I'll make a fortune, you see. That was my idea. But after, after all is said and done, then get your diploma and get out, face the reality. You cannot do it unless you have a license electrician, contract electrician. So give up the idea, go work for somebody else for a little while. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Where were you living at this time?

YEE: In New York, in New York.

LEVINE: In Manhattan?

YEE: In Manhattan, a tenement house. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Lower East Side?

YEE: Lower East Side. You know, you survive the Lower East Side, you survive any place in the world. That's the way I feel. But while you're at it, you don't know. But, anyway. And, so I worked for somebody in manufacturing for sixty dollars a week. See, I worked like hell to make it successful. After I worked more than a year-and-a-half, I want to go out, you know, I, gee, I need more money because the kid is here. And, and I asked for a raise, for a five dollar raise. I said, "Look, give me a little incentive to work for you." And the old man refused. "Oh, you refuse me, I have no choice. I have to come out to be your competitor."

LEVINE: What were you working, what, manufacturing of what?

YEE: Manufacturing those, the decorative arts for table ornaments there. At that time, I don't know, you people don't know, of ming tree, M-I-N-G, tree, that with a piece of (?)either a piece of moss, and with a dish, like a [not understood], see. So, but I told him, "You give me no choice. I had to be your competitor." But how the competition goes. I come in and, uh, he lower the price, so every door I go into I got blocked, see. So what I do, I said, "Look, I won't say die, listen," I said, "I'm going to survive." Get up early in the morning, four o'clock, you start driving until you're a hundred miles away from New York. You sell your item, and charge fifty cents more on each item to compensate

here your expenses to go out there and sell it, and people buy it, for cash. I do not extend credit, because I told him I have no money. That's why I come this far, to deliver to you free, see. You save a lot of freight, see. I did, and I say I increased it fifty cents, but, you know, people love it. They bought it, they sold it. That's how I stayed in business.

LEVINE: Now, were you selling to communities that were Chinese, or they . . .

YEE: No, no, no, no, no. No. I, I feel the Chinese, you do among Chinese, it's have been going on for three or four generations, and you see the visible successful, it's just like this. They own the store right there, see? They go back to China every five years until they die, see. And bring the children over to educate them and all that stuff. They're very limited for what America can offer you. I said, "You people at the laundry so goddamn long. Why don't you take over, consolidate laundry?" At that time, you know, that's a big thing, you know. So, and I said, "Why don't you own Automat? Why you let Horn and Hardart do it? Why don't you own Automat?" That's the way I tell them. They don't like me, see, I put them down. (Dr. Levine laughs) "You never go back to China. I'm telling you, you'll never go back to China. You're rooted here." They said, "Maybe you're right." But all their lifetime they go back to China. Three times, four times, maybe that's the maximum. I go back to China three or four times, five times a year, and they all, if they know anything, they'll turn over in their graves so many times. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Now, what did you do that you became so successful to be able to go back like you do now?

YEE: Well, marketing, marketing. American, to be an American, entrepreneurial spirit. See? There, you know, America give you an opportunity. It's up to you to take it and develop it. It's hard work. I never worry about hard work. See? But you believe what you believe. That's how America's dream is all about. How those one fifth of the United States population came to this cou-- spot make America, make America what it is today.

LEVINE: Do you feel you have certain customs or ways of doing things or ways of thinking about things that go back to your Chinese roots, even though you have become American?

YEE: The Chinese, the Chinese philosophy and principle, compared to any old culture like Italy, the Hebrews, you know, all, the Romans. You know this thing, you're coming down here, and basically it's almost the same thing. It depends on the individual, you know, the individual.

LEVINE: Are there certain things in your heritage that you, that you like to hold onto, that you feel?

YEE: Yeah. Quite a few -- the family, the family values and everything like that, you know, that part of it. But the, see, the Western culture had a lot of family values and all that thing, too. See,

that's why it, to make this country great is because of multi-cultures. And the good ones have survived, the good point of each ethnic culture, we pool it all into this country, and that's why you make our country so much more unique than any other society. And this is the only country can tolerate that many different culture and make the system work. See, you look at Yugoslavia. See, such a small country, you know about their country, a little bit over New Jersey, or something like that, you see. How they fight each other, see? But you put the same people, the Serbs and the Moslems, you put them into this country, they work beautifully. They're wonderful neighbors. And this is what I mean. In a bigger sense. You put the United States in it this way. It's a multi-culture, and each ethnic culture, the better part. It's being utilize, and contribute it into this society, and that's why this society is so unique and successful so far. Not perfect, but it's the best you can find.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is there, uh, is there anything that you can think of that would be maybe unique to the Chinese that they're bringing to this culture that's so multi-ethnic? Can you think of a contribution that comes maybe with the Chinese people . . .

YEE: Being Chinese, being Chinese has contributed a certain part into the humanity, yes. Uh, as a whole, but to say the, the Chinese culture is more superior than any other culture, no. See, you know, you have to, each culture, on each particular thing, you see, that is the thing, you had to, that is why, you see, you take this country, that's, you know, almost as hard, that's the example of it, see. You put the different ethnic culture, only the bad one, the good one into it, you know. And all there's a good one from this end, a good thing happens, because you had all the good point into, you know, one pool, and that's why you are -- be able to generate the result as what it is. Not all good but, you know, I said before, you know, the best you can find in this world, this time, this century.

LEVINE: And so did you stay in New York pretty much, most of the time, then, after you were doing your own manufacturing?

YEE: Uh, see, the trading, New York is still the trading center of the world, and I know that as far as business is concerned, I'm still continuing running a business, and I want to stay around New York, see. As a matter of fact, officially I'm retired, and my children are running it. (he laughs)

LEVINE: But you still have a hand in it.

YEE: Yeah, you know. Why not? Keep myself busy.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. And, now, this is importing and exporting, what you . . .

YEE: Importing and exporting Chinese artcraft -- art and craft, art and craft, you know, handicraft, labor intensive handicraft.

LEVINE: Oh. And does your company have a name?

YEE: Yeah, my name, Bill Yee. Bill Yee Associates.

LEVINE: Bill Yee Associates. Okay. So, now, how many children did you have?

YEE: I had two, a boy and a girl.

LEVINE: And their names?

YEE: Uh, the boy is Brian, Brian. The girl is Christina.

LEVINE: Christina. And now you have grandchildren as well?

YEE: Right. I have Mikey, and I have Christopher. I have Rory, that's my girl. And I have, uh, Bryn, B-R-Y-N, Bryn. Bryn is with me.

LEVINE: Good. And can you say what makes you feel most proud of having done in your life? Are there some things that, that you feel very good having achieved?

YEE: Well, you know, I mean, something related to this immigration thing, okay. I'm proud, uh, but I, you know, I make, use the opportunity that I migrated here, and, uh, that I joined the group that's pursuing the American dream and found it. I'm very proud. I'm proud of that, and I try to give that to my children and my grandchildren. And so they have something, uh, to be proud of, and proud of the root where they come from. And, again, that centers back to what I am trying to do today, to give a mark in the root, so the children can remember.

LEVINE: Well, I think that's a wonderful place to, to conclude. I want to thank you very much for coming and talking with us. This is Janet Levine. I've been talking with William Yee, who came from mainland China in 1939 when he was sixteen years old. Today he's sixty-nine years old, it's July 18, 1994. We're in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio, and we're signing off. Thank you.

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