

Joe Dan Yee
Yee's Food Land- Lake Village, AR

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Interviewer: Jung Min (Kevin) Kim, Swarthmore College
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: Chinese Grocers in the Arkansas/Mississippi Delta

[Begin Joe Dan Yee Interview]

00:00:00

Kevin Kim: This is Kevin Kim for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Wednesday, August 25, 2010 and I'm here with Mr. Joe Dan Yee in Lake Village, Arkansas. Mr. Yee, can you state your name and date of birth and place of birth for the record, please?

00:00:19

Joe Dan Yee: Joe Dan Yee, born March 3, 1954 in Lake Village, Arkansas.

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KK: Thank you very much Mr. Yee for allowing me to come to your store and thank you so much for providing me with lunch. There's this great spread in front of me of different Chinese dishes from duck to char siu which is roast pork.

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JDY: Roast pork.

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KK: And some bok choy and--

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JDY: Shrimp.

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KK: --and the shrimp dish. Well to start, can you tell us where we are right now?

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JDY: We're in the back in kitchen of our store that's been here for almost 40 years and my sister cooks us lunch twice a day, at least six or seven Chinese course-meal a day and this is like growing up; nothing has ever changed. You know it's always the Chinese customs. You come eat at different shifts; there'd be like 10 of us and we eat in different shifts. And it's just remarkable how we have you know I guess--accustomed to the same things that we done for so long; we've never changed. You know I guess it's because of our parents.

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My mother is 96 years-old and she doesn't like any change. You know what I'm saying; she wants it the same way she used to have it when she was cooking for us back in the early '60s.

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KK: And your sister's name is--?

00:01:46

JDY: Xing Lee; she used to cook--she is 76 years old and she's been cooking for--oh I don't know. She took over for my mom in I guess 1990 when my mom got kind of just you know kind of older and couldn't do it all. But she loves to cook, too now; that's--she-

-you can ask her to do anything and she might get upset but as far as cooking Chinese meals, okay just tell her what you want and she--she goes at it you know.

00:02:09

KK: Well so I guess we should start with a little bit about your parents and the history of your parents coming here to Arkansas. I'm wondering if you could start from the beginning and sort of tell them when they came and how they started this store up.

00:02:28

JDY: Yeah; my dad came over back in probably 1940 and he was here with like a bunch of friends and cousins. And they were in Dumas, Arkansas. And it was so funny; it was like they had one gentleman, I guess my--it was like my uncle, I call him my uncle, Eugene Lee, and he is Christina Lee's grandfather, but he had the grocery store there and it was like four or five working under him. And as they got older, Mr. Lee just told them, says it's time for all you guys to find a city for y'all to start a life in, get settled down in. And my dad went back and he had his grandfather come to Wynn, Arkansas, god I guess it was back in like--I'm trying to think what year it was--my grandfather; it may have been in 1950-something he was in Wynn. But my dad worked very little there. But he worked mainly with Mr. Lee in Dumas and he said you know growing up it's like what Mr. Lee taught then. And then it was like he went back and got my mom. And when they married they came over here and he--I don't know how he ended up Lake Village, but I was so glad he did. And ever since then my dad has just--I'll tell you; it's just he's worked so hard to raise our family. We got six kids in our family and he--he has always taught us to do the best we can do you know in life. And I've just been so thankful my

mom and dad, you know 'cause they--they were raised up the hard way and that's the way they raised us up, you know to always to do better in life, you know and always keep the Chinese tradition, too.

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As a matter of fact, my mom would always--growing up, Chinese New Year we'd always have the Chinese I guess you'd call it--what would you call it--[inaudible]--I'm trying to think. I'm trying to think what it's called. I'm trying to think what they call it.

00:04:38

KK: Yeah; sure, so we're back. We had a bit of a problem with a--with some translation stuff. But, sorry; we were talking about festivals and customs.

00:04:52

JDY: Yes; customs, where you know growing up you always--my mother always tried to teach us how the Chinese weddings were done compared from the--the real Chinese weddings compared to the ones here in the South. Even like when your first son is born, how you have a Red Egg Party, how big that was you know, compared to if you know you had a girl, your little boy was the most important Chinese heritage, you know the first boy. And then it's just I mean you can watch it on TV and you think does this really happen? And then I'll ask my parents and they said yes, son. They said you need to really learn--know this because if you don't learn it and don't pass it to--to your children and grandchildren it wouldn't--the tradition would never carry on, you know what I'm saying, stuff like that; yeah.

00:05:41

KK: Well I'm sorry; what was the Red Ink Party you were telling?

00:05:44

JDY: The Red Egg Party.

00:05:47

KK: Oh a Red Egg.

00:05:47

JDY: The Red Egg Party--that is for the first time born into the family. This is my brother [inaudible]; [inaudible] what is [inaudible]?

00:05:55

KK: All right; so we're back and I was wondering if you could tell us if you know what part of--what part of China that your parents came from.

00:06:05

JDY: Canton--Canton, China, Canton; yeah Canton, China.

00:06:11

KK: And from our research that was a pretty common--there were a lot of Cantonese here in the Delta, right?

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JDY: Yes; there was a lot of families here. Back in the early '60s there were probably I'd say at least eight to ten families that were in Lake Village and there was probably six Chinese stores on Main Street back then. You know I mean that was just--everybody had a grocery store when they came over here and you know everybody got along with everybody else you know. I mean everybody helped everybody; that's the way it was back then, you know.

00:06:47

KK: And so can you tell us a little bit about the--the--the start of the store? You said it's been here for about 40 years, right?

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JDY: Forty years; uh-hm. Well my dad started back on the other side of Main Street back in 19--is it '50 that we were there. And he had a partner and they rented the store. Like I said, they used to open at 4:00 in the morning and close at like 12:00 midnight and they did that for about 10--15 years Joe-Joe? About 15 years they used to have them hours and back then it's when the city of Lake Village was so busy you couldn't even walk downtown Main Street. And not when it was just our store but it was every Chinese store on Main Street. And you know that's when--that's when you had people that worked in the fields like for farmers and they come to town on the weekends and they would just--that was just like the big deal to come in town on the weekends. And all the Chinese families were with their kids; we would all just work in the store. I mean it was like **[Laughs]**, I guess it's kind of like a big sale. You know I mean everybody pitched in and watched everything and--and it was just something that I wish the times were still

here, I mean those days were still here because those were the good ole days. And with the Chinese family traditions and everything you know--that's all.

00:08:08

KK: So, oh so did your parents live in the back of the store or did they have a separate house or--?

00:08:18

JDY: No; we lived like a block from the store. And then we had my dad's partner, he lived right behind the store; so I mean you know Lake Village is not such a big community you know where it's so spread out. I mean you could--we--you could get in the store within like two minutes you know what I'm saying and back then all the Chinese family lived close. I mean all the houses were like a block away from the stores. And some of them, as a matter of fact, two of the Chinese families did live in the back of the store back in the early '50s when it--Joe-Joe wasn't it? It was two Chinese--older Chinese families that they--the husband and wife, and I think they had like two kids. But they grew up in the store, in the back of the store. And every day when they operated it's like they--they--you know they would cook for their husband or wife or whatever the case may be. They cooked the food right there and they would bring it up to the store to the front of the counter. And they would eat while they worked, you know.

00:09:16

KK: Oh and just to let the--the listeners know, we're--we're in the back of the--the store we're in we're joined by Mr. Yee's brother and sister. I'm sorry; I didn't get your name.

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Joe: Joe.

00:09:29

KK: Joe and--

00:09:34

Xing: Xing; uh-hm.

00:09:35

KK: So I--when we were having lunch we were talking about the--sort of the neighborhood that you grew up in that--and that you had a lot of--and the customers that came to the store, a lot of them were--were the field workers. I was wondering can you tell a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up and the type of customers what would come in during those early days.

00:09:56

JDY: Well you know back then it was just like everybody got along with everybody, you know what I'm saying. You just had like the farmers, I mean this is a big farm community back in the '50s and '60s and back then it's just like everybody--all of the people--the customers that you had, they were all working for farmers and that's what--that's what the big industry was back then. And I mean it's not--as far as hospitals are concerned, the hospitals are the big industry now but back then it was just all you know

people were just working for big--. I mean there was so many farmers. I mean I think everybody--almost you could say it was almost like a farm. If you're not in the grocery business like that you're not--you know there's no other industry or business back then.

00:10:39

KK: And also when we were having lunch, Mr. Yee sort of went through the sort of typical day at the store. You were telling me that your father would open up at like 4:00 in the morning?

00:10:53

JDY: Yes; he'd open at 4:00 in the mornings. That's when they chop--the people, the farmers had to chop cotton and couldn't get their lunches and stuff. And he would stay open from 4:00 in the morning to like 12:00 midnight and that was every day you know. And I mean he was--he was telling us that back then you had to do what you do to survive. And you know that's when people always came in back then, but you know times have changed now. You know I mean those were just--I guess the good ole days you want to call it, whatever [*Laughs*].

00:11:19

KK: Oh what are the hours now?

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JDY: The hours now are from 8:00 in the morning until 7:00 at night, six days a week, and then we open from Sundays from 8:00 to 12:00.

00:11:29

KK: And you--so--so this isn't the original building, right? When did you--when did you move to the--?

00:11:36

JDY: No; this building was in 1976--this building was--'77, '77. We've been here probably 33 years, yeah; so we've been in this business--and then we were across the street for 27 years, right, yeah 27 years, so we've been here a long time [*Laughs*].

00:11:54

KK: Yeah; and--and I assume you've grown accustomed to some of the sort of I guess the regulars, right?

00:12:02

JDY: Yeah.

00:12:02

KK: You certainly probably have a lot of regulars coming in?

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JDY: Yes; you know it's--when you're in a small community everybody knows everybody. And the thing we try to provide is hometown, we--hometown service. We go about our way where--when you're a bigger community you don't have--we're like when

people call us we'll--we'll cater to them. I mean if we had to take the food to their house or whatever, they can't come get it, we'll do that. And sometimes when they don't have enough money and they say can I pay you at the end of the month, we provide that service, where in your big community you wouldn't have that opportunity to do that.

00:12:35

KK: Yeah; and that's one of the things that I learned is sort of the key to the survival of these small grocery stores, particularly with the competition from the big chains. I don't know if there is a large supermarket here--here in Lake Village, but people were telling me that--that sort of service is what's going to help the survivors.

00:12:57

JDY: That's right; that's--you know the main thing is when you're a small, I guess small business owners it's hard to compete with people like Wal-Mart and other stores. But when you have that hometown service where you go out of your way to provide stuff that they can't do, you know people come back and say hey, I'm going to come back to your store because you are giving me the, you know opportunity or letting me do things that I wouldn't be able to do in another store, you know.

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KK: So--so one of the things that I've been asking the grocery store owners is when they first came here or when it--when you know in the process of running of the grocery store, what did they--? What kind of--how do they know what kinds of items to stock? Is it you know trends that you see or is it customers telling you, you know maybe you should

carrying this stuff or anything like that, because I know sometimes it's hard, you know particularly the newer immigrants to sort of know what--what you know small town Americans like to eat? So I'm wondering if you could sort of talk a little bit about that process.

00:14:06

Joe: Well you just have to listen to what people ask for and you know a lot of times trends come--when they tell you what--what's selling and what's not selling and you know a lot of times, it's just like a trial and error thing. You just try the product and if it sells you restock it; if it don't you don't buy it and you try something else, you know. That's the way--that's the way it used to be and that's the way it still is you know.

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KK: Yeah; and do you think it was sort of hard for your parents when they first started to sort of you know understand that premise or did they sort of get it off the bat?

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Joe: I think they got it off the bat, because you know it--they worked in it a--a while and they understand what was going on, so they kind of had a feel for everything 'cause you know when you was back in the older days you didn't have a whole lot of variety to choose from. So whatever you--you bought what you got, you know.

00:15:15

JDY: Yeah; you just had your basic flour meal, sugar, you know stuff like that--your fruits and your vegetables that you just carried that really--just like your basic everyday needs and that's what they carried most of. You had--you know just like the special meats that you know you just--people I guess ate in those days and that was it. It's not like now you've got lamb chops or you know something variety or something special; you know back then it's just like just a basic. And then like my dad said back then you just carried what people asked for. And then a lot of times if somebody came in from out of town and they said they were fixing something special you didn't have it because of the fact that's not what's accustomed in this--you know they're not accustomed to this--in this area to eating, you know what I'm saying. It's just what basically people ate in those days every day you know. It was not like a special deal; it's you know just the same old every day what everybody cooked every day and that was it.

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KK: And I think that gets to another question that I--that I've been asking is--is so--so we're enjoying this lovely Chinese meal; did your parents every try to--or did your mother or your family ever try to cook American food or really learn how to cook American food as a part of you know sort of everyday--everyday life, or have you sort of stuck to cooking Chinese every day?

00:16:38

JDY: I think mother cooked Chinese food all the time until we finally just asked her, like we wanted fried chicken or pork chops and she just--I guess she just had to learn how to cook it [*Laughs*] and ask some of her friends because for a while there we'd have to--

she would only speak Chinese and we were--growing up, little, we only spoke English and so we had to ask our dad. Say well daddy, tell mama to cook us some fried chicken and pork chops. And my dad would say son, if you want your mother to cook your pork chops or fried chicken you've got to start learning how to speak Chinese and then she would ask her friends, other Chinese friends how to cook it. That's how we--she started cooking American dishes. You know I mean she had to catch on to other Chinese families that learned--I guess they you know just caught on how to do it, you know.

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KK: So--so going back to some of this food, going back to some of the Chinese food here, do you know where your--do you know where your mother got the ingredients that she needed? You know did she grow her own vegetables or did she go to you know like Memphis or--or--or I don't know where the nearest Chinese market is but--?

00:17:44

JDY: Back then they grew their own vegetables and stuff. I mean and then as far as later on in the years they would buy--they would get families together and buy all your Chinese product like from San Francisco, the Chinese store. And what you would do is you would buy a large quantity and then you would split it up between the families and then you'd divide the costs between the families. That's how they did it.

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KK: They would--they would order stuff all the way from San Francisco?

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JDY: From San Francisco, yes; and then I'm not talking about like one or two cases. I'm talking about like five to ten cases you know and they'd be shipped by a freight--you know whatever freight line would be you know and--and then when they got in here they would check off the invoice. And then my mother would call her friends and say hey, you order this and this and that and they would look on the Chinese invoice and divide the cost out. And that's how they did it. So that way, you had to order so much before they would ship it to you and so the only way to do that was to get more Chinese families involved and say hey, I got the--the items that--that you know that they sent from San Francisco that we can buy. What would you like and tell me you know how many you want, and that's the way they did it back then.

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KK: So--so going back to the vegetable did she bring the seeds over from China or how did she get the seeds for the vegetables?

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Joe: She'd buy them from California.

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JDY: She bought them from California.

00:19:07

KK: Oh, she bought them in California?

00:19:07

JDY: California; yeah, and you know back then it was--it was a big thing for every Chinese family to have a garden. That was the thing; everybody growing their own melons, their own bok choy or whatever the case may be like, green beans, Chinese green beans, or squash you know--all that was just you know everybody had a garden and raised that you know. And everybody had enough to supply not only your own family but a lot of other families too in the Delta. They didn't have--if they didn't have a garden they would say hey, just come on to my garden and pick out what you want you know and cook tonight. And that was the just the big thing back then.

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KK: And so I'm--it's--I'm interested in going back to sort of how your mother would learn how to cook sort of American food for like--for example fried chicken and pork chops you know from other Chinese families and I'm wondering if that then led to sort of the mixing of Chinese and American like food together, like if you saw any examples of where she would mix Chinese food and American food together.

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JDY: Oh yes; she would 'cause a lot of times she would cook like you know fried chicken and then we'd have bok choy or we'd have duck you know and--and she'd only cook like a few American dishes, but it always had to be like fried. She didn't cook anything like macaroni and cheese or any casserole dishes or anything like that, you know 'cause she didn't know how to do it. But then she would always say--even like

spaghetti, if we asked her to do like spaghetti, she'd say son now if I cook spaghetti I can't cook anything else, because the bok choy wouldn't go with the spaghetti or the duck wouldn't go with the spaghetti or your roast, you know pig or whatever wouldn't go with that. And--and then she would say, now son, if that's what y'all want to eat what do you want me to cook for your dad 'cause my dad every day had to have his rice and his Chinese food?

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You know he--he liked American dishes like fried rice, I mean like fried chicken and fried pork chops but he always had to have also his Chinese you know like the--the rice and some of the vegetables and stuff. He always had to have that because if he didn't have that he'd always say there's nothing here for me to eat [*Laughs*].

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KK: Well I guess that also leads to sort of line of questioning that I've been interested to ask is--whether or not you know growing up here in the South do you consider yourself Southern?

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JDY: Yes; it's so funny 'cause everywhere I go--it don't care if I go to New York or San Francisco and I'm so thankful that my parents taught me how to speak Chinese at a very young age. And I--I go to the cities or whatever the case may be and I speak to them. When I go to a restaurant if they can't speak English and I'll speak the Cantonese and Chinese and they'll laugh. And I'm like am I not saying this right or is it--what's wrong? And they'll come back and say will you say that again? And I'll repeat what I order in

Chinese and Cantonese and you know they'll call some other waiters or the owner out and they'll come and listen to me. And I said what's the deal? Am I saying that wrong, sir? He says oh no, sir; you're saying it right but we never heard a Chinese with a Southern accent [*Laughs*]. And they love that; I mean I can't tell you how many times I've been in New York and Chinatown and San Francisco and everywhere I go they would tell my sister bring your brother back in here. We love the Arkansas accent that he has on a Chinese accent. So I get a big kick out of that you know a big kick out of that.

00:22:37

KK: So--so how did you learn Chinese at an early age? Did your parents teach you?

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JDY: You know well yes because it's so funny, my mother never spoke English and my--my dad did. And growing up it's just like my mother just keeps on talking Chinese and she's like you picked up on it; like she would point to stuff and say it in Chinese. And about the fifth time after she--I guess you would know what she meant by it so you'd just translate the English into the Chinese what she you know pointed to, and then you know--you just picked it up from that. That's how I learned from it and I'm very thankful to have that you know because like I said I've been to China a couple times and it has come in very handy [*Laughs*]; I'll tell you, because without it I'd be lost you know. I mean even though they point you out as a--a tourist from the United States, but still that's amazing how that I still can speak Cantonese and have that Cantonese background not knowing--not being from China you know which I'm proud of.

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KK: Do your--do your other siblings know to speak Chinese I think--you know I've-- just hearing your brother [*Laughs*]--?

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JDY: Yes; we all do. That's something my mother always made sure that when we grew that we knew how to speak Chinese because she thought it was very, very--oh how do you say it--it's very, very bad when you're a Chinese person and you couldn't speak Chinese. I don't know how you--you see what I'm saying? She just thought it was very--very--. And when we hang(ed) around with some of other Chinese friends, their kids couldn't speak Chinese. My mother would say son, now you don't want to be like that--would tell us. She said you need to learn how to speak your Chinese heritage and know how to speak your language and your culture and stuff. So that's something I'm very proud of.

00:24:17

Even being stuck in Lake Village, Arkansas all my life--but that's something I will never-ever forget you know.

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KK: And I think you were telling me that some of your nieces and nephews go to Chinese school?

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JDY: Yes.

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KK: Can you--do you know anything about the Chinese school? I think it's in Little Rock you said.

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JDY: Yes; in Little Rock and they go to a Mandarin school every weekend--every week. And they learn Mandarin and they learn how to count and they learn how to write it and everything; it's amazing because they're only 10 and 13 and they've been going for like three years. And they can pick up a Chinese newspaper and read it to me and that's amazing to me. I wish I had the opportunity to do that because I think that is so--to have you know. I mean to--that would be something I wish I could do. I wish I had the opportunity when I was growing up to have Chinese school where I could learn to read and write it, you know.

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KK: And you mentioned that they were being instructed in Mandarin. Is that something--is that a change that you've noticed that there are more and more Mandarin speakers coming in?

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JDY: Yes; I think that's what the trend is going to is getting away from the Cantonese. I notice more and more the Chinese language is in Mandarin. When people come to the South or when I--I go up to Little Rock or whatever the case may be, they'll ask me do I

speaking Mandarin? That's the first thing they ask me; do you speak Mandarin? I say no, Cantonese; and they say--they just shake their head, so I know it's mostly--percentage-wise it's more Mandarin than anything.

00:25:49

KK: And what do you think brings them here you know the newer immigrants?

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JDY: You know I don't know if Kevin came over here just to get away for a better life, I think which is probably the case. But I have to say coming to the South it's hard because being a Chinese person if you can't speak English you know and this is what I tell my mother when she has friends coming that moved to the South here; mother it's hard for them because they don't have anybody to talk to. They're--it's not like they're in San Francisco or New York where even though you don't have any family you can walk down Chinatown and always pick somebody just to speak with you know. And to me that's--I always--I mean you have some families that come here and try to start a Chinese restaurant or whatever the case may be but if they don't have anybody to talk to they feel like they're in prison. That's just me; you know and I feel--I hate that because I wish we had like a Chinese village here where as soon as you came here if you didn't have any family but yet you felt welcome and part of the community. That's just me, you know.

00:26:57

KK: So you mentioned, I think you said you have family members who moved away from the South.

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JDY: Yes; I have two sisters that as soon as they graduated from college they went to San Francisco and which I had an uncle and aunts and cousins there. And it's like I think the reason they did that is because the Chinese culture is so small in the South and I think like my dad says, I guess it's a Chinese custom; when you're Chinese you want to marry the Chinese. And my dad and mom felt like there were not enough Chinese because people here at the time--because all the kids back here at that time as soon as they graduated they were going out to Houston or to--you know for jobs--jobs and stuff like that. And that's why they moved there. And they left when they were very young--like 20-something years old and they never--they live there now. You know and my sister is 61 years old and my mother sister is like 59 and they left when they were like 21 years old.

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KK: Have they ever tried to talk you into you know leaving the South?

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JDY: Yes; they have but I just feel like you know my mom and dad was here and I felt like if I left no one would look after my parents. I felt like that's--that's my thing is to look after my parents in my life. You know they've always asked my parents to go out there and my parents like living in the South you know--even though the Chinese community is so small, but yet you can drive and they can go visit them, right. Out in the bigger cities it's like everybody works and when they get off work and when they get off

work they're tired to take you places. And it's such a far distance to go from I guess from one house to the other house in the bigger cities, you know like Houston or San Francisco, wherever the case may be, and they always feel like they--they would always--they felt more comfortable living here than they would in a bigger city. And I always felt like as long as they were alive that I was going to stay here and take care of them because they raised me and I didn't want to leave them.

00:29:11

KK: Now when your parents came here to the United States did they have plans on moving back to China or did they have plans to stay here?

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JDY: They had plans just to stay here because they--it was a better life for them. You know they always told me growing up how hard it was in China and everything and the people that lived in China, and when I would always watch the *Educational Channel* I always thought--that was back in the heyday. Back in 1985 when my dad took me back to China it was just like it was on television. And I pray for those people over there every day 'cause I felt so sorry for all the people over there. They were working so hard but yet they got paid so little money. It wasn't like it was over here; I mean we're spoiled over here compared to them over there. And--and I just--I used to tell people I wish people in the United States would go to China just for three days and they wouldn't waste half the stuff that--I mean China would be glad to have what they waste over there.

00:30:15

KK: Well I think right now I kind of want to shift gears and sort of talk about your personal history. So you were born here in Lake Village, right?

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JDY: Born here in Lake Village and when I went to graduate from school here and went to school at Fayetteville. Every since then I--I got into politics big and heavy. I've been on the City Council for 20 years. I've been on the Bank Board here in this community and I've been involved with just not only local politics but State politics and ever since I was born and raised in this community I've tried to do everything I can to make this a better community for--not only for me to live but for everybody and for the younger generations to come.

00:30:59

KK: So growing up, I'm wondering if you've faced any sort of racial barriers, you know growing up, because you were telling me that Arkansas was different than Mississippi. You know some of the people that I've talked to in Mississippi said that they--that they had a hard time you know with that. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about you know some of the racial barriers that you're discovered here in Arkansas?

00:31:27

JDY: Well you know growing up in the early years, I guess my dad when he grew up and went to school here he said he had a hard time 'cause they wouldn't accept Chinese into an American school. He had to go to--with the black people.

00:31:41

But you know when I grew up here it's just like people just accepted us you know in this community. And it--it was really different 'cause it's like--there was so many families in Arkansas that when we ever had a party it was like big families, like 200 or 300 people, but we never associated with--that much with the Mississippi Chinese. It was just like a different--I don't know how you say--oh how do I say that?

00:32:13

KK: Culture?

00:32:13

JDY: Yeah; a different culture you know. It's just like they did their thing and we did our thing, you know what I'm saying. It's like we never got together and partied that much or associated that much with the Chinese people in Mississippi. But now it's like people have moved away and now it's like you try to scrape up all the families you can just to get together, so you can have a nice Chinese community--Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, or whatever the case may be, you know.

00:32:45

KK: So back in those early days when you didn't really associate with the Mississippi Chinese, why would you say that was the case? Was it just being--I guess you said it was just a different culture?

00:32:53

JDY: Yeah; I think because you know being in Arkansas and growing up we just--it was so many Chinese people around here that we just hang(ed) around with our own group. We never went out like, you know we--we may see them in Mississippi or Greenville or whatever the case may be, but we never got together and like partied with them. You know I guess it's because there was so many Arkansans and you know that Chinese people here, we always just hung with the own group you know.

00:33:18

KK: Yeah; and you were telling me something about some of those parties and sort of festivals that you would have. Can you sort of talk a bit about that? I think you mentioned some of the dances that you had.

00:33:27

JDY: Well you know later on back in I guess it's the early '60s maybe yeah, early '60s when we started hanging around with the people in Mississippi, you know went to college at Mississippi State, Ole Miss, or Arkansas. Well they always had--they started a Lucky 11 Organization at Mississippi State. And every year they would have this big dance and it would be thousands of Chinese people there. But we all got together and--and it didn't matter if you were 10 years old or 30 years old or 40 years old, I remember when I first started going I think I was like 13 years old. And I always felt like I was a baby-boomer. I mean I felt like man, I don't know why I'm going to these dances, but when I went it's like I saw all these people having such a good time and they didn't care if I was there or not. You know I mean it's not like they didn't care if I tagged along or

not, but it--I was like--. It was just amazing me to see all these Chinese people having such a good time.

00:34:26

And--and it was something that I'll never forget because it's something that's gone now but back then it was something that you looked forward to every year. I mean that was the big thing. And then after like--we'd party 'til like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and then there would always be one Chinese family that would always have breakfast at their house in the garage and would feed us all. And we wouldn't get back 'til like 6:00--7:00 in the morning. And you know that was something to always look forward to. And I will never forget those days.

00:34:54

KK: And--and those dances, were they--were they held in different places or were they always held at the same place?

00:34:59

JDY: Well mainly in Cleveland and maybe sometimes in Clarksdale, but mainly just those two cities 'cause they had a big enough facility to host us all. You know there was like a big American Legion or there was a big Army or something like that--that the Chinese people could--. Also it--it was based on how much money that they raised so they could pay for the facility but you know they would have food there for you and it was paid by all this organization, the Lucky 11 you know from Mississippi State.

00:35:32

KK: Sorry; I just dropped some of my papers here.

00:35:39

JDY: He'll tell you about the Lucky 11 dances, too; Raymond will 'cause he was one-- one of the ones who started--.

00:35:43

KK: I need to start recording again. I'm so sorry; I'm back with my papers this time. So Mr. Yee was sort of talking about the future and you don't seem very optimistic about the future of the Chinese community here. You know a lot of people are leaving and so where do you see yourself you know in the next couple of years? Where do you see the store? Do you think there's going to be someone to take over once you know everyone sort of retires or--?

00:36:11

JDY: You know Kevin I hate to say this but you know the young generation when they go to college they have to go somewhere where they can find job opportunities and there's not any opportunities in the Delta. So I see it as like I told my brother, we're probably retiring in this store and when we do retire that would probably be the end--the end of the tradition because of the fact, you think about it, young generations you're more involved in like computer fields or you know--it's different fields now. It's not like it used to be. You know the grocery store is a thing like--of the past you know what I mean. It's not something that kids look at now when you go to college, you know.

00:36:52

And--and I hate it because there's not that many--like I said, all the Chinese kids when they finish college they went out so they could find opportunities--job opportunities and there was not none here in the Delta. It's not that many Chinese people that would take over like a grocery store now you know.

00:37:06

KK: Has you know--have any of your siblings, have any of your siblings you know tried to convince their--their children to--to look into taking the store over or has that--that's not--?

00:37:17

JDY: No; that's not feasible Kevin because you know you--it's just the change of times and the trends you know. I mean you got so many more modern technology now and fields that people go into that I think they just--it's just a change of times you know. And I think it's--I mean I know they say it's for the betterment of the--of the world an everything else, but to me it's just like I'd rather have the old times back to me. I love the old times, the old mom and pop stores, the--everything you know like it used to be.

00:37:51

KK: And did you see yourself when you, you know when you went off to college that--that--did you see yourself taking over the store when you know when they retired or--or did this sort of happen?

00:38:02

JDY: Well you know not at first because I thought when I majored in the marketing field I thought I'd like to go out to Dallas and get into a big department store and work like--that's--that was my thing back then. And you know I had friends that came back that graduated with me from Fayetteville and were born and raised in Lake Village and said hey we're going back to Lake Village. And I'm like--I'm losing my mind because I said nah; I can't believe that I'm going to back to Lake Village after I went to college and got my Marketing degree and did interviews for job interviews and--and already been accepted as a job in Dallas you know. And--and then my parents said son, you know you've got your friends coming back; what do you think? I said dad, it's kind of a hard decision to make.

00:38:44

But then when I thought about it, I said you know my dad--back then my dad--or parents were probably already like in their late 60s. And I had my brother that came back and--and my dad said son, someone has got to take--help your brother take over the store. And that's I thought well me--that's why I did it; you know and I'm glad I did it. I don't look back it; I'm glad I did it because not only for my parents but it's--it's been a good life for me living in a small community and doing what I'm doing, you know trying to make this a better place for everybody to live and that's what I plan to do.

00:39:18

KK: Well so it--so how--so I think we've sort of answered this already but I'm wondering how you sort of see yourself fitting into this sort of rich history of the Chinese grocer here in the Delta. You know that you know it's a tradition that you know that's been around for ages now, so you know since--since the turn of the century there's

always been a Chinese grocer. You know do you see yourself fitting into that tradition or is this just sort of you know an everyday--a day-to-day job?

00:39:57

JDY: Well I fit myself in that tradition because of the fact that's why my brother and I did this because we felt like my dad always raised us and said you know whatever you do, do the best you can do in life and--and do the best for your family. And my dad always loved the grocery business. And my brother and I felt like we wanted to carry on the tradition for my dad. You know when he passed away eight years ago we wanted him with the feelings that we carried out his wishes you know. And my mom is still alive today like I say and she--she sees that and that's why we're still here--'cause I told my brother, I said you can't retire with mom alive knowing that what she and my dad had built up all these years to see it go down the drain, you know what I'm saying.

00:40:42

And--and we felt like--like I say living in a small community, we try to provide services that other people can't provide in a bigger community, our competition. And with my mom having friends now that she you know has known in this community she doesn't want to see anything happen to the older generation like her friends that can't help themselves, you know like come and get groceries or whatever the case may be you know or they don't have the money to pay for it at the--you know to the end of the month. She wants to make sure that we take care of them like they took care of us all these years.

00:41:14

KK: Yeah; and I think that's you know that sort of sentiment sort of shows and you know I was just looking you know at the entrance of your supermarket. I saw a portrait of your parents hanging as well as a family portrait next to it.

00:41:27

JDY: Yes; yes.

00:41:29

KK: And yeah; I'd just--I'd like for you to talk about that and you know that sort of idea of tradition and carrying on. You know your father's hard work was sort of very important to you.

00:41:38

JDY: Yes; you know my dad, I mean he raised six kids and my mom and they went through hard times. And you know you--when I think about it, they provided us education, you know a meal every day, food--you know food and clothing and everything and they wanted what's best for us and--and I'm trying to live on a tradition where I want to do what my dad built up you know. I don't want to let them down so whatever my dad thought was best and what--how he raised--my parents raised me that's the way I want to be you know and that's the way all of us feel in our family tradition.

00:42:12

I'll never forget what our parents taught us.

00:42:19

KK: Well Mr. Yee, I think our time has just about come to an end but before we go I have a couple more questions; first is, do you have a favorite Southern meal?

00:42:30

JDY: Yes; fried chicken--fried chicken and--and mashed potatoes is my favorite with cornbread. That is my favorite; you know I mean I can't get enough of that. I mean it's just good old Southern food [*Laughs*].

00:42:42

KK: Now do you also have a favorite Chinese meal?

00:42:45

JDY: Yes; I love pepper steak in--in the South. You don't get that everywhere and I also love the Peking duck which my mother when she makes it I can't get enough of it [*Laughs*].

00:42:59

KK: That was some good duck. I had some of that today. Well before I go is there anything else you'd like to add or anything else you'd like to say?

00:43:06

JDY: No; I just you know I'm just wishing the best for the Chinese community in the Delta and I hope that tradition lives on, you know even though when I'm gone that

hopefully there will be some Chinese families that would move into the South and never let the South die without any Chinese families. That's just me.

00:43:25

KK: Well thank you very much Mr. Yee for--for allowing me to come into your store and allowing me to interview you. Thanks so much.

00:43:32

JDY: Thank you Kevin.

00:43:34

[End Joe Dan Yee Interview]