

Interview with Kent Lee and Chui Ping Lee

Place: Home of Chui Ping Lee (David Lee's wife)

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Interviewer: Zhongping Chen and Charles Yang

Interviewees: Kent Lee (2nd son of David Lee); Chui Ping Lee (David Lee's wife)

Table of Contents

Family history of migration (Kent Lee’s great-grandfather in Portland; grandfather’s education and businesses in Taishan and Canton.....	pages 3-5
David Lee’s education and teaching work in China, Hong Kong and Singapore; his family in Taishan, Singapore and family life during the Japanese war.....	pages 5-7
David Lee’s family migration from Taishan to Hong Kong after the Communist takeover of mainland China.....	pages 8-9
David Lee’s and his family’s migration from Hong Kong to Canada.....	pages 10-11
David Lee and the Chinese Public School in Victoria.....	pages 11-12
David Lee and Chinese associations and newspapers in Victoria, Vancouver, and New York; David Lee and the Chinese Nationalist League	pages 13-14
David Lee and his writing on Chinese Canadian history.....	pages 14-15
David Lee and nationwide Lee associations; his home village in China and fellow townsmen in Victoria.....	pages 15-17
Chui Ping Lee (David Lee’s wife)’s education in China and working experience in Victoria.....	pages 17-18

Zhongping Chen: I think you mentioned your great grandfather first went to the United States.

Kent Lee: Yup, it's him over here (pointing to a picture on the wall). He went to Portland, had a laundry business.

Zhongping Chen: So he...

Kent Lee: Probably early... turn of the century I guess. I'm not sure of the date but if he's living now he would have been almost 200 years old.

Zhongping Chen: His name is Li Yiyou, I think ?

Kent Lee: I don't know.

Zhongping Chen: Did he ever come to Canada?

Kent Lee: No. He returned from Portland to China for retirement.

Zhongping Chen: Did he go there alone or went there together with brothers or uncles or...?

Kent Lee: No, he was there by himself.

Zhongping Chen: Really?

Kent Lee: Yup. (asked Chui Ping Lee) As far as she knows, he didn't have any relatives there...

Zhongping Chen: He went there alone? Always in laundry business?

Kent Lee: Yes.

Zhongping Chen: So how many years? Do you know?

Kent Lee: (asked Chui Ping Lee) She doesn't know. Probably something in that book maybe.

Zhongping Chen: Ok. So I guess that's your grandma?

Kent Lee: My grandfather is the only son because he [great grandfather] spent his time over here right in North America. That's why he only has one son. He's on the picture over there, my grandfather.

Zhongping Chen: Did your grandma ever go to the United States?

Kent Lee: No, not during that time. You know it's only the men who came.

Zhongping Chen: So it seems your grandfather, he always stayed in Taishan. Did he go to...?

Kent Lee: No he didn't because he knew the hardship of going overseas, right? So he won't... actually he wouldn't allow any of his sons to go.

Zhongping Chen: I read a story about your grandfather. He actually opened some factories in Taishan?

Kent Lee: Rice producer or something.

Zhongping Chen: Oh, processing rice, ok. So... let's see, then that's your grandfather... Your grandfather seems to have received some kind of high level education in Canton.

Kent Lee: Yes, and he become very wealthy at one time.

Zhongping Chen: Why? Just because your great grandfather left him with a lot of property or...?

Kent Lee: Maybe, maybe so.

Zhongping Chen: It seems your grandfather also opened a bank?

Kent Lee: Yeah, he's got a lot of business going on at Taishan at that time: bank, theaters, stores.

Zhongping Chen: Theaters?

Kent Lee: Yeah even theater.

Zhongping Chen: Oh, that was not mentioned in your father's writing.

Kent Lee: Yeah.

Zhongping Chen: So yeah, he was... Let's see. But he also was in some school. Did he ever go to Hong Kong?

Kent Lee: No.

Zhongping Chen: Never been to Hong Kong?

Kent Lee: Yeah, he had been teaching. My grandfather started teaching then went into business.

Zhongping Chen: So he was in both teaching and in business?

Kent Lee: Yea, he started out teaching first and then he got into business.

Zhongping Chen: Like your father, he first went to Nanjing and then to Beijing and then to Tianjin to study. What was he studying there? What was his major?

Kent Lee: It's always history, I believe.

Zhongping Chen: Really?

Kent Lee: At 19 years old he went to Beijing..... Oh, at 19 he went to Hong Kong for his education, yeah. And then he went back to Taishan to teach. And then went to Singapore to teach. In Singapore, the Japanese came to occupy Singapore and he left Singapore and went back to China. And that's why he went to a university like a...

Zhongping Chen: Xiamen.

Kent Lee: Yeah.

Zhongping Chen: Ya, he went to Xiamen University. So when did your father and mother get married in Taishan? I mean when? Which year was that?

Kent Lee: I think it's mentioned over here. These are the wedding gifts over here. Can you tell the year over here?

Zhongping Chen: Oh, this is a wedding gift? Oh that's... 1932... I think your father got married earlier than that. Oh yeah, but that's right, in 1932. Yeah I think he actually first went to Nanjing, Beijing and Tianjin to receive education. And I'm not sure when he went to Hong Kong, he didn't mention that in his writing. Can you ask your mother what sort of education he received in Nanjing, Beijing and Tianjin?

Kent Lee: Water products...Nanjing and Beijing... he was studying...

Zhongping Chen: Oh.. yes.. so like seafood or something...

Kent Lee: Yeah, something like that.

Zhongping Chen: Production of seafood. Oh, ok. He went to Nanjing, Beijing, at 18 years old, and then came back... he said he went to Southeast Asia together with your mom, older brother and your sister.

Kent Lee: My sister was born there. That's in Singapore.

Zhongping Chen: So how many years did he stay in Singapore?

Kent Lee: Just two years.

Zhongping Chen: What was he doing in Singapore?

Kent Lee: He was the principal there.

Zhongping Chen: Chinese school there.

Kent Lee: Yes.

Zhongping Chen: And then he said he came back... he actually sent your mother back to Taishan and he went to Xiamen University.

Kent Lee: Yeah, that's right.

Zhongping Chen: Why did he choose history, to study at that time?

Kent Lee: Probably more accessible. My thinking is it might have been because it was more accessible. From Hong Kong to... you know, there.

Zhongping Chen: Did your mother do anything in Singapore? Like did she work there, in Singapore?

Kent Lee: My mother? No. She raised the family.

Zhongping Chen: She had three children.

Kent Lee: Yeah, at that time.

Zhongping Chen: Your father said when he went back to Taishan, your two uncles and one of your aunts actually joined the anti-Japanese guerillas. I just wonder was that the Nationalist Party's guerilla or the Communist Party's guerilla?

Kent Lee: It was the nationalist.

Zhongping Chen: So it was fighting against the Japanese. He came back in the war when Japan was still ...

Kent Lee: Yeah but I don't think he was in the army ..

Zhongping Chen: Yeah your father was not, but your uncles...

Kent Lee: Yes.

Zhongping Chen: Oh I see. So did they later move to Taiwan? Did your uncles...?

Kent Lee: No.

Zhongping Chen: They stayed in....

Kent Lee: Actually I don't know my family that well because my grandfather had two wives. So it was kind of... half uncles and.. you know. But they... during the Japanese occupation at that time, a lot of them starved to death.

We only left with two uncles. The only two I knew used to be in Toronto and the other one in Australia. They both died now.

Zhongping Chen: When your father went back to Taishan, I think he went to teaching in Taishan. When the communist came, what was he doing? I think he was still in Taishan.

Kent Lee: After he came back from university, he went back to Taishan, worked for a few years, three years I think. And then he went to Hong Kong.

Zhongping Chen: So he went to Hong Kong after the Communist came or before the Communist came?

Kent Lee: As soon as the Communist came, he left overnight. Because he was involved with the Nationalist He actually left overnight, you know.

Zhongping Chen: So he left together with your family?

Kent Lee: No, just by himself.

Zhongping Chen: Oh really, when did your mom and the others join him?

Kent Lee: We didn't go to Hong Kong until I was five years old. So you know...

Zhongping Chen: You were born in China?

Kent Lee: I was born in China.

Zhongping Chen: Oh, I assumed you were born in Canada.

Kent Lee: I was born the same year the Communist came. We left China when I was about five years old. But my father left for Hong Kong five years before. As soon as he left, about two, three days later, they would not allow anybody to go to Hong Kong at that time.

Zhongping Chen: But your mother and you actually went to Hong Kong later?

Kent Lee: We stayed. Five years later.

Zhongping Chen: That's in 1954?

Kent Lee: Ya around there, yeah.

Zhongping Chen: But at that time you still could leave China?

Kent Lee: Yeah... I don't know how we... See during that time, I think there was a policy. They allow you so many people to go out. But you had to leave somebody behind. My two older sisters were left behind when we went to Hong Kong. That's how it is. The three of us, my mother, myself, and my younger brother went to Hong Kong. We went to Hong Kong but my older brother and two older sisters remained in China. And then later on, somehow, they got out. Especially my older brother, he tried to apply to get out from different cities. Wouldn't allow him to go out, out of China. Then he went to Guangzhou and then he applied. We went to Hong Kong during that time and we applied for my brother to come out and my two sisters came out afterwards.

Zhongping Chen: So finally your older brother and two older sisters came...?

Kent Lee: Yup.

Zhongping Chen: When did your older brother leave China? Do you have any idea?

Kent Lee: Two years after we came out.

Zhongping Chen: That's 1956.

Kent Lee: Somewhere around there.

Zhongping Chen: Your father actually did not mention he was involved in the Nationalist Party in China. What was he doing there? He was just teacher there I think.

Kent Lee: Yeah he's teaching, but he's quite involved politically in the Nationalist Party but he doesn't want to announce it, you know.

Zhongping Chen: So what was he doing in Hong Kong?

Kent Lee: He's teaching in Hong Kong too.

Zhongping Chen: Which school? Do you know?

Kent Lee: Actually he spent his time in Hong Kong working for a relative, to take care of business. He's actually working for a friend of his father at that time, you know, have business in Hong Kong and then a few years later he applied to come to Canada. He came over here because the Chinese school needed teacher over here.

Zhongping Chen: They actually invited him to be principal here. But how did he know people here? Do you have any idea?

Kent Lee: We got a distant uncle who's already the principal here at that time.

Zhongping Chen: Do you know his name?

Kent Lee: Yup. I'll show you. He's actually... That's him. He's probably his brother I think.

Zhongping Chen: Brother or cousin?

Kent Lee: So it should be. Yeah, cousin, I guess.

Zhongping Chen: So did your mom and you come together with him?

Kent Lee: No, he came 1954, I believe. Somewhere around there right? 1954...

Zhongping Chen: Yeah, should be 1954.

Kent Lee: We didn't come till 1959.

Zhongping Chen: Your mom and all family members?

Kent Lee: Not all. Again because right here, the immigration, they only allowed people under 19 years old, I believe.

Zhongping Chen: Yeah, that's right.

Kent Lee: My brother was over age at that time, and my elder sister had married already. So only my sister, one of the sisters, and my younger brother and myself.

Zhongping Chen: Came?

Kent Lee: Yeah.

Zhongping Chen: So your brother joined you later?

Kent Lee: Yeah, much later.

Zhongping Chen: Oh, when did he come?

Kent Lee: I don't think my mom remembers. I think around 1962, I would say.

Zhongping Chen: So here actually... I found your father was first like... he was the principal of the school...

Kent Lee: I could backtrack. My nephew was one years old when he came to Canada so he's... He's 47, so minus 47... about 46 years ago, my brother came.

Zhongping Chen: So how did your brother come? Your father applied for his arrival or?

Kent Lee: Yup, he was married then with one child and their whole family came during that time.

Zhongping Chen: So your father was always the principal of the school from 1954 he came...

Kent Lee: Yup.

Zhongping Chen: Until when?

Kent Lee: Until... I think he retired from there soon after my mother arrived.

Zhongping Chen: Do you know how many teachers in the school at that time?

Kent Lee: I'm not sure how many. Not many, I would say... because I went to school there too. I believe there's principal plus three teachers, I believe. total of four, maybe.

Zhongping Chen: So at that time... Right now I knew the school received government fund.

Kent Lee: During that time, I don't know if they did or not.

Zhongping Chen: No fund from government?

Kent Lee: Probably not.

Zhongping Chen: Just paid by students?

Kent Lee: Students pay very little. I remember we only paid \$2 a month to go to school.

Zhongping Chen: How did this school operate then?

Kent Lee: I don't know. Yeah, that's something I really don't know... I don't know if they were funded by the government or not. Probably not, probably donation from the community, the Chinese community.

Zhongping Chen: Did the CCBA support the school?

Kent Lee: Oh yeah. Yeah, but there's no... During that time, people donate. I think people were very generous at that time. You know, that's the only community centre for the Chinese at that time because everyone was living by Chinatown at that time, right? So everybody's actually supporting this during that time.

Zhongping Chen: So he was principal until when? Do you remember?

Kent Lee: I'm sure it's late 60s, probably...

Zhongping Chen: And then he retired?

Kent Lee: And then he retired, I would say 1969 but I couldn't get you exact date.

Zhongping Chen: When did he become president of the Lee Association?

Kent Lee: He's always involved with the Lee and Taishan associations. Off and on, ever since they arrived. I'm sure he was involved with these associations.

Zhongping Chen: He was also president of the Taishan association for a while?

Kent Lee: Yeah, so, all those societies, you know. You could run, you could be a president for two years per term. So you could do 2nd term but basically you have to let someone else do it so you kind of rotate all the time.

Zhongping Chen: How long is each term?

Kent Lee: Two years.

Zhongping Chen: He was also the editor of the newspaper, the *New Republic*.

Kent Lee: Yeah.

Zhongping Chen: So when did he become the editor of that newspaper? Do you know?

Kent Lee: He did it all the time over here. Like he wrote an article and send it over to Vancouver to have it printed.

Zhongping Chen: But originally the newspaper was here.

Kent Lee: Yeah, that's what I heard.

Zhongping Chen: But you cannot remember the time...?

Kent Lee: Oh, that's probably before we came to Canada, I'm sure.

Zhongping Chen: He actually mentioned that he went to New York in the 1970s...

Kent Lee: He went to New York for a few years, worked there, for one of the newspapers over there. That's probably... let's see, if I can remember... that's probably right after he retired from teaching, I guess.

Zhongping Chen: After his retirement from teaching? Oh yeah, that's 1970, 1971. But your family was here?

Kent Lee: Yeah. He went there by himself.

Zhongping Chen: Let's see... I can't remember when the newspaper moved from Victoria to Vancouver. Before that time, I guess your father was the chief editor of that newspaper in Victoria?

Kent Lee: Yeah, that's probably before we came to Canada.

Zhongping Chen: So when you came, you just saw him writing articles, send them to Vancouver to publish.

Kent Lee: Yes, that's right.

Zhongping Chen: Was he also a leader of the Nationalist Party here in Victoria?

Kent Lee: Yeah, during that time because he spent, devote a lot of time getting funds from Taiwan to keep the club going.

Zhongping Chen: The Nationalist Party had a club?

Kent Lee: Yeah.

Zhongping Chen: When did that disappear?

Kent Lee: Just recently. Maybe five years ago? Because they couldn't get fund from Taiwan anymore. So they couldn't get enough supports. So they couldn't financially operate.

Zhongping Chen: So that club was renting a place?

Kent Lee: Yeah.

Zhongping Chen: So I guess you probably remember he was... he wrote the book about the Chinese in Canada?

Kent Lee: Mhm.

Zhongping Chen: So when did he start that work? Start writing the book on the Chinese in Canada, do you remember how many years did he spend on that?

Kent Lee: About thirteen years, spent ten years on doing all the research and writing the book in three years. So about thirteen years. He was planning on writing a second book but then he just... yeah.

Zhongping Chen: What was the second book about? His plan, I mean.

Kent Lee: A continuation of the first book.

Zhongping Chen: I read his writing. It seems after he published the book, somebody in Taiwan was not happy with the book. Do you know anything about that?

Kent Lee: [asked Chui Ping Lee] No, actually she said he got a lot of support from Taiwan to write that book.

Zhongping Chen: Yeah. It mentioned somebody complaining about something. Not sure what they were complaining.

Kent Lee: From Taiwan?

Zhongping Chen: Yeah, somebody... Not the government, probably somebody in the government. So he was also involved with the nationwide association of Lees. So what was his position in the nationwide association?

Kent Lee: Actually all this... there's no position. It's basically it's just cooperation between different associations in different cities. Basically get together and have a meeting. I don't think they have positions.

Zhongping Chen: So original the Lee Association was formed in Victoria. So I guess later Calgary became more important? Or Toronto?.

Kent Lee: I think Calgary.

Zhongping Chen: Became more important?

Kent Lee: Yeah. Calgary just had... I was there at their convention last year. They had their 100th anniversary or something.

Zhongping Chen: I mean, when did that happen? When did Calgary become more important than Victoria.

Kent Lee: I wouldn't say more important but they get... It's actually Vancouver who wants to dominate. It's not Calgary. Because the headquarters is at Vancouver right now.

Zhongping Chen: So your family came from Shuilou township of Taishan. How many people from Shuilou in this city? Do you have any idea?

Kent Lee: A lot actually. I don't know... I estimate right now... I know myself I could probably say right now... including all the descendants right? Probably a good fifty of them from Shuilou.

Zhongping Chen: Fifty families?

Kent Lee: Members in our association, I would say. I don't know, I'm only guessing.

Zhongping Chen: Do you know which village your family exactly came from? Your mom probably knew. Oh, Long Anli, your family came from Long Anli. Did you go back there?

Kent Lee: Yeah, I went back there twice.

Zhongping Chen: Like how many people in this...?

Kent Lee: Not many... Village is almost empty because people all left. They've all gone abroad.

Zhongping Chen: Oh really?

Kent Lee: Yeah. Now if you walk in there, you thought you walked into a ghost town. Hardly anybody there, all the empty houses.

Zhongping Chen: But still the buildings are there.

Kent Lee: Yeah, that's right. Including our family, just an empty building there.

Zhongping Chen: Like your mom, when she came, what kind of job did she do?

Kent Lee: She's working in the rest home at that time.

Zhongping Chen: At what home?

Kent Lee: She had many jobs. Originally she worked in poultry factory, like chickens and plucking feathers. But she later on worked in a resting home for old folks.

Zhongping Chen: She took care of older folks, I see.

Kent Lee: She's a cleaner over there.

Zhongping Chen: Until she retired?

Kent Lee: Yes.

Zhongping Chen: So how long? That's like 20 years?

Kent Lee: More than 20 years. About 15 years at the rest home.

Zhongping Chen: It seems your mom's Chinese is very good. So what kind of education...

Kent Lee: She's 96 years old right now. She's forgotten a lot of words now.

Zhongping Chen: So what kind of education did she receive in China?

Kent Lee: She had high school.

Zhongping Chen: High school, really? So where was she born, in the same in Taishan or...?

Kent Lee: Yeah, in Taishan. She was in... She says it's over here somewhere.

Zhongping Chen: That's still in Taishan?

Kent Lee: Yes, still in Taishan.

Zhongping Chen: Was that usual for girls to receive high education? In your mother's time.

Kent Lee: She was from a wealthy family at that time. So she could afford...

Zhongping Chen: So her family also...

Kent Lee: She's trying to tell me where it is, but I wouldn't know.

Zhongping Chen: Just think at that time girls usually would not receive education, I guess. So your mom was probably unusual.

Kent Lee: Yeah, because her father went to United States too. His brothers went to Buffalo too.

Zhongping Chen: Doing what?

Kent Lee: Business there too.

Zhongping Chen: So that's why he decided to give his daughter education?

Kent Lee: Yeah.

Zhongping Chen: I see. Your father actually left a lot of writings, so we can piece them together and write an interesting story about him.
