



EAST-WEST CENTER
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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Victor Hao Li Interview Narrative

12-14-2007 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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Victor Li

12-14-2007 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

Personal Background

I was born in Hong Kong, about two months before the Japanese invasion. My father at the time was governor of Guangdong province. My mother went to Hong Kong to have me because the medical services were better. Almost as soon as I was born, to avoid the invasion [*which occurred soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor*], my parents took me and my siblings into Guangdong province as far north as one could go, to a very hilly area called Shaoguan. I have virtually no memories of that period except some of my parents, a little bit of the *amahs* who took care of me. And once -- I don't know if it's my imagination or a memory -- when our car was strafed by a Japanese fighter plane.

I came to this country when I was six and grew up in New York City and White Plains, New York. Like all good Chinese boys at that time, I studied science. I was a physics and math major at Columbia. Four years of that study taught me an important thing: I was not any good at physics or math -- I just did not understand Green's theorem or quarks.

Life Before EWC

Teaching Law

At that point, if I wanted to continue my studies, it would be difficult to apply to any non-science department, since all I had taken as an undergraduate were science courses. That left two main choices: business school or law school. Law school seemed better because it involved "justice" -- I did not know much at the time. For that flimsy reason, I ended up in law school. My father was not at all happy because in the Chinese tradition, law is

not a good profession. One of the traditional colloquial names for lawyer was "litigation trickster." You do not go to your father and say, "When I grow up, I want to be a litigation trickster."

And it took some friends – older Chinese faculty members at Columbia -- to say to my father, "This is America, where the culture is very different. Let him try it." So I went to Columbia Law School not knowing what this entailed, or whether I would like it, or what I would do afterwards. Most of my classmates were heading for Wall Street. I got caught up in this mindset, and actually got a job with a Wall Street law firm the spring of my third year!

The same spring, I received a call from Jerry Cohen, who was teaching law at Berkeley and was visiting for a year at Harvard. He is a marvelous scholar and wonderful friend. He is the person who got the contemporary Chinese legal studies started, a remarkable man. He asked if I would like to come to Harvard for a year to work on Chinese law? I had always thought that attending Harvard Law School would be nifty. I said I would love to go for a year, and a year led to many, many years. I never did go into law practice, but straight into academics. I taught at the University of Michigan Law School for two years and then returned to Columbia Law School – a great thrill for me to return to my old home.

In 1971 I moved to Stanford, where both the law school and the university were growing very rapidly. The attraction of Stanford for me was, like much of California, an open and open-ended kind of place. If I stayed at Columbia, I would be polishing the 47th facet of a very beautiful diamond. If I go to Stanford, I might be able to make my own diamond;

I might fail, but at least I would have the opportunity to try. Another reason was that my first child had just been born, and raising him on West 120th Street seemed daunting.

I had nine wonderful years at Stanford, probably because I started to learn things outside the law school. I did some teaching in the Political Science department, and volunteered for all dissertation committees where China was the topic – an “outside” person was always needed on these committees. This gave me a wonderful education.

Intellectual Innovations

Uniqueness of EWC

The East-West Center opportunity presented a new and exciting set of challenges. I had been teaching in a classroom for quite a while. What started off as trying to learn an art, which is wonderful, became a craft, which is all right but less than wonderful. But more important was the intellectual side. Universities are organized vertically by departments that often resemble intellectual silos. Crossing from one to another silo was difficult.

Stanford was one of the best places for crossing these limitations, but even then the path was difficult.

The issue that had interested me the most as my education expanded at Stanford concerned the role of culture in everything we did. My instincts told me culture was absolutely, critically important. Culture is not just song and dance; culture is language, values, institutions, practices, habits -- all of that. In that case, culture would play an important role in every development and every solution to problems. Yet we study culture academically and usually in isolation. That is, when we examine a problem such as oil shortage or air pollution, we look primarily to the technical and economic aspects.

The cultural aspects have no place. That leaves a situation, I believe, where culture as part of both the cause and the solution is not touched.

A university would find it very hard to integrate the cultural silos into all other disciplines. But the East-West Center, ahh, is different. We are organized by “problems,” which makes mixing silos much easier. Another view of the same phenomenon is that in silo-type subjects, we would find it difficult to compete with the far larger resources of the universities. But if culture is added as an indispensable element, then the universities are not set up to compete with us. Of course, we would have to show that culture is in fact important, and identify the aspects of culture that affect how problems are defined and solved. That is, or would become, our mission.

One other attraction was the participants or “alumni.” Many of the American participants, especially in the early decades, were “Asia-philes” who were committed to learning about Asian languages and cultures, and then go “do” instead of just “study about.” Many of these persons went on to hold important positions in government, academia and business.

The Asian participants – students, fellows, visiting scholars, etc. - were even more striking. Virtually all of these persons were already very successful in their careers before coming to the Center. We got the cream of the crop. The return rate from the Center was very high and continues to be. After returning home, they were placed in even more important positions.

I thought about the Asian participants for a long time. How do we mobilize this large group of key persons? If we could manage that, we will have an extraordinarily large and capable asset for “doing things” in Asia. How do we accomplish this without causing a

loss of enthusiasm in our own research associates? I should add that for the great majority of the Asian participants, the importance of culture was already accepted, perhaps even innate.

Life at EWC

President of EWC, 1981

I had traveled through frequently, and also spent a semester at [*the University of Hawaii's*] Richardson Law School in 1979....

I think that from its very beginning and continuing to today, the Center has been searching for its mission and for the best mix of problems to deal with and ways of dealing with them. This was true when the first study team went out in 1960 to ask: “What kind of institution should the East-West Center be?” And it continued through the tenure of [*President*] Everett Kleinjans, and then to me.

Such a search can be a very good thing. It forces constant reexamination and open-mindedness. One of the strengths of the Center is that we are organized in a way that enables change to take place, much more so than a university. And it helps to not have to teach every year English 101 and Contemporary Civilizations 101. We are not boxed in by departments and disciplines.

Of course, change can be confusing and even painful. People find it comfortable to stay with the tried and true rather than risk change. Yet we had to constantly adjust and change, and had the capability of doing so. The Asia-Pacific was changing extremely rapidly in every dimension. We had to look constantly on whether we are investing our resources – staff, participants, money, opportunities – in the best possible way. We

should always be asking: “What should we be when we grow up?” Trying to ask and answer that question was an enormous learning experience for me. It was wonderful.

One of the people that I tried to spend a lot of time with [*at EWC*] was Harrison Brown, a pre-eminent scientist. I knew him from Stanford days when we both were part of an arms control program....

I tried to learn why he came to the Center, what he wanted to accomplish here, and where did he find successful routes forward or stubborn obstacles. He helped me move away from being strictly an academic.

Another very helpful person was Bob Hewett, who took me in hand and taught me about how to run something. When he thought he had done enough, he would say: “OK, that's all you're getting from me. Now you've got to go do it your own way.” Ken Char and Herb Cornuelle did the same thing with respect to my relations with the Board [*of Governors*]. I guess they were teaching me management and how to deal with a variety of people. I now manage better but still have a way to go in learning how to deal with people, something that is missing in an academic's training. Compared to my wife, I'm still terrible at it. But that's her profession. Diane Dods ran my life – for which I will be forever grateful.

And there were many new subjects to learn -- Toufiq Siddiqi taught me so much about environment. I still remember him stressing the primary role of water in development. He also taught me about South Asia, a place I knew little about. PIDP [*Pacific Islands Development Program*] did the same for the Pacific Islands.

I think I may have learned the most from our alumni. I spent a lot of time visiting them, and would urge everyone else to do the same. I would ask what key problems their

countries were encountering? What solutions worked and what failed and why? Who are the “players” who can get things done? What are the best approaches we – meaning staff, alumni, friends and anyone else can mobilize – can adopt to be the most effective? How can we best communicate and make decisions? What are the problems just coming around the corner? I would get answers spoken from first person experiences, not some academic discourse. I learned that one never gets it right in the beginning, so that one must fix and fix and fix.

One thing I think I brought to the table was stressing that the East-West Center could and should constantly adapt and change, and that one reason for this is because we were not bound by departments or disciplines. We were unbound.

Early Years as President

I did tickle and stir. I tickled the right people, and they went to work and made it happen. And I am sure you remember that at the beginning of President Reagan's term, all were told to expect an enormous budget cut. We had to deal with that by reexamining our own spending. Senator Inouye was a tremendous help in limiting the cut. I began my term in the fall of 1981, but I spent the spring and summer learning about the Center. I asked for everything a person had written while he or she was at the Center. As you might imagine, crates of materials arrived. I read them late into the night, poking my poor wife whenever I encountered something unusual.

I do not know how much I really was able to understand, but I read them all anyway. At least I could say when I met a researcher, “I did read that, and there were parts I did not understand and hope you will explain to me.” Then we would get into a real conversation. This was good for me in two ways. First, I was able to learn more and

faster. And second, the researcher and I were working together in a collegial way. I was a colleague adding my two cents, and not a corporate boss.

'Lobbying' Congress

To return to the funding issues for a minute, I spent the summer of 1981 in Washington at an apartment. I was probably as close to being a lobbyist as one can get, even though I knew little about the administration and even less about the Congress. I could not even tell the difference between the Hart office building and the Dirksen office building.

You just feel around a lot. Senator Inouye's staff and the people at USIA were a great help. With their guidance, I spent time with every member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and most of the House Foreign Relations Committee. I had been a consultant to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1978 working on the Taiwan Relations Act, so I knew these senators slightly.

At the Congress and USIA, the agency through which our federal funds came, I tried to convey much of what we talked about earlier – mission, problems, culture, change, participants, etc. I would say that I am new; here is what I see, and what I think I can accomplish. I am asking for the chance to do this job right. If a large amount is cut from our budget, I might as well go home now because I know I cannot do the job right. But if what I'm saying about the future of the Center is of interest, could our budget be preserved as far as possible? My promise in return is that three years from now you will see that every dollar we received is being spent the way I think it ought to be spent. We did bring in new people and programs, but most of the work was done by the existing people who may have changed their labels. All this preparatory work was great fun – except for the lobbying.

1985: EWC's 25th Anniversary

(Editor's note: 1985 was the big 25th anniversary of the Center, and the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first immigrants from Japan to Hawai'i. At the same time, the new Imin International Conference Center was built at Jefferson Hall. A conference was held at the Imin Center with video and audio satellite links to Washington D.C., Manila, Tokyo, and Singapore. U.S.)

In 1985, that was really something. I remember sitting on the stage and thinking: "Truly I'm looking at the future."...

[Secretary of State George Shultz spoke at the new Imin Center.] He took a great liking to us that remains to this day. I still see him, and we still talk about the Center.

The Imin Center had another very important component. We got tremendous support from the community, both the Hawaii community and the international community. The Imin Center got built because Johnny Bellinger decided he would make it happen. Mr. Bellinger and I talked and talked. He was a wonderful man. He was a very local boy and sometimes a little rough in speech, but he really understood the world. And once he commits to do something, just get out of his way because he will get it done. He was a founder of the Japan-Hawaii Economic Council. Through this organization, he got support of the Japanese government and business. Herb Cornuelle and Ken Char of the Center's Board were also very helpful....

[First Hawaiian Bank President John Bellinger raised \$4 million toward the construction of the Imin Center.] John Bellinger led the way. That's why the auditorium is called Keoni Hall. Keoni is John in Hawaiian.

There were other people as well. For example, the two founders of Sony, Mr. Akio Morita and Mr. Masaru Ibuka [*who was a member of the Center's board*] gave enormous support. You must have noticed that two conference rooms are extraordinarily well-equipped, especially for 1985.

Mr. Morita simply said that he would do the inside of the Imin Center - the language equipment, translation room, audio and video-taping facilities. The works. And he did it with his own funds.

I think the very wide range of support was based on the real hope that if over time we could carry out the goals we discussed earlier, then the Center can be a very effective and useful institution, indeed a leading institution. And part of what we wanted to do was to move the United States from being the teacher and giver in Asia to being a co-learner and exchanger.

And to genuinely realize that you have information and experiences that I could not possibly get by myself -- and the same is true the other way around. Truly a collegial exchange.

Prominent Visitors

[In 1986, the Center started the First Hawaiian Bank lecture series. Helmut Schmidt was a guest speaker, among others.]

People were perfectly happy to come. Well, first, it's Hawaii, which doesn't hurt us in the slightest.

We were -- people saw in us not so much accomplishment as hope.

You recall that the Chinese Premier, Zhao Ziyang, came here as the first stop on his visit to the U.S. ...

Before that, I went to China to deliver an invitation asking him to come to the Center. My expectations for success were very low. I had made many boxes of orchids to bring with me, not only for Premier Zhao but also for a number of senior officials. You can imagine the problem I had in trying to get fresh flowers through Chinese agricultural inspection – that is, until the inspector looked at the names on the boxes, and then just waved me through.

I met the Premier's secretary, who asked me, why should he come to Hawaii first before Washington. That is a very hard question to answer, and I had not clearly thought it out. So I had to work it through as I was speaking. I said something like, "China always has made it a very important point to deal not only with the American government, but also the American people. Come to Hawaii. We are the American people." (It was the best I could do on the spot.)

A little after returning to Hawaii, I got a call from the secretary saying the Premier is coming. I was at a loss for words. It took the State Department even more aback. I didn't care. (laughter) And the Secret Service had a hell-of-a-time, as you can imagine. Do you recall a wonderful photo with the premier in the Imin Center, which was filled shoulder to shoulder with Americans and Chinese students? I wanted that format: him talking informally in the middle of an American crowd. Diane Dods, bless her, had to convince the Secret Service that we together with the Honolulu police, we can handle the security. Not an easy task.

It was great. [*Japan*] Prime Minister Tanaka came, as did the Prince of Japan. Prime Minister Prem of Thailand came frequently. The Pacific Island leaders. Many others. One draw was that this is Hawaii – not just the beautiful ocean and mountains, but also a

truly multicultural society. These visitors reaffirmed the importance of the Center to the Asia/Pacific region, and made a strong impression in Washington. It was not that hard to get important personages to come.

Challenges

Well, you know, I guess I would put it in much broader terms than specific successes.

What we wanted to do was and is getting us to actively think about what is the Center's role and mission, both on the intellectual side, as well as on practical applications. That shows up in a lot of places. It also did not work in a lot of places.

The challenges were -- I had an awful lot to learn about many subjects. That was one challenge.

I also had to think through how to best cut across the intellectual silos. Again I return to the area of culture, how to find and articulate its influences in ways that do not turn off some electrical engineer in the first sentence. And then to get other people at the Center and beyond to try thinking about these issues and acting on their conclusions.

Or to change the paradigm because they found a better way or a way more suited for their particular work.

Ties That Last

The Alumni Network

I remember an early trip that included both Tokyo and Mindanao [*Philippines*]. And at the University of Tokyo, Todai, people were very interested in what we knew. But they also knew that they were able to reach the rest of the world by themselves.

Mindanao, however, was isolated professionally. The people there had problems with access to data, as well as difficulty in distributing their own work and getting feedback.

Once I thought about it more carefully, I realized that the persons on Mindanao would give their all to the Center, because the Center could become their best link to the rest of the world – with the traffic moving both ways. Whereas Todai already had excellent links of its own.

I think that accounts for much of the enthusiasm of the alumni, not only the ones who got degrees but also from short-term participants. I believe the alumni looked at the Center and said, “If you do what you say you want to do, then we can create together a very large partnership which will benefit everyone. And Mindanao can play a very large and effective role.” One consequence of the above was that over time we should be giving more and more decision-making to the people in the field, the alumni, rather than focus primarily on the staff.

Some [*staff*] liked it very much, and some did not like it at all. It depended on both the person and the subject matter, but I believe that greater decision-making power by the alumni is the right way to go. I have seen projects and exchanges going on now among alumni without the involvement of our staff. That is striking.

And they work together, even without us at times, because they made the necessary ties through the Center.

It is wonderful to see because that means that problems encountered by a person in one country, together with the solutions found, can be quickly discussed with someone else in another country dealing with similar issues. All sides gain. I also remember meeting an environmental specialist in the Philippines who wanted President Marcos to support a project on silting. He was in too low a position to get an appointment. So he got his colleague, a senior environmental official from Thailand, to come to the Philippines.

This colleague from Thailand could get in to see President Marcos, and took the Filipino person to the meeting, where – you can guess – silting was the topic of discussion.

That had nothing to do with us, though in an important way we contributed by putting these two persons together in the first place....

The alumni are such wonderful people. As you know, we had and have a very large program with journalists in China, including training a sizeable proportion of the staff of the *China Daily*, including the new editor-in-chief, who was in the first class. [*China Daily is the only English language newspaper published in China.*]

It was a combination of both the Jefferson Fellowships and the Gannett Fellowship. Recently, I was in an elevator in the *China Daily* building. A man walked in, whom frankly I did not recognize. He shouted “Dr. Li” and gave me a hug, much to the puzzlement of the others in the elevator. I was thinking I better find out who just hugged me because he's obviously important since everyone was deferring to him. He asked me who I was going to see. Ten minutes after that meeting started, this man walks in and stays for an hour. It turned out he was the new editor-in-chief, and sat in to give me much face. It is like that everywhere -- the warmth, the appreciation, and the sense at least from their end that the Center tie is a continuing tie.

Life After EWC

Work in China

[Upon leaving the EWC in 1989, Victor Li has continued to reside with his family in Honolulu.]

Absolutely! You cannot get me out of here with a crowbar.

I focused back on China. I am bringing U.S. businesses, usually fairly large ones, who want to go to China and enter the China market. The range of clients is quite broad. For example, two of my earliest clients were General Reinsurance, the largest reinsurance company in North America, and Children's Television Workshop, who made a co-production in Chinese of 130 episodes of Sesame Street with Shanghai Television.

Though the clients' interest vary greatly, I say pretty much the same to all of them: "I will take you in a particular way which does not include fast returns but will lead you to building strong relationships. But if you need fast returns, I have got a whole list of people whom I can recommend instead of me."

I also stress culture. Differences in language, institutions, procedures and preferences are likely to be the source of some of the most obstinate problems. But with better understanding, we can deal with these problems even if we cannot resolve them.

It is very critical to build the relationships. That is as true for Hawaii as for China. In many ways, the terms of the contract you sign is less important than the people you can work with to successfully carry out the deal. So we spend considerable time learning each other's culture. Sometimes we encounter something real strange. We can say "I would not do this the same way, but I understand why you hold the position you do. So it is OK." Sometimes the differences are so deep that compromise is not possible. Then you say, "Let us pick either your way or mine." This works when there is strong underlying mutual trust and appreciation.... That takes a while.

'The Smile Train'

In the late 1990s, Charles Wang, the founder of Computer Associates, started a project after his retirement called "The Smile Train." They do cleft lip and cleft palate surgery for indigent children for free, and also they train in-country medical personnel.

Throughout the world. When I was first asked to help them set up a network of cooperating hospitals in China, I declined. I knew almost nothing about the medical area. I did not know the people or have the needed relationships. I did not know a steroid from an antibiotic. But Mr. Wang said I still might like to attend the conference in Beijing. I did. At the conference I saw photographs and also in person, kids before and after the surgery. You know, a cleft is really ugly, you have no face, and hence no life. After the surgery, even the surgeries that were not beautiful, the kid had a face and thus can get a life. I was moved beyond words, and immediately asked Mr. Wang to sign me on.

I had so much to learn and so many new relationships to build. The Smile Train is very successful in China. It now has a network of about 150 participating hospitals, and is handling about 20,000 operations a year. We established with China Charitable Federation a means of certifying indigence, and did a lot of good training. We rely only on Chinese doctors so that when we leave, as non-profits always eventually do, the work stays and the skills stay. We bring new skills. There is almost no speech therapy in China. In the United States, cleft surgery occurs when the child is very young, so that speech does not become a major problem in most cases. In China, especially among the poor, we are often dealing with teenagers who have had no schooling and can not talk. After surgery, the kid has a face, but still does not have a life. To deal with this, The Smile Train is trying to start a speech therapy industry.

Every person hopes that everyone thinks you are wonderful and do great things. But honestly, this does not carry any weight for me. What carries weight is to work with good people to move ideas forward. Do you remember a poem by Christina Rossetti:

Be the grass green above me,

With showers and dewdrops wet;

And if thou wilt, remember;

And if thou wilt, forget.