

FHS Oral History Project – Will Cao

Description:

Xiongwei “Will” Cao was born in Hangzhou, China, in 1977. Will recounted his upbringing, particularly the economic challenges his parents faced as poor communal farmers. He shared stories that his family passed down regarding China’s Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, particularly how the Red Guards tortured his great-great maternal grandmother to death for her “superstitious” medical practices. Will also remembered how the educational curriculum that he learned in primary and secondary schools reflected the transition from the Cultural Revolution to China’s economic liberalism under Deng Xiaoping by the mid-1980s. Additionally, Will recollected memories from the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and it affected his parents' arrival home that day. He also reflected on the radio’s role as the chaos unfolded, particularly through BBC and Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts. In 1997, Will attended college, studying English with the hope of working as a reporter, inspired by the BBC and VOA broadcasts he had listened to during his childhood. His deeper passion, however, lay in medicine, and Will explained his sources of inspiration and how he managed to create the Lang Acupuncture Wellness Center, an acupuncture practice in Orlando, Florida, rooted in traditional Chinese medicine. Before practicing medicine, he served in the Inter-Parliamentary Relations Department in China's National People's Congress, representing the country on the world stage and promoting relations with other countries. Environmental concerns, namely heavy pollution, prompted Will to leave China and emigrate to Orlando, Florida, in 2013. Additionally, Will received a scholarship to attend a doctoral program in International Relations at the University of Central Florida, furthering his decision to leave China. In August 2024, Will created the Lang Acupuncture Wellness Center, detailing his underlying reasons. Lastly, Will described his broader observations about Central Florida since 2013, including his connections with the Chinese community, environmental changes over the twelve years, and contemporary challenges the region faces (c. 2025).

Transcription:

00;00;03 - 00;00;19

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Will Cao on May 22nd, 2025, in Orlando, Florida for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please restate your name, date of birth, and where you were born?

00;00;19 - 00;00;25

WILL CAO: Xiongwei Cao. September 23rd, 1977.

00;00;25 - 00;00;26

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And where were you born?

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WILL CAO: I was born in China.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Where in China?

00;00;29 - 00;00;34

WILL CAO: In Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, China.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you tell me about your childhood growing up in China during the mid to late 80s?

00;00;42 - 00;02;03

WILL CAO: I was born in a farmer's family, a very poor family. At that moment, everybody was poor, back in China. But I had a very happy life in my childhood. China started to reform and open up in late 70s, early 80s, during Deng Xiaoping's time. So the economy was very booming, becoming more liberal. When I was five years old, my parents finally got freed from the community's land. They were farmers on a community farm. Later on, they became freelance workers, they started their own small business. They did different businesses not very successful, but enough to support the family. My parents are always working hard to support. I am the only child. Also I am the first generation of the One-Child Policy, so I am the only child in my family. So I had a pretty peaceful and happy childhood in Hangzhou, China.

00;02;03 - 00;02;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: That was my next question if you were an only child. So thanks for sharing that you were a part of that first generation of the policy. Talk to me about sort of, as you mentioned, this was a period of transition in China. But did your parents ever pass on stories of how China was like at the midst of the Cultural Revolution?

00;02;32 - 00;04;12

WILL CAO: Oh, yeah. Definitely. My parents [were] the same generation of the People's Republic of China. My father was born in 1953, four years after the People's Republic was founded. So, yeah, both of them experienced all the movements in China. But fortunately, because they were farmers, [and] farmers [were] less impacted by the political upheavals. Mostly the intellectuals were heavily impacted by the political movements. But still they remember all the impacts of those political movements, especially the disastrous results because of the famine disaster. They told me about stories like how hard to fill their stomach during their childhood. But approaching the early 70s, things became better. They talked about a lot of things like that. They taught me do not spend money to quickly, you need to save, that kind of values definitely passed down to me.

00;04;12 - 00;04;22

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You mentioned how once they were sort of liberated from the community farm, they became freelancers. What type of jobs did they do in their freelancing?

00;04;22 - 00;04;44

WILL CAO: So they started do some small businesses like, buy something from the city and then transported to more rural areas and sold the products there. That kind of businesses.

00;04;44 - 00;04;48

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What was your schooling experience like in China?

00;04;48 - 00;05;47

WILL CAO: So when I grew up, education, in my hometown, was very happy teachers. School was not strict. So we did what we wanted to do. Teachers were very kind to students. At that moment, there was not much competition, so parents did not pay a lot of attention, especially in the rural areas. They did not have a high expectation on their kids. They spent some money, not much, only a little bit tuition. Most of the education was free. So I was very happy. I did not have much pressure at that moment in school. I was always a good student, an A student from primary school all the way through college.

00;05;47 - 00;06;11

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And before getting into sort of your college experience, I am curious especially since you were part of this transition period in China. Did the education curriculum, what you were taught reflect those changes in terms of what they were teaching you?

00;06;11 - 00;07;33

WILL CAO: Oh yeah. Definitely. Like during Mao's time, kids were taught about revolutionary ideas, thoughts, the "evil capitalism," that kind of thing. But during my time, the ideological side of the education was not that big. So mostly we were expected to learn more science and the technology knowledge at school. So, yeah, the ideological side is not strong. But still we are taught to love the motherland, love the party, be loyal to the people, that kind of thing. Pretty much like the pledge to allegiance here in the United States. Back in China, Monday morning every week, students gathered together, stand on the big playground and salute to the national flag, rise up and sing the national anthem together. The patriotism replaced Mao's era, like [the] revolutionary ideas.

00;07;33 - 00;07;55

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Interesting. You know, also during this time of your primary school education experience was, in 1989, the Tiananmen Square event happened. And of course, you were in China. I am curious, I know you were still twelve years old—

00;07;57 - 00;07;58

WILL CAO: A little boy in the primary school.

00;07;58 - 00;08;07

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. You were still very young, but still I am curious. How did you and your family or your peers react to that event?

00;08;07 - 00;10;21

WILL CAO: So I remember my parents told me, because they were businesspeople at that moment, so they traveled to the city, and the students stopped all the busses. They used knife to make all the tires of the busses flat and use the busses as blockage on the road. People were very scared. Hangzhou was a capital city of the Zhejiang province. It is a big city, but not as big as Shanghai or Beijing. But it was definitely a national movement, students across the China, I think, they did similar things. So my parents, they were also pretty scared. They told me. So they took a private-run minibus, not those public big bus, minibus with a very expensive ticket and got home pretty late. And they told me people were queuing up that day before the stores at

that moment like the food, especially rice, which was the major food in our hometown, people queued up before the state owned store to buy rice, like people try to grab toilet paper and a water here before each hurricane—same thing like that. They told me about it. At that moment, I was too young, I did not have any political ideas. But I did remember, some people, they try to use a shortwave radio, try to get a signal from, VOA, Voice of America. And there was news on Voice of America that Deng Xiaoping was dead at that moment. Those kind of rumors were flying all everywhere. And we did not get a lot of information from the state run TV channels. So, yeah, people were kind of scared and worrying about the future of the country at that moment. That is what I remember.

00;10;21 - 00;10;28

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Fascinating. So, what year did you attend college?

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WILL CAO: That was 1997.

00;10;29 - 00;10;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 1997. What college?

00;10;32 - 00;10;45

WILL CAO: Zhejiang University, which was the best in my province. It was also one of the best in China, like number three or number four in China.

00;10;45 - 00;10;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what major or field of study—**[WILL CAO: English.]** Interesting. Why?

00;10;52 - 00;11;47

WILL CAO: English was my best subject in middle school and high school. So that was one reason. The, the other thing, I used to dream to be a reporter. I always listened to radio like BBC and VOA listening to those news reports, given by those reporters back from war zones, foreign countries. I was very much interested in the life of their kind of reporters. So definitely language is the first thing you have to have as the basic skills. So that was why I always wanted to pick English as my major.

00;11;47 - 00;12;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: I am sitting in your office today, in your medical practice, so clearly something changed. What happened?

00;12;00 - 00;14;47

WILL CAO: Oh, yeah. So, my mother's side, her family has a long tradition of traditional Chinese medicine. Her grandmother was a great doctor, very famous in her hometown. I never met her. She died before I was born. She was tortured to death during the Cultural Revolution. So in old times, some traditional Chinese medical doctors, they were kind of half doctor and half witch, so she was regarded as a superstitious figure, and it was cracked down by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Yeah. So my mother told me about this story. Definitely.

She did not expect me to be a doctor. She has a lot of skills in a medicine. She could easily fix me when I was young can easily fix me with some very simple skills, like scraping my neck and back to treat sunstroke. She also used some herbs, got some herbs from backyard. So I always had that kind of family background. I think it is in my genes. And later on, my mother in law, she was also a traditional Chinese doctor. So I think it was probably it was destiny. So, finally, I decided to be an acupuncturist and a Chinese doctor to help people be healthier because the Chinese way of living, the concept of health, it is so different. Our modern society emphasizes a lot about efficiency, everybody needs to work really hard to reach the highest level they can reach working really hard, which brings them a lot of stress. So I saw a lot of people like that. So that was why I want to help people, to correct I would say, or to promote more information to them, how to lead a better life, how to lead a healthier life in a more relaxed, healthy way.

00;14;47 - 00;14;57

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So, did you ultimately change your major from English to science, or did you finish with that in college?

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WILL CAO: I finished my college with English. My job was related with the English. I got my master's degree from UCF, actually, in international relations, and I got my PhD from UCF in the same field. So I am more a researcher, a social science researcher I would call myself. I also used to teach at Valenciana and UCF as an adjunct professor. But as I said, I felt like my passion is more in the traditional Chinese medicine. I felt more rewarded, when I see people get better with my help with only very simple treatment, they can become so much better and feel, so much rewarded from that.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So did you attend medical school in China?

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WILL CAO: I did not attend professional medical schools in China. As I said, both my moms [were] Chinese medical doctors. My mother in law is more professionally trained in a modern, traditional Chinese medicine university. She is still practicing back in Beijing as a traditional Chinese medicine doctor. My mom is more a freelance, traditional skills passed down by family traditions. I was heavily influenced by them. But I did not receive very formal college education back in China. I did attend an acupuncture school here in Orlando, Florida College of Integrative Medicine. So I got a degree from there and got my license here.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Interesting. And before we get to that. What did you do after college in China in terms of [your] profession?

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WILL CAO: Yeah. So I worked for the Inter-Parliamentary relations department in China's, National People's Congress, which is the national parliament. So I traveled a lot abroad. I worked with officials from other parliaments of other countries to promote people to people

relations. That was what I did before. Yeah. So that was why I chose international relations as my subject.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how long did you work in that occupation. What years?

00;17;54 - 00;18;01

WILL CAO: I left Beijing in 2013. So altogether twelve years.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So around 2001.

00;18;04 - 00;18;12

WILL CAO: Yeah I graduated from college in 2001. Yeah. So twelve years.

00;18;12 - 00;18;33

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What did you learn about China—its politics, its culture, but also its standing with the world through that position? Since you were in contact with so many other different parliamentary, especially during this period where China continues to expand and be more open.

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WILL CAO: Exactly. Yeah. China swiftly rose to be an economic power definitely in the world. I can definitely experience the difference. China was a big country even before that. But I felt that China is more and more a positive force on the world stage after its economy took off, its influence, people's image about China. So during that period of time, I did experience that other countries, their views, their attitudes towards China had changed a lot. Definitely. I think in a very positive way.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And relatedly, do you think—especially with your upbringing and your parents upbringing and those stories of the Cultural Revolution and even your grandma—in what ways has the regime changed their practices towards people?

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WILL CAO: China is very different now. I think the government now definitely has changed a lot as compared to that of Mao's time. People's living standard is hugely changed. If you go to China, some places, like my home town, it is very modernized. It is very urbanized, even more beautiful than most places here in the United States. Very clean, modern technologies like, subways, especially high speed trains, you can reach almost every major city in a few hours. I would say huge changes. So if you watch some YouTubers they have videos recently taken in China. I have not been back to China since the pandemic. So even myself, I was amazed by the change that has taken place in the last ten to twenty years.

00;21;10 - 00;21;37

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Since you were there, I am asking this question. Some have pointed to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, sort of as a moment, as a symbol of China's position in the world stage and opening to other countries and whatnot. Do you recall any memorable moments from that time in 2008?

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WILL CAO: Yeah, I was in Beijing at that moment. I remember I [felt] very much proud as Chinese, especially the opening ceremony, the elements of the Chinese culture, the theme song in Chinese and English. Yeah. It was directed by one of the most famous movie directors. It was awesome. I think many Chinese, even a lot of foreigners, they watched the opening ceremony. It was very organized. The government spent huge amount of money on this, and in Beijing, they renovated a lot of places, invested huge money in infrastructure, so for citizens, for the city dwellers, residents, it definitely was a great thing. It brought a lot of positive things to China, to Beijing, both materially and spiritually. So I think you are right. It was one of the major times that China became more positive or more obvious, eye-catching, on the war stage.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: A few years later, in 2013, you left. So I know you mentioned masters and whatnot, but what were some of the circumstances that led you to leave China, and did you ever envision leaving?

00;23;25 - 00;25;01

WILL CAO: I did not envision to leave because well there were many opportunities in China. The major reasons why I left number one is environmental reason. So because of the fast economic development, there was a lot of pollution in China. In Beijing every year there were so-called sandstorms. I do not know if you have heard of it. So big winds will bring sands from Mongolia, Siberia, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, all the way to Beijing. So, like in each spring, we will have a few sandstorms. The whole air is filled of sand, coming together with the winds it can sweep all the way to Korea and Japan. So every year in spring, it was terrible. And also because of the pollution. At that moment, my son was just born. So I really do not want my child to live in that kind of atmosphere and a very accidentally, I got accepted to the PhD program at UCF. So they gave me a scholarship. So, without many calculation or planning, I just took it and quit my job and came here with my wife and my little child.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Especially since you lived at that point thirty plus years in China, in what ways did your perceptions about the US change once you came here?

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WILL CAO: I would not call myself a very good observer of the society because most of the time I stick to the Chinese community here, because of language barriers, cultural differences. I do not have many friends who are local residents. We do have some friends, but not many. But I do feel a little bit change here. So I was here in 2009 to 2010 for my master's degree. I went back and then came back in 2013. So within three years I felt a difference. The first time I came here, I bought a car. I easily got an insurance car plan. But when I came here the second time, I called the same company. I told them I was insured by them. I did not have any accidents, any

claims, but they just did not want to give me anything. You know, they refused to give me a car insurance plan. So I was looking really hard. And because I did not have any credit history, I was looking really hard for a car insurance plan, and I could not find one. So finally, one of one of our friends here helped us, add my name to their car insurance plan. And for half year, I stayed on their, accumulated some credit history, and then I was able to find a plan on my own name. I talked to some agents. "Why this happened? Because the first time I came, there was nothing like that." And one agent told me, she said, because there were a lot of fraud issues. So that was why insurance companies changed their policies.

I do not know how long you been living in Orlando. The first time I came here, the sky was pure blue. Pure blue, a hundred percent. And I would say, except for the storms, you can see the sky was so blue. Nowadays it is more like New York, the sky. The sky color is more like that of New York. It is kind of bluish grayish not pure blue. I went to Sarasota a few days ago. I saw that blue sky again. So there have been more and more people coming to Orlando, definitely. When we first came here, there were a lot of woods. Now a lot of woods being cut down, became shopping centers, apartment buildings, which is good for the economy because more people are moving into Central Florida. Traffic is another big change, I noticed, I always travel on Highway 429. When I moved [into] that area, like five years ago, six years ago, there was almost no traffic on 429. Now it is full of cars, traffic jam almost every day. So big change.

00;28;48 - 00;29;11

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how have you, on one hand maintained your Chinese heritage and culture living now in America for ten plus years, but also what has your immigrant experience been like?

00;29;11 - 00;30;20

WILL CAO: Yeah. So I think I slowly get melted into the pot here. Regarding myself as a local resident, because the growth on my kids. They made a lot of friends, and their friends parents become our friends. I feel like more and more becoming an Orlando resident, a Floridian. But I would say many of my Chinese friends, most of them, they still hang out with the Chinese, stick to the Chinese community. Also, the Chinese community is becoming larger and larger in recent years, especially the Oriental markets, used to be very empty. Now it is full of people. The parking lot is always full.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me about your practice here. When did you start it? What is your mission here? Your office is really beautiful. And I see a lot of Chinese script. How have you maintained your heritage through the space?

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WILL CAO: So this is a new practice. It started actually last August. But it officially open, since January this year. It was not big, but I try to make it as beautiful as possible to help the local population, because acupuncture, Chinese medicine definitely is a long tradition of the Chinese culture, Chinese medicine. So I want to be a modern clinic, but also at the same time, to have some Chinese elements here, so I can serve the not just the benefits of the local

population, but to fit their taste about the combination of modern science and the traditional Chinese heritage.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what is the name of the practice?

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WILL CAO: It is called Lang Acupuncture Wellness Center.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You are involved in the scientific community more broadly, the medical community. When the pandemic hit, there was a surge of anti-Chinese sentiments. And I am curious not only as a Chinese American yourself, but someone that is involved in medicine, did you experience any—what was your experience like?

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WILL CAO: We did not. We read most of the reports on TV, online, but we did not have any hate issues towards us. We live in a very good community in Winter Garden, in the western part of Orange County. We were very much scared, definitely at the beginning. But we actually had a very happy life during the pandemic because we went shopping cautiously. We barely went out. We stayed at home most of the time, but still got connected with our relatives, family back in China, with friends locally. We were very cautious. But at the same time, we spend most of the time at home. So kids started to do home school, and they got very well with that kind of atmosphere. We did not know that before pandemic. They went to the local public schools. They did well. But, not as successfully as they did later when we started homeschool. So both my kids, they got really in advance during the pandemic with their education and, we are very thankful, when we look back, we felt very thankful. Because with the help of Chinese medicine, we were very healthy during—we got the stuff, definitely, but with very minor symptoms. We got the shots. We follow all the guidelines. So it was a pretty smooth and nice, and we got more time with the kids. So actually was a very happy experience for our family for sure.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Few questions left. What challenges does Orlando face today from your perspective?

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WILL CAO: From my perspective, the development of the economy so fast and the coming of new residents so fast. I think the development of the infrastructure. We see [the] buildings of roads and bridges everywhere. But it seems that is still not good enough to follow up the speed of people coming in. I know the government is working really hard. I guess the county government, the city government, they are doing a great job, but still, I think more infrastructure needs to be done, a lot of issues needs to be addressed, especially the traffic issue for me.

00;35;43 - 00;35;7

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How has Orlando changed since 2013?

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WILL CAO: As I mentioned, the first thing is the environmental change. So remember, I told you, I moved here from Beijing mainly because of environmental reasons, so I focused a lot on the change of the environment. So we noticed a lot of woods being cut down, which I fully understand because the human development, we need more lands to be used to support the incoming population. The difficult thing is to how to find a balance between economic development and environmental protection and also the building of infrastructure to support the people living on this land. There is a lot of change, definitely. But I think all the changes are towards the positive direction. I think Orlando is becoming more and more famous. It is famous in the United States. Everybody knows Disney is here. But before when I talk to my friends back in China, many of them know Orlando Magic because a lot of people watch NBA [National Basketball Association], but a lot of people do not know Disney. They do not know what Orlando is like, what the economy is like, what Florida is like even. Most of the people know New York, California, Washington DC, but they do not have much idea, much knowledge about Florida, Orlando. But now I think more and more people, they know Orlando, they know Florida.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: From your perspective, how do you think Orlando will change in the next twenty five years.

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WILL CAO: Next twenty five years? Definitely, I think, it will become more and more an international city because I know there are more international flights. Before it was difficult to travel to Asia. Now, I know this year there will be a new direct line between South Korea and Orlando. I know Orlando had direct flights to many European cities as well. Latin American cities. Definitely. Orlando will become one of the major cities in in the south of America.

00;38;19 - 00;38;29

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How has your Chinese heritage influence your perspective on life generally and living in Central Florida specifically?

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WILL CAO: I have not thought [about] that a lot. Some things, definitely it is in your blood. It is in your genes. For example, food is so difficult to change. So we always shop at the Asian market. We shop at local markets like Costco, Target, Walmart as well, a lot. But we can never stop shopping at the Asian market. Some vegetables are only available there. And also I think, Asian way of life is more—because we have scarce of resources in Asia, we have relatively more population. America is a rich country for a long time, people got used to wealthy life. They open the tap, there is clean water they can drink directly from the tap. It is not possible even not possible in many cities in China today. So I think the Asian way of life is more environmentally friendly. So saving more and not spending too much. Probably that is the only two things I can think of now.

00;40;15 - 00;40;27

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And lastly, if someone is listening to this recording fifty or a hundred years from now, what do you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida?

00;40;27 - 00;42;52

WILL CAO: Each culture has its beautiful factors, characteristics. Chinese culture is a very old and very rich culture. I am part of it and proud of it. I want my children to learn more about the Chinese culture. You know, they can read, they can speak the language. But they can barely write the Chinese characters, which is a pity. That was my responsibility. I did not teach them a lot, but I do hope when, China rises, when it steps into the center of the international community, more and more people can look more positively towards the culture, could stay away those politically motivated agendas and look at each culture more objectively to learn from each culture. I love Vietnamese food, Indian food, Mexican food. My kids love all different kinds of foods. I bring them to different places, culture, events. I want to them to know that in today's world it is not possible [to] stay within one culture, [to] stay within only your community. Our world is so mixed up, especially here in the United States. I think, in the next fifty years, I hope I can live that long to that day, I see more and more people, more communication. We will be definitely in a very different world after so many years, after decades of years. I hope people will love each other more, live in more harmony and a peace, enjoy each other's culture. More peace, more friendship. No more wars, no more confrontations. But that is my dream—I know it is not quite possible—within the next fifty years.

00;42;52 - 00;42;59

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Doctor Will, thank you so much for taking some time out of your busy day to speak with me and share your life story. I really appreciate it.

00;43;00 - 00;43;04

WILL CAO: Thank you, Sebastian. Thank you for this opportunity. I am happy to share my views.