

East-West Center Oral History Project: Victor Li



Victor Li

Victor Hao Li was President of EWC from 1981-1989. Born in Hong Kong, Li taught Chinese and international law at University of Michigan, Columbia University and Stanford University before coming to the Center. Li's tenure was marked by: a major reorganization; the 25th anniversary celebration; the dedication of Imin International Conference Center at Jefferson Hall keynoted by Secretary of State George Schultz; the launching of the First Hawaiian Lecture Series by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt; and the start of several new programs including CTAPS (Consortium for Teaching Asia/Pacific in Schools), the New Generation Seminar for young leaders, and the Hawaii International Film Festival. The eighties were also marked by numerous visits by heads of state. Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang made Hawaii his first stop on his first official U.S. visit in 1984 after a personal invitation from Dr. Li. Of these visitors, including Prime Minister Tanaka, the Crown Prince of Japan, and Prime Minister Prem of Thailand, Li says, "These visitors reaffirmed the importance of the Center to the Asia/Pacific region, and made a strong impression in Washington."

Read Li's interview narrative (see separate pdf)

- **Personal Background**
- **Life Before EWC** - Teaching Law
- **Intellectual Innovations** - Uniqueness of EWC
- **Life at EWC** - President of EWC, 1981 - Early Years as President - "Lobbying" Congress - 1985: EWC's 25th Anniversary - Prominent Visitors - Challenges
- **Ties That Last** - The Alumni Network
- **Life After EWC** - Work in China - 'The Smile Train'

Interview Quotes

“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 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.”

These narratives, which reflect interviewees’ personal perceptions, opinions and memories, may contain errors of fact. They do not reflect positions or versions of history officially approved by the East-West Center.

LINK (as of 06/12/2020)

<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/research/research-information-services/oral-history-project/victor-li>