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Tel: 6223 1264
Fax: 6224 7827
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Uncovering the Truth

- INTERVIEW WITH DR HENRY LEE

By Dr Cuthbert Teo, Editorial Board Member

Dr Henry C Lee is one of the world's foremost forensic scientists. He was a prominent player in many of the most challenging cases in the last 45 years, making him an icon in modern day criminal investigations. Having consulted for more than 800 law enforcement agencies, he has helped to solve more than 7,000 cases around the world. Known for finding the tiniest clues, he has even solved a murder without a body.

Dr Lee's testimony was crucial in the O J Simpson trial and the conviction of the "Woodchipper" murderer. Other famous cases include the JonBenét Ramsey murder, the 1993 suicide of White House Counsel Vincent Foster, the Laci Peterson case and the re-investigation of the Kennedy assassination. He also looked into the Washington, DC sniper shootings, 3-19 shooting incident of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian and Vice-president Annette Lu, the death of Thai Citizen Party MP Hangthong Thammawattana in Bangkok and worked on the post-9/11 forensic investigations.

In addition, Dr Lee has authored hundreds of articles in professional journals and co-authored more than 30 books. His recent books *Famous Crimes Revisited* and *Cracking More Cases: The Forensic Science Textbook* and *Blood Evidence* have been well-received by the educators and the public.



For his work, he received the 1996 Medal of Justice from the Justice Foundation and the Distinguished Criminalist Award from the American Academy of Forensic Sciences among many others. He is also a recipient of 11 honorary doctorate degrees from various universities, in recognition of his contributions to Law and Science.

Dr Lee is currently working as the Chief Emeritus for the Connecticut Department of Public Safety, Division of Scientific Services, and as Distinguished Chair Professor at the University of New Haven. He lives in the United States with his wife of 40 years, Margaret and their two grown children, Sherry and Stanley.

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Dr Cuthbert Teo: Where and how did you meet your wife Mrs Margaret Lee?

Dr Henry Lee: (*Laughs*) How I met my wife? A long story. It is 45 years ago. I was a young police captain in Taiwan. My wife came from Sarawak, Malaysia. She was getting her bachelor's degree from National Taiwan Normal University. However, somehow she forgot to extend her VISA for three years. That was a violation of immigration laws. In the early days in Taiwan, immigration was run by the police. At that time, I was young and working pretty long hours and working pretty hard. People wanted to fix me up to slow me down and when she came to the police station, they told her that it was a serious matter and she had to see the captain. That was how we first met. It was love at first sight and of course, I helped her to extend her VISA. We started dating and subsequently got married.

CT: That sounds very interesting. So did that have something to do with you leaving Taiwan in 1963 to work as a reporter and editor in a newspaper in Sarawak.

HL: Yes. When we wanted to get married, both our families were against it. In the early days, the image of a police captain was usually someone who is very old with long beard, long fingernails, like in the 19th century Chinese movies. So her father thought his daughter was marrying a corrupted old man and decided to oppose the marriage. My mother was against it too because my father passed away when I was very young and she single-handedly raised all 13 kids and everybody got a degree before they got married.

Subsequently, my wife's father came to Taiwan, looked at me and realised his daughter's choice is correct. So he agreed to the marriage under one condition that I had to go back to her hometown and marry again. So legally, I am married twice. My mother agreed to our marriage when I promised her I will finish my doctor's degree.

CT: So you actually went back to Sarawak to get married a second time?

HL: Right. Her relatives and friends came and witnessed that she did not marry an old man with



long fingernails. So we got married in Sarawak again and I had to find a job there, which was as a reporter in the local newspaper.

CT: You had actually quit the police force at that time, did you?

HL: Yes because in Taiwan, when you leave the country, you have to quit your government position. I then applied for university and was accepted with a scholarship to go to the United States (US) to study. Before I came to US, I was in Sarawak for a whole year. It just happened that the local newspaper was looking for a reporter and I got the job.

I worked for about a year and three months later, they had an opening for the assistant



Dr Teo Eng Swee Cuthbert is a forensic pathologist by training, with a special interest in work against child abuse. Since doing disaster victim identification (DVI) work in Phuket after the December 2004 tsunami, he has taken a strong interest in doing charity work. It is good for the soul and he recommends it for anyone. DVI work was a truly life changing experience, and he has learned to be less uptight and more forgiving.

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editor's job and they promoted me as assistant editor. Six months later, they promoted me as chief editor.

CT: When you were a police captain in the Taipei Police Department, what was your motivation to become a captain at such a young age of 22?

HL: Well, Taiwan has an excellent police education system. If you want to be a patrol officer, you go to a police academy for two years. If you want to be an officer, you go to a four years' university, so that after you graduate, you become a lieutenant. If you perform well, meet all the requirements and pass the national examinations, you become a captain.

I was working at the foreign affairs police office for a while and was assigned to the detective unit. I became interested in investigating with forensic science and that was why I made up my mind to come to US to study. Because in Taiwan, they were still using traditional forensic identification techniques such as fingerprints, footprints and photographs, and I wanted to learn more about the advanced forensic techniques.

CT: When you went to do your Masters and PhD in biochemistry at New York University, was biochemistry a conscious choice since you already knew you wanted to do forensic science?

HL: Yes. When I first came to US, I attended the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the City University of New York. It is one of the few schools which have forensic science majors.

To make a living, I found a job at New York University Medical Centre, which was within walking distance to the College. It was pretty convenient as after a whole day's work, I can just run for school to study at night. I finished four years' college in two years, which was significant because when I came to the United States, I was already much older than the rest of the students.

At the Medical Centre, I worked for a Nobel Prize molecular biologist and he encouraged me to study biochemistry. Since at that time, no university offered a doctor's degree in forensic science, I

decided that the closest area was either chemistry or biochemistry. Thus, I chose biochemistry as my career.

CT: Did you play any sports while you were at John Jay College?

HL: Yes. I chose self-defence karate and kungfu.

CT: I heard that you have a black belt in karate.

HL: In Taiwan, if you graduate from the police university, you have to have a black belt. I started learning kungfu when I was only 4-year-old and so I am pretty good at it.

CT: How did you eventually end up at the University of New Haven after doing your PhD in New York?

HL: After I finish my doctor's degree, my research advisor and also my boss, Dr Severo Ochoa, wanted me to stay. At that time, my sister also teaches molecular biology and she was already very established. Molecular biology then was a really hard field and all of them persuaded me to stay in biochemistry. However, I was really interested in forensic science. In 1975, forensic science in US

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had just begun so I see it as a way for me to go back to what I was really interested in.

It happened that the University of New Haven was looking for an assistant professor. I applied for the job and they offered me the position despite being reluctant initially. They said my qualifications, publications, research and experience were superior to the other candidates except that I am Chinese. In the early days in US, there was still some discrimination. They think we, Chinese, cannot speak English fluently. However, the students attended my seminar – usually you have to give a two-hour talk about your research – and liked it so much that the students voted and they wanted me to be their teacher. The students override the faculty's decision and in 1975, I joined the University as an assistant professor.

CT: As the director of forensic science?

HL: Yes. In three years, I became a full professor and the director of forensic science.

CT: You mentioned that there was some discrimination against the Chinese. Did you have to do some of the dirty work that your bosses ask you to do which the others did not have to do?

HL: Well, as an academician, teaching is not really any dirty work, just that I have to teach more courses at odd hours, like in the early morning or late afternoon. Those are timings that most professors do not want. I really do not care. I enjoy teaching and doing research so much. Students work with me six days a week and around the clock. That is why a lot of my students who have graduated to become doctors, judges or physicians, they all come back to see me. Some students even make contributions to scholarships to help others.

CT: In terms of the forensic work itself, were you asked to do the actual searching, say for example, if something was found in a rubbish dump?

HL: Yes, that was later in 1976 and the police asked me to be an advisor or consultant for the forensic laboratory and police departments.

CT: Did you find it difficult to overcome this discrimination?

HL: No, not really. Yesterday I was delivering a lecture to some 900 people. I told them in forensic work, there is no shortcut. That is so important. Even as a professor, no matter how many degrees you have, you still might not know how to do it. Just like a reporter, you have to start from ground zero. To write a good article, you have to walk on the streets and talk to people. But if you got a doctor's degree but never work as a reporter before, yes, maybe you know how to write but you really do not know how to dig up a story.

CT: You have been assisting various states in many cases and also helped in the defense. More recently, you have been involved in the music producer Phil Spector's case where there were some news reports that criticised your work. Do you find it stressful to get involved in controversial cases like this? Do you get upset when the attorneys attacked your integrity?

HL: Well, Chinese have an old saying: "If you are famous, everybody tries to attack you; when pigs get fatter, they get to go to the slaughter house." and "When trees become too big, they become lumber." I have been in the forensic field for more than 47 years now and have probably worked on about 7,000 cases. Of course, those cases do not measure how fair we are. But in every case, only one side is going to like us, the other side will definitely attack us.

When our findings indicate that this person is a murderer and he is guilty as charged, definitely his family is not going to like us. If we say this person is innocent and has been wrongfully arrested by the police, of course, the prosecutor and the police are going to hate us too. So there is nothing you can do about the nature of the case. You just have to follow the evidence, be objective and totally unbiased. History will prove everything.

For the Spector case, history has now proven that the prosecutor and the police were wrong. The judge's ruling was totally wrong. So the jury did not believe the prosecutor and the police and did not convict Phil Spector not only once but twice. So you can see that the jury can see the truth. Of course later, the witness officially claimed I did not take any fingernails. The newspapers did not cover her new statement because they only wanted to cover controversial stories.

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CT: Why did you start the Henry C Lee Institute of Forensic Science (IFS) at the University of New Haven, Connecticut. How did you obtain the funding for this institute?

HL: There are so many cases to be solved and I have already reached the career peak now. I have already retired three times but everybody still wants me to continue. I realised that each of us has a limit and it was time to train the younger people to continue the work. That was why I set up an institute.

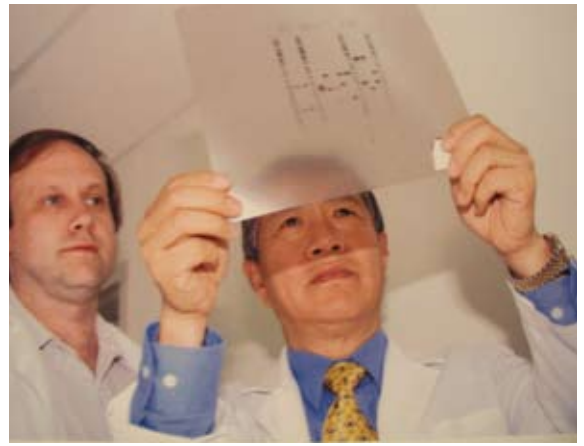
The funds from this institute basically come from three different sources. The first is grants from the government – federal government, state government. Three years ago, the government gave me \$2 million to set up a National Crime Scene Training Centre to train the detectives around the country. We develop the new forensic techniques and people from all over the world come here to study the forensic techniques.

Last year, the government gave me another \$1 million to set up the National Cold Case Centre, which specialises in investigating cold cases. In the United States, an average of 30% of homicides are unsolved, 50% of sex crimes are unsolved, above 60% of burglaries and arson cases are unsolved. Those cold cases need special skills to solve them so we provide training. We help the police officers and detectives, who bring their cases to the institute and the faculty, to re-investigate the cases.

A couple of weeks ago, the federal government's new budget included almost a million dollars grant for us. They also funded a new project to set up a National Forensic Crisis Management and Investigation Centre.

The second source of funds is myself. I donate my lecture fees or consultation income to the institute.

The third source is public donations. We have individuals who donate the money and recently, the CEO of a computer company donated \$2 million. He thinks that this is a very worthwhile project because we not only train US detectives and forensic scientists but include the whole world and provide them with an opportunity to learn and go back to



their countries to make a good contribution. That really is a good deed and good cause.

CT: Do you have some dreams for the IFS in future?

HL: We are currently trying to raise funds to construct a building, which is going to have a museum, a learning centre and a training centre. The museum will keep pieces of history because there are a lot of old cases with historical stuff and there is no central deposit. In future if somebody, for example, a writer who is interested in the cases or a young person who wants to study forensic, they can come to the museum to look at the historical records and the real facts of certain cases. This is because sometimes television series will not depict the real story.

Like a learning centre that is not only for college students, we also want to provide the public with a place to see the real forensic stuff. Many of them get the wrong concept from watching movies, *CSI* and other detective shows.

Lastly, we hope to provide national and international training for visiting students, scholars, and anyone who wants to study, research and look at the development of forensic science.

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CT: Dr Lee, you mentioned about these *CSI* shows. Do you think that these television shows have glamourised forensic work too much?

HL: Well, they still have a positive side. The positive side is public awareness for forensic science and the importance of criminal investigation. Of course, the negative side is that younger people will believe what they see in movies are real. For instance, when watching kungfu movies, they might believe that it is real somebody can jump to the top of the roof and can really use *qigong* and push somebody up till 30 feet away. Similarly, when watching *CSI*, they might think forensic scientists drive convertibles, live in style, eat in fancy restaurants, drink wine that costs \$500 a bottle, kick the door and beat people up. But in reality we do not do that.

CT: Do you consult on any of these shows?

HL: Yes, many shows consult me. I also have my own true crime stories show called *Trace Evidence: The Case Files of Dr Henry Lee*. It became very popular and received three awards. Next year, CCTV channel is going to film 30 episodes for true crime stories.

CT: Are there any characters in the shows that you consult on that are based on you?

HL: In real life, there are many times when the medical examiner or the crime scene investigator consult me. In a couple of movies, they used a Chinese actor and try to say that is me.

CT: A colleague of mine is reviewing your novel *Cracking More Cases: The Forensic Science of Solving Crimes* and she felt that you seemed to be deeply affected by the tragedies that you investigated. Are there any particular cases that stand out to you?

HL: Yes. There are many times when you see young victims or senior citizens who cannot help themselves. However, the violent crimes take their lives or destroy their lives. I sympathise with those victims. Let's say two drug dealers kill each other or two gangsters shoot one another, those are the violent crimes that do not get my sympathy.

To illustrate, I worked on a case which involved a family of three – a 72-year-old lady, Mary, with a 44-year-old son, Joey, who was mentally retarded

and blind, and an 8-year-old granddaughter, Lena. One night, somebody broke into their house and killed them. Joey was stabbed 37 times, Mary 24 times and Lena, the young girl, 14 times. Their throats were cut. It was a terrible tragedy. Why would somebody want to kill them? They are innocent victims. I sympathise with the family although the newspapers did not cover the story because they were poor. Nobody cares. The newspapers always talk about the rich and famous and cover sensational stories so they probably did not want to talk about this case. But for us, these cases are given more importance to solve than cases where the rich people have sex scandals.

CT: Do you see the IFS as a source of expertise to people who may not be able to have access to forensic expertise because of poverty? Do you see a role for IFS for that?

HL: Yes, definitely. One of our objectives is to help poor people who cannot get proper defence or poor people who have cases that police cannot pay much attention on. Those cases definitely warrant spending some resources to assist them.

CT: Dr Lee, you have lectured quite often in Singapore. Can you tell me what are your thoughts and feelings about Singapore?

HL: Singapore is a beautiful country which is very clean. I travel around the world and probably lectured to two-thirds of all the countries. In comparison, Singapore is very orderly. Although there are a lot of people, everything looks orderly and everybody appears to be very happy. So it is kind of like a peaceful life.

The Singapore police and the forensic people are also doing a wonderful job. The former chief medical examiner, Prof Chao Tzee Cheng, was a personal friend. We knew each other for almost 30 years. I visited the Centre for Forensic Medicine many times. He attended my class before and he was an excellent medical examiner. I also lectured to the Singapore police many times.

Of course, my wife likes Singapore too because when she was in Sarawak, she was the basketball captain and always came to Singapore to attend tournaments. So she has a lot of old friends there. We plan to visit Singapore again this coming May.

CT: Dr Lee, you give a lot of talks and I think you are very much sought after as a speaker.

HL: If I may tell you my life, in 1965 when I came to US, I never dreamt that people would want to pay money to attend my lectures. Now, I belong to the Washington Speakers Bureau and am paid about \$10,000 for a one-hour talk.

CT: If you had to give advice based on your long experience on how to be successful in one's chosen career, what would that advice be?

HL: Just last week, I was in Harvard giving a speech and was telling the students that when I was young, I wanted to attend Harvard but they told me I was too poor and did not have the money to pay the tuition fees. When I grew up and had saved a bit of money, they said I did not have the grade. Now when I am getting old, they have to pay me to lecture.

What this means is pretty simple. Just pick a field which you are interested in and work hard and strive for the best. I often tell people there are three categories of people in this world. The first category is people who make things happen. The second category is people who watch things happen. The third category is people who wonder what had happened. I encourage students to be in the first category – make things happen.

To make things happen, you have to learn how to manage your time, develop your technical skills and develop your communication and interpersonal skills. All these skills are mandatory for success. But each of us has a limit. The first thing is to know what your limit is. If you are not good in science, do not pick that specific field. For example, when I was in high school, I wanted to play professional basketball. But I realised that I do not have Yao Ming's chromosome or Michael Jordan's DNA. I cannot be that tall so I have a limit. Pick an area and know your limit. I enjoy science and logic. I enjoy solving cases so that is why I picked an area in forensic science. So once you know your limit, "Set the limit of No limit". Do not let people tell you "No way." When I first came to US, people told me "No way. As a police officer, how can you study molecular biology?" When I joined the university to teach, people told me I have language problems. I did not listen to "No way" and within three years,

There is nothing you can do about the nature of the case. You just have to follow the evidence, be objective and totally unbiased. History will prove everything.

I became the Professor of the Year consecutively. Then when I became a laboratory director, a lot of people said: "No way. This is a Caucasians' world. Never had a Chinese been a laboratory director." But I did it. And of course, when I became a commissioner, never in US history had a minority been a police commissioner. But I did it too. You have to prove yourself to the world that you can do it. You have to prove to the world that anybody can do anything. Just put your heart and mind in it.

CT: One last question. You said you retired three times already. Do you ever dream of putting up your feet and really retiring for real?

HL: Yes, I do. However, at this moment, I still have about 800 cold cases sent to me from different parts of the world. So even with my lifetime, I do not think I can finish those 800 cases. Probably I will not take any new cases unless they really require my help.

Right now, I am also working on another four books. And I have a television series project which I have signed a contract with CCTV so I have to finish it.

And of course, we still have to build the institute. So once all those are finished, definitely I will put my feet up. I might devote my time to education. That is my love and career dream to help our next generation.

CT: Thank you very much for your time.

HL: It is my pleasure and thank you. ■

Editors' Note:

The review of Cracking More Cases can be found on page 14.