

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

NORMAN N. LI

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

James G. Traynham

at

Mount Prospect, Illinois

on

5 May 2000

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## NORMAN N. LI

1933 Born in Shanghai, China, on 14 January

### Education

1954 B.A., chemical engineering, National Taiwan University, Taipei  
1957 M.S., chemical engineering, Wayne State University  
1963 Ph.D., chemical engineering, Stevens Institute of Technology

### Professional Experience

1963-1981 Exxon Research and Engineering Co., Linden, NJ  
Senior Research Scientist

1981-1988 UOP Co., Des Plains, IL  
Director of Separation Science and Technology

1988-1995 Allied Signal Co., Des Plains, IL  
Director of Research and Technology

1995-present NL Chemical Technology Inc., Arlington Heights, IL  
Chief Executive Officer

### Honors

1980 Chairman, Industrial and Engineering Chemistry Division, American Chemical Society

1988 Alpha Chi Sigma Award for Chemical Engineering Research, American Institute of Chemical Engineers

1988 Separation Science and Technology Award, American Chemical Society

1989 Fellow, American Institute of Chemical Engineers

1990 Member, National Academy of Engineering

1992 Director, American Institute of Chemical Engineers

1995 Special Symposium in Honor of Dr. N. N. Li, American Institute of Chemical Engineers

1995 Ernest W. Thiel Award, American Institute of Chemical Engineers

1996 Member, Acedemis Sinica

1998 Member, Chinese Academy of Sciences

- 2000 Perkin Medal, Society of Chemical Industry, American Section
- 2000 Chemical Engineering Practice Award, American Institute of Chemical Engineers
- 2000 Special Symposium in Honor of Dr. N. N. Li, American Institute of Chemical Engineers
- 2001 Fujimura Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Technology Cooperation and Development, American Institute of Chemical Engineers and World Congress of Chemical Engineering, Melbourne, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Norman Li begins the interview with a description of his family and childhood years in Fuzhou, China. After World War II, Li's family moved to Taiwan, where Li completed high school. Li then attended National Taiwan University, where he majored in chemical engineering, receiving his B.A. in 1954. Li's father encouraged him to further his education in the United States. Li attended Wayne State University, where he benefited from the care, support, and assurance of Professor Harold Donnelly. He received his M.S. in chemical engineering in 1957, and then attended Stevens Institute of Technology, receiving his Ph.D. in 1963. Li accepted a position in the Process Division of Exxon Research and Engineering Company. Early in his career at Exxon, Li began thinking about liquid-membrane technology and applications. While with Exxon, Li received a combined total of forty-four patents on either hydrocarbon separations or facilitated transport. Li was approached by Mary Good about a new career opportunity at UOP Co. After much deliberation, Li decided to make the move from research to research administration, becoming Director of Separation Science and Technology at UOP in 1981. As soon as he arrived at UOP, Li wrote a proposal that established a liquid-membrane research program. Li left UOP in 1988, joining Mary Good at Allied Signal Co. In 1995, Li decided to "retire" from Allied Signal and establish his own consulting firm, NL Chemical Technology, Inc. Li concludes the interview with a discussion of the future of chemical R&D, reflections on winning the Perkin Medal, and thoughts on his family.

## INTERVIEWER

James G. Traynham is a Professor of Chemistry at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. He holds a Ph.D. in organic chemistry from Northwestern University. He joined Louisiana State University in 1963 and served as chemistry department chairperson from 1968 to 1973. He was chairman of the American Chemical Society's Division of the History of Chemistry in 1988 and is currently councilor of the Baton Rouge section of the American Chemical Society. He was a member of the American Chemical Society's Joint-Board Council on Chemistry and Public Affairs, as well as a member of the Society's Committees on Science, Chemical Education, and Organic Chemistry Nomenclature. He has written over ninety publications, including a book on organic nomenclature and a book on the history of organic chemistry.

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