

**Houston Asian American Archive**  
**Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

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Interviewee: Frank Tsuru  
Interviewers: Helen Pu, AnhThu Dong  
Date of Interview: 02/06/20  
Transcribed by: AnhThu Dong, Helen Pu  
Edited by: Youngbin Lee, Ann Shi  
Audio Track Time: 1:11:32

Background:

Frank Tsuru was born in Chicago, Illinois on March 2nd, 1960. His grandparents and parents experienced living in Kooskia Internment Camp in Idaho during WWII and were later released after around a year. Instead of resentment towards the American government, Frank's parents felt ashamed for what the Japanese government has done, and tried to instill a more American identity onto him, and to earn their trust as Japanese-American citizens. Since the age of 7, he was an avid boy scout in the Eagle Scout, and is currently the President of National Eagle Scout Association. He attended the University of Kansas, where he self-funded all the tuition, and graduated as a Petroleum Engineer, which he has pursued as a career ever since. He has started and sold seven companies to this day, and currently serves as the CEO of a pipeline company he started, as well as the CEO of a oil and gas company that his partner had started. He holds a steadfast Christian faith, and is committed to contributing in the non-profits including serving as honorary co-chair at the Asia Society Texas Center.

Setting: This interview was conducted in Rice University's Fondren Library. Helen Pu and AnhThu Dong interviewed Frank Tsuru, who shared his experiences growing up in America as a Japanese-American. The interview lasted around an hour.

Key:

**FT:** Frank Tsuru

**HP:** Helen Pu

**AD:** AnhThu Dong

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

*Italics:* emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

**HP:** Um, today's February 6th 2020, and we're in Fondren Library and I'm Helen. [**AD:** I'm AnhThu.] And this is...

**FT:** Frank Tsuru.

**HP:** Okay. Um so, we're going to start with your early life. So where and when were your grandparents born?

**FT:** My grandparents—I don't have the date, exact date of the— my grandparents' birth. But it would be somewhere in 1880 or 1890. They immigrated to the United States from Japan in 1910 for my— my— my dad's folks; and 1911, from my mom.

**HP:** And what brought your parents to the States?

**FT:** Well, my parents were actually born in the United States. Their parents immigrated here. [**HP:** Oh, so sorry. Yes, your grandparents. Sorry, yeah.] Yeah, so yeah, so my grandparents moved here to... because America was the place to go. And there was a big migration— or immigration, excuse me— of Japanese, from Japan, mainly to—the United States in that timeframe. And then, at—at about 1924, the United States stopped any more Japanese and Chinese immigration from coming into United States.

**HP:** And then, um, your grandparents settled in Seattle, right? And what brought them to Seattle specifically?

**FT:** Well, there was a big Japanese community in Seattle. And so they, it was very— America was extremely foreign to—to them. So the... what they did is they wanted to get amongst their um, the Japanese community there. So they settled. Both my mom's, uh, and my dad's families. Both settled there.

**HP:** Ok. Um, how did they find that community?

**FT:** Well, it was— it was before they went. Uh, a lot of people went before them, and they— they— they said this is where you should go. And so they- they boarded a ship in Okinawa, uh, which is an island off of Japan and then went from Okinawa to— to the port Seattle.

**HP:** Um did they already know English before they immigrated?

**FT:** Um, my grandparents did not. Um, and they never. They really spoke Japanese all the time, um, to my parents. Um, so, uh, it was very—it was scary for them very, very much so.

**HP:** And how did they handle the language barrier, cultural differences?

**FT:** Um, my grandfather on my mom's side was, um, more of a labor; and there were other Japanese that knew more English, that helped. My grandfather on my dad's side was a chef, and he worked—started

working, at a place called Seattle Tennis Club in Seattle as a kind of a line chef. And he became the head chef there, uh, about 10 years later.

**HP:** Um I guess, living in that Japanese community in Seattle, were they like sheltered from the rest of American culture?

**FT:** A little bit, I guess you could say that. I— I'm sorry to say I don't have a lot of information about that. Um, they um, they were, their Japanese culture is, um, one very- ver... It—it still is till this day, that Japanese just huddle up with Japanese and they go back to Japan. And the immigration laws in—into Japan are very, very difficult. They don't allow— it's very hard to get into Japan to live; and that's why the blood, Japanese blood is really pure and it still is till this day.

**HP:** And where and when were your parents born?

**FT:** Both my parents were born in Seattle. And um, my, my mom was born in 1928. My dad was born in 1930 and— or '31. And so they were both born in that, uh, community in Seattle.

**HP:** And then they didn't know each other...?

**FT:** They did not know each other, um, at all. Um, they would— uh, my mom's family was she and two sisters. Uh, but one sister got kind of trapped in Japan when— when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, there was no— obviously no movement from Japan to—to United States. And then my dad's family's a little bit larger. He actually had a brother and a sister trapped in Japan for the duration of the war. And then, and then he, um, had a brother and a sister in— in the United States with— with the family.

**HP:** How big was the Japanese community in Seattle?

**FT:** It was fairly large. It was, um, probably numbering 20,000 Japanese, something like that. Yeah.

**HP:** Oh. That's pretty big. [**FT:** Mhm] Um, how was it for your grandparents and your parents growing up in America amidst all the, uh, sentiments against the Japanese during that time?

**FT:** Yeah. Well, um, it was— it was difficult, particularly um, on that fateful day in December of 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Um, it was very much anti-Japanese, and Chinese would say, “We're Chinese; we're not Japanese.” on the— on their—on their storefronts and all that kind of stuff. So the—the Japanese were very much, um, segregated, singled out; and then in May of 1942, um by executive order 1966— and you can probably look that up. It was— gave the President the authority to incarcerate without trial. Uh, people— enemies of United States, and who would that be? That would be the Japanese are the enemies. So they without, without trial, without anything, made them leave their house, businesses, cars, everything that they— unless they could carry it, um, behind. And they took him to the camps.

**HP:** And how old were they? When...

**FT:** Um, my dad was, um... 12; and my mom was 15. Yeah.

**HP:** And I guess like, what was the whole process like in the camp?

**FT:** Yeah, well, [sigh] I have had several stories, uh, discussions with my— with my parents about that and um... very scary, had no idea. My grandparents, if you asked about language, it was a huge language barrier; could not hear, understand what these soldiers were telling them to do. Uh, they understood they had to come with whatever they could carry. And um, so, my mom has said that she had to put on three pairs of pants and shirts and jackets as many as they— she could; but it was May, and it was warm, so they're sweating. But they had to do that because they needed to carry as much as they— they could. And so, and a little kid can't carry very much at all anyways.

So uh, it was a bit frightening and you know, they— it was more than anything though, it was a—it was humiliating to them that uh, in front of their neighbors and everything. They get— by armed guard— taken out of their house; and—and had to leave everything behind. They had to— they had some time. They had to sell their houses, and cars, and businesses, um, in a couple days, which is very difficult, so. And they loaded them up in train cars, um, and took them to a camp that they didn't even know were... they didn't know Idaho I mean. They didn't have internet and be able to say, “Oh, this is where uh, Minidoka, Idaho is.” But they went there and that's where they had to go.

**HP:** Okay. And um, so your parents only spoke Japanese, too? Bec-

**FT:** No. my parents were... They—they spoke, uh, spoke English fluently, uh, despite going— as a matter of fact, they were at American schools. So...

**HP:** Okay. And then, um, so I guess up to middle school? Before they entered the camps they were in school?

**FT:** Yeah.

**HP:** Okay.

**FT:** Yeah, right.

**HP:** And then, um, I think you mentioned that they were eventually released. [**FT:** Yes.] Why were they released?

**FT:** Well, um, the government shortly thereafter, within a year or so, realize they really made a mistake here. Um, they, they, these— all these people they, uh, put in these camps, they have no way of, um, supporting themselves. And particularly they knew that the camps were gonna close at some time. And what did they do with all these, uh adults that have no— they haven't worked for five years; they've lost all their income that they've gener—were always generating before. And, and so, um, they found families or companies that would sponsor they— them, and take care of them and make sure they have a— a job, a place to live and uh, education and, and everything. So there would be different places.

And I told you my grandfather was a chef. And there was a resort in Wisconsin, that they needed a chef. And so he went, and he didn't know what Wisconsin, where. They were in Seattle, Washington; they had no idea anything east of, you know, the city limits, what is like. And so they went to Wisconsin, and um, started a life there. And that was about a year and a half after they entered the camp, okay. Now my grandmother's family. He, he was a laborer, you really, there was nobody that really needed him. And so he endured life through 1945 in the camp. And so they had to stay in the camp, because there's nobody that really said, I need a laborer.

**HP:** So they were, so only the people who were needed were able to be released? Pretty much?

**FT:** That's probably right. I don't really know. But, you know, if you— if your resort needs a head chef and there's a renowned head chef. As a matter of fact, I told you my grandfather on my dad's side at Seattle Tennis Club, became the head chef there. As a matter of fact, the Seattle Tennis Club said, “We will be responsible 100% for this family— take care of them, make sure they don't— are not spies, or anything.” And the government wouldn't let them do that. Because it's too far— too, too close to the west coast. They needed all Japanese inland so they don't— didn't cause, and I have— I have no idea, were spies.

**HP:** Yeah. Um and so both your parents were in the same internment camp?

**FT:** Yeah, no, that's right.

**HP:** And how did they— did they meet in there?

**FT:** It's— it's interesting. No, um, my mom and my dad's sister were friends [**HP:** Okay.] Yeah. And um, but yes, they both—since they're in the same community, they got put on the same, um, trains and shipped off to the same camp. And um, and that's where they—they—they spent their time, but my mom and dad didn't. Met later in Chicago.

**HP:** What brought them to Chicago?

**FT:** Well, my—my mom, my mom's family— family eventually was sponsored by a Catholic Church in St. Louis. Okay. And, um, a— a mutual friend was getting married, and that's when they met like 1956 or 57, somewhere in there was when they met, and they were— they got married in, um, uh January of 1958. Yeah.

**HP:** Um, I guess, when they were around the time that they met and they got married, were there still kind of like anti-Japanese sentiments during that time?

**FT:** Oh yes, very much so. Um, it wasn't as bad further inland that you got. But it's still. You guys know, you look different, then you're able to be picked out very easily, very quickly. And um, there were people that were just great, that wanted you to be there, uh, in their community, and there's people that didn't and, you know, you can understand. For instance, someone, their son got killed in the war and, and in— in

Japan or in the Pacific Theater; and um, they have huge issues with the Japanese. And that's what happens. So you— you have a lot of that.

**HP:** Okay. And going to you, where and when were you born?

**FT:** So um, I was born uh in Chicago, March 2nd, 1960. So in about three weeks, I'll be 60. [**HP:** Congratulations!] So that'll be my birthday. Yeah. Big, big time. Um, and um, yeah, so I was— I was born in Chicago, and I had... Actually my sister was— is about two years older than me.

**HP:** And she's still in Chicago?

**FT:** Yes.

**HP:** And did she stay there the whole- her whole life?

**FT:** Yes. Yeah. She stayed in the Chicago area for, uh, her whole life.

**HP:** Um, how would you describe the household you grew up in? For you and your sister?

**FT:** You know, it's very interesting. Um, my parents wanted us to be extremely Americanized. They... It— it was— it was all to do with the camps and World War II, and what the government did to them. And um, I was very young. I recall, maybe uh, nine years old or so, and, my— talked to my mom and dad. I said, “Aren't you,” you know, “aren't you mad that they took you out of your house, and took your house, and your car, your business, and made you go somewhere else you had no idea, put you in a prison camp.” And it's something that still is interesting, strikes me as pretty amazing. And I don't know if I'd had the same sentiment, but they said, “No, we're not mad. We're actually embarrassed. For number one, for our country of origin to have caused this much harm to our new country that we've— we've adopted; and two, the country we've adopted could not trust us, and therefore had to incarcerate us, because they're afraid we were gonna cause harm to the United States.” And so therefore what one of the things that they were saying is that you kids, my sister and I, will prove the government wrong. And we're going to make you the very best Americans that you can be. And one of the things, at least for me, the best thing, um, show the military service, to teach a young man how to be a great American is to be a boy scout.

And so that's my start of my boy scouts is that I had to be, understand and learn the characteristics and the qualities of a great American and that's what boy scouts taught me. And so.

**AD:** Um, do you— um, yeah. I'm sorry. [**FT:** Yeah.] Yeah, but yeah. Do you recall, you as a kid, have any reactions about how your parents think about America and Japan? Like, did you hear anything about it?

**FT:** No. Um, they're— they were focused on very much the thing that they wanted to make sure that, I understood was that um— you can't blend in. Okay? You don't— you don't, just don't blend in. But you can exhibit these qualities that have been, and learn what, what Americans perceive as being a great American. And that's, that's what the scouting does. But I—I—I always agreed with them. Okay I, and that's

one of the things— your generation is different. You, you, there's talk, you— you talk back. There are, there you push back against what your parents really, um, think is best for you. In nin- the 1960s you didn't. You said, "Yes, ma'am and yes, sir." And did what they asked you to do without, uh, questioning. Questioning was a something that was equal to not trusting what your parents are doing for you. So you, without question, went forward and did what they told you to do.

So the household was loving, the household was caring, the household was a great place. I loved it. But if. My mom and dad had final say. There was no other way. And, you know, times change, and I'm sure you're brought up maybe a little differently than that. I won't— I won't even— I won't question. You're— you're— you're asking me questions, I won't ask you. But it's, it just is a— a little different today.

**HP:** Did they instill any like Japanese values in the household?

**FT:** The Japanese values they instilled were, were very similar to, um, what I needed to learn and understand through scouting, being a great American. And—and, their goals, uh, were to make sure that being loving and caring for— for your fellow man. I would think that was one of the big things. Um, they're very strong Catholics. Um, I told you my mom's family was sponsored by a Catholic Church and, and so they learned— my mom's family learned— how important that was.

Uh, but Japanese values are— are— are different than the values in the United States to the point where there is absolutely— there's a higher authority that is irrefutably the— the— the authority on everything. If you recall, in Japan, the Emperor Japan was thought of almost a god. It was a human being, but almost a god. And his lineage still goes through to today, to that— there the Emperor, and at one time, no Japanese people ever saw the Emperor, never saw him in person. 'Cause the Emperor wanted to be almost a deity, wasn't—wasn't a, a human. But one of the things in World War II that the Americans required for the— for the Peace Treaty, was that the Emperor show himself to the Japanese people that he's just a human being. And that happened, and ever since then, uh, he's been out, and his whole family's been— been out that way. But there is, it's very critical in the culture that you still have a single authority that— that you do what that person does; and you are asked for rather. And—and—and even today, there was maybe 50 years ago— I think, uh— 30 years ago, they found Japanese soldiers on these islands because they refuse to, um, give up. And it's just instilled in them that way. Probably one that is, is much that, but there was a lot of uh, very high ethics, high high morals and high gods.

**HP:** Um I feel like if I were in your parents place, my initial reaction will be just hatred towards the government, or American government. Um, did they ever express like hatred towards America? 'Cause it seems like they were pretty...

**FT:** No. You know, it was absolutely as I said— it was absolutely their feeling was their own. It's their embarrassment and, and it's on... One of the things that Japanese families do, if any shame comes to the family because of an action done, it's— it's very shameful. And they looked at that— as that extended family caused shame to them. And so they, by gosh, that was— that was nothing other than, uh, their own country. And they were going to prove the government wrong.

**HP:** And was this like a popular sentiment among the other Japanese families?

**FT:** Now that's a good question. I would say no. I would say no, because it's not normal. Like I said, to have that, be vows there. I think I'd be more upset. I'd be mad at what, uh, what happened.

**HP:** Yeah. Um, did you experience any discrimination going up, personally?

**FT:** Um, yes, I did a lot. Um, you know, Vietnam War was, was going on at that same time. And there are people that could not distinguish the difference between a Japanese and Vietnamese or a- a- anything, which I'm sure that's- that's case. But at that time um, yes. And- and I fought a lot. I mean, kids don't fight today anymore. But I was in a fight in elementary school, junior high school, not as much in high school. But growing up in my early teens and in earlier, I would have to, because there was, um, a lot of discrimination. But um, I was quickly told by higher authority being the principal of the school, I can no longer do that. And, and so I slowed that down, but I was pretty quick to- to go to fighting. But like I said, it's- it's, I, or it could be just boys growing up. That's a little different than girls growing up. So.

**HP:** Um, how has like being in the camp influenced how your parents raised you or do you think...?

**FT:** Oh, they, It was very much um, they- they raised us a- as a, um, to be model citizens, to never ever have that happen, uh, to the family again.

**HP:** And that, I guess, encouraged you to join boy scouts.

**FT:** Yeah.

**HP:** And when did you join the boy scouts?

**FT:** Um, It was when I was, in 1967.

**HP:** And how old were you?

**FT:** That was seven years old. Yeah, yeah.

**HP:** Did you like it?

**FT:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. And I mean, I thought it was great. And I, I learned so much. Um, my son today even says—he goes, I didn't know how to do- do something. How did you know how to do that? Well, I was in boy scouts so...

**HP:** Um, how has being in b- being a boy scout influenced your life values and your outlook on life?

**FT:** Yeah. Well, it was interesting. Um... um, so my folks insisted on- on us not being, uh, trying our best but to be the best. That was everything we did. You're either the best or you- you better, you know, have a good reason why not. And so in sc- in school, and and sports and everything, um, if I didn't come home with the best grades or the- or really be um, standout athlete, I had to explain it. Um and scouting, I



was going to be an Eagle Scout. There wasn't— or there was no question about it that, I'd go through cub scouts and I'd go through boy scouts, and ultimately I'll be an Eagle Scout by time I'm 18 years old.

Um, and— and so that was interesting because there's a story behind it. My first job that I ever got was, um, as a petroleum engineer for a company that I really wanted to work for. They came to University of Kansas and interviewed us. Um and I got... So it was different then; you go, you race up there. And when soon as they post the list, you get your name, put your name on— on a list to be considered. And the Dean of the Engineering school look at the people on the list and say who gets, because they only got eight slots that they can interview. And um, so I was fortunate enough to get on the list. And um, as far as the— they're only hiring one entry level petroleum engineer at the time. And I had the interview and I got the job, which, um, which shocked me. But um... And the guys that I was on the list of eight men that were on there, it was all petroleum engineering school, had all guys and maybe one girl. So it was like 30 guys and one girl. But um. So I went to the person that my, my boss and he was actually the guy that interviewed us. I said, you know, "I know the guys that I interviewed against. It's like, I know them all. And we all have about the same GPA, and we have done summer internships at different places. Like how did I get the job?" And he said, "Well, you guys are all pretty much the same. And um, basically you got the job because uh, you're an Eagle Scout. And being an Eagle Scout holds a lot of credibility in this organization, and that's why we hired you."

And so I have this, this kind of a three foot by four foot mural that has all my scout patches on. You know, that my mom gave me, um, made it for me for my high school graduation. And um, and actually, it is a funny story there too. Uh, you know, when you're— when you graduate from high school, my buddies were getting shot guns or cars or trips around Europe or whatever. And I get this thing that's a— a mural of my boy scout patches. And I—I want to tell you I was a bit, I wasn't mad; but I, I was a bit jealous of my other, my buddies all got cool things. And I just got this, you know, thing of patches. But oh, as it all turns out, I still have that mural. They don't their cars, or their— their guns, they're all gone. But um, and I, and I've taken that mural patches everywhere to every office that I've had, all across the oil field. Just everywhere. Crappy little trailer... offices. I'd hang it on the wall and I'd be there. And I remember that's why I keep on going progressively bigger and nicer offices; to— to today, and, and my office is the— on the 56th floor of the tallest building, west of Mississippi. I mean, it's a— it's just followed me and it's kind of beat up and it's kind of old, but it's—it reminds me and keeps me humble. Still how I got my first job.

**HP:** What was your favorite part about boy scout?

**FT:** Um just learning all sorts of cool things, so many things: going on— on campouts, um, being with friends that I really enjoyed. Um, uh, just being in the outdoors and getting to do them.

**HP:** What was your Eagle Scout project?

**FT:** Oh, that's a good question because I've— I've— quite a few people have, uh, have asked me that. I'm th— I'm actually the president of the National Eagle Scout Association for all United States. And— and so I look at all of them, but mine wasn't nearly as elaborate or— or— or as good as the other, the ones I get to see today. But mine. Um I was at the um, we— we met at the First United Methodist Church in Deerfield, Illinois. Um and, what—what I did is there's this— there's this basement area that was really really dingy,

really terrible place. And I got it all cleaned out, painted the walls, put it in some bright lights and made it a youth, uh, little youth center where we all would go there, too. And then there'd be TV and, and popcorn maker and all these things that we got to hang out there, but go to a place where you also, um, learn about Christ and—and—and maintain your Christian centered values. So that's kind of what I did.

**HP:** Um so going into personal life, how did you meet your wife?

**FT:** Ah. I went to, uh, school at University of Kansas. And, um, and that, I went in at nine... 1978. And, um, I met her in 1980. And um, and so she's, um, um, we dated there in college. And we... When I graduated and got my first job, I was drilling oil wells, and hunting and fishing, and doing guy stuff, you know. And I really didn't think that the relationship would survive something like that. So I— I broke, broke it off then. And I broke her heart, too. So, at least that's what she says. Um, and kind of went my own way and did all that. And, you know, like I was saying, went to all these little towns and I worked as in the oil field. And um 10 years later after graduation, there was a— a 10 year reunion for fraternities and sororities. And um, we saw each other i— i— in a bar. And I couldn't believe it. And it's been ev— so that was 1990— uh, I guess 1992. 1991! So, and— and we've been together ever since. It has— it's been great.

**HP:** How many kids do you have?

**FT:** Have three kids. Uh, two were... She got married right after we broke up and she had two kids. And then we have one, uh, of our— of our own. The oldest is Seth. Now that I— they, they have. This is very interesting. Seth is married to Katie. And they have two kids, Lucy and Stella. Lucy and Stella are— Lucy is 4, Stella is 2. But, um, Seth, and Katie— which is his wife, changed their name to last name Tsuru, when they're adults. Our middle child, Kylie, who's, um, from the previous marriage, also changed her name to Tsuru. And um, you know, it was a— it's a great thing. Uh, so like— so Seth's 33, um Katie's 33, and the two kids. Kylie's 27, 28. And, she just got married last November to Ben, who's 30, and they live in New York. And then Bailey's our youngest, she's 24; she'll be 25 here in two months. And um, and she works as a Pre-K teacher at Yellowstone Academy, at Downtown Houston; and it's a— it's a school for underprivileged um, kids. And so she's a Pre-K for teacher.

Um, and, and so that's our family. And, and Kylie and Ben are in New York City. They got married there and they're— they're planning in a couple of years to come back to Houston. So we'll have the whole family. But anyways, Seth and Katie and Kylie all change your name Tsuru. And um, and it's, it was quite a deal because, you know, you can go through your whole life and not really know if you did a good job raising your kids. But when they're adults and they said, “Dad, I'm gonna change our name back to Tsuru.” It's— it's— it's an amazing thing because that was the validation, that they believe that I'm really their father. And um, it's— it's a— it's a phenomenal, uh, feeling, because many parents don't have that ability. You'll say to your parents, “Yeah, you were— you're great parents. You're great parents.” But they have no way of knowing that. And so, it was a— it was an amazing way for me to, to have that, uh validation.

**HP:** So what values did you instill in your children?

**FT:** It was very important to— uh, my wife Stephanie and I—to make sure that they knew that first they're, they're very loved. Um, and w— w— we always thought that that's probably the most important

thing that they know that, um, they have, um, they're loved unconditionally, by– by their, uh–by their parents. Um, the other thing, pro–probably as important or more is, to bring them to Christ to– to uh, make sure that they are saved and understand the whole concept of salvation; and that was not something that we could do very easily when they're younger.

Uh today, it's completely different. And um, you know, that it's, it's been really great to have to know that they're, um, they've accepted Christ and um. And then really, there was a lot of little things that uh– that we did as as a family that was we felt very important. Like we, we had a lot of rules in the house that were some– somewhat lopsided than today uh or anybody. And I gave them all the freedom that they– they wanted, there was nothing that they– they couldn't do. But if I had reason to believe that they're doing something wrong, that's when I would take away some of those. Instead of– instead of giving freedoms or giving um, abilities to do things, I allowed them to do it. But if they was any reason they were abusing it, then I would bring it back. So that– it was– and that's that's kind of where I think they really understood I've got this freedom, but I also have this responsibility. So I have this responsibility to be. Because I– I really like staying out till midnight; and so therefore, I'm going to make sure that I don't have any, any reason for mom and dad to take this away so.

**HP:** Um backtracking to your college life, so you mentioned you studied at University of Kansas?

**FT:** Mhm.

**HP:** And then what year did you graduate?

**FT:** Graduated in 1982.

**HP:** 1982. Okay.

**FT:** Yes.

**HP:** And what did you study there?

**FT:** Petroleum engineering.

**HP:** Only petroleum engineering?

**FT:** Yeah, yeah.

**HP:** And did you know you were going to study that going into college?

**FT:** Yes. As a freshman I entered, uh, I applied for and got into the school of petroleum engineering. Yeah.

**HP:** And why did you choose petroleum engineering?

**FT:** Oh man, there's nothing really good reason. I, um, you know, I– I wanted to have something that I'd be outdoors and and really get to do things with machinery, and– and that just fit just so perfect so, that's what I...

**HP:** You think like Boy Scouts influenced that?

**FT:** Yeah a lot, a lot. You bet. Absolutely.

**HP:** Did you have any struggles in college?

**FT:** I did. Um I think it was um, you know, I was really used to getting high grades. And my—after my freshman year, the grades weren't as high as... and it was really a, a tough thing for me to try to tell my folks that my grades weren't what they would expect. And um in... it was a... I— I thought about going to be, to geology; and geology was, I don't know if it's easy or not, and I— I never thought of it, but I really thought about doing that. And as it turns out, I just said, “No, I can— I can get through with this.” My petroleum engineering degree, and I— um, and I really worked through it. And, and I finished with just above a 3.0, um, in the engineering school, which is on a curve— would be closer to the right hand side of the curve. So um, I felt good about that after having a pretty rocky start. But college was, you know, talk about the freedoms, you had all the freedoms; but there was nobody to take things away from you. Okay. And I was used to, you know, the leash being pulled, yanked, you know, it was... Um, I didn't have that. So I think my freshman year was a little too much fun. A little less, you know, too less— least— least amount of studying. So, um, but I changed that around quickly.

**HP:** Were you satisfied with your college experience?

**FT:** I loved it. I just loved it. We just— it was fantastic. And uh, University of Kansas has a uh amazing basketball team— you guys don't already know. Y-Y-You should know, you should— you should follow the Jayhawks because they're the best basketball team in the nation. Uh I— no I actually think they're ranked number three in the nation right now. But um, I loved doing that. I- I loved everything about it. I had lived in a fraternity. I had a— a great experience there. Um, and no, it— it was great. I wish I had today's wisdom and— and— and that kind of energy that I had back then. I think I got an email from you at 1am. Uh, I was uh, you see that's the energy I don't have. I have been asleep for three hours by then.

**HP:** Um I guess if you could go back and change one thing, what would you change?

**FT:** I'll tell you. Since my wife won't see this, it would be staying with her. Yeah, I— I— I should have done that. Um, you know there, I didn't ha— do anything that I have regrets about. I really, I really felt extremely satisfied. Um, I felt just um, very blessed to be a petroleum engineer getting through all that having doubts about what I was going to do, and taking the right— the right path, uh, to graduation. Um and um, the University of Kansas was a beautiful campus, beautiful place and I was very fortunate to— to be there. So I have, I really don't have any regrets; but truly, if I did it over, um, I wouldn't let the 22-year-old voice in my head, say, “gotta go run and be free”. I probably would have done something.

**HP:** And um, I guess how did you hear about University of Kansas?

**FT:** Well, um it was interesting. Um, I don't know. I can't remember exactly. They had these big books, these catalogs of different, um universities, all— all universities across the United States. And, and I was leafing through it and, and they have rank, um, stars, academic, social, living standards, blah— athletics, all that kind of stuff. And this one was a state school that I had to pay for all myself. You know, my folks didn't have money; so I couldn't go to Rice, let's say. Okay, I mean, I probably couldn't— couldn't even get into it today at all. But um so, you know, the universe of schools kind of— kind of got smaller, because I knew at what my tuition— and tuition, um my first year that I— I went there was um \$750 per semester. [**HP:** Wow.] So I could afford that, right. Um and it was, it was they had stars for value, you know, because that tuition was good. Uh, so that's how I looked and I— I saw kinda University of Illinois, 'cause it's Chicago area and a lot of Chica... Uh my high school went, a lot of went to University of Illinois. And I kind of didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be in high school again. University of Iowa, I looked at. Uh, Miami, Ohio I looked at that. And then I looked at, at Kansas. And um, I looked at doing a few different things actually. Petroleum Engineering and another field, uh, biomedical engineering. I

wanted— I thought the prosthesis would be cool for handicapped special needs people. And so that was kind of uh something I was looking at, too.

**HP:** Do you, did you consider yourself a risk taker in college? I guess like saying that you didn't have any regrets in college. Do you think you took risks or did you just kinda know?

**FT:** Yeah, I— I— I took risks. There—there's no question I, I'm— I'm... If you look at a scale of risk taking to super conservative, and—and it kind of, college and in my business career, I would be on more, on the right of center, on the risk, riskier, or I'll be left right here. Right would be conservative; and— and left would be risky, risk taking. And I'd take, well, I'm a risk taker.

**HP:** Mhm. Um, and then going to your career experience. So your first job was a petroleum engineer?

**FT:** Yes.

**HP:** And what were your responsibilities in that first job?

**FT:** Yeah, I was, um, I entered as a production engineer, which um, was responsible for maximizing the amount of oil and gas that came out of the ground. I also was a drilling engineer. And um, some of the areas that I was working the drilling part of it was not as technical, as—as others; but um, loved it. I loved that all about it and I learned so much. And I—I couldn't get enough of it. I stayed out on the rigs all the time and uh, and I loved every bit of that.

**HP:** Mhm. Um, were you able to apply like what you learned in college into that job?

**FT:** Absolutely. It's a— it's very different than, say a marketing or finance major going into business. I mean, everything that I learned in, in college, I applied almost immediately into my job. And it w— my job was just I like a master's degree of it, 'cause it just took right off from what I learned my senior year on through.

**HP:** Yeah, and did you have other jobs after that before your previous, or before your current one?

**FT:** Yes. Oh, yeah, I did. Um, um, I was at my first job, uh, for nine years, I think. Then I decided to, I had a short stint that I worked all over the world, uh for a um, a service company that uh did um analytical uh, electronic analytical work. And I enjoyed that for a little while, but then being gone for four months at a time it was. I didn't like it. So came back, of course, that's when Stephanie and I got back together then. And then um I started um a new company, just my own and two other friends that were with me at my original company. And so we started that and uh, we purchased it a— a— a— a gas field in southwestern Colorado. And those two guys stayed in Denver and I went to um, Durango, Colorado, southwestern corner, and started, uh working those wells.

**HP:** And what inspired you to open your own company?

**FT:** Oh, it's— it's great. It's— it's really, it— it's super risky; it's super scary, especially when you have family. Um, but there's nothing more um, gratifying when you put something together and say you sell it, and you sell it for this great profit. And, um, it's— it's amazing. I mean, I've sold now, um five companies, seven companies um in my career. And it's— and it's been everyone's been very gratifying. And, and just the number— dollar numbers is a— as significant as what you started, what— what you went through and how you got, got it done. And so that— that was uh, that was really cool.

**HP:** And so the company you're at now you also started, right?

**FT:** Yes.

**HP:** When did you start that?

**FT:** Started that in 2004.

**HP:** Okay, and then was that started in Houston or?

**FT:** No, I started it in Durango, Colorado. We were down in Durango. And I started there and then in 2007, moved to Houston. Um, because the company was getting bigger and bigger. And Houston is kind of where it was. And I was traveling so much. And Houston was where I was headed to all the time. So moved the whole family to Houston in 2007. Yeah.

**HP:** And what are your responsibilities now?

**FT:** Now, um I am the CEO of the pipeline company that I started, and the CEO of the, um, gas and oil production company that my partner actually started, and he asked me to grow it in three years ago, 2016. And so I'm kind of got two companies. That's why I'm really busy. [laughs]

**HP:** Um, I guess, what would— what's your biggest takeaway from your entire career experience? Just like being in the workforce.

**FT:** Well, I— I have to say that. Um, what I've experienced and what has, uh, and it became abundantly clear here recently, last few months, um is that— everything we do, we do to the glory of God. And that is— it's an unusual concept for a CEO to talk about that. Because most CEOs would say it's because I'm one of the smartest guys around; I'm— I'm— I'm— got a great business mind; I've got ability to do this or that... And I know that's not the case. And I know that, um, that if we give the glory to God and we— *He* blesses the company and we are able to do the things that we're— we do and we've accomplished, um, where others can't, others have not. Selling seven companies is absolutely unheard of. One company is mostly the way if anybody; if any, two companies; okay, there's a few, three; count on one hand... and seven is rarified air. There's just really nobody there. And so I often wonder why and uh, that's— that's what I come up away from— with is the fact that, uh we continue to give the glory to God, we continue to be obedient, and I think obedience is the nu— the number one thing.

**HP:** Mhm. Um, so going to your identity, how do you identify as? Would you identify as Asian, or Asian American, Japanese-American?

**FT:** I identify as a Japanese-American. Um, I just spoke last— I guess it was uh— Wednesday. Um I spoke at a...Tuesday night. I spoke at a— a event that Mitsubishi Corporation of America, the Japanese company. They're sponsors of the Asia Society, here in Houston. And my wife and I are honorary, honorary co-chairs of the— of the gala this year. Are you going to that gala?

**HP:** The Asia Society one?

**FT:** Yeah.

**HP:** Um, no.

**FT:** No? You—you guys want to get all dressed up and really fancy. I'll invite you.

**HP:** Oh, oh I'm down. [**FT** laughs] I love the Asia Society talks.

**FT:** Yeah, and so we're— and and and so if you'd like to, I'll contact you. But you have to get all, you know, it's pretty... do you have any long dresses?

**HP:** I have my prom dress.

**FT:** Prom dress?

**HP:** That I haven't worn since. [chuckles]

**FT:** Oh okay, but um. So I was able to speak to them. And um when I... People talk to me. They—they don't expect a Japanese guy to come. When I talk on the phone, I sound very American. Um but, and then not only that, but I'm six foot two, and they don't expect that. But it's just enjoyable to connect with them. They're— they're great, great. It was great to— to— to talk with them, and that's how I— I definitely, uh feel very convicted uh of my—my Jap—not just Asian roots— but Japanese roots.

**HP:** Mhm yeah, so um I guess you mentioned how, like how American you wanted to be. So why did you identify—why do you identify as Japanese-American as opposed to American?

**FT:** Well, you know, I didn't want to be as American as I... That's my— my parents really, were the ones that instilled that in me. They said, "No matter what, you're gonna— you're not going to speak Japanese. You're not gonna learn any Japanese, you know, be... learn English. You're gonna be a boy scout, you're gonna play little league, you're going to do everything that American boys do. And because we're going to show that you're, you're, you're an American, and uh you can be trusted."

**HP:** Has your identity as a Japanese-American changed throughout growing up?

**FT:** Yeah, it— it has, um, probably more in the past 10 years than the previous 50.

**HP:** Mhm. And how has it changed?

**FT:** Um, that I don't have a feeling there's a stigma against an Asian or Japanese-American. [**HP:** Mhm.] I feel like um actually, people look at the Asian Society as overachievers; and, um, and so it's not something that you should be embarrassed about. You should be, you should embrace it. And that's kind of how I look at it.

**HP:** And has your family, like your wife and kids, influenced how you're— how you identify?

**FT:** No, they— they love— they... Well their— they can't their my, my, my wife is Caucasian. [**HP:** Okay.] And so, you know, we have this mixing bowl of a family. Because my daughter married, uh, his name's Ben Xia. And it's a Chinese last name, but he's from Ghana. [**HP:** Okay.] And, and so I mean, we have the United Nations whenever we go to dinner. But um, it's— they, they love the fact that, that I've embraced and that they've embraced the— the Japanese culture.

**HP:** And what do you center your life around? It could be like an object or a person, a job...

**FT:** No-nothing from this world. And it's um, again, it's— it's something that um, there's a saying, you know, if you, uh, worship two God's you, you, you, you worship none. Uh, you can't, uh you can't worship um, the Lord and worship money. You can't worship the Lord and worship a person. Um so, my love and c— my centeredness is around my Lord and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; and, and but past

that, uh my family is, is then the most important. My friends— I've got such great friends, really, really great friends here in Houston; and then um, then probably my job. Um you know, when you're 30 and not 60s probably number one is your job, right? You just got to go ahead. Could be your finals are number one, you know that, it's— it changes. And um, and but my faith is really really, really strong and really important and I know my— having a strong faith is why, um, I've met success that I've had.

**HP:** Um if you were— if you go back to when you were a child, would you imagine, like, could you imagine yourself how you are now?

**FT:** Gosh no. I mean I mean I, I can't. I— I— I wish my parents were alive and be able to see what their son has done because, uh you know, I've— I'm the President of National Eagle Scout Association because my, my, my mom and dad said, "You're going to have to be the best Boy Scout that you can be." And that's being the President of the— of all Eagle Scouts is something that is— is hit the pinnacle. And, I— I would just love to have a cup of coffee with my folks and just say, "Well I— I kind of hit it on these three things. I missed it on these two." Something like that whatever.

**HP:** Yeah. What did you want to be when you gr— when you were little, I guess?

**FT:** What did I want to be when I was little? Uh, when I was little I uh, I— I— I loved sports probably wanted to be some kind of athlete. I was big, I was probably as big as— as any of my friends. Um, and so I was able to play high school sports. Uh not good enough for any college sports and um. But um I didn't really have a— a vocation that I wanted to be. Every boy— boy wants to be the best basketball player, next NBA player and next MLB player, whatever NFL... Um I didn't think I had that kind of aspiration as much as—I just wanted to have a career, or study something that had a long career in it. And that was it. I never dreamed that—I mean, the—the wealth and the— what have you— that has been generated through these sales is far staggering. It's far surpassed anything I ever thought of. And uh, but we give away a lot of it, we— we give away so much. And um to us, it's important that— that we realize that we're just stewards of someone else's money and that someone else is, it's God's money. *He* gave it to us, and we give it away the way *He* wants it. So uh, and we have this foundation that is a he— he— heavily funded and it gives away money all the time.

**HP:** And, I guess how have you seen the Asian-American community or just Asian-American representation change throughout your life? You've been all over U.S.

**FT:** Yeah, yeah, it's interesting. I— I see the Asian. It's really funny. Um, it's this running joke within our family that we drive around and we see an Asian family or couple. And I— I don't know this typical, really geeky looking guy that's got a camera strap around his neck. And I mean, it's just funny. And then it's— it's the stereotypical kind of uh, uh look of Asians that come here from, to visit from— from Japan or wherever. And um, I have found that over these most, more recent years, that I've connected much better with, with Asian people, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese... many different Asian cultures through this Asia Society. And I've really really enjoyed that. I really have. It's— it's something that I was not, I was not exposed to it all. All through high school—graduate, excuse me— elementary school and high school. There was no Asians, zero. I was the only one at a school of 2200 kids, one Asian and— no, no, there was one other girl—there's uh, uh Patricia Fechner. But um, there was two of us, and um, you know. It's really interesting in college, University of Kansas at the time was lily white— it was super white. And today there's a lot of Asians there at KU, but I was not exposed to— to— to Asians at all. And um, but now with our— our work at the Asia Society, it's— it's completely different.

**HP:** And what, I guess what— how did you get to know about the Asia Society?



**FT:** Um, I guess it was about four or five years ago, they had a exhibit and the gala was on *Japan*. And we thought, “wow, we gotta check this out.” So we did and met some people there. It was a lot of fun. We just stayed involved and helped because Asia Society doesn't just, as you know, doesn't just, um, cater to Japan or China; I mean, it's like Indian and Pakistani and all the different Asian societies. And so it's really, really interesting to learn all that kind of— of the different cultures.

**HP:** And how do you see the future of the Asian American community?

**FT:** Well, I think the way I look at it is that the university levels in— in Japan are different than here in— in the United States. Here in the United States, you work hard, your elementary and high school years. And— and then you get into a university and you really work hard in university too. In Japan, you work hard, very hard to get into a prestigious university. And once you get in, it's not as rigorous at all. And um so, you know, that was— that, there's a big difference between the two and that, I talked to a lot of Japanese American; and they say, “We like bringing our kids here to learn in the universities in the United States. But what happens is—at least from Japan— most of the time, the people graduate from the uh, universities, and go back to Japan or China or Vietnam or wherever they're from; and they- they go back. And that's— that's kind of, uh, it's interesting. Because it's, um, they don't really um, they don't stay here in the United States.” And that's why there isn't this huge like— you look at the Hispanic community, what it's 50% right now? And they come and they come and they come.... and they *stay*. That, and that's why you don't see it. I mean, there's a Vietnamese community, kind of Sugar Land Area, a pretty big community, but not nearly as big as the— as the Hispanic and, and uh... Ao anyways um, I— I see the uh, it not being this huge wave of continued Asians, uh coming in and— and then being; just because it's harder, immigration laws are— are— are tougher. Now you're a US citizen, are you?

**AD:** No, I'm an international.

**FT:** International? Yeah. So you. It's hard. If you wanted to be a citizen, it's— it's kind of— you've got to go through a lot to get a company to sponsor you, to put all that thing, get your green card. And um, so that's those barriers keep the Asians kind of out. Um, and don't allow a huge migration.

**HP:** Um is there anything you would like to advise to the future generations?

**FT:** Yeah, I would like to say that— congratulations on where you are right now. You two in particular have, have reached um, and are studying at arguably one of the finest institutions in— in the— in the world maybe. And in academia, there's a lot of liberalism. And, just research everything that you hear and— and— and understand what it is that you're backing. Because a lot of times, people back things, ideas or movements, because all their friends are backing it. And there, that there, I can cite so many instances where, people have been kind of led astray a bit, just because it was the popular thing to do. And uh, you know, listen to your conscience because your conscience really is something that is not getting bombarded by external, um, stimuli. So, that's what I would say probably to this generation.

**HP:** Um this question just came up in my mind, but have you been back to Japan recently?

**FT:** You know what, that's a great question because I am going in March 11, I'm leaving. With my whole fam— taking the whole family. Yeah.

**HP:** How long has it been since you've been back ?

**FT:** I've never been.

**HP:** Oh really.

**FT:** Yeah, yeah.

**HP:** It's gonna be an interesting experience.

**FT:** Yeah, yeah, it really is. I'm excited. I really am. It's— I talked to some of the people just this week from Japan and, they said, well, you'll be the tallest person there. That's for sure. [laughs]

**AD:** Do you have any goals in mind of this trip?

**FT:** Well, it's just to really understand the culture more. Immerse myself in the culture and really pay attention to what people do, how they do it, and why. And— and that's what I want to try to learn most from the— from the trip.

**HP:** And where's your, like, family originally from in Japan?

**FT:** Well, I don't know exactly from su—for sure. But I do know on a— on a ship manifest that I found, that it left Okinawa, which is the island, uh off the um, I think the eastern side of this— of the country. But they could have come from a long distance to get there because that was the port that they left from.

**HP:** Are you planning on visiting that?

**FT:** No um, it's— it's actually in, uh, uh... We're going to Tokyo, to Hiroshima to see the, uh, the Atomic Bomb Memorial. Um, Kyoto to see all the shrines and everything and that, as a matter of fact, that was all spared during the war. We're going out in the country, and experiencing what a Ja— authentic Japanese hotel system. It's called *ryo-ryokan*, and they're the places that have the rice paper sliding doors, and the tatami mats, and the futons and you sit on lower tables. So I'm— I'm looking forward to that too.

**HP:** Sounds exciting.

**FT:** Yeah. Yeah, it really is.

**HP:** Um, anything else you like to add before we end?

**FT:** You— you guys have hit about every base that there is, and it's very thorough; and I appreciate you guys researching, um, me. And— and— and hopefully the stuff that I sent helped you, um, give— give you a little outline. So...

**HP:** Well thank you so much.

**FT:** Okay, thank you. All right. How long was that?

[Interview concludes.]