Interviewee: Angela Cheng
Interviewer: Kelly Liao
Date of Interview: 06/05/2020
Transcribed by: Kelly Liao
Edited by: Sarah Kong
Audio Track Time: 01:35:22

Background:
Angela is a Brooklyn-based writer and filmmaker who spent her childhood performing Chinese stand up comedy in Houston, Texas. Since then, she's traded the stage for writing and directing movies. She spends most of her life obsessing about Asian-American identity, weird science, and how to perfect the noodle soup.

Angela's feature screenplay, *Lucky Grandma,* co-written with director Sasie Sealy, won the AT&T and Tribeca Film Festival's 2018 *Untold Stories* $1 million filmmaking grant. The movie, starring the inimitable Tsai Chin (*Joy Luck Club, Casino Royale*) debuted at Tribeca Film Festival in April 2019 and will be making its European debut at the London Film Festival.

Her screenplay *Trouble to the Herd* is also the winner of the 2019 AsianCinevision SAG-AFTRA Screenplay Award and is currently a finalist at this year's Nashville Film Festival.

Her short film *Ten & Two* - about a Chinese-American housewife who learns how to drive in order to leave her husband - was awarded NYU's Wasserman Prize for Filmmaking. She's been awarded the Sloan Foundation feature screenplay award for *Sugar Water*, a gothic drama about the strange discovery of insulin. Her work has been shown at SXSW, Palm Springs International Short Film Festival, Newfest, Outfest, and Los Angeles International Film Festival.

Professionally, Angela has directed the stage for TED Talks, featuring brilliant speakers with "Ideas Worth Spreading." She is currently the Creative Director of Format Development at TED, experimenting with and launching new forms of storytelling. She and her team are the creative force behind the video series *Small Thing Big Idea* and *DIY Neuroscience* - garnering millions of views online. She is also part of the editorial team behind *WorkLife with Adam Grant* - a popular podcast about how to make work not suck. She continues to develop short form video content as well as longform podcasts with a focus on exploring ideas that have the potential to make an impact on the world.

Setting:
The interview took place via Zoom, a popular video conferencing app (and the official app for Rice University) during COVID-19.

Key:
KL: Kelly Liao
AC: Angela Cheng
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
…: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

KL: So today is June 5, 2020. And we are here with Angela Cheng for the Houston Asian American Archive Oral History Project. How are you doing, Angela? And is everything okay in New York?

AC: Yeah, I'm doing really well. And things are pretty messy in New York right now because we're still in the middle of shelter in place orders. I think we open—we're doing the first phase of opening up on Monday. But also right now, there are lots of protests about Black Lives Matter regarding the the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. There's just a lot of protests in the street. So it's fine, but also very political right now. Yeah, where I am.

KL: Okay. I think we're going back to this topic later in the interview.

AC: I got it, okay. Okay.

KL: To start, would you like to tell us where and when you were born?

AC: Yes, I was born in 1978. And I was born in Bryan, Texas, which is also I guess, known as College Station because my parents were graduate students at Texas A&M.

KL: So when did you move to Houston?

AC: I moved to Houston—I want to say it was 1981 or '82. I can't actually remember but it was around the time that my brother was born. So, so yeah, I moved to Houston, then and then I think in '84, we moved to Sugarland.

KL: Okay, I see. So, how would you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

AC: I mean, the neighborhood I grew up in was very suburban, very safe. I think my mom said we moved there because there were no trees at the time and because I was allergic to trees, but it was a good neighborhood I think at the time was very affordable and also happened to have a lot of other Taiwanese Americans—Taiw—sorry, Taiwanese immigrants. And so I don't know if that's why my parents decided to move there. I've never actually asked them, but it seemed to have found, like Taiwanese immigrants, found a community there. And so we live there. I mean, I lived there almost all of my childhood up until it was time to go to university. And yeah, it was a very safe neighborhood that had a lot of Asian Americans. I went to a high school that had a lot of Asian Americans. And, and there was like, some discrimination but I honestly felt–compared

to many people's experiences, I think I was very lucky because I–I felt like I was I grew up in a place where being Asian American was not, was not that different.

KL: Okay. [**AC:** So yeah.] That's great. What were your parents' occupation? Like, do you have any siblings?

AC: Yes, my, my dad is an architect. And my mom is—her background was actually in meteorology. But she ended up—I'm not actually sure what she ended up doing. It was something having to do with systems. She called her—she was a system's analyst, which I have no idea what that means. But, but she definitely was a white collar worker. And at one point actually owned, was a small business owner. Along with, I think, she owned the company with like five other people and they did quite well. And again, I have no idea what it was. It was like something having to do with databases. It was very, was a very—at the time, in the 90s, it I think it was a very, like future-facing job. But hey, I wish I—maybe I should go back to her and ask her what it was, but I don't remember what the occupation was. And then I do have a sibling. He's a younger brother by four and a half years. He still lives in Sugar Land. And he is a very successful insurance salesman, working in healthcare and working with senior citizens and healthcare.

KL: Okay, that's great. And what kind of family values have your parents emphasize on during your upbringing?

AC: Definitely hard work, grit. I think I think they believe very much in the American, sort of in the American dream. Like if you work hard, then you'll succeed. My parents are very honest people. They like—I remember my mom once saw some kids sneak into a movie theater without paying for their ticket and she was very upset about. She just thought that that was not, you know, you don't—what's the word, "mei you gui ju (Mandarin)." She didn't follow—like you don't follow the rules, you know. And I think that she's… They're very, very, they're very rule oriented. But they were also very open minded. And you know, my brother and I were just talking about this yesterday that my parents were very welcoming to all different types of people. We definitely had a household that if we had any kind of friends, it didn't matter what race the friends were, it didn't matter what class our friends were, they were always very welcome. And later on, when I—I think for my parents, it's very much like treat other people how they want to be treated, not treat other people how you want to be treated, but treat other people how they want to be treated. I think that was a real value that my parents had, that to me, feels very progressive. And when I came out as gay, later on in life, they weren't—at first they weren't that happy. But, but then they managed to work through it, and they're, like, just incredibly supportive. So they're very good at accepting things and moving forward and just accepting things. I do think that their strongest value was acceptance.

KL: That's wonderful. So how much do you think those values have impacted you and your life?

AC: I think a lot. I think that my parents, the way my parents are, and maybe it's genetic, but–but I think that the way my parents raised me have impacted me a lot. You know, they're—they weren't perfect parents, they were young when—they, they're not they weren't that young when they had me. But they were—when I think about how old they were when they raised me, I realized that they were pretty young and they were just trying their best. So they weren't perfect, but I think that they just the most important thing was that they wanted to be good people. And they also wanted to be very community-focused and be generous. And again, be accepting of other people and other people's differences. And I believe that they really—that just by, by doing that, by example, they pass that on to me.

KL: I see. What languages do you speak at home with your family?

AC: I speak Mandarin Chinese and English, so like Chinglish. I'm pretty fluent in Chinese because when I was growing up, my, my parents, my mom in particular was pretty strict and didn't really let me speak. She wasn't that—Oh, she–she–she preferred that I speak Chinese to her. I was also very close to my grandparents, and would go, would visit them every summer and spend the entire summer with them. So, so yeah, so my Chinese is pretty fluent and we don't, you know, we have a language barrier, sort of, but not, not really.

KL: Mm hmm. That's cool. [**AC:** Yeah.] You said, you were like—when you were in Sugar Land, you're around with lots of Asian people. So, when did you come to have those kinds of awareness that being Asian is kind of different or being Asian it's kind of, I don't know...

AC: Yeah. Hmm. I you know, I don't think I had true awareness until—let's see. I mean, okay, so when I was in middle school, which is like the worst time in any kid's life, and for me, according to me, because it's so hormonal, and everybody's going through puberty, and you know, and I do remember that in middle school, I s—I started to see that there were differences. And I–and I really didn't realize there were differences up until then, but–but in middle school, I realized that the popular, very popular people, were white. And the next popular people, at least at the time was–was black. And then Asians to, at the time, to me seemed like at the very bottom, and I started realizing that there were there—It wasn't that we truly had differences, but that we were treated differently, socially. And then in high school that got better because people just were actually a little bit more mature. So. And you know, like, if you grew up in Texas, it becomes very obvious that you're different. Because people treat you differently. So there definitely were like moments where, you know, like a Texan, like a white Texan would say something to us that felt maybe ignorant or they didn't really understand us or something like that. And so that's how I recognized that there were differences. But yeah.

KL: I see. Can you talk about your involvement in Chinese stand-up comedy in your childhood?

AC: Yeah, it's yeah, I was from five to thirteen, my mom, my–my mom—I'm gonna say she made me but she basically wrote Chinese stand-up comedy scripts for me and–and I would

perform them. Sometimes I performed it by myself and sometimes I performed it for a partner. We performed it at like Chinese community gatherings and Galas. And, and they weren't—I mean, it was kind of funny, but it was mainly because we were kids born and raised in Texas who could speak, who could speak fluent Chinese and make jokes. And, and I think that to me, my–my theory is that it—we were very popular and my theory was because it was very comforting to the, to the, to the Taiwanese and Chinese immigrant community that their children could speak fluent Mandarin Chinese, and also be fluent in English, and be very confident. 'Cause I think there's always a worry when you move to another country that your child won't be able to assimilate or adjust to the culture there. But I—but or, or there's a worry that your child will forget about the original culture, forget about Chinese culture and so I think to them they were very comforted that you that we were able to embody both pretty comfortably. So yeah.

KL: Do you think that kind of experience has influenced in your later career?

AC: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think that I was always—again, I don't know if it was genetic, like my my mom clearly enjoyed writing scripts and clearly enjoyed putting on a show. She's kind of a type of personality that likes to produce things and likes to, likes to, like she likes to put on events. She likes to do stuff like that. And it did help me learn—feel pretty comfortable speaking publicly. And actually, right now I work at TED conferences, like Ted Talks. And so—which is like all about speaking on stage, you know, and so I feel pretty comfortable in the world of like public speaking. And I think that that that definitely had a lot to do with my upbringing. But also, I'm not interested in pursuing like a public facing career in terms of like I don't, I don't like to speak on stage, I'm just comfortable doing it. I would much rather be behind the camera and be behind the scenes, which is the kind of work that I do at TED. And it's also the kind of work that I do in filmmaking—is to be behind the camera and make things happen that way instead of be in front of the camera, like an actor or something like that.

KL: Okay, that sounds cool. What college did you attend?

AC: I went to the University of Texas at Austin for my undergrad and I went to the—I was in the College of Communication in the radio, television and film program. And then after that, I graduated and then two years later was accepted to the New York University's Graduate film program. Where I—it was a small program. I think my class had like 36 people at the time. And it's a very intense, intensive conservatory style program where all you do is make films and learn about filmmaking and, and learn about New York and filmmaking in New York. So–so yeah, that's where I went to school.

KL: And when like, why when did you come up with the idea that you'd like to study film and video production?

AC: I mean, I think it was quite young, probably—I can't say an age but I mean, maybe as early as third grade, nine, something like that. I just always liked to telling stories I always liked—but

it was always also not–not about theater. It was always about film because my parents had bought like a—an old, like a—now it's old, but my at the time my parents bought like a home video camera. And I was obsessed with that camera. I always wanted to make things with the camera. And, and yeah, I think it was just an interest that I had at a very young age.

KL: I see. Thinking back to your time in college or graduate school, what were some defining moments that you had?

AC: Um, in terms of my career?

KL: Maybe, or in general.

AC: Yeah, I think that when I was in undergrad, I remember even in freshman year, and like University of Texas is a pretty big school. So, but I remember that I was going to all these classes and the classes were very different with very different teachers. But I started seeing how, you know, the business calculus class that I was taking somehow felt very, like somehow connected to like the history of film, film class like, there was suddenly like, I hadn't felt this way when I was in high school or middle school, the idea that everything was actually connected and related. But it wasn't until college, when I realized, like, "Oh, this is what it means to like, learn." Like before that when I was learning, it's not that I wasn't interested in what I was learning. I was, but I think I was too young or not mature enough to put things together to say, this is just about life, you know. And it wasn't until I think undergrad that I realized that and it was just like a regular day. So that I think that was very meaningful for me to realize like what the point of college was. And then in New York, it must have been the first year the, the—I moved to New York in 2002, which is one year after 9/11 and and when I started school, you know, one of our first assignments was to take a camera and go somewhere in New York and film. And I remember at one point I was in Chinatown, shooting like a just a film exercise. And remember thinking, I am standing in New York Chinatown, like making a movie right now in Chinatown. And there was something about that, for me that felt like I was in a very exciting place. And the thing that I only dreamed of when I was young in Houston, Texas, is now like coming true, you know, in this big city. So I think, I think that was like a big realization.

KL: That's–that's great. What kind of extracurricular activities that you have you been engaged?

AC: Well lately nothing because of COVID. But I am a big runner. I like to run. And I live in, in Brooklyn, in a section that's really close to the park, which is very big. And I really enjoyed running around the park. I love, I love watching movies and television shows, and thinking about the process of how they made the movie and what choices they made in the movie. I also love to read and of course, I love to eat. So, I mean, yeah, those are kind of like my extracurricular activities. Very basic.

KL: Yeah it’s fine, but I guess my original question was like during college.

AC: Oh, I'm sorry during college. Honestly kind of the same thing, I—during college in terms of extracurriculars. Like I don't know that I joined—I was pretty consumed by filmmaking during college. So I didn't really have extra hobbies, besides, again, just watching movies and reading and yeah. Yeah, and playing basketball. Actually, I still like to play basketball.

KL: Do you still play it now?

AC: No, no, not really. And I think if I tried to play I would look like a fool. So...

KL: Your short film Ten & Two was awarded NYU's Wasserman Prize for Filmmaking. Would you like to talk about that production experience?

AC: Oh, yeah, sure. Actually, that story was based on a woman in Houston, Texas, who I don't even know who that woman was. But it was—she, she—my mom is very a big part of the Chinese—wait, what is it called? It's the Chinese school. I don't know what it is in English. But Chinese community center? I don't know what the school's name is. But anyway, she is a big part of it. And one day there was a woman, a friend who showed up who was crying and my mom asked her what's wrong, and the woman is like, "I think my husband's having an affair with somebody, and I don't know what to do. And I don't know, I'm stuck. I don't have any job. I don't have like, I'm stuck. Like, I have no job. I only at home and barely have any skills. I'm not quite sure what to do." And my mom was like, you need to learn how to drive. Because like, learning how to drive is the first step to like movement to mobility to, to, to taking on a skill set for yourself, you know, and so, so the woman learn how to drive and I think it might story in Ten & Two, she actually drives away. But I think in reality, this woman learned how to drive in order to show that she can learn something. And I am not quite sure what the real story was, I think perhaps she finally confronted her husband and they probably got a divorce. But I think that learning how to drive actually just gave her the confidence to know, I'm never it's never too late to learn something. And it's never too late to help yourself, you know. So yeah, so that that's what inspired the film. And–and yeah, it was a really fun movie to make because it was my first kind of real movie, in the sense that I had like a beginning, middle and end. Up until then I was making things and I had no sense of story structure. And so I—you know, and this one actually had like a beginning, middle and end and had a very small crew, and I shot it in my apartment in Brooklyn, and got in trouble with my landlord for doing that, but it really taught me how to like write a script, how to cast, how to how to sort of design what the film should look like, and really how to tell the story through editing after you after you film it. So it was like a really positive experience for me.

KL: It was cool. So what was your first job after graduating from grad school, I guess or colle—

AC: Oh, from grad school. Um, I mean, I had a bunch of little tiny freelance jobs. It was like, you know, help edit this promotional video together, help do this, help do that. And my first real

job actually was I had been—I saw that there was a listing for somebody to help arc, do archival editing for a place called TED. And so I applied and it was just a freelance contractor position. And I and I got the job. And all I was doing was archiving. All like—TED basically has been around since 1984. And they have videotapes since 1984. And they had nobody to like organize the videotapes. So all I did was just organized the videotapes. And the reason why I like the job, there were two reasons why I liked it. One, it was steady income. Actually, there's three reasons one, there was steady income. It wasn't very much, but it was very steady, two, it was actually interesting content, because I was, you know, in order to archive it, I actually had to watch it. And I was like, "what is this? These are really interesting talks." So so that was that was two. But three, it didn't use too much of my creativity. It did engage me, but I wasn't like, yeah, my creativity wasn't really utilize that much. And so it allowed me to write scripts at night. So I could work during the day and not and not be too tired to get up early and write in early in the mornings and write late at night, because I really still wanted to make movies. And I really just took on this job at TED as a way of just making some money. But then the more I worked at TED, the more I just got involved in the stuff that we were doing. And I ended up turning the freelance job into a full time job. So I've been there now for a long time, like 12 years. But I've also grown, like I started doing archives editing, but now I'm the, one of the creative directors there. And so it is now using all a lot of my creativity, but I'm still trying to still find time, early in the morning and late at night to work on other projects.

KL: So can you talk about your current work at TED, and what kind of projects have you participated in?

AC: Yeah, so I started it, you know, once I finished the archival editing at TED, I also learned how to encode videos, which, that sounds kind of boring. But actually, it's very interesting because at the time, digital video and things like YouTube just started happening. And there needed to be a way to make sure that video was compressed in a, in a good—like in a, in a high quality way to be able to be shared and streamed online. And so I was that person who was encoding all these old videos to make sure that they played properly and in good quality online. So again, it sounded boring, but it was actually quite interesting. And then after that, I did a lot of media managing, which again, sounds boring, but is interesting. It's where it's when you film a lot of things—when you, when you have a lot of film, somebody has to organize the film and categorize it and be able to, be able to give that film over to the editors. And so as—I was that person, this sort of media manager. And then from there, I actually finally got to direct the talks on stage, which means figuring out where the camera goes, working with the speakers to see succeed the best way we could capture their talks. And today, I'm the creative director of a team at TED called format development, which is really just reimagining what talks could look like off stage. And so we make we make short form videos as well as podcasts. And my day is pretty consumed, like listening to rough cuts and giving feedback and notes and working with speakers and like I said, also creating podcasts and developing podcasts.

KL: I see. I remember you are involved in two projects, which are Small Thing Big Idea and DIY Neuroscience, right? [**AC:** Yes.] Can you talk about a little bit, talk a little bit about them?

AC: Oh, DIY Neuroscience was a video series that we did with a scientist called called Greg Gage, who is just really—he's a neuroscientist, really interested in how the brain works, and does tons of experiments on having to do with neuroscience. But is also like a great speaker on camera and so we just worked with him to create like a six episode series on–on like, the topics that he was interested at the time. And then Small Thing Big Idea was just—is a—it is still like a short form video where we take everyday objects and we talk about the design of that object. And why that–that is why that object changed how people do things. So objects like chopsticks, or the coffee cup lid, or what else? Well, there's so many, surfboard. Just being able to look at an object that you sort of don't think about anymore. And then realizing that the actual invention of that object has actually shifted how we engage with the world. And it really is meant to be a series that makes you realize how amazing human beings are, and how, how creative people are, and to recognize that design isn't actually just about pretty things, that it's about trying to fix a problem. You know, trying to change, like chopsticks were created because people needed something to pick up food and and why? Why are why chopsticks why to pair, why two pieces of stick instead of a fork? You know, there's all sorts of reasons why and it's just super interesting why those choices were made. You know?

KL: This sounds very interesting project. [**AC:** Yes, it was.] So normally how do you produce a TED video? Like how do you come up with those creative ideas?

AC: Um, I mean, it's, it's not just me, it's like a team of people who are really smart and who are very interested in things. I think the most important thing is that you have to be interested in things and then you if you get the right people in the room who want to just, they want to make something because they want to know the answer to things, that's how it happens. You know, we–we get in a room, we brainstorm ideas, we make sure that the idea has enough substance. And then from there, we see if there are experts out there who can share information regarding that idea. And then the rest is just actual hard work, which is like working with the expert to make sure that their talk is clear and useful. And then it's about like, you know, really boring logistical things like making sure that they have time to film, setting up the studio, organizing equipment, hiring people to help film, figuring out who's going to edit. And it's like, the thing about making videos or making films is that even though it seems like exciting on paper, it's actually so, so much hard work and a lot of troubleshooting and can be very boring. So yeah.

KL: Normally how long does it take for you and your team to produce a video?

AC: I mean, it depends on the video, but we can do something as quickly as a week or even two days to like months. It just depends on how complex the video is.

KL: I see. So throughout your, like 12 years working as a video or creative director at TED, what was their most memorable experience?

AC: One time we had—we produced a bunch of TED talks on a boat and the boat was—it wasn't a cruise ship. It was it was a National Geographic boat that was meant for exploring explorers. And so we were on a boat with a bunch of marine biologists and scientists, and it was in the South Pacific so really far away. I mean, it's probably it was probably the furthest point I've ever been from here. And that experience of producing an event on a boat was really hard because it's—you're jet lagged and you're seasick and also very tired because you've just flown you know, halfway across the world with all this equipment. But it was a really eye opening experience because we're in part of, we're part of the world where I don't think I've ever seen—the ocean was the very deep blue that I have never seen that kind of blue before. And, and we were with marine biologists so they were able to show us the craziest, you know, like, like at one point—I didn't go but a bunch of people went nighttime diving and saw like under like, saw, like, sharks that like glowed in the water. It was very scary. At one point, we filmed a talk in the ocean, like literally the speaker stood in the ocean and we filmed him with like a camera and it was very scary because if you drop the camera, the camera would, you know, would break. So I think that was probably one of my most memorable experiences because it was so adventurous and it was so far away and so hard.

KL: I see. And besides your job at TED, you're also a screenwriter and your feature screenplay Lucky Grandma has been released lately. Would you like to briefly talk about it?

AC: Yeah, sure. So Lucky Grandma was a was a project that I started with the director and also co-writer Sasie Sealy who I went to homeschool with. She actually came up with this sort of original premise, which is about a 80 year old Chinese lady who is riding the Chinatown bus when like a bag dropped in her lap and the bag was filled with money. That was like the original idea. But we built it out together. And for five years, we–we worked on the script. And we really loved the story. But we could never get funding for it because people just kept on saying that, like, there was no market for a movie about an eighty-year-old Chinese woman. You know, there's barely a market for a movie about Chinese people in the United States, much less an eighty-year-old Chinese woman. So we–we did you know, for a while we kind of gave up and put the script in like a drawer. But then Tribeca Film Institute—a lot in partnership with AT&T had a program called Untold Stories where they would pick a winner, to, to give them a million dollars to make their movie. And the only criteria is that the screenplay had to be something that you just—people have never seen before. And they approached Sasie about submitting something and Sasie remembered Lucky Grandma and, you know, took it out of her, her desk and like blew off the dust and turned it in. And we were picked as one of the five to pitch the project in front of like a room full of like celebrity judges, is kind of like a TED talk needs Shark Tank. And Sasie and I really practice for the pitch. And then, and then when we finally pitched it was a live pitch, like it was on Facebook Live, all this stuff. And we weren't really sure if we had won or not afterwards, we felt good about the pitch. We weren't sure that we won. But then that

very day, we were told that we had won and we're super excited but it also meant that now we had to make the movie for a million dollars, which crazy enough—is not actually that much money to make a movie. So, so yeah, so that is kind of a long, five year journey to get the movie made.

KL: So can you talk more about how did you come up with the story?

AC: Yeah, I mean, so I mentioned that Sasie had sort of had the early premise of it, but I was very inspired when she pitched me the idea because my own grandmother on my mom's side is, is very much like kind of grumpy. Like, she—my grandmother's very different from the grandma in Lucky Grandma, like she's, my grandmother is actually friendlier. But she also has a—she had a lot of principles, was very proud woman and did not like to be bossed around and really had ideas about what she wanted in life. And I really wanted to base the character of Grandma, on my own grandma. So in many ways the story and also when my grandmother was, was getting really older, she—I was I was struck by how stubborn she was like she didn't really want, she hated, she hated getting older. Actually, she she struggled with it, because it meant that she was more dependent on other people. And it meant that she wasn't as able, like at one point, she stopped—her eyesight got worse, and she loved to read, particularly the newspaper. And it was very hard on her when she had to when she stopped being able to read, and very hard on her when she stopped being able to hear as well. And in many ways, the movie itself is about the vulnerability of getting older and and I wanted to reflect my own grandmother's experience with getting older. In our own, I mean, all of us, I think have feelings about getting older and being more helpless. And–and so that's what I was trying to bring into the story even though the story itself is really, you know, like a comedy action film. To me the heart of it is about accepting that you're, you're getting older and which means that you have to rely on other people.

KL: So besides the portrayal of Grandma, how much the story is based on real life experience?

AC: I mean, very little is based on real life like, I mean, there's some there's some historical like, you know, we did a little we did do historical research about gangs and Triads in Chinatown. Those–those gangs and Triads were mainly more active in the 90s. They're not very active now. But some of those characters are sort of based loosely on characters from–from gangs and Triads that we had read about. But for the most part, I think the heart is–is based on real life. But the story itself is pretty unrealistic. I mean, there's not really anything. And so I can only say that the spirit is rooted in reality, but nothing else.

KL: I see. [**AC:** Yeah.] What kind of messages are you trying to convey through the film?

AC: Again, I think it is about vulnerability and aging, and how difficult it is to accept vulnerability. I also do think that we you know, we don't see enough in the United States, we don't see enough movies about Chinese or about Asians, but we also don't see enough movies about old people who are who are the main characters. And so I think the message that we're

trying to say is that, like, there's a lot of stories out there that haven't been told yet. And we, you know, Hollywood keeps on putting out the same kind of stories, especially these days when it's just like, the sequel, you know, such and so three like James Bond like, or like the Marvel Universe, like not, I'm not knocking on that stuff. That stuff is really entertaining. It clearly works. And it's really fun to watch. But there are also so many other stories that just haven't–haven't been explored yet. And we have not run out of ideas. And so I think that, for me, it was really very much like, hey, 80-year-old Chinese women can be main characters and superheroes as well. That's basically what we're trying to get at.

KL: I see. So in the film, we see grandma as a figure of strong Asian elderly which subverts the traditional obedient or good Asian American woman stereotype. Do you consider the representation a kind of feminist?

AC: Yeah, I would definitely say that both Sasie and I would identify as feminists. And I think that and what that means to us is that all women have a reign, like every single woman has a different experience and has her own experience that is worthy of telling. And really what we wanted to do was to try to tell one story about one woman that felt complex and didn't feel like she was the girlfriend or the mother or like she–she is somebody's mother. She is somebody's grandmother, but she has her own world going on that has nothing to do with–with just being a mother or being a grandmother.

KL: So how does this add to the representation of Asian American do you think?

AC: Yeah, I mean, I think that people, there's just, honestly, if there's something that's missing right now, in the United States, there's just not enough stories that are about Asian Americans, period, on screen. And there's, and I would like to see different stories about Asian Americans because we also want to recognize that like, it's weird to even lump every Asian American into a group like, there's so many different kinds of Asians and different kinds of Asian Americans, that, that even though as like a group of people, it gives us some kind of political and cultural power, we have to recognize that we're not a monolithic group, you know. And we have to recognize that there are, you know, there are, there's just a huge range of human experience that can be found in every single Asian American person living in the United States right now. I mean, the fact that people don't even know that there are tons of Asians in Houston, or in Texas, I think is kind of it's because everybody, when we tell the story of Asian Americans in the United States, we only think about California or New York, we don't think about places we don't think about places like Texas or Illinois, or, or Minneapolis or Florida. I mean, they're, like Asian Americans are everywhere. And, and, and so I'd love to see just a diverse set of stories about Asian Americans.

KL: Oh that's wonderful. And at the same time, I also noticed that you have been representing grandma as a stereotypical Asian grandma as like she frequents fortune tellers, and she jumps

lines, which we sometimes relate to the negative side of being Chinese, I guess. What do you have in mind in showing her in this manner using these details?

AC: Well, I mean, I think that, I think that honestly, we weren't really thinking about her being stereotypical in that way. Right? Like, like the fact that she's so superstitious and goes to the fortune teller is literally based on Sasie's, Sasie's own mom who is quite superstitious. And the fact that she jumps lines is yes, it's 100%, a negative–negative stereotype of like Chinese women, but it also is for us still character-based. Because when you think about the choices that grandma makes, it's always about strong choices. I'm a strong woman, and I don't care what you think about me. And if you use that as her main characteristic, then it would make complete sense that she would push her way up into a line to get the best seat. I think that there'll be plenty of other opportunities for, for me to tell stories that that again show like diverse experience a diverse range of experience in women. And, and I just think that when we were writing grandma that we never wanted to reduce her to just one simple idea, we really wanted to write her as complex. So yes, there are that she does display behaviors that can be seen as negative. But we really wanted to try to represent her as like a whole person on screen.

KL: So do you faced any challenges when you produce the film?

AC: Yeah, I mean, the other challenge I mean, I think the main challenge for me is I'm still kind of early in my career in filmmaking, even though it's crazy, because I've been trying to do this for years now. And the challenge that I have is that if I want to I like, I think the challenges that I have are the sort of limitations that a lot of Asian Americans face in the entertainment and filmmaking industry, which is that there is a real belief there. I think there's a belief that A—there's not always a market for Asian American storytelling, and B—Asian Americans can only tell Asian American stories. And I think that both of those are just not true. So–so there is perhaps one day where—there is now like, a hunger inside me to tell stories that aren't about Asian Americans, period. And, like, that's a big road for me to try to have to prove to a bunch of you know white executives that I can tell that story even though of course I can. I was born and raised in the United States. And then separately, there also is a hunger in me to tell Asian American stories. But if there's no market for Asian American stories, then or if the if people believe that there is no market, then that that becomes an obstacle to get those that story push through.

KL: Yeah, I think your movie is definitely a meaningful step for diversifying Asian American representation.

AC: Oh, thank you so much. I appreciate it.

KL: I wish it will be a great success.

AC: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

KL: Your screenplay Trouble to the Herd was also the winner of the Asian CineVision SAG-AFTRA Screenplay Award last year, would you like to talk about it and your writing process?

AC: Yeah, sure. Trouble to the Herd is actually weirdly enough my–my attempt at trying to even address the idea of model minorities you know, the idea that like I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna focus on like Chinese Americans right now and not just sort of cut out all the other Asian Americans because truly I can only speak about being Chinese American and like Taiwanese American, which is that for a lot of like, Chinese Americans, there's like, there is this idea that Chinese Americans in the United States work hard, are pretty quiet, follow all the rules, and, and ended up becoming sort of embodying the sort of model minority stereotype. And so what I wanted to do for Trouble to the Herd was write about a family filled with people who are very successful, very model minority, but the main character was like the opposite of being a model minority. She was like, the sort of black sheep of the family. And she wanted to and she's sort of, you know, and I wanted to have her character try to meet, just try to, like reach model minority status by–by sort of taking kind of like a, what's the word—I'm having a hard time thinking. She's—she tries, she tries to meet my, she tries to like, be successful in a way that normally we wouldn't, you know, we like in a very unorthodox way, which is to marry like a white Texan rich guy thinking that she could kind of trick him and in the end, he still tricks her. And I think that the–the thing that I was trying to play around with again, was just was about the American dream and how difficult it is to reach the American dream that it's kind of filled with traps.

KL: So as a relatively young director or screenwriter to delve into a career that demands rich life experiences and cultural understanding, and the currently racially the complicated background, what are the pros and cons given your young age?

AC: Wait, sorry can you say that again? That was long. Say it again, sorry.

KL: As a relatively young director or screenwriter to delve into a career that demands rich life experiences or like cultural understanding in a complicated background. [**AC:** Got it.] What are the pros and cons given your young age?

AC: And that's funny that you think I'm young. I'm actually not that young. But I also I mean, I do think that at this point, I've probably I don't know that I've lived like a rich life where I've learned so much stuff. But I do well, I should step back. I don't think I've learned so much through experience. But I do think that I've learned a lot just by trying to live. And I, and I want to say that I think most people, by this point, sorry, my cat has lived has–has a lot to say. But they, but in order for them to say it, they have to process it. And for in order for them to process it, they have to be aware of it and to notice it. So I think even in the past three months, when we've been sheltering in place where all I've done is sit in my hot apartment, staring at my computer. I feel like I've learned a lot just by reading about the world, thinking about the world and noticing what's going on in my own head and making sure that I'm always double checking

that what I think in my head is like not in a bubble. Again, I guess my point is that if you keep on learning then then there's so much to make movies about, you know?

KL: Yeah, that's great, so what are the challenges of Indie movies do you think? Like how do you keep a balance between finances, practicalities, authenticities?

AC: Indie movies are not great for finances. I mean, it's–it's indie movies are very expensive or there, there, there's not enough money to make Indie movies. And you will never make money in Indie movies. Um, and it's precisely why I have a full time job while still trying to make movies. But I'm also not—I guess there's a reason why I didn't go to Hollywood to be part of the Hollywood system and I don't think it's because I wouldn't have like liked it. I think it's because I really just love New York. And I—what I love about and–and like I think if I did move to LA and I tried to pursue something in Hollywood, who knows if I would have been successful? But if I did, I think that I probably would have enjoyed it, probably would enjoy it. It's just that like, what I love about New York is how much it has to offer. It's in New York. It's not just about movies like in LA sometimes it's seems like it's only about Hollywood, but in New York, it's about art and photography and activism and community and education, and there's just so much to offer here. And also, my job at TED allows me to be constantly learning because I'm constantly meeting scientists. I'm always learning about a new topic. I think that yeah, I don't actually remember your question all of a sudden, I feel like I'm just kind of rambling. Oh, did I answer the question?

KL: Yes.

AC: Okay, sorry it's the end of the day and it's been a hard week. So I'm kind of feel like suddenly I'm just rambling.

KL: Oh you're good. [**AC:** Okay.] So you also directed a bunch of short films or videos, I think, on your website. [**AC:** Yeah.] Like to talk about your involvement in those projects?

AC: Yeah, actually, there are three other films that have not been released yet. They're short films, and they're part of like an Asian American collective called Type A. They're all like short films that are singled around, just the Asian American experience of living in New York. And, and there's three more coming out. And it was really a way for me to practice directing and writing and a way for me to just make sure I was working with fellow Asian American actors as well, and just making sure that I was, again practicing. And just, I think that two of the three films are pretty good. One actually came out, I think, really good. And then one I think was a little bit of a failure. But, but I'm still so part of this. Here's the thing. I think that I grew up being very afraid of making mistakes. And I want to say that it's probably part partially my personality, but it's also partially being—having an Asian upbringing because you want to and probably being a girl, so like, you don't want to put something out there until it's perfect. You know, because you don't you and so and so it makes you afraid to try things because you're afraid to

make mistakes. And so I am learning more and more how to put things out there even if it's not perfect, because that's what a lot of white people do. I think a lot of like men don't have problems doing things and trying things. And if they don't succeed, they just try again. And I think a lot of women try something, you know, I'm actually I don't want to like generalize about women, I think I have had in the tendency, in the past a tendency to try something. And then if it's not, if I don't do well, the first time, I just won't do it again. But I want to be, I want to be a filmmaker, a good filmmaker so much. But I'm really realizing that part of the process is that even if something's not perfect, you have to put it out there. Because you need to be able to learn from it. And you also, yeah, you need to be able to have people look at it and watch it and be able to give you feedback about whether or not it's good and you have to also like learn how to grow a thicker skin. And so that even if you know that people didn't like something that you made, at least you tried to make it, you know. And so and so that's all a long way of saying that I'm putting out three pieces, three videos probably later this year through the film festival circuit first and then it'll be online. And that like, a few of them are not perfect, but I have to like force myself to put it out there. Because it's, it's, it's good for me to grow.

KL: What kind of impacts you'd like to bring through those videos?

AC: I think I just want—those–those films, the audience, the core audience really is an Asian American audience. Like I don't really, it's not that I don't care if people who aren't Asian American watch the movie. I would like for it to be a, you know, for the general public. But I really am trying to speak to an Asian American audience. And so I just want people to watch it and feel like they've been seen—that there's somebody else out there who shares their experience.

KL: Absolutely. For you to have a full time job as the creative director of format development at TED while working on films outside of your job, how difficult it is for you to handle both at the same time?

AC: It's very difficult. I mean, my day usually starts at five in the morning. And from five to nine is when I—is like me time to work on my own projects. And then from 10—and I'm also lucky enough to have a full-time job that starts at 10, I should say. So, and then from 10 to 6 is my full-time job. And so I often also just will work on the weekends. So I don't—I have a hard time with balancing my work in life, but I also am just so passionate about work and so passionate about film that I don't really know how else to make time to do both. Because there just isn't enough time. I mean that that's the main thing. But I also will say that like, when I do make when I'm like writing, for instance, early in the morning, like it is a kind of meditation for me. It is a it is a kind of it does comfort me. It's not, it's not just like hard work. It also is like a form. It's not leisurely, but it's also like a way for me to feel happy. Yeah, it's like therapy, I guess.

KL: Okay. How much has your Chinese American background influenced your artistic production?

AC: I mean, 100% there's a lot. I wouldn't I mean, it's hard to even separate because being Chinese American is just such a deeply intertwined part of me that I don't know. You, I couldn't tell you what part was American and what part was Chinese like, it's just, it's just who I am. And, but–but also, but also connected as like being gay is also a part of who I am in it and being gay is also 100% of what affects the kind of work that I put, like, how it affects my work, like it would be very hard to separate who I am from what what my identity is.

KL: I see. So what kinds of perspectives from Asian Americans do want you want to convey through your artistic production?

AC: Um, I mean, I don't know I have to think about that. What kind of—[**KL:** Or messages.] I don't know that I have a message. But I do think that, you know, I was really raised in a, in a, in a family where the like, I didn't mention this value, but I was raised in a family that really values loyalty, you know, where you were, it's very much about the, what I do affects the rest of my community. And I think in the United States, there's a real value of that, like people really value independence. You know, like, you know, everything I do, I do it for myself. I think for myself, I make independent choices on my own. And that's a very dramatic like, obviously, people are much more complex than that, but like, there's like the Chinese, the sort of Asian value of loyalty doing something for the group. And then there's like the American value of independence doing something for yourself. And obviously, obviously, you want a mixture of both. But I think that often in the United States, there's a lot of focus on the independence and the self, at the expense of thinking about the community. And, and when I was, you know, at some point in my life, I thought, being independent and thinking for yourself is, is very important. And it's, it's more important than loyalty and a sense of community. And as I've gotten older, I'm not so sure that that's true anymore. So I think that being Asian American, for me is always wrestling between me versus us. And, and I think that my stories are probably almost always about like me versus us. And as I've gotten older, I'm not sure which one's more important, you know.

KL: Do you think that kind of conflict between your two identities have helped you complicated your story?

AC: Oh yeah, absolutely. And I also do think that like, recognizing that stories are complicated, and people are complicated is part of art, you know. I don't think if it's, if you don't try to tell complex stories, then you're probably just making propaganda. And I and I, you know, and I think it's really important to say like, people are not good or bad or too selfish or not selfish enough for you know, all that type of stuff. Like, we–we need to recognize that things are always messy. And I think that that's what's the most important part of filmmaking and storytelling is to be able to tell messy things, you know, and so yeah, I think that I think that being pulled between

two directions is a big part of who I am and a big part of film like story—interesting storytelling always.

KL: So you've been stayed in New York for like 20 years. And also, I also noticed that you have many stories related to Texas. [**AC:** Yeah.] So how do you think you're experienced living to different places affected your artistic production?

AC: Yeah, I mean, I think that there's a lot of misconception about the North versus the South. I guess you can, we'll–we'll go ahead and count Texas as the South even though it's really like the Southwest. People really think that in Texas, it's like just like cowboys and racism something and–and it's very complex. It's not, you know, Texas is a complex place as well. And, and, you know, in the north, you think like here, it could be diverse and everybody could live together. But in fact, in the North, it's pretty segregated. There's, you know, when you like—Chinatown is Chinatown. You don't there's not a lot of mixing of cultures actually. It's like a lot of cultures living next to each other pretty peacefully. That's great. But, but it's not actually as integrated as we think it is. Whereas I think in Sugar Land, at least if when I look back at my—now, I don't know what it's like now, even though my family still lives in Sugar Land. When I look back at my yearbook from high school, there was—the diversity was very mixed. Like, there were lots of photos of friends and it was like, it was like a, like two black people, two Indian people, some people from Viet like some Vietnamese Americans, some like Chinese Americans, and there were like a group of friends, like for real. And I've never—I don't—I've never seen that in, in New York. So like, I think that I think that the reason why I'm so drawn to Texas is because it's it's also very misunderstood. You know? There's like one story that people tell about Texas. And it's not true. It's not enough. You know.

KL: In pop culture, we've seen the rise of Asian American representations like, Crazy Rich Asians and the Farewell. And also this year, we got an Oscar winning the Parasites, which is also a foreign language Korean film. What do you see the changes in the representation of Asian Americans in our country?

AC: I just think that the changes are that like, is just reflective of the fact that we belong. That's all. I think that there's a real narrative that Asian Americans are too different and too exotic for a general public to understand. And I think more and more, there's a recognition that Asian Americans are just Americans. And that even though their stories represent a very specific experience, that it is a part of the fabric of being American, as much as any other race or ethnicity. So I'm hoping that that trend will grow, continue to grow, and that it'll broaden out to include a lot more narratives and stories and say these are all American stories. And I mean, I would even say like, you know, on Netflix, have you seen Never Have I Ever at all? The Mindy Kaling. Like, that's a story about an American teenager. She happens—she is also South Asian, and she has like, rich, she has like her home life is about is, is, you know, she has a struggle with her mother who is an immigrant woman, and all this type of stuff. And she does have an identity, a South Asian identity, but like, for all intents and purposes, she is trying to be an American

teenager and trying to have like American rites of passage. And like that, I think, I think that plays like platforms like Netflix have actually paved the way for the rest of Hollywood to follow, because Netflix itself, tried to be, is trying to be a more of a global brand, the fact that they're licensing, like Korean soap operas and all that type of stuff and doing like a reality show with Marie Kondo and having her just speak Japanese, instead of trying to make it into some American show, they're not even bothering doing that. They're just, they're just saying they're just—they are a global brand. And I think that there's just going to be more and more stories that allow for us to see not just global brands, but also see stories from Asians who are in the United States that are just American television shows or American movies, you know.

KL: Do you think some Asian movie stars have been typecast into particular stereotypes?

AC: Oh 100%. Yes. Yeah. And like, obviously that's because these, by the way, when we were casting for Lucky Grandma, like we came across so many incredibly talented Asian actors. And they're just simply like, the reason why they're typecast is because the parts aren't being written for them. Rich, you know, complex characters are not being written for Asian actors. And also, Asian actors aren't getting parts that are like, rich, complex characters. They're getting parts to play like doctors and scientists and hackers, you know, stuff like that.

KL: So how do you think we combat counter this trend?

AC: I mean, I think like I said, movies like Crazy Rich Asians, The Farewell, I think people like I think, you know, talented folks like Mindy Kaling and Alice Wu and Sasie Sealy are trying to pave the way—oh and Awkwafina, sorry, are trying to pave the way for–for–for stories about Asian Americans that feel very different, you know, that that aren't always about the struggle between you and your parents, for instance, like, which is like every Chinese movie, Chinese American movie ever, you know. I'm hoping again, nothing against talking about the struggle between a kid and their parent in Chinese American movies, but like, there's just more to it than that. And–and I think that that we were seeing a generation of filmmakers who are trying to pave the way and I think the only way to do it is to just keep on doing it.

KL: So how do you see your film like, like Lucky Grammar different from the ones we've mentioned them all?

AC: I mean, I would say that I don't like—I would say that what we wanted to do was to make a movie that entertain people where the main character was somebody very nontraditional. And I don't know, I don't know what the other the intentions I can't speak for the intention of the other movies. But like, that's simply what we were doing. And we were writing about something that we felt like we knew about in a world that we wanted to explore. So I don't think we had a big mission beyond that, and and so it's weird to say how it's different. But I think that—that's like, I think the intention is–is to entertain.

KL: What do you think of the future of Asian American movies in the States? Will they ever be as popular as the mainstream movies or would they just be always be considered as neutral movies?

AC: Um, I really can't say. I think that I think that I can't say about that. But what I can say is that I think there will be bigger and bigger Asian American stars. And I think that they'll be able to even be even played main characters in movies. So like Hustlers, you know, with Constance Wu as the main star. I think there'll be more opportunities for Asian American actors to become leading roles to play leading roles that aren't always movies about being Asian. And that that really is I think, that's really my hope. Yeah.

KL: Another question I'm personally curious is how do you think of like Asian and LGBTQ like these topics appeared at the same time in the movies because it's not like very common, you know, in Asian culture. [**AC:** Yeah.] Like, have you ever watched the recent one the Alice Wu?

AC: I haven't watched the Half of It, but I did watch her first film Saving Face. And also there's Wedding Banquet, [**KL:** Yeah.] which yeah. You know, I don't know. Are you saying are you saying why are there so many like queer, LGBTQ Asian movies when it's not really a big topic in Asian culture? Is that what you're asking?

KL: Yes, I guess I'm asking is how do you think oh, there's yeah, probably like a rise of these types of?

AC: So yeah. I don't know. I actually don't have a…I actually don't know. But I–but I will say that it's a, it's a really, it's a good recipe for conflict, because, because being Asian American, in the United States, there are some inherent conflicts, right? Because there's a sense of—there's that question of belonging, like, do I belong here? Even though I was born here, do I belong here? And then if you are also happen to be gay, there also is a question of belonging. So it's like a double belonging thing. And so for me, there's like a lot of storytelling, richness in there because it's just, you know, storytelling is about conflict. It is about conflict. It's not that interesting if there's no conflict and so being able to do the double, you know, trying to explore something that has double conflict like that is already very juicy, and there's a lot to–to think about and write about and, and to film, so.

KL: Yeah, absolutely. So do you see yourself continuing with topics related to Asian Americans? If so, like, can you describe other topics that you have in mind?

AC: Yeah, I think, I think I touched a little bit on like, the whole loyalty versus independence. I think that's like a big topic that has been on my mind a lot. And, and yeah, I do see myself continuing on telling stories about Asian Americans 100%. But I also see myself telling stories that aren't about Asian Americans, or that don't have Asian Americans as like, that's not a central core thing. I can see that happening as well. I'm…I'm very interested in themes around like,

acceptance, I think. I don't mean like, I don't mean acceptance, like being accepted for being gay or something like that. I mean, like, we're all I think it's actually kind of Buddhist, it's, it's sort of like, we all have—human beings all want things that they don't have. And they don't want things that they do have. And the whole point of life is to learn how to be okay, and how to accept that sometimes you will not get what you want, and that sometimes the thing that you have, you have to actually try to cherish, and I'm really interested in topics like that to try to explore. So that doesn't necessarily have to do—you don't need to have an Asian American character for that. But to me, it's kind of an Asian idea. You know?

KL: So how do you go about looking for stories?

AC: That's like a very, it's kind of boring how I do it. I mean, I read, I think, I listen to podcasts I run, I take showers. Like, it's very, it's not. I don't, it's not like, there's no process that's like that. It's just kind of like you put it in your head that you want to find stories, and then the stories kind of find you. But you have to, like open up the door to allow the stories to come in. And it doesn't just work by like sitting there writing it, you know, it's not like that. It's like, you, you tell yourself to search for it. And you allow yourself to open you open yourself up, to come up with an idea and then it will come to you. But it's like, while you're doing something very boring like chopping, chopping garlic or something like that, and then something if something pops into your head, and then you have to remember to hold on to it, and write it down and start making connections.

KL: Actually do think our like Houston Asian American Archive can be a good source for you to explore story?

AC: Oh yeah, that's it. I mean, that's great. How does it does it just live online? Or how does it work?

KL: We have a online archive, basically, there are like a bunch of different stories really related to Asian Americans in Houston, or people who have lived in Houston.

AC: And, and I'm, weirdly enough, always interested in Galveston for some reason. I don't know why I think it's because it's so polluted. I have no idea I have to think about it. But that's okay. That's cool. That's really interesting. Yeah. That's cool.

KL: So my next question is, with the uncertainty of COVID-19, what's your view of the future of the movie industry? Will there be a like increased reliance on streaming? Because based on the response to Lucky Grandma, do you think streaming is here to stay for good?

AC: I mean, streaming is definitely here to stay for good. But also, yeah, I think that COVID-19 really brought a lot of independent theaters, small theaters, and has brought a fair amount of the Indie movie scene to its knees. And I, and it's scary, actually. And I hope, I hope that it will

rebuild, and I'm not sure if it will. And I honestly have to admit that I don't know enough about the Indie movie industry to be able to speak very smartly about it. But my—but what I will say is that somehow people have a way of being deeply creative and deeply entrepreneurial, when it comes to telling stories. And the–the future of the movie industry may look very different from what we know of it now. But that I don't believe that that that means that good filmmaking good storytelling will go away.

KL: Yeah. And speaking of COVID-19, as we're now in the middle of it, like do see any parallels and the history with what happened to Asian Americans today?

AC: Give me an example. I mean, like.

KL: I mean, probably have some racist attacks against Asians?

AC: Yes. Oh yeah. Yeah, yes. Yeah, I mean, I think that historically, whenever, like, when we talk about xenophobia, one of the easiest sort of xenophobic lines of thinking is that like Chinese people, or–or like Asians are dirty. And so certainly the fact that in the early days the Coronavirus, was connected to China and to people of Chinese descent, like really fit very nicely into that narrative that, that people who came from China, who came here brought with them disease. And, I mean, I think that those kind of that kind of storyline still exists, regardless of COVID. I mean, there's always some kind of story about like Chinese restaurants in Chinatown, not being very clean and stuff like that. That's all very, very related. The idea that was like very san—unsanitary conditions, etc, etc. Somehow the story about wet markets in Wuhan, like, it feels very mirrored to Chinese restaurants in Chinatown, you know, so. So yeah, definitely. I think that it's the easy—it's very easy to connect disease to a population to a foreign population.

KL: How do you think the COVID-19 and also the recent protests against racial injustice have impacted Asian American communities?

AC: Well, I mean, I think certainly COVID-19, well, we can I think we should probably look at it separately, but I think certainly COVID-19 has really affected Asian American communities. I mean, it's affected everybody, right. But like, in particular, in Chinatown in New York, for instance, the–the–the decimation of Chinatown in New York is really hard. I think even before COVID hit New York, Chinatown was seeing its business go down because people were afraid of going to Chinatown to eat or to patronize places in Chinatown because of the perception that Chinese people had Coronavirus. And I'd probably pretty sure that's the same in Houston’s Chinatown as well, right? Really affected by just the perception of, of people of Chinese people spreading disease. So that alone has really affected I think the Chinese community for COVID-19. What I will say about Black Lives Matter and the sort of recent protests, in response to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, that I do actually think that there's some anti-blackness in Chinese culture and Chinese American culture and an Asian American culture, period. I think there's a—there is actually a fair amount of racism going on from Asian Americans against black

people. And I do think that that's something that our communities really does have to address and talk about. And it's very diff—like that this kind of racism is very specific to the Asian American community. And it's something again, we have to talk about and address and reckon with. And it's very hard because it's a generational problem as well. Like, we have to be able to talk to our parents about why it's not okay to have negative stereotypes of black people. And I this this part for me is like, probably one of the most heartbreaking difficult parts in like, in particular to reckon with and to figure out.

KL: So has the COVID-19 change your perspective about the future of Asian Americans?

AC: Um, no, not really. I mean, I hope that I hope that Chinatown rebuilds. I really will say that like, maybe I think perhaps I'm even stereotyping, but I feel like Chinese people in general are very like, as a culture, we don't really—we're very persistent, I guess. And again, this might be a stereotype, I might be generalizing, but I think that Chinese, I think that it, you know, like, at least the way I grew up was like, if you don't succeed, just try, try again, you know, and, and so I think it probably brought us down a little bit, but I also think that we will find a way to rise back up. So yeah, that's all I can say about that.

KL: Absolutely. So what do you think Asian Americans could do to promote more racial or social solidarity?

AC: Yeah, I mean, A. I think we can, I think that A. we need to confront the fact that we like when it comes to the idea of white privilege, that Asian Americans actually do benefit from white privilege. Like, if you look at a list of things that Asian Americans can do, without being afraid that they are going to be arrested or killed by the cops, the list is very long, and there's a lot of things that we can do that. That–that like a lot of black people, for instance, cannot do. And I think we need to, I do think we need to start recognizing the white privileges Asian Americans have, and the kind of benefits that we've had from like that from like, it's fantasy. But I also think that like, we are not white and, and like there are definitely, you know, there's definitely like Asian Americans 100% face xenophobia in a way that like, is very specific to being Asian. So but anyway, that aside, I do think we need to reckon with the fact that like, we really benefit from white privilege. And then I think from there, we have to kind of talk to our community and talk to each other about what we can do to support black lives. And a lot of that is, I think, it's not just protesting and organizing, but it also is voting. And I, and I, you know, I don't know that Asian Americans always vote. And I do think it's very important to exercise our voice by voting, and by like, being counted as a citizen. And, and, honestly, if it's just if you could just vote, that's already, that's already, like wonderful. So I think that that's the first thing is to make sure that we participate in, in like our civic duty by–by registering our voice.

KL: Absolutely. And you mentioned model minority myths. I'm wondering like, how do you see that could be our like harm to not only Asian American society, but also others?

AC: Yeah, that's a great question. And I think that I think that let's talk about how it's a harm to ourselves first, right. So I think that the problem with model minority myths is that it, it only allows us to be one way. And if we're not that way, it makes us feel like we are not a part of that group. So if you're not, I mean, this is like a dumb joke. But if you're not good at math, and you have to be Asian, then there's a, there's subtle messaging that you are not smart or something just because you're not good at math or that you're not one of us. And I think that model minority myths are designed to keep us from from being ourselves. It's a way of the system to say you are you can only be good, you can only, you can only work hard, you can only be quiet and not speak up. You can only follow rules or else you are not you. I think that that is very damaging to young Asian Americans. And it also doesn't recognize that there's like so many different types of Asian Americans again, and it doesn't recognize that there are—it also like, assumes that almost most like that most Asian Americans are very successful and make a lot of money. Whereas in reality, the, again, the range of socioeconomic classes and the range of mobility across Asia, different Asian American populations and people is gigantic and huge. Like I think in New York City alone, the gap between poor and rich in Asian American communities is probably one of the widest income gaps ever. And so it doesn't recognize—it only paints one picture of what it means to be Asian American and there's a real danger in that because it keeps, keeps you from seeing yourself. And it keeps you from being you, you know, and I think that's a real problem. So that so there's that. The other problem, I think that it being a model of mino—or that like model minority myth springs up is that it is 100% away for white America to have a wedge between black and brown America and Asian Americans because it's a way of saying, "Hey, look, these minorities can make it, why can't you?" without addressing very real systemic infrastructural problems that are that are designed to not allow black and brown Americans to rise in mobility. So I just think that I mean, it—I mean, it's a really tough problem to solve, and I wish I had a solution for it. But I do think the first thing is to do is to stop telling that myth and also I think our parents I mean, a lot of immigrant parents help tell the myth, it makes—it's, it's a, it's really easy to buy into that myth. Because it—we don't want trouble. Our parents don't want trouble. It's very easy for them to say like, if you work hard and you shut up and you follow the rules, you're going to be successful. But there's a reason why Asian Americans are not always leaders. It's because you are allowed to rise so only so far, but not that far. And a lot of it is because we're just we're basically kept in our place by this model minority myth, I think.

KL: So. Yeah. Absolutely. So how do you think younger Asian Americans can like bridge that generation gap? Or like...

AC: Yeah. I mean, I'm not gonna say don't work hard and don't you know, but I will say, be okay to make mistakes and be okay to try things especially when you're young and you have energy. You should try to, you know, and when a by the way, I wouldn't say like, figure out what your life path is early because you're not going to know. But recognize that like, from the day you enter school, like at a young age, to the day you get your first job or to the day that you get your fifth job, that that path to knowing who you are is like a long path and you weren't going to know exactly what you're supposed to do when you first graduate, for instance, not–not

everybody, some people will, but some people won't. And if you don't, that's okay. And the most important thing is to just keep learning that learning is more important than good grades, I guess is what I'm saying. And it that doesn't mean go to Europe and have all these experience it means it really does mean like know that the value of education is that you are learning something that's fascinating, not because it's going to get you into college because, or into a good college, for instance, that in the end is meaningless for your life, I think. I think it's more meaningful to know about the world and to learn things and to be enriched by things that you're learning than it is to be like, "Oh, I got a perfect score on my SATs," "Oh, I got into this school," "Oh, I'm, I'm achieved all this stuff." Because in the end, it doesn't, I think I personally think it doesn't really matter whether your school was an amazing Ivy League, I think what matters is what you picked up in your life and how you apply it to who you are, and how your connections about how the world works. I think that's really more important.

KL: Absolutely. Yeah. That's great. I guess, these are my questions for today. And do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

AC: No, no, I think this was great. Thank you for having this interview and I'll definitely check out the archive that was that's really useful. I will definitely look at it to see if their story is there to to like try to tell on screen so I appreciate it.

KL: Thank you so much for your time today.

AC: Thank you. Thanks so much.

KL: Thank you, bye.

AC: Okay, talk to you later. Bye.