Background:

Esther Woo Quan was born in 1925, in Augusta, Georgia to Mr. and Mrs. Leong Woo. She was reared in Atlanta, where she worked in her father’s grocery store and finished her high school education. At the age of eighteen, she visited her sister in San Antonio, Texas, where she started corresponding via letters with her husband-to-be who was then stationed in Germany. They got married a year after he returned from the service. Since then, Esther has raised five children while working in her husband’s grocery store upon moving to Houston in 1951. After being in the grocery business for thirty-two years, Esther left work in real estate. She is now retired but still active in Chinese Baptist Church and other volunteer organizations.

Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of labor and capital to develop a working history around the context of childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities. Much attention is given to the grocery business. The interview was conducted in Mrs. Quan’s kitchen, at the breakfast table. The interview required an hour. She recounted several stories of her childhood and gave us a very succinct outline of her life. Mrs. Quan speaks clearly, but it was sometimes difficult for her to remember details. Her daughter, Wanda Choi, participated in the interview to provide assistance and add her knowledge.

Interview Transcript:

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PW: Today is Thursday, June 3rd, and we’re here with Mrs. Esther Quan…um my name Pin-Fang

CC: My name is Clarissa.

PW: And we are interviewing her on behalf of the um Chao, Chao Center for Asian Studies and Rice University.
EQ: Should I introduce myself? Or…

CC: Um well…

PW: Sure!

CC: If you want to.

EQ: My name is uh…Esther Quan and I’m being interviewed now by Pin and uh Clarissa.

PW: Um I guess, let’s start with…um…could you tell us a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, um what your parents were like?

EQ: Well, um, let’s see know, where do I start? My father came over when he was about um in his early teens, and uh then he uh helped in his uh godfather’s store. And then he went back to China and he got married and came back in 1920…22 I imagine. 1922. And we were all in Augusta, Georgia. [laughs] And uh of course his uh godfather had a grocery store too. And uh as most of the uh Chinese people at that time because it didn’t require them to speak too much English, you know? And the merchandise there, you know, just uh is easier for them to communicate that way to deal with the public. And uh my oldest sister was born in China so she was about seven months, seven months old when she came to the U.S.. But, uh, of course my dad had a grocery store, a neighborhood grocery store, um in uh African American neighborhood [laughs]. And as we grew up, we helped him in the grocery store. [laughs] And there were eight, eight of us, and I’m the third, third child. [laughs] And, uh, what else, what else? Oh of course my mother, we lived in the adjoining to the grocery—you know, living quarters adjoining the store. So, it was very convenient for us to, uh, help in the store too. And uh…what else?

CC: In the family, like, in the grocery store among your family did you mostly speak Chinese or English?

EQ: Well, among ourselves, we spoke Chinese. [laughs] But, uh, and that’s how we learned Chinese because now-a-days, you know, English comes more readily. We don’t speak as much Chinese to our family.

WC: Yeah, well you went to public school and you learned English…

EQ: Oh yes. We went to the public schools there and it happens that you know, um….our home was located not too far from school so uh sometimes we walked to school, sometimes my father, he has time, he’d take us to school. And, afterschool, we, we, we’d walk home, you know? And, uh, what else?

WC: He was instrumental in maintaining a Chinese School after [inaudible] school….

EQ: Oh yes! My father, my father was anxious for us to learn Chinese, so

WC: To maintain your Chinese…yeah.

EQ: Yeah, he organized a Chinese School and we had about, I guess, twelve students. So he could teach us Chinese, and that went on for about four or five years I guess. What else?

CC: So other than your family, um were there many other Chinese residents…in Augusta?

EQ: Oh yes, uh-huh…we had…I don’t know approximately how much—what the population was then…but everyone had a grocery store. [laughs] And sometimes we would have, you know, within three blocks there would be three grocery stores.

WC: All run by Chinese.

EQ: All of them…[coughs]. Excuse me. All Chinese and uh…just a small neighborhood store. And, uh, on Sundays, well, my Dad would um take us to Chinese Sunday School because back then they didn’t have a Chinese
church but there were some uh very dedicated Christian ladies that had uh taught my father speak English and also taught him about the gospel, that of Jesus Christ.

[00:05:05]

And, so, he…so when he had his family, he would take us every Sunday afternoon because most stores open on Sunday were part day, open part of the day on Sunday. So, it’s like around 4 o’clock in the afternoon. Four-to-six, you know? We would have our Sunday School. And, uh, besides taking his own family, he would pick up other children along the way, you know? Because their families didn’t have time or didn’t drive or, so we wound up with about, sometimes maybe ten-twelve kids in the car because back then we didn’t have to have seatbelts. [laughs]

EQ: But uh…let’s see what else?

WC: When you left Georgia and stuff like that.

EQ: Well she said [inaudible] we were growing up…

WC: Well, what’s to say?

EQ: [laughs]

PW: Well, were a lot of your friends um, Asian, or of Asian descent then? Or did you play with a lot of other kids at school as well?

EQ: Well, I guess we did have mostly Asian friends. And you know, at one time, they um they didn’t even allow the Chinese to go the ‘white’ schools. But, the people at church would help us protest that. And, uh, so we were able to continue to go to the white schools, but as I heard before that in Mississippi, that they had to move out of Mississippi, or either form their own little schools you know, to uh continue their education.

CC: So would you go to a school that was classified as colored then?

EQ: No, no.

CC: No?

EQ: Well…at that…

WC: They wanted you to…

EQ: They wanted us to, but we…they—we protested, they didn’t uh follow up on that.

CC: So you weren’t um…so your whole—you went through high school that was all in Augusta?

EQ: Yes…uh huh.

PW: I want to go back to—how old did you start working at your father’s store, and what were some of your duties?

EQ: [laughs] I think uh…Well pretty early, you know? About ten or twelve years old, you know, as long as you can mount the cashier or stack, stock shelves, stock the shelves and all. Um…

PW: Did you enjoy working there? [laughs]

EQ: At times. [laughs]

[0:07:30.1]
It wasn’t bad, really. You know, it was, uh, because we can have our snacks and all right there. [laughs] So anyway. I think most of the families had the same set up, you know. That they uh—most of them did have their living quarters adjoining the store, and uh so, it was not uncommon to have that set up.

CC: Were the products sold there like strictly American rather than any Chinese import food? Or…

EQ: How’s that now?

CC: Like did you import any food from China or sell any sp-?

EQ: Oh! Back then we had to mail out to California to get out our Chinese groceries, and about twice a year, you know, we have a big box of groceries that ship in. And that was always exciting ‘cause we always had some goodies in there.

WC: But those were mostly for your family.

EQ: Right.

WC: You sold in the grocery store just regular food.

EQ: Right.

WC: Because your, your clientele was African American?

EQ: Right, right.

WC: Right. So they...

EQ: No, we didn’t sell Asian food in our store. We just sold regular American food, and so uh. And, uh, let’s see when I was uh eighteen, um I came out to visit my sister in San Antonio. And, I stayed with her until I met my husband and, and married him. But, before I met him though, he was in the service. He served in the uh, World War II. And, uh, actually, we became acquainted through, through mail ‘cause we were pen-pals [laughs], back in those days. I guess we call…

CC: So who suggested you become pen pals?

EQ: Well, actually, he’s my brother-in-law’s cousin.

CC: Oh, Okay.

EQ: [laughs] So, uh, we corresponded until he came back and, uh, so four months later we were married. Now what else? [laughs]

PW: Well, I guess um most of your family lived in Augusta when you guys were little.

EQ: Right.

PW: And so, what caused your sister to move out to Texas?

EQ: Oh, after she married.

PW: Okay...

EQ: Yeah…she married a, a fellow from San Antonio. And, so that’s why I came out to visit her and stay with her for a while.
CC: How did they meet?

EQ: I think they were matched. [laughs]

CC: Oh, Okay.

WC: He came out to Georgia.

[00:10:00]

EQ: Yes, he came to visit in Georgia. So, uh…

PW: After corresponding with your husband, um what made you decide to stay in San Antonio? Just because you guys got married, or…

EQ: Well, actually, after we married about three months. He wanted to go back…it was only his father in San Antonio. His mother was still in China, so he wanted to go back to see his mother after he had been in the service. So, we went back, so I went back with him to, to visit his mother. And while we were there, my oldest son was born there, and we stayed there two years, because, the Communists were coming and uh they asked all the citizens, the U.S. citizens to come back home to the U.S.

CC: So you moved back to San Antonio then?

EQ: Yes, ‘cause when she was born. [laughs]

WC: [laughs] That’s where I was born. [all laugh]

EQ: She was born in San Antonio. So we stayed there, I think two years. ‘49 to ‘50—

WC: Not quite two years.

EQ: Not quite two years. That’s right.

CC: So did you work at a grocery owned by your father-in-law then? In San Antonio? Or…

EQ: No. I did not work at all. I took care of the children. But, uh, then uh…

WC: But my father was working in the grocery store. Again, in San Antonio, that was the common type of business for Chinese.

EQ: So, you know, uh. He was working with my brother-in-law in the grocery store. You know, the one that married to my sister. [laughs] So, then, we uh…you know, they decided—he had a fr—he had another cousin in San—Houston, that uh told him about another grocery store here. So uh, he felt it was a pretty good set up. It had, it also had an adjoining living quarters for family. So, we moved to Houston in ‘51. And, uh, so we’ve been in Houston ever since.

CC: So when you moved from San Antonio did you have two children?

EQ: Pardon?

CC: Uh…when you moved from San Antonio to Houston, how many children did you have?

EQ: Two.

CC: Okay. Was that a factor in the decision to move at all? Or…
EQ: Yes, in a way, yes, uh-huh. We felt like Houston had, uh, a better future in a way. San Antonio relied on a lot of the military bases over there yeah.

WC: At that time…yes. San Antonio has changed a lot too.

EQ: [laughs]

CC: So…what aspects of Houston did you think would be a better future for your children?

EQ: Well…we heard about the oil industry. [laughs] Actually, we were near the ship channel. Our store was located near the Ship Channel. So there were a lot of workers that worked in the Ship Channel were our uh customers. We were patronized by the, by the ship channel people. So, uh…

PW: You guys opened a grocery store as well, here in Houston?

EQ: Right. So we stayed in the grocery business for over thirty years. [laughs] That’s where all the children grew up in grocery stores. [laughs]

PW: So, um in San Antonio and in Houston, did you guys provide groceries to the same type of clientele?

EQ: No. We had uh Hispanic over here. Most—first it was Caucasian and Hispanic but it gradually uh, it was mostly Hispanic, yeah… And since my husband and—oh my father-in-law was—came back to the U.S. too. And, uh, he—he and my husband had lived in San Antonio so long they could speak Span-Spanish so that was another attraction you know to live, being in that neighborhood. So, they could communicate with the customers and all.

PW: Did you enjoy Houston more than you enjoyed San Antonio?

EQ: Well, I’ve lived here longer…[all laugh]

EQ: I think so. Yes. Yes.

PW: What were some of the differences living here versus living there?

EQ: Well…of course now, we have a, a bigger Asian population. We have, uh, we can go to Chinese church and uh that’s where most of our friends are, I guess, in Chinese church. And, uh, there’s uh, you know, they have Chinese organizations and my husband used to like to be a member of and he, he enjoyed being in community service too. So, that’s why I think it’s much better than San Antonio.

CC: So your children all went to public school?

EQ: Oh, yes.

CC: Okay. Was that ever an issue? Like, were there any…problems?

EQ: Well…uh...definitely. You know, they um have better opportunities if they would just uh—have a college education all. They didn’t want to stay in the grocery business. [laughs]

[00:15:06]

CC: And your husband didn’t go to college either because…

EQ: No.

CC: He was drafted?

EQ: Uh, yes, he was drafted.
CC: Do you know how, how old was he when he was…

EQ: He was eighteen only when he went, went into the service. He served in Germany.

PW: So after moving here, when did you have your third child? [all laugh]

WC: Pretty soon! [all laugh]

EQ: Third child lives in Houston. She [Wanda] was born in ’50s so third child was born in ’52. Yeah and then I had one in ’56 and one of them in ’60. I have five kids, yeah.

PW: Would you like to talk a little bit about your children? What they do…

EQ: Well, um you know Gordon, my oldest one—he’s an attorney for over thirty years now, an immigration attorney. And of course he served as a City Councilman back in, what year was that? 19—

WC: I don’t remember…

EQ: I think it was 1999.

WC: Three terms or two terms…

EQ: Three—well it was three, six years. So I think he began in ’99 until 2005. And then um…now he’s running for County Judge. [laughs] And uh…

WC: Next is me.

EQ: You. [laughs]

WC: You’re supposed to talk, not me. [all laugh]

EQ: Well he went to UT, Gordon went to UT. And uh then he went to U of H to get his uh Masters in Guidance and Counseling. He had an Education degree first. Then, he went into guidance counseling. Then, he went back to South Texas Law School to get his law degree. And…Wanda, my second child, went to University of Houston.

WC: Education degree.

EQ: Education. [laughs] And she has taught in HISD for over, what, thirty-two years?

WC: Thirty-one years.

EQ: Huh?

WC: Thirty-one years.

EQ: Thirty-one years.

WC: Before I retired. [laughs]

EQ: And she’s interested in uh. Well, she used to be the, um…HISD used to have a, uh, a program called um…

WC: People Place.

EQ: People Place. And she was with People Place uh representing China.
PW: Oh…

EQ: Have you ever heard People Place?

CC: I think we were talking with Ed Chen, and I think he mentioned it.

WC: Hmm.

CC: Was that where middle-schoolers would interview…or like…

WC: No, actually, it was a cultural center for elementary children.

CC: Okay.

WC: So it was one of those magnet programs of HISD.

EQ: It was one of those programs where they bussed kids in three times a day. And she would—

WC: It was a little center for children to come learn about different cultures.

EQ: Uh-huh.

WC: So, actually, it was a predecessor of the Children’s Museum, because, uh…

PW: Is it still going on right now?

WC: No.

PW: I remember…

WC: Unfortunately, HISD closed it.

PW: When did they close it?


PW: I remember going there.

WC: You might have come! You might have come!

PW: And there were like multiple countries?

WC: Because we tried to service all the elementary schools.

EQ: Yes…six different countries!!

PW: I think I did go there.

EQ: See, Gordon started with that.

WC: Yes, he…

EQ: When he first began…Gordon was representing China. They actually, they started one in Japanese…Japan.

WC: Right.
EQ: But the…

WC: They couldn’t find a Japanese teacher. So then he talked them into having China.

PW: Oh…

EQ: So Gordon had it before she had it. So... anyway. Um, so now she’s retired. Mother of three boys. [laughs]

WC: Oh, Gordon has three girls and…

EQ: Yeah…Gordon has three girls.

WC: Two granddaughters.

EQ: That’s my great-grand… There’s a picture over there.

WC: Let’s see where are they. Where are they?

EQ: Well, that picture has all of them in it.

WC: Oh…in this one. It’s a family photo.

PW: It’s a big family!

EQ: Five chi–, five children, five in-laws, eight grandchildren, two great-grands, and, and then three great…three grand son-in-laws. So that’s what—adds up to around twenty-four of them, I think. But anyway. Yeah uh…let’s see… Go on to the next one?

WC: Yep, go on to Jeanie.


WC: It’s covering your mouth.

EQ: Okay. Um she works for MD Anderson right now.

WC: She has her doctorate degree from University of Houston.

EQ: Right. She also had her BA from U of H, a Bachelors from U of H.

WC: A Bachelors, yes.

EQ: And, uh, her Master from GWU. And then, her Ph.D. from University of Houston. And, she’s uh working with MD Anderson in research for Asian health. And then the next one is…oh. She’s the mother of one daughter. [laughs] Points at picture. This is, this is Beverly, and that’s her husband and that’s her daughter and son-in-law. And this is…let’s see where’s Wanda? Wanda’s up here. That’s her husband and three sons here… One, wait a minute, wait a minute; this son and this is the youngest son and this one. Yeah, three sons. [laughs] So, anyway. Then, my second son is in San Francisco. Oakland, Oakland, San Francisco area—Bay Area. He was a sportscaster, he’s a spor—television sportscaster. So he—first, he was in Hawaii for seven years, then he uh…

WC: Points at picture. Rick and his wife.

EQ: Yeah he worked for chan—he worked for Channel Five for twenty years. But now he works for Channel Seven.
WC: Yeah. He was with CBS, but now he’s with ABC.

EQ: And also he has his own production company, RickQuan Productions, doing, doing sh–movies or videos.

PW: Does he visit often if he lives all the way out there?

EQ: Pardon?

PW: Does he visit often?

WC: Not too often.

EQ: Oh…oh a couple of times a year.

WC: Two or three times a year. But one of the things he likes to do with his video uh business is he does biographies on Asian uh athletes, and he’s done uh several uh histories of Asian family, a kind of patriarchs or matriarchs as a family legacy way of preserving history.

EQ: And his wife is a United Airline flight attendant. And uh, recently he did a video for a the uh Japanese inter—. You know, during the time they were interred during the World War. And so, it was, it was good. It was…They took it up to Smithsonian in Washington.

WC: Yes, it was shown in the Smithsonian as part of an exhibit up there. It was really an honor.

EQ: So he’s very proud of that.

WC: So then lastly, Dave.

EQ: And David is also a UT graduate. The second—all three boys went to UT. And uh David has his Masters in, uh, Government and Public Affairs. Yeah and then he has a…a law degree from UT Austin. So, now he’s practicing um labor litigation and also serving as a judge.

CC: Is he in Houston?

WC: A municipal judge. Yes. Points to picture. So that’s Dave and his wife Rachel and their son, Nathaniel. Yeah so, anyway.

EQ: Points to picture. And then my granddaughter. [laughs]

WC: Oh, okay now you’re going to go to the next generation. Okay.

EQ: Well, Gordon has three daughters, like I said earlier. So, the older daughter is um Caroline. She’s a chiropractor. So, she’s been practicing for almost, over five years now. She’s married to Patrick Long.

PW: Is that her?

EQ: Yeah. Uh huh. And they have two daughters, Victoria and Katya. Victoria is three and Katya is about one and a half.

PW: They’re cute.

EQ: And Gordon’s second daughter is Christine, over here. And her husband, Hunter.

WC: And both of them are attorneys.

PW: A lot of people are in law in your family. [ all laugh]
WC: Yes.

EQ: And they both live in Washington DC now. And, then uh…

WC: Katherine.

[00:25:00]

EQ: Katherine. *Searches for her on the picture.* Is uh…youngest daughter is…here. That’s Gordon’s youngest daughter. What do you call…product design…

WC: I don’t know.

EQ: She does um…

WC: Production designing. She works for Martel Art Design and uh she also does—has her own uh t-shirt designing company. She's kind of an entrepreneur.

EQ: And then my… [all laugh]

EQ: The other granddaughter that’s married is Rachel. That’s Beverly’s daughter, and she married a minister, and they live in Raleigh, North Carolina. And then her [Wanda] three sons. This is John. Her three sons are not married yet, yet. This is John, he’s uh—he just graduated from Emory, and he’s a physician’s assistant, P.A. So he’s still living there. And uh…

WC: In Atlanta, in Atlanta, Georgia. So he went back to Georgia.

EQ: [laughs] Let’s see now, where is… *Refers to picture.*

WC: Where’s Matt?

EQ: Matt right here. Matthew. He lives—he’s the number two son and he lives in New York now. And what kind of work does he do?

WC: He does uh de—well, graphic design. So he does uh a lot of plumb line advertising. So he works for a small company up there in New York.

EQ: And the youngest son, Mark. She has John, Matthew, and Mark.

PW: All biblical names.

WC: Uh huh!! [laughs]

EQ: So Mark, he just graduated from Baylor, just graduated from B— Baylor two weeks ago, and he’s also in digital…

WC: Imaging. Uh digital…uh media.

EQ: Film.

WC: Yeah.

EQ: So, I think that covers all of them.

WC: Digital media. That’s what it’s called. Digital media. So anyway, yeah.
EQ: They’re all kind of spread out. All spread out. [laughs]

WC: That’s the gang!

PW: So you have a really big family. How do you, how do you know, get them together?

WC: Not too often.

EQ: Holidays, holiday time.

WC: That’s why we had to plan a very special weekend in the, in the foothills of Austin. [laughs] Yeah, so…

EQ: That refers to picture was last year in May. Had to plan about six months in advance so they could get their leave of absence from work and so forth. That’s to celebrate my 84th birthday. Yeah, so…

PW: You had a lot of children as well. How did you, how could you tell us a little bit about how you raised them? Or…

WC: How did you raise us? [all laugh]

PW: Like family values, stuff like that.

CC: It seems like the church was pretty influential.

WC: Yes.

EQ: Yes. Attending church has a lot to do with it. Yes. So, uh…they enjoyed doing Christian work and uh, and of course Wanda’s been to China to teach uh, help Chinese students learn English. It’s been three times?

WC: Yes.

EQ: And her sons have been there too.

WC: Right. Also to teach ESL.

EQ: So most of our activity, I guess, is centered around church. But uh…

WC: Mom was one of the founding members of the oldest Chinese Church in Houston, which is Chinese Baptist. So uh we’ve been established for fifty-eight years.

EQ: Yeah. Fifty-seven years.

WC: Fifty-seven years—something. So…so a lot of our socialization and activities are—were around the church, and our closest friends are there, besides relatives. [laughs]

PW: So you guys still go every week?

WC: Oh yes. We, we attend different churches, but we all started there.

EQ: Mmhm.

CC: Was there also a Chinese school there?

EQ: Yes, there is. I don’t know it’s…I think my grandchildren started…
WC: [laughs]

EQ: Yeah. They always tried to have a Chinese school even when they were growing up.

WC: They sent us, but it didn’t, it didn’t take. [laughs]

EQ: [laughs] Yeah, but we do have a good Chinese school there now, with uh, I guess an enrollment of about what, close to a hundred?

WC: Oh yeah, I’m not sure.

EQ: You think so? Uh-huh.

WC: We just uh—our Chinese school just celebrated its 30th anniversary, but because our church was one of the older ones, it taught the uh Cantonese language, and you know now everybody’s learning the Mandarin dialect.

EQ: But they do have a Mandarin class now too.

WC: Yes, Conversational Mandarin.

[00:29:57]

PW: Did you ever…when they were born, when they were little, did you ever try to force them to speak Mandarin?

EQ: Well, at the table. [all laugh]

WC: Well, Mom doesn’t speak Mandarin. And, no…

EQ: No. We all speak Eng–Chinese yes.

WC: But Chinese, yes.

EQ: Chinese not, not Mandarin.

PW: Oh, Chinese?

EQ: Yes, we speak Cantonese. Well, well they. I guess you hear Taishan, you know, it’s mostly uh like village dialect, mostly, but uh it’s close to the Cantonese uh lang—you know. So…

PW: Yeah, I guess, let’s see. Here’s…um. How…I know you’re really involved in like Chinatown and you’ve listed a lot of the organizations you belong to. Could you tell us about one of your greatest accomplishments, one of them…or what you deem your greatest accomplishment?

[Pause]

PW: Or you can tell us about several.

WC: Chinese organization?

EQ: Have you heard of the Chinese Americans Citizens Alliance?

PW: I’ve heard of it.

EQ: It’s been organized for over a hundred years, you know. It started in California of course. And uh, in the very beginning it was just seeking equality you know for the uh Asians, and, uh, so now that uh we have that, they, uh, like to help in other community services uh. Uh they feel there’s an injustice somewhere. They, they really have
representatives to go and speak for them. And, I don’t know, that Lung Kong is...it’s uh more of a family association. It, uh, consists of four different families like the uh, the Liu, Quan, Chu, and Jiang. I don’t know, you probably don’t study this Chinese history but there’s a legend that you know those four formed a brotherhood and, so they continued to keep that tradition through it generations, you know? So, um, I don’t know. They have conventions, but I don’t know what their main goal is. But they um, they always have their spring banquets, you know in, you know in the springtime after Chinese New Year, and have a big celebration at that time to get the families together and the fellowship and all. So.

CC: Was the CACA-Houston Chapter founded while you were here? Or was it started before?

EQ: Um... My husband was more involved in it than I was but that Chinese Citizens Alliance, he was one of the charter members when they organized it here, and also Lung Kong, he was one of the charter members also, in that. And of course, um at the beginning, they didn’t have the auxiliary for either one you know, but now they, they uh formed either auxiliary or just uh admit the females as members.

PW: Um you said the, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance was—dealt a lot with inequalities, and did you feel like you suffered any inequality while you were growing up here in America or in Houston?

EQ: [sighs] Well, when we were in San Antonio, and my husband has just gotten out of the service, we had thought about staying in San Antonio. And, uh, because my sister was there and all. So, we made a down payment on a house, but they refused it, and he had just gotten out of the service. [Voice breaking, tears up] So…that’s all. I guess that’s the only time that we…

WC: Yeah, they felt like the reasoning, of course, was racial… reasoning.

EQ: Yeah.

WC: And so it just seemed so ironic that he had just served our country, but they did not feel that he, uh, met their qualifications to be a resident in that particular neighborhood. So that was one of the things that kinda led them to think, ‘Well, Houston is just getting started maybe, you know, we can be a part of that new community of Asians in Houston.’ So, anything else? How about in Houston?

EQ: I don’t think we felt any prejudice in Houston that I remember… Did you feel anything when you were going to school?

[00:35:08]

WC: Ohh, just the usual, you know, children’s taunting. Where they all think you know kung fu or something, or make fun of the way the Chinese language sounds. [all laugh]

WC: But other than that. I think…

EQ: Chong, chong, chong.

WC: That’s right. I mean still we went to school with Caucasians and Hispanics. And we, we made friends among all, but quite honestly when we were growing up, and of course schools were segregated, and it didn’t dawn on me until uh when after I graduated from high school that I had no blacks in our, my high school, so uh…actually when Gordon was teaching, he was one of the first batch of teachers that took part in cross over teaching, and that’s when they would take non-black teachers into the black schools as an introduction to start crossing over the uh the student bodies as well as the faculties.

CC: Did he actively pursue that program specifically to help with that, or was he just assigned?

WC: No, no. It just so happened that when he began teaching, that’s what the district was going through. So.

EQ: Actually, you taught in a black school too.
WC: Oh yes. That was one of my first schools when I started teaching. I was teaching to the black schools, and it was a new culture to me because we grew up with Hispanics uh down, like she said, near the ship channel, so I really found that having not been around a lot of African-Americans, they really had a culture of their own. And so, but, uh, I continued to teach in um minority schools like that throughout the district. Even though when I took a break, I came back to teaching because the Vietnamese came to uh America and they needed an Asian face to help them with their ESL, so, um, that’s what brought me back into teaching, so.

PW: I want to go back to…could you reflect a little on moving from Magnolia Park to Houston, Greater Houston area?

EQ: Right. [laughs] How’s that now?

PW: Could you reflect a little bit on moving from Magnolia Park, near the Ship Channel, to the greater Houston area? And if there were any choi–changes at all…maybe in your daily life or…?

WC: From going from Magnolia to Glenbrook, was there any change there?

EQ: Not that much.

WC: Glenbrook was the area that we moved to which is a part of...

EQ: You know Glenbrook Valley is near Hobby Airport. That was where we had our home uh after we moved from the store.

WC: That was a mostly Caucasian area.

EQ: Yeah. There wasn’t any big difference. We’ve been here ten years, so…

WC: So then, from there she moved to the Bellaire area.

EQ: It was okay. [laughs]

PW: You didn’t feel—did you feel any difference between the type of people you associated with over there, so community, since you said it was largely Hispanic and here was it the same as well, or…?

EQ: Not really…

CC: Um…but and so, when you moved away from Magnolia Park, was that also when you stopped working, or when your family stopped working at the grocery business, or um…when did…?

EQ: How’s that now? Oh…the store’s in Magnolia Park. And…

CC: And how, for—did you still work or did your family still work there while you weren’t living immediately next to it? Or…?

EQ: I think we lived—at Magnolia Park, we, we built our own store and we continued to have our living quarter adjoining until about ten years. And then we had this house built in Glenbrook Valley, of course, by then the children were in college or high school. So, didn’t work as much in the store then. We had to hire help then. [laughs] But uh…

WC: We continued having the store…

EQ: Yeah.

WC: Even when we moved to Glenbrook.
EQ: Sure.

WC: Uh…for how many more years?

EQ: Huh?

WC: How many more years?

EQ: Let’s see, if we had uh…at least twelve or twelve years or something like that because uh we rent a store first, for the first ten years. And then, after we built the store, another ten years. And then, we were in the grocery business almost thirty-two years, so…

CC: Is the store still a store? Or what is it now? Do you know?

EQ: The store?

CC: Yeah.

EQ: We sold it to some Hispanics. I think they continued to have a store there, but it’s not like it used to be because of the supermarkets and all—the competition. You know, it’s a very small store, smaller than the one we used to have now. Yeah.

[00:40:08]

PW: Can you reflect on some of the prices, as in like growing [inaudible] the prices of like the groceries from now—from then until now? Do you feel like there’s a really big change?

EQ: Now, I’ve been out of the store for over twenty years.

WC: Well she even talks about you know, when she was in Georgia, how things cost. Even how they would have to sack up items that we ordinarily wouldn’t think about as being…

EQ: Everything is pre-packaged nowadays, whereas, you know, back then we bought things in bulk, you know a hundred pounds of sugar, a hundred pounds of rice, and then we—and because the economy was so bad back in those days, we just packaged a little package of rice for five cents. Five cents and ten cents and fif—and twenty-five cents like that. So, every weekend, uh my bro—sis–brothers and sisters and I, we helped package the little packages to, to be ready to sell on weekends, you know. And, even loaves of bread, we used to break it in half and sell half a loaf of bread.

CC and PW: Wow.

EQ: A whole loaf was like ten cents so half a loaf of bread for five cents, you know. That’s really, um, really nickel and diming back in those days. Yeah. But, a nickel and dime then, you know, could get you more than you can get now. [all laugh]

EQ: And that a dollar can get anything now.

WC: And, we were just reflecting on the cost of— well, we don’t smoke but, we sell cigarettes, and when we were selling cigarettes at the store.

EQ: At the store.

WC: And they were like twenty, twenty-nine cents a pack and something like that.

EQ: I understand now-a-days, it’s like five dollars a pack?
WC: Yeah I think seven dollars a pack?

EQ: When I was growing up, we used to even break the packages open and sell one or two cigarettes at a time. So, it was really a very big difference.

PW: Was there a much of a price difference from when you worked as a little kid in Georgia versus, um, when you opened your own store in uh…?

EQ: I think by then everything was pre-packaged by the time we had our own store. We didn’t do much packaging any more.

WC: Well, cost-wise; I guess because everything was pre-packaged things just automatically became more expensive.

EQ: Well, the economy is different too.

WC: Sure.

EQ: Well, you know, even now when you buy uh sugar. It used to be five pounds in a package, now it’s four pounds in a package.

PW: Huh!

EQ: You didn’t realize that? [all laugh]

EQ: And we used to sell like, uh, five pounds of sugar for about twenty-nine cents and now it’s sometimes over two dollars. For fi—but now it’s four pounds but still it costs almost two dollars. So, it’s a big difference because the figures on the paycheck is high—uh larger but you don’t get much more. [laughs]

CC: This is kind of jumping around in time, but um during World War II with rationing, what was that like working in the grocery business?

EQ: Oh yeah, it was kind of rough. Yeah, because uh they rationed the sugar and what else…did they ration flour? I can’t even quite remember.

CC: How would you get your supplies during that time?

EQ: Pardon?

CC: How would you like get the sugar during that time? Would you also be rationed or…how?

EQ: Well the wholesalers would uh ration it to us too.

CC: Okay.

EQ: And, we had to get those coupons, you know, and uh trade in the coupons to get a certain amount too. But I can’t even remember what all was rationed back in those days. I just remember sugar for sure. Uh…I know hosiery, you know, hosiery was uh rationed back in those days, but uh, I don’t remember the food items. Bad memory…

What all was rationed back in those days? You remember anything?

WC: Oh no, I don’t remember.

EQ: I mean do you remember hearing us talk about it?
WC: Now did—are you mainly uh researching work experiences? Because Mom actually did have other, uh, work experience. She was a realtor…

CC and PW: Oh...really?

WC: Uh-huh. And uh…

PW: I guess we haven’t gotten to that yet.

EQ: [laughs]

CC: Yeah.

EQ: That’s okay. That’s why I said I didn’t know if we had an hour interview or just a half an hour interview.

[00:45:03]

PW: We want to learn as much about you as possible.

WC and EQ: [laughs]

WC: And after my father retired from the grocery store, he actually became a banker.

EQ: Yeah, he organized the first Chinese bank, Chinese-owned bank. And um so, he went into banking and I went into real estate because around that time we had an empty nest. [laughs]

PW: Could you tell us a little bit about your experience as a realtor?

EQ: Well, I enjoyed being a realtor, but then, uh, later you know they had to have inspection of asbestos and all. I only stayed there about 10 years, but during the time I was working as a realtor I enjoyed it. Of course, prices nowadays are a little higher than they used to be. [laughs] That was back in the uh…let’s see…

WC: And you started with Aunt [inaudible] company right?

EQ: Yeah. Uh…Four Seasons Realty.

WC: Her sister had her own real estate company, so she worked with agents.

EQ: So I worked for her. Uh that was back in 1970, ’75, or something like that. 1975. Stayed with it about ten years.

PW: What were some of your daily activities as a realtor?

EQ: How’s that now?

PW: What were some of you daily activities, as a realtor?

EQ: Daily activities? [laughs] Well… I did some volunteer work at the uh Texas Medical Center. Yeah. At Texas Rehabilitation—TIRR. I did, I think I did that for 7 years. Uh what else did I do?

WC: As a realtor, I guess, what, did you have open houses? I was really married, so I didn’t know what you were doing.

EQ: Yeah. Occasionally we had open houses. You know. We tried to get the…

WC: Mostly residential.
EQ: Yeah residential.

[long silence]

EQ: What else? [all laugh]

WC: I don’t know. You helped out to answer the phone with Aunt Lil, for Aunt Lil’s office.

EQ: Yeah. I had helped in Gordon’s office too.


WC and EQ: [laughs]

EQ: That’s right. Being a grandmother. Yep. At the time we got out of the grocery, that’s when you were starting your family and all.

WC: Right.

EQ: So…I guess…

PW: Out of all your occupations, which one did you enjoy the most?

EQ: [laughs]

PW: Cause you’ve, I mean, you’ve been everywhere.

EQ: I guess being a mother. [laughs]

WC: Yeah. That’s pretty full time.

PW: A lot of your children are in either medicine or law, and like digital media. Did you—do you think you imposed any sort of like teach them anything that made them want to go in that direction?

EQ: Not really. They kind of chose their own careers. What do you think?

WC: I don’t really think you pushed, shoved or…just mainly just uh gave us the opportunity to be educated to pursue, uh, the fields that we were interested in.

CC: What...do you know what exactly um made your husband want to become a banker after being in the grocery business?

EQ: Well, he had some friends that you know they met and decided that with the Asian population growing and all, there was a need to have a bank for Chinese. So, they had the bank downtown, in old Chinatown. You know where the old Chinatown is?

WC: I don’t know if she would.

PW: I think it was...downtown? I think we learned about it in our internship.

EQ: You know St. Emanuel? St. Emanuel and McKinley?

WC: Around where Discovery Green is now? That’s where old Chinatown…

EQ: The building is still there where they started their first bank.
WC: Right behind the George Brown Convention Center. There’s a, that old restaurant area inside those shops and stuff like that.

EQ: But, since then, you know, they’ve changed names several times and if you’re not familiar with the bank on, uh…Corporate. Gosh, I think, I don’t know, what’s the name of that…? Last I heard, it was named Summit. It was Concord and then Summit. And, I think now it’s called, another name, East Wind or something like that. I passed it not too long ago and I noticed that it changed names again.

[00:50:10]

WC: But that was the original Asian-American bank.

EQ: Asian-American National Bank was the first uh name on it, but since then, you know, they have so many other banks. [laughs] Bank on every corner.

PW: Yeah. Especially in Chinatown. So do you guys go—or do you go into Chinatown a lot?

EQ: At least once a week.

WC: Shopping.

EQ: Shopping or dining. [laughs] Yeah.

PW: How do you think it compares with the old Chinatown?

WC: [laughs]

EQ: Oh definitely much more variety and uh much more…

WC: Much bigger.

EQ: Huh?

WC: Much bigger. Yeah the stores…

EQ: Oh, yeah. A lot of choices of everything. A lot of choices of uh groceries and produce and restaurants and you know we used to go out to California and buy those ducks, char siu, and stuff like that. Now, we have it right here nice and fresh, you know? We don’t have to go out to buy.

WC: All the Chinese pastries.

EQ: Yeah all the dim sum. [laughs] You know dim sum Ms. Clarissa?

PW: Um…I guess is there anything that you guys like to do for recreation? Or from like then, now.

EQ: Now? Well I go to the Y, for exercise at least once a week. Sometimes I go twice or three times, but most—and then I do volunteer work at church and I go volunteer at the radio station.

PW: Hmm!

EQ: You know there’s a Christian radio station called KHCB? You ever heard of that? Keeping Him Close By, KHCB. They have uh uh, they used to have a newsletter mail out every month, so they uh—we volunteer to go stuff the envelope. I used to have a pen around here. I guess I don’t have it. I thought I had a…I had a pen with their name on it. Anyway, it’s right—not too far from here, on Bissonnet—off of Bissonnet. So, uh, I go there. But, uh, most regularly I volunteer at church every week.
CC: Um when you had small children running around, what did you do to kind of entertain them? Did you take them out to the park or something?

EQ: Oh yes. Yes. Take them to the park and Play Land Amusement Park.

WC: Pony rides…

EQ: Yeah, yeah… Of course, they have much more to entertain kids nowadays, like the Space Center and, and the museums you know? They didn’t used to have a nice Children’s Museum like they have now. So, they have much more advantages.

CC: Do you think that your like expectations of the futures of your children, I mean obviously, they’re all pretty accomplished, but I mean do you think like what you were hoping when you moved to Houston, kind of came true?

EQ: Yes, I think so. Yeah, I think that… I’m, I’m proud of their accomplishment. That they, you know, chose their field and seemed to enjoy the field they chose, you know.

WC: Yeah, you used to have those blue KHCB pens Mom, but I don’t seem them.

EQ: [laughs] Might be one in my purse. I don’t know. So, what else now? So… your name is Pin-Ang?

PW: Pin-Fang.

EQ: Fong. F-o-n-g?

PW: F-a-n-g.

EQ: Oh. I had an -ang on here, I thought –ang, like that movie producer? [laughs] Yeah… Pin-Fang Wang? So your family name is Wang?

PW: Yes.

EQ: And your middle name is Fang?

PW: Well, my whole first name is Pin-Fang.

EQ: Oh.

PW: I don’t have a middle name.

EQ: Her name is Lan-Fang. Lan-Fang. What is Pin? How do you write your Pin uh?

WC: I’m sure she knows how to write.

EQ: I’m sure she knows how to write her Pin. You go to Chinese school too, huh?

PW: Um… no. My dad actually teaches me.


[00:55:00]

CC: So did you give all your children Chinese names then?

EQ: Yes, my uh husband really wanted all of them to have Chinese names, and they um use their Chinese names on their birth certificates as their middle name. Yeah.
WC: And it goes on down. Grandchildren all have Chinese names and great-grandchildren have Chinese names.

EQ: I’m trying to write your name.

WC: What? Lan-fang?

EQ: Lan like this? Can’t even remember how to write Lan. I think it has a [inaudible] like this, ain’t that right? You know, Lan-Fang you know, the flower? Is that right?

PW: It looks right.

EQ: Is that right?

PW: Looks right.

WC: Do you know the classical Chinese characters or the more simplified?

PW: Classical.

WC: Classical. I like the Classical.

EQ: Is that the one you use? Referring to a Chinese character on the paper.

PW: I use—mine is the same except without the, the top two.

EQ: Oh. Without the top?

PW: Yes.

EQ: And her name is Lan-Fang. And, and Beverly’s is Jin-Fang, like this…and [inaudible] you know? You know they—used the same name for the girls and boys you know? Like, Gordon is Jin-Peng, you know.

WC: All the boys are Jin-something.

EQ: So all the boys are Jin-something. Yeah. Like that. And then the other one is Jin-M—Jin-Mun. Um one is Jin-Mu, Mu is uh. I don’t write it often so I…uh I know Jin-Mun is like that. Uh-huh. Jin-Mu is like bron—...oh like this, I think it’s like this.

PW: Okay.

EQ: Isn’t that kind of like brawn? And this is literary like, you know?

EQ: It just so happens that he likes sports. Turned out to be that way. You know, my husband named them when they were babies, but it turned out ‘brawn’ likes sports, and the other one is the attorney so he’s ‘literary.’

PW: Does that go for all of your children?

EQ: No, this is for the three boys’ names. Uh-huh. Gordon, Gordon, you know like, is supposed to be a legendary bird. Well he’s in politics.

WC: He’s making his mark. [all laugh]

EQ: I think uh uh, his grandfather named all three of them really, my husband’s father. Because he lived with us for twenty-four years.
PW: So he was—also came to the states with you guys?

EQ: Uh-huh. He went back to China with us, and then when the Communists came, he came back with us. So he passed away over here.

PW: And so your grand-children. Do they also have like this type of first character’s same and second character is different?

EQ: Um…

WC: What are Victoria and Katya’s names? Well, my boys are named by my mother-in-law, so, but she, she did something similar. Uh…Gam-fan, Gam–, Gam-hem, and…

EQ: Gam-fan.

WC: Gam-fan is first one.

EQ: Yeah. Gam-hem. And there was a little one.

WC: Gosh, I’ve forgotten.

EQ: You know, when you know you don’t use the name frequently, you don’t remember.

WC: And so…the only one that’s easy for me to remember is my sister’s daughter. Her father-in-law named her. Her name is Chun-Hoi, so like spring love. So, that’s something easy to remember.

EQ: Now, um, you know my granddaughters, you know they have names that are like you know like Gam-Lin and Gam-Ping, you know. And then…

WC: So they have one character the same.

EQ: Uh-huh. Gem-Fan, Gem-Hem, Gem-Men. [laughs] I had my husband write all this down a long time ago, so I can refer to it.

WC: But you don’t have Victoria and Katya there, huh?

EQ: Nope. He didn’t—because, he…

WC: He didn’t get to meet them.

EQ: He’s already passed…

WC: That’s right.

WC: My dad passed in ’05, so.

EQ: So, anyway.

PW: Is there anything you guys would like to add?

EQ: How’s that now?

WC: Anything else to add?

EQ: Not really. [laughs]
WC: I think, you know, if you’re mainly talking about work. You know, certainly, the Asian culture, uh, is a, a strong supporter of good work ethic. My father used to say, ‘Don’t work, don’t eat.’ [laughs]

EQ: And good work habits.

WC: That’s right. So, the value of honest labor is something that we’re brought up with to do a job well done, you know. It’s not only a Christian value, but one I think the Chinese, that culture, tries to support as well. So…I guess that’s about it.

CC and PW: Yeah...

WC: I’m sorry that I had to be on the tape recording as well.

CC and PW: That’s fine.

EQ: How’s that?

WC: I’m sorry that I, I [inaudible].

EQ: Let’s see…did we get both uh sets? What’s that the original? Yeah, these are just copies.

[01:00:49] End Interview