

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

Interviewee: Viola Chan

Interviewers: Clarissa Cox, Tracey Lam

Date of Interview: June 29th, 2010

Transcribed by: Clarissa Cox, Tracey Lam

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/17/2017)

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Background:

Viola Chan was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1929. After receiving training from a local Bible school, she moved down to Houston, Texas to help her older sister raise her family. Since then she has led a life of service with the church in addition to holding jobs in many fields, including secretarial work, real estate and insurance.

Setting:

The interview focused on her work experience while growing up in Chicago and since coming to Houston as well as her relationship with the church and the ways she has helped the Houston community with the help of the Chinese Baptist Church, which she is a charter member of.

The interview was held in a study room in Fondren Library at Rice University, and took a little over an hour.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

TL	Tracey Lam
CC	Clarissa Cox
VC	Viola Chan
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

TL: Okay, so, I guess we'll start the interview.

VC: Alright.

TL: Um, so the first thing we wanted to ask you about was just some background information. Can you tell us about your childhood experience in Chicago? Just, like, how your parents got there, like the ethnic make-up of the neighborhood, your schooling, things like that.

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VC: Oh, okay. [laughs] Well, my mother was born in Canada, and she went to China when she was very little because her father wanted to die in China. And then, my father was over here under a merchant's uh visa, and then he went back to China to marry her at age thirty, so he was in the United States for a short period of time—I don't know exactly. Um, evidently he had been going back and forth—he came when he was seventeen, and then he went back when he was thirty to marry my mother. And after he married my mother at age seventeen, [laughs] she would not come to United—would not marry him unless he promised to bring her back to United States, and so he waited for her, and on the way back from China, they um docked at um Seattle, Washington, and my oldest sister was born, in Seattle. And then they came to Chicago, and that's where I was born. I'm number four in the family, and I went to elementary school, and there—there were only Caucasian people there and one Japanese family and myself—our family. Um and the teachers were very loving, and I just remember I had a lot of friends, and I grew up in a—a neighborhood of uh...mixed uh...well actually, a block away, was the dividing line, and there were blacks on the other side, and then on our side there were Caucasians and Mexicans and, um we were the only Oriental family that I know of.

So, I had a very, very happy childhood, excepting in the seventh grade, at twelve years old, Pearl Harbor was bombed, and I remember all of us were, um all of us met in the uh—the gym—gymnasium, and the family that was Japanese, she went home crying, and I felt real bad because that was my good friend. So, we moved quite a number of times because our family grew, and also we were having a hard time financially, and so from the time that I was born to the time I graduated high school we moved seventeen times.

CC: Around Chicago?

VC: In Chicago, all around the same area. And then when I was a senior in high school we moved to Chinatown, but I also went—when I was a freshman in high school, that, we did not have um junior high—we just had elementary one to eight and then high school, nine to twelve. So in my ninth year, we moved to Chinatown, just as I was about to graduate, so, uh but prior to that I did attend language school in, when I was in ninth grade, and so that was my exposure to the written Chinese language, and since my mother wanted to come to United States, she did not make us speak Chinese. And s—because she wanted to learn English, so whenever she would speak to us in Chinese we just answer her in English.

And um, then uh, well after high school, I decided that I wanted to—well, during the time I was in high school, um I did work during the summer time. I looked at the ads, and looked for a job myself, and my uh—my mother was very much afraid for me because she said you better be careful because there are so many people that um, are bad, and you know, you need to take care of yourself. But, I had a lot of confidence in finding a job, and I did find a job in um—it was a—a pesticide place, and they had a thousand-dollar guarantee that it would work if you um—if it didn't work they would give you a thousand dollars.

And some of my friends heard about it, and they said that they wanted to work also—could they come with me, and so I called the personnel director, and I said, 'Can I bring some friends?' And he said, 'Well we never hired any high school kids, so, just bring them, but we can't promise that we'll hire them,' and it ended up that I had the most skills because I knew how to type, take short hand, at that time run the mimeograph machine—you don't have that anymore, you don't even know what that is [laughs], and um—and then I had my certification for filing, so, I was uh given the job of um just a lot of clerical work and typing, and my friends all had to file. He did hire all of us, which was unbelievable [laughs].

And then um, I was interested in uh going to Bible School because I went to a Bible Church and I noticed that these ladies and men had—I was very impressed with their kindness and love, and so I felt, you know, that I would like to learn more about the Bible and also I would like to um be a missionary. And so, when I applied for Bible School, they had a waiting list, so I was not able to [laughs] go right away, but it was a blessing in disguise because I saved up my money. There was no tuition. It was just a board and room that I would have to um pay for, and my parents were not in agreement, so, anyway, I did go to Bible School for three years, and during the time that I went, in 1949, the Communists um came to China, and they were—the doors were closed for missionaries to go to China, so I—I was still attending school at that time, and then I just asked God for direction as to what I should do and where I should go when I finished. So I finished in January 1952, and, my

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sister lived in Houston. She had married and was down here in Houston, so I came down to help her with two of her children, and that's how I got to Houston.

CC: So, um could you explain—so is Bible school just training for being a missionary or what exactly is it?

VC: No, it's training for being a pastor, a Christian-Ed director, um uh missionary, and music director.

CC: Okay, so, were—could you speak Chinese at that time?

VC: No, no, but—

CC: No, so how were you planning on being a missionary in China?

VC: Learn the language [laughs].

CC: Okay.

VC: Like most Caucasians have to learn the language, I would have to learn uh Chinese. And I um—I majored in Christian-Ed and Bible. Christian Education is uh one of the fields in which you could uh help in a church with their education program.

TL: So just going back to why your parents—or just your parents—why did they choose Chicago, of all places?

VC: I think my—my father's father, or my grandfather, had made some roots there in Chicago, so his—my father's brother—also was in Chicago, and both the families lived together. They had eight in their family, and we had eventually eight in ours. They were a little bit older than our family, so I don't remember us all living together, but that's what my relatives told me. [laughs] What I remember is, we lived by ourselves [laughs], but I had a very nice um childhood, even though we were very poor. I can remember, um one time when we—it was during the Depression, and I remember for supper we just had crackers and milk, and I thought that was a cool supper [laughs]. I mean, I didn't even know that we were that poor because I was very happy.

And people from the church did help us. My mother, even though she couldn't speak very much English, she was—she knew—well, how it happened was, years ago, they had milk delivery, and for some reason, we had milk delivered to our house, and the milkman is the one that told her, 'There's a church down the street. You need to take the children.' Well because my mother, you know, had—well, there were four of us already, and then she—she had another child, so she couldn't take us to church, but we went to church, and the people were very, very kind, and at that time, there was the same Japanese family and our family, and the—we were the only two Oriental family in that church. Most—all of them were Caucasian.

CC: So what did your father do as a job? Did it vary or—

VC: Uh he was a chef.

CC: Oh, okay.

VC: And my cousins told me that he was very good. He worked in a large Chinese restaurant in downtown Chicago, and he cooked barbecue ribs, and they said that, his ribs were so good that they were sold out every time they had that menu, and then when my father left, he did not tell them the secret of his barbecue, so my cousins told me that they always had leftover ribs after my father left, but he was a very good chef. He did go to vocational school in Chicago. He went and learned how to cook French foods, and I don't know where he learned to cook American food [laughs].

TL: And just wondering you said that your parents didn't agree about your going to Bible School. What did your parents want you to do?

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VC: They wanted me to be a teacher [laughs], because I have um four siblings under me, and I used to—there's five years difference between myself and the next sibling, and then two years, two years, two years, so I always was teaching them their ABC's or teaching them something. But I got the blame for everything if they did something wrong [laughs], so it wasn't good [laughs].

TL: And you said that you went down to Houston because your sister was here and she had kids. Why did your sister move to Houston?

VC: She married, and her husband had a uh mom-and-pop grocery store, so they had a business, and his parents were here also.

CC: So was your sister's husband chosen for her? Or did—how did they meet?

VC: Oh, well, her—his sister—his younger sister—went to high school with us, and that's how she knew my sister, so when he came back from serving in the—well it was—he was serving in a—a situation where they made, things for the war and it was counted as military service, even though he wasn't in the military, but anyway when he came back to Chicago to live, she called my sister, and asked her if she would date her brother [laughs]. That's how they met.

TL: And how were Houston and Chicago different at that time? Or were they similar?

VC: Oh yes, it was very different. When I came down here it was hard for me to get used to having this separation of races, the blacks and the, the whites on the bus. And the water fountains. And I didn't know where to sit on the bus, so I stood up in the middle [laughs]. So it was kind of strange because in Chicago you can sit anywhere, and so it was—I didn't know what to do, and so I never drank water whenever they had the signs, and later, those signs were removed, but it was hard for me to uh—to accept it. I felt, you know, I know there's prejudice everywhere, because even in Chicago there's—there was prejudice because when I—I told you I was looking for a job—and I noticed the variety store. They call it Dime Store at that time. And I noticed that they needed somebody, and so I called them. At that time I think I was like fifteen years old, or fourteen. I wanted to work during the school time, and so I called them and they said, 'Come down and make application,' so when I went down to make the application, they looked at me, and I knew I wasn't going to get the job. They said the position has been filled, within that fifteen minutes [All: [laughs]]. Because we lived—during the time we were in high school—we lived close to the school, and one street going from where we lived to the school, which was about a mile, we would walk and on either s—on both sides of the street were businesses. It was all a business area—a shopping area, so I saw the sign and I felt like, you know, I wanted to work, but it turned out fine, because I didn't really have time to study if I had started working there because I was going to the language school too, and it was five days a week—no, it was six days a week. Five days I would go from four o'clock to six o'clock, and then on Saturdays it was a half a day. So it was time-consuming.

CC: Did all your siblings go to language school?

VC: No, [laughs] only three of us—the three females [laughs]. My brother joined the navy when he was seventeen—right after high school.

TL: And you said the summer job you had was pasting frames?

VC: Yeah, that was—I'm sorry—that was the first job that I had—that I looked for, and I—and I found that job, but the second one is the one that—was at the insecticide place.

TL: Okay.

CC: At the insecticide place, you said that you did secretarial work. How did you learn those skills, like typing?

VC: In high school.

CC: Okay. So that was just standard, what you learned in high school?

VC: Yes, yes, mm-hmm.

CC: Okay.

TL: Why didn't your friends have the same certification?

VC: They were younger, yes.

TL: Oh, okay. Did you have any more jobs in Chicago or was that it—just the-

VC: Yes, I had another job. Um after I moved here, I went back to Chicago for, um like six months, and I got another job, and, um it was for, the manufacturer that does baby diapers, Curity [laughs], and uh anyway, both the jobs that I had, uh they never hired Asians. I was the first Asian in both positions, and at the insecticide place, I worked two summers. The second summer, I graduated from high school, and he wanted me to stay on, and I said, no, that I didn't know what I was going to do, but I didn't want to work there. But he went to my home and talked to my mother and told her that he would like for me to work there because I could do all those things and anytime they needed certain people—um certain people needing help, you know, they would tell me to go there, and so I made friends with a lot of the people there, and so my mother was very impressed. 'You should go and work there'-

TL/CC: [laughs]

VC: And I said no I didn't want to work there. I wanted to do something else. And then when I went back to Chicago just for that six months period and I worked there, I received a very, very nice letter from them, and they said, 'If I ever move back to Chicago, please come. There will always be a position for you,' and I thought that was very nice. But they never had Asians working for them, at either place, so I—I felt good about that [laughs].

TL: How did you get that job?

VC: Uh the first job I found in the newspaper. The second one, I think I—I did the same, I don't remember, but I—I applied for it.

TL: And when you were looking in the newspaper, how many—well, we don't need an exact number—but how many jobs did you apply to? Or did you just-

VC: I just chose one that I thought fit. I don't think I called very many places. Whoever gave me appointment, if they heard that I'm in high school, they don't want you, so I, I think I called four or five places, and then, some of them I didn't call. I just went downtown and look at the address, and here are all these tall buildings, and here I am [laughs]. And I was uh very—I felt very uh safe, even though my mother put fear in my heart [laughs]. I mean, she was fearful, so she tried to make me fearful, but I felt—um I felt like I could do it. I had a lot of confidence—not to the point of arrogance. Just [laughs] I think probably, um ignorance of what's happening in this world [laughs].

TL: And why did you go back to Chicago?

VC: Um...I felt like my sister could handle the family herself, so I—I was wrong—I went back, and then she got sick, and I came back. And that's why—and then I stayed, because her—her third child, she needed a lot of help. I didn't think she did, but she evidently did, and then she had a total of six children, so I never left after that [laughs]. Except for vacation [laughs].

CC: So how long did you live with your sister?

VC: I lived with my sister—the first time I lived with her, maybe, two years.

CC: Okay.

TL: And you said that you felt very safe in Chicago-

VC: Mm-hmm.

TL: Did you feel the same way in Houston?

VC: Yes, I did, excepting I just didn't like the racial profiling, you know, on the bus, and the separation, but then I learned how to drive, so that didn't bother me anymore [laughs].

TL: And did you do anything—when you were helping your sister with her family did you do anything besides help her?

VC: No, I worked. I did apply to um Texaco, and, uh the man told me I have several strikes against me. One is I'm out-of-towner, and secondly, my race. He was very open with me, and I appreciated that. And then I got a job at MD Anderson, and so, well, it was—I mean, MD Anderson was hiring every race, so it didn't—it didn't affect me, but I just thought it was kind of interesting the man at Texaco was so open with me [laughter]. I mean, usually they don't tell you, they would say, you know, the position is filled and so forth, but I think he was just feeling very sorry for me.

TL: What kind of job were you applying for at Texaco?

VC: Um it was uh secretarial.

TL: And was this the same way you'd done in Chicago, just like newspaper ads?

VC: No, I went through a uh employment agency.

TL: Okay. And how long were you at MD Anderson?

VC: I was there about a year and a half, and then I went to Methodist. One of the ladies that worked at MD Anderson called me and asked me if I wanted to go over to Methodist as a—a typist for transcribing uh radiology x-ray reports.

TL: Okay. And you were still living with your sister at this point?

VC: No, I wasn't. I was living by myself.

TL: Okay. Did your job pay well enough so that you could live comfortably?

VC: [laughs] Uh not really, but [laughs] I had a budget, and I knew how to save, from past experience. And also, my mother telling me to save, save, save [laughs].

TL: [laughs] Did you ever live with your sister?

VC: Yes, I did. Yes, I lived a couple years when I first came to Houston.

TL: And when did you move out? Or when did you feel that you had to move out?

VC: Well, I left—I stayed with her about a year and a half, and then I left to go to Chicago, then when I came back, I um—I did stay with her until um maybe a couple of years later.

TL: Did you ever help out in the grocery store?

VC: No, that's not my [laughs]. I was a volunteer at Chinese Baptist Church that I'm still volunteering—that was my purpose, is to help out at the church, since I did have a background of Bible and Christian Education.

TL: Okay, so that was more like your main job, and—

VC: Yes, yes.

TL: The typist was just so you could pay—

VC: My bills [laughs], yes.

TL: Yeah, okay. Did you work anywhere else after Methodist?

VC: Yes, I worked for—at the City—I mean, the City County Hospital. Uh at that time it was just the County Hospital. It was Ben Taub—not Ben Taub—Jefferson Davis, no longer exists, and then they merged together with the City and called it Ben Taub. I worked in the tuberculosis uh division.

TL: And were you referred to this job, just like your Methodist one?

VC: No, actually, it was one of my friends was working at the TB clinic and she asked me. She said that they're looking for somebody on the research as a clerk, and would I be interested, so I said sure, I uh—I will be able to work there. I'm sorry, uh, when I came back to Houston, I did help out at the church for maybe two years, and then I—I went to JD Hospital.

CC: Was that a paid position at the Church?

VC: It was a part-time paid position.

CC: Mm-kay.

VC: And I felt I needed a full-time.

TL: Okay. And was salary a factor at all when you were switching jobs?

VC: Yes, [laughs] yes, definitely [laughs].

TL: So they paid you more at Methodist than they did at MD Anderson?

VC: Yes, right.

TL: And then they paid you more at the clinic than they did at Methodist?

VC: No, I'm sorry, between Methodist and um JD Hospital, I worked part-time at the Church, and they didn't have any full-time position at the Church, so I felt, I needed to get a full-time job, and that's when my friend asked me if I wanted to go to JD Hospital which was the tuberculosis clinic at that time.

CC: Was this a friend you had through the church?

VC: Yes.

CC: Okay.

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VC: And then the doctor that was one of the investigators for this TB project also came to our church, but she's not the one that asked me [laughs], but she was happy to [laughs]—I think she was happy to get me. We were very good friends.

TL: And after that did you continue to do cleric work?

VC: Yes, yes, up until—well after that, then I worked ten years for a child neurologist who was also my friend, and then after that I went into real estate and then into insurance.

TL: How did you get into real estate?

VC: [laughs] My friend [laughs]. The same friend that asked me to go to JD Hospital. It's kind of interesting. She was a RN, and she got her Ph.D. in public health nursing, and she was waiting for a job with the World Health Organization, so in the meantime, she was doing real estate, and [laughs] then she asked me because uh she thought I could do it, and so that's why I went into real estate. And then another friend saw that I was in real estate, and he thought I would be good for insurance, so that's how I got into insurance.

TL: How did you do in real estate?

VC: I did pretty well, but I couldn't do both. I—I was um—thinking, well my friend was saying, 'Well, you can do real estate part-time,' and then I didn't like driving all around, so [laughs], but that's what I ended up doing, even in insurance [laughs]. I mean, I've gone to Conroe seventy-five miles away, Bay City—did I go to Galveston? No, Baytown, thirty miles away, yes. So I ended up doing a lot of driving, and then I—I felt like the insurance was a little bit easier than real estate.

TL: Were you catering towards a particular market? Like did you mainly sell real estate to—to Chinese people or to people you knew or-

VC: I uh sold mainly to people I knew, but I did sell to other races other than Chinese because when you're in the real estate office you have calls and people would call in so that's how I got some of the other races—Hispanic and Black.

CC: Was your friend a broker?

VC: Yes, she was a broker.

CC: Okay, so you worked as a salesperson under her.

VC: Yes, yes, and then in insurance also in sales.

CC: Okay.

TL: Okay. And was it the same with insurance, you just, sort of, sold to people you knew?

VC: Well, how it was, is, my manager had a lot of clients, so I just was very fortunate to service them, and then they became my clients because the manager was not selling anymore, so that's how I made a lot of friends.

TL: Okay. So this was different from the real estate?

VC: Yes, yes.

TL: Okay.

VC: The product is different too. One is tangible, and one is intangible [laughs]. Intangible is harder [laughs].

TL: Yeah. Were you given training at all?

VC: Yes, yes.

TL: Okay.

VC: The company gave training, and also you have continuing education that you have to learn more about the products. And then you have to get your license.

TL: So it seems like the Chinese Baptist Church has been a very big part of your life. Can you tell us how you got involved with it?

VC: Well, I first came and um attended the church, and then I just volunteered for different positions. And am still volunteering. [laughs]

TL: Was the church near your sister's home?

VC: No. No. It was downtown, and she lived on the north side but not too far from the church. In fact, the church—You know where downtown, George R. Brown is situated? Well, our church was on the main entrance of George R. Brown. We sold the property, and then we moved to I-10 and Voss.

TL: Okay.

VC: Because uh we couldn't expand downtown. Our land was very limited, and we bought five acres of land in Hunter's Creek.

TL: Okay, so were you one of the, sort of, leaders of the church?

VC: I was one of the charter members, yes. Yes. We were a mission of First Baptist Church in 1948, and then we became a self-supporting church in 1953. And I have been attending since 1952.

TL: And what kind of things did you do at the church at first?

VC: Um I taught Sunday school and was on different committees. Like when I first came I was young, so I was on the youth council. We started a youth group, and so I planned activities uh both social and uh bible studies. And then on the building committee and different committees, personnel, and, and then I also helped in the nursery—Not all at the same time. Different times. [laughs] I'm only one person. But whatever I felt I could do, and then we also put out an annual report. And that involved my skills of uh typing and mimeographing.

TL: And you said you had a part-time job there?

VC: Yes.

TL: What kind of work did you do part-time?

VC: Um it was mainly secretarial, like uh issuing the Sunday uh um bulletin and also I helped the pastor—or at that time we didn't have a pastor when I was first there, but I helped with um correspondence of potential pastors and also did um bible studies for home fellowships. And then tried to visit people in the hospital and in businesses. At that time when I came there were like three hundred mom and pop grocery stores and so we would go and visit uh the people. And then sometimes there's some problems in the community, then I would ask different members of our congregation would go visit them or to help them.

CC: Did the Chinese Baptist Church do anything to help people who came, like, newly from China? To them, like, kind of integrate with the Chinese community?

VC: Whenever they had problems, like, we did have different people that were dedicated to help. Some of them were retired. I would send them out, even though I couldn't speak the language, there was always somebody to interpret, so I would send them out to help these people. And also we did have one lady who was also a professor at the University of Houston and later HBU [Houston Baptist University] uh she spoke uh three dialects of Chinese plus English, and so she would have classes for naturalization and also for English conversation. And so um we had a lot of young mothers that wanted to learn English and also wanted to get their citizenship, so um and also we had a language school. And usu—it was mainly Cantonese, and then one time we offered uh um a Cantonese class for adults. And I attended and it was in the newspaper and we got some Caucasians to come and, and join us. It was a pretty large class, maybe thirty people, and we didn't charge anything. It was all free.

TL: And you said that the church wasn't close to your sister's home. What drew you to that church?

VC: That was the only Chinese church. I wanted to work with the Chinese, and it was the only Chinese church in the City of Houston.

TL: And before you had found that church did you attend any other ones, just for service?

VC: Yes, I did. Close to home there was a church within walking distance that I attended. I think only attended a couple of times, and then—At that time I didn't drive, and the bus situation was uh not very good. So uh I found some people to uh transport me.

TL: And how did you hear about it?

VC: Um, how did I hear about it? Oh, my sister was here, so she new about it. And I think she had attended also.

TL: Okay. And I know you're involved in CanCare.

VC: Yes.

TL: And, um, well, when did you first get involved with it?

VC: Well, to be a volunteer you have to have cancer, so I'm a cancer survivor. And it was fifteen years ago, and what they do is anyone who has cancer—the same type of cancer, breast cancer—uh we would go and befriend them so that they would feel comfortable to talk with you. Lately, I haven't had—I haven't been involved. They called me mainly because uh they didn't have any Asian supporters, so it was kind of interesting. Later, they had one or two Asian cancer survivors.

CC: Were you working at the time that you contracted cancer?

VC: Yes. Yes, I was. I was in insurance then. And then I felt like it was time for me to retire, so I did.

TL: Are you still involved, like, committee-wise with the church?

VC: Um, I am very limited. [laughs] Our church is ten miles from where I live. I still drive, as you know. [laughs] But, anyway, yes, I still—I feel like my tolerance is not as good as it was years ago, and so I'm kind of limited as to how much energy I can give. [laughs]

TL: And when you were an insurance broker were you living with—like had you started your own family already?

VC: Oh, no, I married a short period of time, but I don't have any children. And I divorced, so no, I'm—Right now I'm—My sister's husband died fifteen years ago, so we're living together.

TL: Okay.

VC: And she's older than I am, so I kind of watch after her. But she does have two sons that live here, so they're very helpful.

TL: Okay.

VC: But I kept very busy. [**All:** [laughs]] I, mainly, I like to go and visit people in the hospital, and um and I'm involved in our senior ministry at our church. I get speakers, and also um if there's anyone in the hospital I either ask the pastor or I ask some of our deacons to go and visit. So I'm still kind of involved. Our seniors meet twice a month, uh but during the summer once a month. And we have a committee. I just like—I'm the one that mainly gets the speakers.

TL: Have you gotten involved in any other Asian community organizations?

VC: No, I don't have time. [laughs] I've been asked to join different organizations, but I declined because I just feel like I put up—put out enough time in what I do and I like to do things that uh—I mean, I like to s—make sure that I have the time to finish the project or, or do what I need to do and just—not just have the name-finish up what I, I promise.

TL: Were you involved in any church activities back in Chicago?

VC: Yes, I was. Our—It's interesting, our family lived next door to the church. [laughs] My father used to have a coffee shop there, but it, it was away from the main street where all the businesses were so we weren't very successful. So we were between two churches, a protestant church and a catholic church. [laughs] Interesting.

TL: Yeah.

CC: So I'm guessing you wound up going to the protestant church, then?

VC: Yes, yes, yes.

TL: So what, what drew you more to the protestant church?

VC: Well, that was my background.

TL: Okay.

VC: And then, I had some very deep convictions and theological uh thoughts about the Catholic Church that I couldn't answer.

TL: Okay, and you said that your father had a coffee shop?

VC: Yes.

TL: Was this before or after he worked at that Chinese restaurant cooking ribs?

VC: It was after.

TL: After?

VC: Yes. It was during the time that I was in—I just—was a senior in high school, but we didn't have it very long because it wasn't successful.

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TL: How did he get the capital to start that shop?

VC: I really don't know. [laughs] I think he borrowed the money.

TL: And when you went from Chicago to Houston did you go by train, or did you drive, or did your sister come get you? How did you get down there?

VC: I flew.

TL: You flew?

VC: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

TL: How'd you get the money to fly? Just from saving up?

VC: Let me see—[laughs] Yeah, I think so.

TL: [Did you-] [**CC:** [Did you-]] [whisper] Go ahead.

CC: Did you have many, like, possessions to take with you from Chicago to Houston, or did you just kind of leave everything behind?

VC: Oh, I didn't have too much. I just had clothes. That's all I needed.

TL: Do you remember how much the plane ticket was?

VC: No, I don't. [laughs]

TL: Was it a big cost for you to handle, or—

VC: Yes. Yes. 'Cause I can remember that when I worked at the church I had to borrow money from my sister in Chicago to go on vacation, and then I would save and pay her back.

TL: And why did your sister choose you, in particular, to help her with her family?

VC: I was single. [laughs] No one else was available.

TL: And when did she know that she needed help?

VC: Um after the first child. She never, well, she never took care of any of us when she was growing up 'cause she was the oldest, and she started to working at age fourteen as a cashier in a restaurant. And she was very studious, and so my m—my, my parents felt like she didn't have to do any housework or anything that we had to do. [**All:** [laughs]] But anyway, so when she—She never knew. She never had the responsibilities of caring for any of us, so when she moved down there she felt very uh helpless even though she lived with her in-laws. And um so after the second child I moved down there. I mean, I was finished with bible school, and so I moved down there to help her.

CC: How did y'all—Did y'all communicate through letters, or by phone, or...?

VC: Through letters.

CC: Through letters?

VC: Mm-hmm.

CC: Was that regular?

VC: Yes. [laughs]

TL: Well, that's all the questions that I have. Is there anything that you wanted to add, just about your life in Houston and how it was different from your life in Chicago, or how times are different now from how than they were back then?

VC: Well, I think in Chicago I would have never driven because the transportation is so good, and they had, at that time when I was growing up, they had trolleys. And then they also had the elevated.² And then later they put in the subway, and then they changed the trolleys to busses. And Chicago is uh very well mapped out, so the sign—the street signs it shows which way is south, which way is west, which way is east and the number whereas Houston—[laughs] It's better now than it was when I first came. Uh the signs didn't tell you where—How many—How far south you were, how far north or, or anything. I mean, they just had numbers, and the strange thing in Houston is several streets have the same name. It's the same street, but it may have two different names like Westheimer and Elgin, and Voss and Hillcroft, and West Dallas and whatever that street going into River Oaks is, I forgot. But anyway, that was very confusing to me, and so I used maps a lot because I told you I did a lot of visiting of different people. And I also mapped out routes for different people to go and visit um the businesses and the hos—the hospitals, and so I studied the map in Houston quite a bit. [laughs] And then, you know, you have—Well, maybe not now, but you have to drive in Houston. And um that was the main thing. And also um, in Houston, there are depressed areas that, you know, um one would not like to venture into, but I did mainly because of my business and I told you that there were a lot of mom and pop stores and they were—some of them were in the depressed areas. And so in my job as insurance I went to those areas, and-

TL: So did you seek them out?

VC: Uh some of them were friends of my manager, and so he would just give me the call and then I'd go and visit. And if they didn't—Usually someone spoke English, but there were some that um spoke to me in Chinese. And I didn't—I understood just a little bit, so I kind of learned—my vocabulary increased but my pronunciation was terrible. [laughs] I mean, American accent and in Chinese—In Cantonese, there's eight tones, and some of the words may be the same but the tone is different, so uh it, it's kind of hard. But I made a lot of friends in Houston and, and I have no regrets of living here. I enjoy people, and I enjoy going to a lot of the events like weddings and red egg parties and uh birthdays and um—I learned a lot through some of my friends that I met here that are from China or Hong Kong, and they would explain to me about some of the customs. So I, I felt like I gained a lot by living here. In Chicago, most of my friends were American-born Chinese, so I don't think they know a lot about the customs and I don't think I would have learned my own culture if I, if I had stayed in Chicago because in Chinatown, you know, that's the group that you would hang around with excepting at the church. Very interestingly, a lot of people travelled just to come to that church, and most of them do not live in Chinatown. So that's very different. And also, the church uh that I attend is a citywide church, they come from all over, and fortunately the freeways are very, very good. So we're accessible to all the freeways.

TL: Has the workplace changed much?

VC: The workplace-?

TL: Just from your different jobs as the years have gone by.

VC: Um, in what respects would you say?

TL: Just in regards to, like, the makeup of the workplace, any prejudice that you would have seen?

VC: I think there's still prejudice, but I think it's kind of um shield in the respect that people try to be more open and I think since the Asian population is much more now, um more and more people um seem to have less prejudice. Because if you go to Chinatown, you see there's a mixture, and also um with the computer age,

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it's very different. I mean, for me it's very different. [laughs] Most people don't have typewriters, right? Do you know what a typewriter is?

TL: Yes.

VC: I just recently bought one. [laughs] Uh because uh it's faster for me, and I don't have a computer and this time and age is all electronic and it's uh...well, I just ask people to do things for me on the computer.

TL: So it seems like you were pretty independent.

VC: Yes.

TL: Is there some reason for that? Like, something you were taught as a child, or just the way you guys were brought up, or just your personality?

VC: Oh, okay. [laughs] Well, because I was the middle child, and my mother expected me to do a lot of the things like go to the grocery store and get all the groceries and I'd come back with two large bags of groceries. And also, because my two older sisters had their own friends, and I had my own friends. And um I think uh another thing um is my going to church and not feeling that I had to depend upon my sisters or my brother or my mother or my father. I just felt a lot of strength in my faith, and also just studying the bible. I felt uh that was my anchor, and I just—And also, my mother taught us that we had to take care of ourselves, both nutritionally and also for our livelihood, and also she told us to take care of, not only ourselves physically because as we get older who is going to take care of us? We have to take care of ourselves; we have to be self-sufficient. And then also she advocated helping others. My mother, uh when we moved to Chinatown, she would help all these um immigrants, especially young mothers. She would take them down to show them how to open a bank account, how to get their social security and where to shop for the uh most reasonable prices.

And so I think my mother was a very good role model, and also, another thing, she always wanted to learn. Somehow, she got people to help her learn English, and I think that's another influence. Uh she did get these students from the bible school to come and teach her English. I don't know where she met them, but she was very resourceful. And so I think they also had an influence on my life, and then going to this bible church that I went to, these students also—Another set of students. Different students went there, and so I was very impressed with their lives and wanted to emulate or be like them. And just um—my mother's influence was a lot, and the fact that she always wanted to learn. I mean, when we were growing up, she always uh listened to the radio so she could learn English, and then she also would study at night. Uh she would have her simple book, there, that she was being taught from uh with the bible students, and um she would at an—When my youngest brother was ten, she started working in a factory, and she was used as an interpreter even though her English was not good. But she could tell—They advertised in the paper for Chinese workers, so she helped a lot of the ladies that worked there and would tell them, you know, what to do. And she didn't like that job because she said, 'I don't like to tell people what to do.' So—but they used her as an interpreter, so that was—They didn't pay her as an interpreter, but they, uh you know, she always wanted to learn and she wanted to learn the western way of life. Her hair was braided and long, and she had it cut and she would have permanents. [**AI:** [laughs]] And she dressed very well, you know—I mean, in early pictures we had when we were growing up, she had high heels on, she had a very nice dress, she had a hat on. I mean, very stylish. So I think I, I, I give my mother a lot of credit for having that desire to become what she really wanted to be—um, a United States Citizen. And she finally did get her citizenship in 1956, I think, and the first time she went for the interview the examiner made her feel very insecure. So she couldn't answer the question, and he wanted her to write down 'I am glad to be an American.' And she just got frightened, and so she had to come back. But a missionary lady went with her and just told the examiner, 'Can you be a little softer on her?' And he just wouldn't, but she did pass the second time. So she was real happy.

TL: And you mentioned a bible church. What exactly is the difference between a normal church and a bible church?

VC: Oh, okay. Well, I think it's just the name. Like, uh they just want to emphasize that their beliefs are taken

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from the bible, so it's a uh non-denominational. It's not Baptist or Methodist or Presbyterian, but I did go to a congregational church uh also.

CC: So you did so many jobs when you were in high school, what did you do with the money that you made from that? From those jobs that you did?

VC: Oh, I saved it, and would buy clothes. And our family was struggling, so I tried to be independent and just never ask my parents for money.

CC: Did your other siblings ask your parents for money, then?

VC: I don't know if they did or not. [**All:** [laughs]] I really don't know, but my sister used to laugh at me because I'd be counting my money and she'd say, 'What are you doing all the time, counting your money?' Well, my mother taught us, you know, always to save money, and that was always in our minds 'cause she said, 'You never know if you're going to have an emergency and you need to save money and have it on hand.' So my mother was a wise woman even though she was uneducated.

TL: Okay, well, I guess to wrap up I just have some spelling questions. You mentioned a Curity baby diaper company.

VC: Mm-hmm.

TL: How do you spell that?

VC: C-U-R-I-T-Y. It's either Johnson or [sic] Johnson or—What is the other big company?

CC: Pampers, or—No?

VC: No, that days they didn't have Pampers.

CC: Oh, okay. [laughs]

VC: These were cloth diapers.

CC: Oh, okay. [laughs]

VC: [laughs] It probably was Johnson & Johnson. You know, they made diapers and Band-Aids and things like that.

TL: Like baby shampoo—

VC: Right, right.

TL: And you mentioned a Bentoll City Hospital?

VC: Ben Taub.

TL: Ben Taub?

VC: Mm-hmm.

CC: Yeah, it's right-

VC: B-E-N T-A-U-B. It's close by here. It's a City County hospital now.

TL: And then um, you mentioned a RN?

VC: A registered nurse.

TL: Okay...well, thank you for your time.

VC: You're welcome.