

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

Interviewee: Eugenie Chen
Interviewers: Clarissa Cox, Tracey Lam
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Transcribed by: Clarissa Cox, Tracey Lam
Edited by: Sara Davis (12/23/16), Priscilla Li (12/30/16)
Audio Track Time: 1:15:00

Background:

Eugenie Chen was born in Hangzhou, China in 1937. Although she lived in several different parts of China as a child because of her father's job in the Chinese air force, her family eventually settled in Taiwan following the communist takeover of Mainland China. It was there that she would earn her undergraduate degree at National Taiwan University. She then came to the Houston, Texas in 1958 to attend the University of Houston and earn a Master's degree in Accounting. She has worked as a bookkeeper and a homebuilder, designing homes for properties she owned in West University.

Summary:

The interview focused on her early life in China and her job experience in America. She discussed the differences that existed between the different places where she has lived, and also talked about her role in the Braes Republican Women organization.

The interview was held at Mrs. Chen's house, which she also designed. The interview took about an hour and fifteen minutes.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

EC	Eugenie Chen
TL	Tracey Lam
CC	Clarissa Cox
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

EC: Okay. We can start?

CC: Yes.

TL: Mm-hmm.

EC: I was born in Hangzhou, China, in 1937. My father was a pilot in the Chinese Air Force. Uh before I was born, he got sent to Guangzhou [city in China]. They have uh, a um...school there to train the new pilot, but my mother waited, and here I was born. So when I was two weeks old, we left Hangzhou to go to Canton [province in China]. But the war started in China in 1937.

We were only in Guangzhou for about a year. Then we moved inland. Then we grew up in Sichuan [province in China]. At the time, things were very difficult. Uh what I mean is, you don't get a lot of the things from the outside, and a lot of the people flew the hump to get things into China because Japan took over all the coastline of China. And the Great Britain closed the Burma Highway. Things just couldn't get in from anywhere. And we had like meat twice a week, but we had lots of the vegetables. Uh we didn't have electricity. Oh, there was electricity, but it's for military use only.

Uh my father got an order in 1945. He was going to take a group of the young students to be trained to be pilot in Randolph Field, San Antonio, Texas. Uh but before they left, the war was over, so they said the way they were going to go, which was to go through India to Saudi Arabia and then go to Atlantic Ocean, land—landed in uh Norfolk, Virginia. Then they would take the train to San Antonio, Texas. They said what—you didn't have to do that anymore—uh what you could do was, since the war was over, you could just board a ship in Shanghai and they would go to Seattle, Washington. So that's what they were going to do.

At the time, he said, 'What you all' means his family—'need to leave Sichuan,' because when he wasn't there, my mother had to do everything, and it was difficult to get the ticket for to go back to the coast that's where we were from. So we rode the first ship down the Yangtze River to go to Nanking, but when we got to Chongqing, they said we couldn't go because there were mines. Japan put all the mines down the Yangtze River. It wasn't safe to go on the ship. So they would sweep the mines before we could go. So we waited for about a month. Then we went back to Nanking. But the problems come—was when we went to Nanking, there was no school. The government wasn't back yet, and my father had to leave, so he left, and the—we were in Nanking. Nanking was the capital at the time, and uh...he came back about a year.

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There was a funny story—I thought. We were in Nanking. There was a group of the American reporters—came, wanted to film us. But they said, 'Well, here, come out of the room.' We said, 'What you wanted us to do?' They said, 'Take your shoes and socks off.' So we took our shoes and socks off, went back into the classroom, so they were filming. Now, I know what they wanted to do. They wanted to tell the Americans, the Chinese children didn't have shoes and socks.

And then I got picked by the uh school to go—they wanted the—some children for interview. So I was there. Uh some—they brought their translator—my teacher went with me. They asked me where—what did my father do. I told them, 'My father, at the time, was a lieutenant colonel in the Chinese Air Force.' They said, 'Where did he station at?' I said, 'Oh, he was in the U.S. at the time.' They said, 'Where?' I said, 'In a place called Randolph Field, San Antonio, Texas.' They said, 'What did he do there?' I said, 'He just took a group of the people to learn how to fly.' They said, 'Cut, cut, cut!' So they said, 'This is it.' I asked the teacher what did I do? I'm sure what I said wasn't what they had in mind.

At the time I didn't know who was doing it. They had a banner. That's before I even learned any English. I said, 'Oh, you know what? They had the—like the 'S'—we have a cookie we call the 'S' cookie—they have the 'S' and they have the ear without the tail [describing Chinese character]. They have a backwards mong, you know you draw a mong. You put it down, that's CBS! [laughter] So anyway, they didn't interview me. I think that's already the time the Communist was coming. And they wanted to sell the Communist, I say, land reform. And uh if you have some kind of connection with the U.S., I don't think that's what they wanted.

Anyway, Nanking was a very uh strange place. We lived better, but I didn't like it one bit. Uh but I finished elementary school there. I got into a junior high that was supposed to be the best junior high in the nation, but we all had to stay in the dorm. Uh I was eleven years old. I went there. They said their kids have the best scores of anybody. But why wouldn't it? We had the early morning studying period. That's like from 7 to 8:30. Then, you know, we have the exercise, everything, then we have the regular class. Then we had dinner. Then we had another studying period. The teachers were there. You didn't understand. They would help you. So we learned a lot.

(0:10:48.2)

I only went for half a year in that school because things were getting bad. My mother took three younger children to go to Taiwan. My father left, was in Nanking with my sister and I. And one morning they came in, said, 'There wouldn't be any class, would be no breakfast. Y'all have to find a way to go home.' I said, 'Uh-oh. Well, okay. No problem.' I would go to call—to begin with, I called my father to come to get me. But there was no telephone. The phone line was cut. And uh I said, 'Well, I can take the bus home.' I went to the bus station. It said, 'On strike.' So I said, 'Well, what do I do now?' I said, 'Okay, I would take a rickshaw, because once I get home uh—we have a nanny at home, she stayed with my sister and I—I said, 'She would pay the rickshaw.' But, there were rickshaws. They were not going to take a kid. They had more business than they could handle. So there was my friend and I. She said, 'What we do now?' I said, 'Well, we would go—we would walk. That's the only way.' She said, 'Oh, okay.' So we walked.

Nanking—it's already got the people demonstrating everything. They said, 'Yankee, go home.' Okay. That was—they said, an American soldier raped a Chinese student. Years later, we find out that was all fake. But it got the emotions up, got all the people say, 'Yankee, go home.' You got thousands and thousands of the people on the street saying, 'Yankee, go home.' So I said, 'Well, good thing my father didn't know, my mother wasn't there.' Nobody knew we were walking on the street with the street in the shape like that. We finally got home, and the nanny was there. She said, 'How come you are home? What happened to the school?' We said, 'There was no school, and we had to come back.' So she said, 'Oh, okay.' And uh at night, there was no electricity. They already bombed the, you know, the light, the power plant. So it's not you don't have electricity. It's like there was no electricity even on the streets, you know. And no telephone—they cut all the telephone wires.

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Finally, my father sent somebody there. He said, 'You know, I don't know when, when I could get you all on a plane to fly out, go.' Uh because every flight from Nanking was full, he said, 'I just don't know when you could go.' So we said, 'Oh, well, where were we going to go?' He sent a note. He said, 'Your mother, at the time was in Taiwan. Just go. They'll know what to do.' So one day, he did send a car. So my sister, I, and the nanny, we got to the airport, got on the plane. Every plane was full to the capacity. We went to Taiwan.

And Taiwan was really nice. It's very tropical. It was uh, you know, you see banana trees, and you see the coconut growing, but we went to the air force base there, and we said, 'We were looking for my mother.' They said, well, they knew where we would, you know—we had uh housing—they had housing we could uh we could go. They said, 'Your mother be there.'

So we got to Taiwan. Taiwan was uh [pause] a lot like Houston. Okay, except it never, in the southern part, where the Air Force base was—was not—it would never freeze. It's more tropical, maybe, than here. When you walk on the street you see the banana trees, coconut trees. And here it's, you know, it's not that tropical. And uh it--it's very nice in Taiwan.

Finally, my father came, you know. So that was 1949. I was in Taiwan for ten years. From the seventh grade, and here I finished college. And once I finished college, a lot of the people said, 'Would you like to go to the U.S. for further education?' I said, 'Yes, I would.' And my father said, 'Go to Texas. Texas is a very good place.' Because he was in San Antonio, you know, after the war. He said, 'The people are nice, and uh I think if you like a place, I think you would like Texas.' So I came at the end of 1958. Um we—I had a student visa to come.

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Now, couple of the funny thing is, I'm sure they had standardized test at the American Embassy for the students. I had about a hundred questions for the English test. Now, I remember two of them because first of all, one of the questions was uh, 'What do you use to make coleslaw?' I never had coleslaw all my life [laughter], so I had no idea what you use for coleslaw, so I couldn't answer that question. The second one was, 'Which state in the U.S. has the most Indians?' I had no idea, so I thought, well, I, I just guessed at it. I just wanted to get any score on it, so I put down Indiana, because [laughter] I—since I didn't know, I said, 'Well, that's a shot anyway.' Now, when I had the interview, I kind of complained about the written test, but the counsel who interviewed me, he said, 'Oh that's no problem. You passed.' He said, 'You are going to Texas.' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I'm from Texas.' I said, 'Houston?' He said, 'No, Amarillo.' I said, 'Oh.' I didn't know where Amarillo was, but he was very nice. He said, 'It didn't matter if you miss a couple of the questions. We just want a passing grade.'

And--but the people who worked at the Embassy, I remembered it's a Hispanic lady. She was about as bad as she could be, and uh I gave her the pictures to put on the passport. She said, 'It's not right.' I said, 'I went to get passport pictures.' She said, 'Because you have a border on the picture. They want a picture without border.' I said, 'If you loan me a pair of scissors, I just cut the borders off.' I said, 'Or you could do it.' She said, 'I'm not doing that for you.' I said, 'I'll do it myself.' I cut the borders off and uh asked her whether that was okay. She measured it, measured it again. She said, 'I suppose.'

So, anyway, I came here, in 1958, at the end of '58. And I liked Houston from the beginning, but when I came, I saw in Taiwan, I saw lots of the commercials about the U.S. I said, 'Well, I wanted to go to Houston by bus.' People say, 'Fly. You'll be more comfortable.' I said, 'No.' I wanted to see the country, so I came here by bus. I went to the bus station downtown. There was—I had a host family. They picked me up from the bus station, and they asked me uh where I was going. I said, 'I was going to get a drink of water.' They said, 'Here, here is the water fountain.' I said, 'No, I wanted to go there.' They said, 'Why?' I said, 'Because, that water fountain says 'Colored'.' And uh they said, 'Why do you want to go there?' I said, 'Because I wanted to find out what color is the 'Colored' water fountain.' I said, 'Is it red? Orange?' So they were laughing. They said, 'No, that's not what it meant.' I said, 'What does it mean? It says 'Colored'.' They said, 'We'll explain it to you.'

(0:25:52.9)

So that was 1958. That's when I came. I went to U of H. There were very few Chinese students. And uh I switched my major because in Taiwan I majored in economics, and uh a lot of the people say that's where you go to get your law degree [laughter]. I wasn't prepared to go get a law degree. I said, 'Okay, I minored in accounting, so I would just go for accounting.' Besides, the numbers means the same. It's not like, you know, the language.

So, I went to U of H. Now uh, I met Ed. Then we got married. He finished Rice. He went to the service. Uh I went to Huntsville, Alabama. At the time, I guess Houston was a lot different from Huntsville, Alabama. Even though people were real nice in Huntsville, but you could see a lot of the oldest slave, the, the things they--that reminded you. Anyway, we were there for two years, then we came back. Okay, y'all want to ask any questions?

CC: Um I was wondering, um at what point did you start learning English?

EC: Okay, we learned English in the—from the fifth grade. Uh now, all the way through junior high and high school. Now, in college, the text was half-English, half-Chinese, so we used the uh the—like my major was economics, and you had to have all the text in economics in English. Uh also, we had some professors. They are Catholic nuns and uh priests. They would go to National Taiwan to teach. Uh of course, they would speak English to us. So language wasn't that big of a uh problem, except some slangs, we didn't really learn, and here I got, here.

TL: You said that your mom took your younger siblings to Taiwan. Why didn't you go with her?

(0:29:58.8)

EC: Okay, the reason I didn't go with her—my father kept on thinking, things were going to get better. The Communists were not going to come so quick, and uh I was the—the junior high I went to, was the best school in the nation, and uh he said, 'If you left, could you get back in?' I said, 'I don't know.' So he said, 'Well, just wait. Just go to school here. And here things get real bad, I think I can get you out.' So good thing he did. I actually only stayed about maybe, uh one semester.

CC: Did you go to school at all during uh World War II? Or...

EC: Oh, yes, yes. Yes, I went to elementary school. Uh I went—see, I was born in 1937, and uh I was a year ahead, so when the war was over, uh I was starting—that's '45. I didn't go to most of the fourth grade because we went to Nanking. There was no school. And then uh as soon as the school got, you know, back, I—I mean, they started the elementary school, I went. I just skipped the fourth grade.

CC: Other than your um father coming to Texas, did you have any other connection to America before coming here?

EC: Well, my uncle, that's my mother's brother, was going to UT to get his PhD., but he didn't get it. He went back to China. He never even went to Taiwan.

TL: What was it like to be one of the only Chinese students in Houston at the time?

EC: What?

TL: What was it like to be one of the only Chinese students in Houston?

EC: Oh, I wasn't the only Chinese student. There were very few, but I wasn't the only one.

TL: What was it like?

EC: Uh actually, I find the people very friendly. Uh I went to live with one of the professor here. She taught French here. Her husband was an eye doctor. And uh they were real nice. Uh and at school, I think we had less than a dozen uh Chinese students.

TL: Did you encounter any racism or any discrimination?

EC: No, no, no. Actually, it's more like they explained to me, uh why I shouldn't drink from the 'Colored' water fountain. I said, 'What's the difference?' They said, well, in Texas, at the time, you didn't. So I said, 'But I'm not Caucasian.' They said, 'But you are not black.' So somehow I think Chinese was considered more um—anyway, more on the Caucasian side, because all the kids would go to school—even elementary school—in white schools, not black schools.

(0:35:07.4)

TL: What was Houston like when you first got here?

EC: It was a lot smaller. And uh people were very friendly. I always find people very friendly. And uh um just about every weekend, I had an invitation to go spend either half a day or whole day with a family, and they would take me to the rodeo or things. I just find everybody was real friendly.

CC: How did you take care of expenses for college? Did your parents pay for it? Or did you work when you were in college?

EC: Okay, um you mean in Taiwan or here?

CC: Um in, in Houston.

EC: Okay, in Houston. When I first came, my parents gave me some money. But they did tell me I had to work my way. They couldn't pay the tuition, everything, living expenses for me. And uh I stayed with this professor—her husband was an eye doctor. Uh she said, 'Well, come to stay with us.' They have two small children in school. She said, 'You could go to school.' They also have a maid. She said—then she said, 'When the maid went home'—she said, 'If'—she was a French professor at U of H—she said, 'I could trust you to stay with the kids.' So I had no living expenses. Uh now, the tuition, I worked some, and uh I made enough money for the tuition.

CC: Where did you work?

EC: Okay. Um you all interview the Jane Gee, right?

CC: Mm-hmm.

EC: Her husband had a Chinese restaurant. At the time, was the biggest Chinese restaurant there. And uh I asked him whether I could have a job there. He said, 'Oh good. My bookkeeper was leaving.' He said, 'You said, what's your major?' I said, 'Accounting.' He said, 'Good! Come, do the books!' So I worked there in the summer. I made enough money to pay for the tuition.

TL: How did you meet Jane and Albert Gee?

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EC: Okay, that's uh—the reason I met them was, at the time, at U of H, the student advisor, his name was Mr. Therrington (?). He had a um restaurant on the side, that's—you know, they—they sell—his wife was from Mexico, so they had the—a Mexican restaurant. And when I went to ask him, 'Where do you think I might be able to get a job?' He said, 'Oh, I have a friend. His name is Albert Gee. Uh here, here is uh the phone number. Give him a call. See if he has something you could do.' So I called Albert up, asked him if he had something I could do in the summer.' He said, 'What's your major?' I said, 'Accounting.' He said, 'Great! That's what I need!' So, you know—so I went and had an interview just like the regular, yeah.

CC: And you did bookkeeping, or what was your...

EC: Bookkeeping.

CC: Okay.

EC: I was in the accounting department.

TL: Did you call any other companies when you were job hunting?

EC: I actually worked for a CPA before that. It didn't work out. The reason was I was going to go get to CPA—take the CPA exam. They had a requirement: you had to have some kind of the experience. But uh it just wasn't work I really was looking for, and uh at Baroid that was more, you know.

TL: Uh did you experience any racism or discrimination at work?

EC: No. No.

CC: Where did you live after you got out of college? Did you stop living with the professor?

EC: Um, we got married, actually, before that, but Ed was in Huntsville, Alabama. And finally I was going to go to Huntsville, so I left.

TL: Is this why you quit your Baroid job?

EC: No. I didn't even get a job until we came back to Houston. Um, when Ed was getting his PhD, I was working at Baroid.

TL: Did you work in Huntsville?

EC: I did have a job in Huntsville. Huntsville is a very, um, different place from Houston. It's more inland. I guess, um, you all heard about White Sands and Redstone. Redstone is Huntsville, okay. That's where the beginning of the missile—they developed the, you know, the missile. Ed was there after Rice, okay. So he was working for Dr. von Braun, you know, the German scientist who developed the bomb to bomb London, and they brought over a lot of the German scientists to Huntsville. So I got a job at Montgomery Ward because I couldn't get a job—a government job. And there that was mostly what it was. You had to have your citizenship; I only had a green card. So I went to work for Montgomery Ward. Um we were there—he was there for two years. I was only there for one year, then we came back. We both decided that Huntsville wasn't the place we wanted to be, so we came back to Houston.

TL: And, just wondering, but I'm not sure if it worked this way back then, but I thought that when you married a citizen you became a citizen. Did you..?

(0:44:44.7)

EC: You don't automatically become a citizen. You have to go through the process. I knew they would give it to me—the green card to me, for sure because first of all, Ed was born here, second, he was in the service, and they gave it to me. But I went for the interview, they also told me I took away a slot in like uh 2012 or something like that because the Chinese quota was a hundred and five a year, and, and they put everything on top of each other. They said, 'We have to give it to you, but we also subtract one,' they just kept on going. And a hundred-and-five is not very many.

TL: How was working in Alabama different from working in Houston?

EC: Well, in—I guess in Houston, even back then, people were more friendly, and in Alabama, I was surprised uh that uh I got a job because I wasn't qualified to get a civil service job, I wasn't a citizen. And uh the product company, I went to an accounting firm, it's called Ernst & Ernst. And I handed in the résumé, the man said, he didn't even look at it, he said, 'Okay, I want to let you know, no matter what your résumé says, you're not getting this job.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'You know, because we audit all the books of northern Alabama and southern Tennessee, if we take you, that means you're going out with three men. And we never could afford to hire a woman with the men.' He said, 'So I won't even look at your résumé. I'll just say I'm very sorry.' And once I went to Montgomery Ward, um they didn't say that. [laughter] I was hired.

CC: So you had a family in Alabama, right? Or did you have a child when you were in Alabama?

EC: Yes. Yes. My daughter was born in Alabama. That's a funny thing. She wanted to get a passport, and uh she went to get—to ask, they said they couldn't find the record. She said, 'But I was born there!' Finally, they said, 'Oh, you were born at an army base. That's a separate thing.' So they sent it, finally, but uh see, we didn't know. We just thought, it's Huntsville, Alabama. They said 'no.'

TL: Can you tell us about how you got into homebuilding?

(0:49:12.9)

EC: Okay! Once, uh like I said, my son was born, uh I didn't want a full-time job, so we also bought some houses in West University. That got to be kind of—not a good economic plan because the tax was so high, and the houses were old. When people first moved in, they rent from you, they are very happy—they were very happy. They would say, 'Oh, that's a house in West University,' but once they said, 'Well, this is— this was the rent,' the rent was too high. But they didn't know how much tax we had to pay. We made very little money. Most of the rent that came in had to go for tax because West University was getting better and better, and I happened to have a renter at the time. And he also was very good with everything about building. He said, 'Well, you know what?' He said, 'Instead of selling the rental house,' which all I could get was the land value. He said 'If you would, I would come to work for you, and we could build houses.' And I had seen his work, so I thought he was very good. So I said, 'Let's try one.' Uh he said, 'If you didn't sell?' I said, 'Well, we could move in with the land, you know, we, we could move in,' so he said, 'Okay, let's try one.' So he worked for me, and I uh started to build a house. But even before it's finished people would say, 'Could we buy this house?' We said, 'Yes,' and uh they—so we said, 'If we build one at a time, and uh people didn't buy it, we needed a house anyway.' But we didn't get any. Everybody bought you know the houses. So—

TL: And you said that you designed the houses? Do you have a background in architecture?

EC: No. I just, like, I drew the plan for this house. I just feel, as a woman, we know what we really want in a house, and we can plan for the future. Uh so I, I still had to have an architect to draw the final plan, but instead of for him to put down everything I could sketch out everything what we wanted. And uh they would uh, you know, draw the final plan. You know, like here, we say that we build this house; this is probably it, so when we build it we want to be able to put an elevator in the front. So we put the stairs in the back. Um you know, that's pretty much the way we thought of what we wanted and what would a woman want in the kitchen? You know?

(0:54:13.2)

TL: And were you still working when you decided to start home building? Where you still with Baroid?

EC: No. Um I worked about uh six years, less than six years. That's the time between my two children. Uh then, once my son was born, I never want—I never had an outside job outside of just to rent houses and home building.

CC: So homebuilding, I guess, you just do that on your own time, then? Like you don't have a set schedule, or how did you manage your day?

EC: That's correct. Um what I did was—okay, since I did have a contractor, a um somebody who would do good work, you know, so he would come, we would talk about it and uh from the foundation up, then we go step by step.

TL: And when you were homebuilding, did you stop at just replacing the houses on properties your owned-

EC: Yes.

TL: Or did you just design homes for other people as well?

EC: No. No.

CC: Would you say that your clientele was Chinese, or was it just anybody who wanted a house?

EC: There wasn't even one Chinese. You know, the value in West University—the land was very expensive, so the people who wanted to live in West University, they liked the convenience of inside the loop. They wanted to be close to the medical center, to Rice. Um, a lot of the Chinese, those are not that important. They are way rich. They didn't really care, you know.

TL: And you said that you're a part of the Braes Republican Women?

EC: Yes.

TL: Can you tell us about your involvement with that?

EC: Yes. We lived uh on Durness, which is two streets that way. Uh before, let's see, we moved in about 1967. We moved here in about 1999, um so when I was walking, there was a neighbor. Every sign she put out I said, 'That's the person I'm going to vote for.' And uh I wanted the, the people we elect to be responsible, to have the people who needed the help, but I don't want them to give away, uh or to borrow, to pass out uh, you know, everybody's money just because they can. And so I said, well you know, I read about the sign she put in her yard, and those were the people I wanted to vote for. So finally, I met her, and then she talked to us and she said, well, you know uh, 'Could you take me home?' we said, 'Okay.' Actually, she drove, but she just left her car there so she could uh come back with us. And she told us uh there was a republican women's club in the neighborhood. She said, 'Come to visit us one time.' I did go, and the speakers they got, we still do, the ones, you know—we couldn't invite everybody, but once—when the primary is over, we only invite the Republican candidates. Now, I kind of feel they are more responsible— some of them are, not all, but at least what they tell about I agree more. I fear that if you hand out everything you just make them, you know, say, 'That's really not worth anything.' If you work for it, it's worth more.

(1:00:14.6)

TL: And this woman that you—he woman with the signs that you voted for? What kind of woman was she? Was she Caucasian?

EC: Yes.

TL: And are you guys still friends?

EC: She died. She was the wife of Dr. [?]. I don't know if you heard the name or not. He was the team doctor for the Astros. And she was quite a unique lady. She was—and she lived just a short block from us, when we lived on Durness. So I passed by her house a lot.

TL: And just going back to your education, can you tell us some of the things that were similar and different about education in Houston and your education back in Taiwan?

EC: Very much the same.

TL: Very similar?

EC: Right. But I didn't go to Taiwan until I was in the seventh grade. I was in Mainland China, and in Taiwan, um I went to National Taiwan University, okay. Most of the professors were educated here, so you know—and the texts we used, um I would say one-half—one-third to one-half you have to use English textbooks. So there was no difficulty from the school there to the school here, you know, you can pretty much know. The only thing I was surprised, was the kids here didn't have that much math, and when I was at U of H, there was—there were some people who took the college math, algebra and stuff, and uh I—they didn't know how to work the problems, so I helped them with it. So they were saying uh, 'Were you a math major?' I said, 'Actually, I only had high school math.' They said, 'Boy, sure made us feel good.' [laughter]

TL: Okay. And did any of your family members come to America?

EC: Yes, yes. I have two brothers—both came to the U.S. I have one brother, uh finished—got a PhD from UC Berkeley, and uh he worked for a Nobel Prize winner. I have another brother; he finished at the University of Wisconsin. Also, got a PhD.

(1:04:23.5)

TL: So your brothers just came to study as well?

EC: Right.

TL: Did they end up staying in America?

EC: Yes. Now, uh one brother died. He worked for DuPont. I think the stuff they used was toxic, uh but his families are still here. Now, the other brother um is in Washington, D.C., in Maryland. But he took a job. Went back to uh teach and uh do the research in Beijing, but he's coming back.

CC: And what about your sister?

EC: My sister is in San Francisco, okay. She is retired now. She did work. They all worked longer than I did. [laughter]

CC: So you focused a lot on family life, then, would you say? Like raising your children?

EC: Yes. I think it's very important.

CC: Do you think there were any particular values that you tried to teach your children as they were growing up?

EC: Well, at least I don't have uh the problems that some parents do, you know. They seemed to want to study. Uh they seem to really think education is important. Um yeah, so. By the way, my son just got a professorship at Baylor.

TL: Oh, that's great.

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EC: My daughter finished at Rice. She is in Portland, Oregon. So I think they both value education. Whether it's any good or not for me to be there with them, uh I can't say, but I did the kind of work, when we were building houses, they were, they were children.

TL: In your career, have you ever felt that you didn't need to work? Did you just want to work?

EC: I had fun. Especially, uh my husband was saying, 'Okay,' I said, 'Do you like this plan?' He said, 'Yes, is this ours?' I said, 'We'll see.' [laughter] At the end, he said, 'You always say we'll see. We didn't even get any of it.' So when I built this house, he said, 'You aren't going to sell this house, are you?' I said, 'No.' Some people did come and say, 'Can we buy this house?' I said, 'No, I promised my husband. No.'

CC: So how long did it take before you—from when you started building houses until you finally wound up living here?

EC: Uh, I would say—there were maybe uh fifteen years.

TL: When did you start building houses?

EC: I think it was uh about, uh, 197-something. When they had the, the World's Fair in New Orleans. Uh probably about '75 or so.

TL: And I think you were the first woman homebuilder in Houston?

EC: I wouldn't say Houston. West University. [laughter] That's how much smaller, you know.

TL: And did you—besides with the architect and with the contractor, did you collaborate with anyone at all? Did you work with anyone?

EC: Well, uh like I said, uh I did have somebody who was doing the contract for me. He would come to talk to me you know to see if this person is okay. Some of the small stuff, if he thought the person would do a good job, we just went ahead you know. I said he could just hire the people, but we did the plan—I did plan the house, everything.

(1:10:26.04)

TL: Did you ever plan for other people, or was this just for your own houses?

EC: Well, some houses we built were actually a little too big for us, but uh at the time we'd say, 'Just, we'll see what happens.' So of course, there were some mistakes in building, too, and uh especially you worked with West University, they would approve your plan. They came back to say they vetoed it, so you had to take, to take down whatever you already started, but overall it's not too bad.

TL: Is there anything else you wanted to share with us? Just about your life in Houston when you got here and what it was like immigrating to America?

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EC: Uh, actually, I think America is just of the place, and when I went from Mainland China to Taiwan, I didn't understand the language. I came here, I did understand. It's even easier to get into the life here than when we went from Mainland China to Taiwan. Uh of course, you know, Taiwan is nice. It's a really good place, so-

TL: You said you had difficulty from mainland to Taiwan, what kinds of difficulties?

EC: That we didn't understand the language, okay. Uh one thing that's very nice for me was the school in Nanking. They were so advanced, when I went to Taiwan, I didn't have to understand anything. I knew how to work all the papers. My mother never knew I didn't have to understand or study. She said, 'You did pretty well,' but I didn't understand one word the teachers were saying.

TL: Is it just because they were speaking a different dialect of Mandarin?

EC: That's correct, but later they did speak Mandarin.

TL: Okay.

EC: Okay. But now like when we went to college, the, the people, the American teachers, they were speaking English, so there was almost you know no transition from that then to come here. So it's very easy.

CC: Did you ever learn the dia—the Taiwanese dialect?

EC: No, never. Well, I guess that's the thing. You do what you have to do. Things, they were—they said that they had to learn Mandarin. We spoke Mandarin already, so no problem. And uh here, you had to learn English, so now I still don't understand Taiwanese. [laughter]

TL: Okay, well, I think that's all we have.

EC: Okay.

TL: Thank you very much.

End Interview