

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Jane Gee

Interviewer: Daisy Gee

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Transcribed by: Ariel Heiblum

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Interview:

In this interview, Jane Gee begins by speaking about her arrival in Houston from San Antonio in 1939 and her memories of her family and the larger Chinese community in those times. She touches on topics of education, religion, and politics in her present day as well as in her past. She then talks about her business and her social life before touching on her interests in Chinese culture and her perception of problems that the Chinese in Houston were facing and might have faced in the near future.

[0:00:06.8] DG: Where did you move from?

JG: San Antonio, Texas.

DG: Were you born in San Antonio also?

JG: Yes.

DG: When did you come to Houston?

JG: In 1939.

DG: How did you come?

JG: Believe it or not, I came by way of train. Passenger train.

DG: Who came with you?

JG: I came by myself.

DG: Why did you come to Houston?

JG: I came to go to college here.

DG: Did you have some relatives living in Houston?

JG: Yes I did. My sister and my brother-in-law.

DG: What are their names?

JG: Mr. and Mrs. K.T. Chen

DG: Did you have any Chinese friends in Houston?

JG: No I did not at the time.

DG: Who did you stay with?

JG: I stayed with my brother-in-law and my sister. The Chen's.

DG: Where did they live?

JG: They lived in an apartment on Calhoun Street close to the downtown area.

DG: ...(?) first impression of Houston?

JG: Yes I did. I did not like the climate here. It was very humid and hot in the summertime.

DG: How many (?) Chinese would you say were here at that time?

JG: I would say approximately half a dozen Chinese families only.

DG: Can you name the families?

JG: Well, yes. There was two Chen families, the Si Tao (?) family, Chu family, and maybe the Lim family. There was a Lim family here at the time too. Oh yes, and also there was a Chinese consulate here at the time, and it was Consul and Mrs. Wong.

DG: What would you say was the Chinese population at that time?

JG: I would say that the total Chinese population would not exceed 100.

DG: Do you recall problems that you had studying in Houston with such a small Chinese population?

JG: No, I'm happy to say that personally I did not encounter any problems being a Chinese person in those days.

DG: What kind of work were Chinese doing in Houston?

JG: They were mostly in the grocery store and also the restaurant business.

DG: How many business places were there?

JG: There were more grocery stores than there were restaurants. I think restaurants number less than half a dozen. And the grocery stores were probably about a dozen.

DG: Do you remember some of them?

JG: Yes. There was the Main Café on Main Street run by Mr. Harry Gee. There was the China Clipper, though the China Clipper was not at the time yet. There was a Golden Pheasant and I think there was a Silver Bowl restaurant. There was the Quon Yik, and the Yan Yik, and the San Li. And also Mr. William C Tole (?) has a William C. Tole grocery.

DG: Were there some Chinese that have dabbled in American companies ?

JG: I don't believe so. The Chinese were in business for themselves and the younger Chinese were students at the time.

[0:04:11.9] DG: What was your first job after Rice University?

JG: Well I didn't really have a job. When I left Rice University I got married and my husband and I went into the restaurant business with his uncle.

DG: How did you get to and from work at that time?

JG: Well we were living fairly close to the restaurant so we walked.

DG: Since you were here in 1939, do you remember any families moving between 1935 and '40?

JG: Well, I was here in 1939 so in 1940 Mr. Harry Gee's family came in from China, and then also another Gee family moved in from Lake Village, Arkansas. There weren't really that many families at that time.

DG: Between '40 and '50?

JG: Well many more came between '40 and '50. When World War II ended in 1944 a lot of the young people who got out of the service came into Houston from neighboring states like Mississippi and Arkansas and settled here.

DG: How about between '50 and '60?

JG: Well, many many more Chinese people moved in from neighboring cities and states. A lot of people from San Antonio in fact moved over here.

DG: '60 to now, what type of Chinese people come to Houston?

JG: Well, in 1965 US immigration laws permitted 20,000 Chinese immigrants to come to the United States, which is a much larger number than ever before, so the Chinese people that are here were able to bring a lot of their relatives over from China, which account for a swelling of the Chinese population here in Houston and most recently, the Chinese-Vietnamese came into Houston as refugees, and that really almost doubled up the Chinese population. And growing.

DG: '65 to '70?

JG: Well from '65 to '70 I guess you could say there was a population explosion. A lot of Chinese children were born here. In fact, during the 50's and the 60's and from '60 to '70 due to the fact that in 1965 the

immigration quota for Orientals opened up by at least 20,000 a year were admitted into the United States, and a lot of Chinese immigrated here and people were able to go back, men especially, were able to go back to China and get married and bring their wives here. So that really helped the population growth. Plus the fact that Houston had become such a city of opportunities that people were bringing their relatives in for a better opportunity to make a living. The elements were all there, conducive to increasing the Chinese population here.

DG: How about 1970 to now. What kind of people coming to Houston?

JG: Well I understand that a lot of Vietnamese of Chinese descent and students have come into Houston and settled. That accounts for, well as far as the refugee count is concerned, I understand there's at least 15,000 of them here. I'm sure there are several thousand foreign students, and many of them, or perhaps the majority of them elect to stay after they finish their education.

[0:09:52.0] DG: Who did you marry?

JG: Albert Gee.

DG: Where were you married and when?

JG: Well we were married in Houston in 1940.

DG: How many children do you have?

JG: We have two daughters.

DG: Where were they born?

JG: They were both born in Houston.

DG: What are their names?

JG: Janita and Linda.

DG: Can you tell me something of their education?

JG: Well, they're both college graduates. Janita attended TCU and finished at University of Houston, and she's an education major, and she is now teaching biology in a Catholic High School in California. And she also got her master's degree in education from San Francisco State College. And Linda attended University of Texas and got her Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics and she is working presently at Joskey's (?) here in Houston as a merchandise manager in junior sportswear.

DG: Can you tell what high school they graduated from?

JG: They both graduated from Bellaire High School.

DG: What year?

JG: I think Janita was graduated in '65 and Linda was graduated in '69.

DG: Where was your husband born?

JG: He was born in Detroit, Michigan.

DG: Where did your parents come from?

JG: My parents came from Canton China.

DG: What are their names?

JG: My father's name was Eng Lin Dan and my mother's name was Jin Chee.

DG: Are they still living?

JG: No, they are both not living.

DG: Do you remember your grandparents?

JG: Yes I do remember my grandparents.

DG: Do you know their names?

JG: Yes. My grandfather's name was Ing Ming King and my grandmother was Wan Shi.

DG: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

JG: Yes I do. I have one sister and four brothers. And I lost a sister.

DG: What are their names?

JG: I lost my oldest sister, and her name was Janie. And then my brothers are Richard, Tom, Sam, and Butch. And my sister is Sally.

DG: Where are they now?

JG: Everybody is in Houston except for my sister Sally and she lives in Oregon. Oh, I'm sorry. My brother Tom, I think I even forgot to mention him. He lives in San Antonio.

DG: What are their occupations?

JG: My brother Richard is an insurance agency owner. My brother Tom is semi-retired, dabbling in stock. My brother Butch has a TV and appliance business. My brother Sam is an attorney and also owns his own insurance agency. My sister Sally is a counselor at Oregon State U.

DG: Why did all your brothers come to Houston?

JG: Well, maybe because two of their sisters were here. I really don't know exactly why they came. I guess everybody wants to get out of the small town they were born in.

DG: Why did you stay in Houston?

JG: Well, I came here to go to school, I got married and my husband and I started a business and we just stayed. We liked the place.

DG: Where did you go to former school? Formal education. Elementary school.

JG: Well I went from elementary through high school in San Antonio.

[0:15:12.9] DG: Do you know anything of your parents' or your grandparents' education?

JG: Well, my grandmother never attended school, but my grandfather was very highly educated in Chinese.

DG: How about your parents' education?

JG: Well it's the same with my parents. My father was highly educated in Chinese, my mother never did go to school. In their generation in China, girls don't go to school.

DG: What do you recall about your schooling? Anything special that you want to...?

JG: Well, I think I just led an uneventful career in school. Nothing out of the ordinary happened. I just went to school and did the best I could. Always tried to do my best, as far as making good grades, because my parents were very gung-ho about higher education.

DG: What are your feelings about the quality of education in Texas? In Houston?

JG: Well I don't know that at this time I'm qualified to make a fair judgment of that because my own children have been out of school for so long that I really can't say. But I felt that when they were going to school that the quality of education was very good. At least I'm very satisfied with the education that they had because now that I can see how well they're doing with their careers that I felt like it was because they did have a good education back then.

DG: Do you think the schooling in Houston needs any improvement?

JG: Well, I guess there's always room for improvement, especially because of the turbulence that had occurred when the schools were being integrated. I think a lot of teachers were very disgruntled, and because they were not happy with a lot of the situation on account of that I'm sure the quality of the teaching probably went down. A lot of teachers quit their profession and you have problems like that. I'm sure that the quality of the education was affected adversely.

DG: Do you feel the Chinese in Houston feel the same way you do about education in Houston?

JG: Well I don't know that the Chinese would feel any differently than the Caucasians as far as the estimate of the quality of education. I don't think that race would have anything to do with it.

DG: I mean other Chinese, feeling the same way you do.

JG: Well, I can't speak for them, but I think if they have children in school they would probably feel the same way.

DG: What is your religious preference?

JG: I'm a Protestant.

DG: Is that the same as your parents?

JG: No. Well, let me qualify that. My mother did become a Christian and a Protestant so I would say that in her case, it would be the same.

DG: How about your father?

JG: Well, I think my father believes in a higher being, and he never did embrace any other religion, so maybe I can say he's a Christian too.

[0:20:03.2] DG: Do your children follow your religious preference?

JG: Yes they do.

DG: Do you go to church regularly?

JG: No, I don't go regularly I'm ashamed to admit.

DG: Are you a member of a church?

JG: Yes I am.

DG: Do you contribute in any way?

JG: Well, financially some, but as far as by attending and taking active part in activities, I have not been able to do that.

DG: Do you think Chinese in Houston share your beliefs in religion?

JG: Well, those that I know, most of them are Christians.

DG: What church do you think the majority of the Chinese in Houston belong to?

JG: The Chinese Baptist Church

DG: Do you think they have put any of their previous beliefs and customs into the religion they are now?

JG: Well, I'm sure some of them do to a certain degree, but I don't think that the extent is that much.

DG: Do you vote?

JG: Yes.

DG: Did you vote in the last city election?

JG: Yes

DG: Did you vote in the last state election?

JG: Yes

DG: In the presidential election?

JG: Yes

DG: Do you go to political meetings?

JG: Well, I don't make a habit of it but I have gone.

DG: How about party meetings?

JG: I have attended.

DG: How often?

JG: Well, I can't say exactly how often, but I would say I do it enough to say that I am interested in candidates and issues. I do keep up with politics.

DG: Have you ever run for office?

JG: No, I have not.

DG: Do you know why there are not many Chinese running for offices?

JG: Well I think in the future there will be Chinese running for office here in Houston. I think that compared to cities where they have many more Chinese such as San Francisco and New York, Chinese people run for office a lot more there. I think it's a little premature here, but I think that the time will come, since our Chinese population is growing so fast that there will come a time in the near future where we may have Chinese people running for office.

DG: Would you encourage Chinese who are qualified to run for some kind of office?

JG: I certainly would. I think it would be a good thing because we are a minority ethnic group and we have people with talent enough to contribute to the benefit of the community so I really believe that they should run.

DG: Do you speak other languages?

JG: (?)...and Spanish limited.

DG: And English.

JG: Well, English.

DG: Did your parents speak other languages also?

JG: Well, my parents knew some Spanish because they had operated a grocery store in the Mexican neighborhood and they learned that way.

DG: How about your children?

JG: Well they are also bilingual and maybe trilingual. One of my daughters had taken French in school, and the other one Spanish, and they both speak Chinese limited.

DG: Did you ever attend any special school for languages?

JG: No I did not, other than regular schools.

DG: Did your parents put any emphasis in speaking the Chinese language?

JG: They certainly did. In fact they sent us to Chinese school when we were going to elementary and junior high school.

[0:25:12.5] DG: How did you learn English?

JG: Well personally I did not learn English until I started American school and that was a handicap which I had to overcome.

DG: What difficulties did you encounter in learning English?

JG: Well, it was pretty difficult to go to a school where everyone spoke English and nobody spoke Chinese and you just don't understand what's going on. So I learned the hard way.

DG: What do you do in leisure time?

JG: Well, if I have enough leisure time I like to travel and I do travel. When leisure time is limited I like to visit my friends and relatives.

DG: Do you attend any classes?

JG: Well, connected with my work...(?)... with the new things that are going on.

DG: Do you have any hobbies?

JG: Well, not really anything. I do like photography and I do that.

DG: Do you socialize with your neighbors?

JG: Yes I do.

DG: How? What do you do?

JG: Well, we go out to lunch together when we have time. I have a lady who lives next door to me that works full time except for Saturdays, so sometimes we get together and go to lunch or go shopping. Sometimes the other people in the neighborhood have dinners or special occasions and I go when they invite me and I invite them sometimes. We know each other in the neighborhood, which gives everyone a pretty secure...

DG: Do you socialize with your working associates?

JG: Well, we socialize but when we do, as far as working associates, we usually socialize at lunch or at dinner but the event would have something to do with education of our profession.

DG: Do you socialize with your relatives?

JG: Yes I do.

DG: What do y'all do?

JG: Well with relatives we usually go to each others' houses and catch up on what's going on with our children and it's usually somebody's birthday or anniversary and we'll cook or we'll go out to dinner together.

DG: Do you belong to any community clubs that are not all Chinese?

JG: I don't think so.

DG: Why not?

JG: Well, because personally I tend to socialize with Chinese people.

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese clubs or organizations?

JG: Yes I do.

DG: Which ones?

JG: The Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. I am a member. Gee's family. Gee's family association.

[0:29:41.7] DG: Do you remember who was instrumental in forming the Chinese lodge and the Gee Association?

JG: Well I don't know about the Gee association. It could be Mr. C. Y. Chu and Mr. Weng Han Gee. They were some of the earlier Gee's that were here. And as far as the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, the men that are responsible to form the Houston lodge in the beginning are my brother-in-law, Edward K. T. Chen, my husband Albert Gee, my brother Sam Ing, Charlie Chen.

[END OF PART 1]

[BEGINNING OF PART 2]

[0:00:44.0] DG: Are you active in business in Houston?

JG: Yes I am. I'm a real estate broker.

DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?

JG: Sometimes I do.

DG: What occasion?

JG: Well, sometimes they have during the Chinese New Year season, many of the family associations have their spring dinner there.

DG: How often do you go?

JG: Well, not very often. The other times that I go, is to buy some Chinese groceries or gifts.

DG: Do you ever go to the Chinese theater?

JG: No, I don't.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese opera?

JG: No I'm not.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

JG: Yea, I like Chinese art. Some forms of it.

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese things?

JG: Yes I'm interested in many Chinese things. Like, for instance ceramics and jewelry, Chinese inspired clothing. I'm interested in Chinese calligraphy.

DG: Do you think there's a gap in the Chinese culture in Houston?

JG: You mean between... what do you mean a gap? Between generations, or what kind of a gap are you referring to?

DG: In culture.

JG: In culture? Well, I don't think it's...I think the culture could be opportunities for young Chinese people could be improved, to embrace more of the people, but I think there are facilities here that are available that is not being taken advantage of. For instance the language school at Rice University is available to students, but not everybody is interested enough to attend.

DG: Have you traveled to China?

JG: No I have not.

DG: Do you have any future plans to go to mainland China?

JG: Well, I wouldn't say never, but not in the foreseeable future.

DG: Would you like your children to visit China?

JG: Well if they want to I would certainly have no objection.

DG: Do you have any relatives in China?

JG: Yes I do. I have an aunt in China.

DG: Do you receive any newspapers from China? Magazines?

JG: No I don't.

DG: Do you maintain any Chinese traditions or customs?

JG: Well, not really, being born and raised here I don't really observe on a serious basis any Chinese traditions or customs.

DG: Do you celebrate any Chinese holidays?

JG: Well, as far as, during Chinese New Year time when the family associations get together and have their dinners, that's about the extent of my observance of Chinese holidays.

[0:04:58.0] DG: Do your children maintain any Chinese traditions or customs?

JG: I don't think so.

DG: Are there any Chinese customs you have abandoned that your parents strictly observed?

JG: No, although my parents were born and raised in China they adapted to the way of life here pretty readily and they did not observe any customs from Old China.

DG: Do you think this is true of other Chinese in the Houston area?

JG: Well, I think it's kind of a mixture. I think some do and some don't.

DG: Are you aware of any Chinese customs that your friends observe that you don't?

JG: Well, yes. Well for instance there are certain seasons when they bake Chinese pastries. Maybe during the moon festival or whatever they do that.

DG: How many Chinese do you think live in Houston now?

JG: I understand there are probably somewhere between 15 and 20 thousand.

DG: How do you view the Chinese as an ethnic group in Houston.

JG: Well I think the Chinese in Houston enjoy a special place in the community, and as a whole highly thought of by the Anglos. I don't think that... on the whole that... we have not been prejudiced against.

DG: Are the Chinese closely knit compared to ethnic groups in Houston?

JG: Well I suppose that we are, being that we are not as large a group as other minorities such as the Latin Americans and the black people, and because of that I feel that we intermingle more and have more to do with each other, especially on special occasions.

DG: How do you think the Houston Chinese ...(?) as a group, compared to other ethnic groups in Houston?

JG: Well I think that they pretty much feel the same way that I do. I don't believe that that many, or hardly any have really been discriminated against because we're Chinese. I'm not saying that there hasn't been any discrimination at all, I'm not saying that, but I think as a whole we have really been given the opportunities to education and business and although there, I have known of cases of discrimination in job offers before but I think that was, the cases were very few and far between.

DG: Do you foresee any political divisions in the Houston Chinese community?

JG: You mean that Chinese people might be interested in politics?

DG: Do you see any political *divisions*?

JG: Oh you mean differences. Well, I believe there is different views among the Chinese population here that during campaigns that some people would be for one side and some for the other. I don't believe that the Chinese here... vote... they're not led like sheep.

[0:10:19.0] DG: Do you see any changes in political support among these divisions with US opening relations with China?

JG: No, I don't believe that has a lot to do with it at all.

DG: What social values do you think remain most important in Chinese traditions today?

JG: Social values. Umm, well the way my parents taught us children when we were growing up is to...there are certain things, you know, like the value of a higher education should not be ignored, and the laws of the land should be obeyed, and we that we should be good citizens, try our best.

DG: What social values do you think other Chinese in Houston (?) important to them?

JG: Well, I think that being a good citizen embraces a lot of things. Economically, we should be prepared to take care of ourselves so that we never become a burden on the state, and socially we should do the things that are right so that it will not have a bad reflection on the Chinese as a minority. SO basically, I think that the Chinese all feel the same way.

DG: How do you think you were disciplined by your parents?

JG: How? Well I came from a large family and the only time we ever get together is at dinnertime so I think at dinnertime every night is a lecture time so that's when we get discipline.

DG: Do you see any changes in conception about child rearing from your parents' time?

JG: Difference? Well I think my generation in raising our children are quite a bit more permissive with our children, although the values that we were brought up with are passed on to them. They have a lot more advantages than we did because we were able to give them more advantages and maybe even a lot more material things, but I think we weigh these things to make sure they're not spoiled.

DG: What did you do in your leisure time as a child?

JG: I did not have very much leisure time as a child after coming home from American school at 3:30. By 5:00 I'm sitting in Chinese school until 8:00 at night. And then I also go to Chinese school on Saturday mornings from 9 to 12, so as a child I did not have that much leisure time.

DG: What type of toys did you play with as a child?

JG: Didn't have very many toys. As a young child I remember my mother making rag dolls that were printed on flour sacks for the children to play with. And then we had a few tricycles and, toys were really far and few between.

[0:15:18.0] DG: What kind of toys are your favorite?

JG: Well, I can't say that I had a favorite toy.

DG: Do you see your childhood as much different from your children's?

JG: Oh very much different. Being that, since my parents were from China, we only associated with our Chinese relatives, so my childhood until I went to school, was limited only to Chinese friends and relatives. And even after I went to American school, I did not play with children after school. There weren't any around to play with, which is very different from the way my children grew up. They had American friends and Chinese friends from childhood, from before school age on. And then also when they were going to school their American schoolmates would come over and play after school and we would have birthday parties for them and invite the children over and, as a child I don't ever remember having a birthday party myself.

DG: Do you perceive any changes in family size in the Chinese community?

JG: Well definitely I think the trend in the last, say, 15 to 20 years the trend is towards less children in the family.

DG: Do you think the Chinese people who come to Houston now will encounter any problems?

JG: Well, whoever coming to Houston or any other city, depending on the language I think is mostly if they don't speak the language they will have a problem. That would be the biggest problem.

DG: What special problems do you think the boat people could expect to encounter?

JG: Well, they have a different set of problems and I think the language problem, if they're not able to communicate would be their number 1 problem, and also those people came over here, I guess most of them have lost everything and when they got here they don't have anything and they're starting from scratch so economically it's a big problem for them to get adjusted and try to be self-supporting. So that creates a host of problems for them.

DG: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

JG: Well, I felt that the Chinese in Houston from the beginning have enjoyed a lot of privileges given to us by the Caucasians that are here already, that we have encountered very little prejudice and I think that the people who were here in the beginning tried real hard to establish ourselves, establish a good reputation a good name by being law-abiding citizens and making our own way economically and educating our children so that we could be a respected part of this community and I feel that the Chinese that have come in later and are coming in now have a good foundation to build upon and I hope that as we get more Chinese people into Houston that the good relationship that has been established through the years will continue to grow.

[0:21:09.0] DG: Do you know any respected Chinese in Houston we would want to get on tape for our oral history study?

JG: Well I don't know of anybody. I can't say for them that they would want to, but I feel that there are people like Bill Wu, who is a leader in this community and also Hobrid Joe (?) who is a very successful and respected Chinese businessman. I think those two should be approached for an interview.

DG: Do you have any documents that we may use to support our oral history study?

JG: I think I have some at home. I'd have to look for them.

DG: Can we borrow them to make copies?

JG: Yes. Definitely.

DG: What do you think led to the presently large population of Chinese in the Houston area?

JG: Well many factors, one being the increased quota of immigration quota for the people here in Houston to bring family and other relatives in, and also the economic climate in Houston has been on the upswing and Houston is recognized as one of the, if not the, one of the leading growth cities in the

whole United States. It's getting around, that fact is being known all over the world so for that reason a lot of people are coming here.

DG: (?) Thank you very much.

JG: You're welcome. [0:23:33.0]