Interviewer: Daisy Chan Gee  
Interviewee: June Dove Leong  
Date: 1980  
Track time: part 1- 31:31, part 2- 31:46  
Transcribed by: Katarina Slobodova

Summary:

Daisy Chan Gee gives her impression of Houston, after having moved here from Portland, Oregon, where she grew up. Despite speaking little Chinese, she talks about her interest in various aspects of Chinese culture. She also voices some strong beliefs about parenting as well as what she thinks about the difficulties of getting an education as a child in contrast to the opportunities presented to her children. Other topics covered include religion, hobbies, and community involvement.

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Audio file part 1:

DG: -did you live in Houston?

JL: Over 30 years.

DG: And where did you live before you moved to Houston?

JL: We lived in Portland, Oregon.

DG: Where were you born and grew up?

JL: We grew up in Portland, Oregon. My- I have one younger sister and myself and we lived in Portland, Oregon, born and raised there.

DG: When did you move to Houston?

JL: It’s been over 30 years ago.
DG: What year?

JL: We first moved to Houston- I can’t exactly remember what year, but it’s-

DG: Who came-

JL: We were one of the first people, Chinese people, in the city. Very very few in number of the Chinese people that were living- not very many other people- most everyone knew everyone else at that time who were Chinese.

DG: Who came with you to Houston?

JL: My 2 children and my husband. At that time we only had 2 children.

DG: Why did your family move to Houston?

JL: My husband came here to be associated with the executives of [inaudible several words] of Houston [inaudible several words] and he decided to come here to the Houston area. [inaudible several words].

DG: Did you have any relatives here at that time?

JL: We knew no one at that time. We just came because the [inaudible 1 word] was here. The first people we knew were- that is of Chinese ancestry, were people who were [inaudible 1 word].

DG: Where did you live when you first arrived?

JL: We lived near the business administration office at a place called [inaudible 1 word] Plaza.

DG: What were your first impressions of Houston?

JL: It was warm and we were more conditioned to the cool weather, so we had to get acclimated to [inaudible several words].

DG: Can you estimate how many Chinese lived here at that time, when you first arrived?

JL: A rough estimate might be a 100. I have no way of telling if that is in fact the correct number. A guess.

DG: Do you remember any problems [inaudible 1 word] here due to the small population of Chinese here in Houston?
JL: We were noticed more because we were small in number and minorities, I believe, are always noticed more, because it’s an unusual thing [inaudible several words].

DG: What kind of job opportunities for Chinese at that time?

JL: I think that most of the Chinese at that time were in the grocery business. Eventually I think that more and more became interested in the restaurant.

DG: Can you name some restaurant and grocery at that time?

JL: The first restaurant that we knew of was Din Hao, which was owned by Mr. Albert Gee and they also owned a grocery [inaudible several words]

DG: Are there many- are there any Chinese professionals working for any corporation at that time?

JL: Not that I know of, at that time. I believe that actually through the years the Chinese became more in number at the [inaudible 2 words] and I believe with the [inaudible several words] there were more minorities and more [inaudible several words].

DG: What do you think led to the presently large influx of Chinese to Houston?

JL: I believe that this is a very wealthy part of the country. Houston is renowned for the gas industry, the oil industry. I think that there is a [inaudible 1 or 2 words] and people are attracted to it. Comparatively in relation to New York and some of the older established cities, a land where a young person can still make his way and become successful. Not all of the places [inaudible several words] is not an established city. You might say that Houston is a pioneer in comparison to many other cities, and I think that’s an attraction that all [inaudible several words].

DG: Do you feel that there are more professional [inaudible 1 word] Chinese come to Houston now?

JL: I think- well, from the sense of the medical people, I think that there are more professionals here because of growth of the Texas Medical Center. At the time, my husband was the first Chinese doctor in the city, but since then I imagine there must be- I think there are probably, you might say, close to a 100 Chinese positions now in the city.

DG: Can you name some that finished medical school here in the Hospital District?

JL: Well, I think that it would be girls [inaudible 1 or 2 words] Houston Baptist College. She was the daughter of Henry Gee, who was one of the owners of the Southwest Chinese Journal for which I write. [inaudible comment] She finished at
Baylor College of Medicine, and she was a student at Houston Baptist taught by another Houstonian, a long-time Houstonian, Dr. Joyce Chan. [inaudible several words] medical department at Houston Baptist College and because of good [inaudible 1 word], I believe many many under her supervision of the Chinese race have graduated with [inaudible several words] and on to medicine or dentistry. She is also one of the first Chinese people here, Dr. Joyce Chen and Dr. Paul [inaudible last name] who is [inaudible several words].

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

JL: I don't know, but I believe I read somewhere that it were at this moment 23,000.

DG: Who did you marry?

JL: I married Dr. Richard W. Leon (?) who is originally from Oregon [inaudible several words].

DG: Where were you married and when?

JL: We were married in Chicago, Illinois. How many years ago? Hold on. 38 years ago.

DG: How many children did you have?

JL: We have 3.

DG: Where were they born?

JL: Our first 2 was born in Portland, Oregon and our third child was born here in Houston, Texas.

DG: What are their names?

JL: Richard W. Leon Jr., Lotus Leon Giu(?) and Tanny Leon(?).

DG: Could you tell me about their education?

JL: My son who is the eldest studied [inaudible 1 word] and he is now residing in Florida. My daughter studied to be an architect and she is residing in [inaudible several words] and my daughter graduated from St. John’s (?) School and then [inaudible several words] Rice University where she is [inaudible several words].

DG: Where was your husband born?

JL: I think he was born in Portland, Oregon.
DG: Did your parents come from China?

JL: My mother and father were born in the United States. My mother, she is a [inaudible several words] and my grandmother was a [inaudible several words] so that makes me a third generation American-born Chinese and my mother on my father’s side, his mother and father were born in China and he was born in New York, so I’m really close to my Chinese ancestors on my father’s side.

DG: Are your parents still alive?

JL: Well my mother recently died. She died on October 15th of last year. My father died [inaudible several words].

DG: Do you remember anything about your grandparents?

JL: My…grandfather, as I understand, from my father’s side was the first man who brought a Chinese [inaudible 1 or 2 words] to the United States. At that time, they tell me, there was a World Fair in Omaha, Nebraska in the 1800s and my grandfather was responsible for the Chinese [inaudible 1 word] at that World Fair.

DG: How could you [inaudible several words]. Your grandfather- what is your grandfather’s name and your grandfather’s grandmother?

JL: [inaudible name] but I never did know my grandfather because he died before I was even born, so I just know him from a large picture that was always [inaudible 1 word] in our home when I was a little girl. [inaudible several words] alongside my grandmother and so I knew of him and they always talked to me about him, but I never had the opportunity to meet him.

DG: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

JL: I have just 1 sister. She is 2, 3 years younger than I. She now resides in California with her husband in Belmont, California. Her husband works at [inaudible].

DG: And what does your sister [inaudible several words] name?

JL: Dr. [inaudible first name] Edgar Louis. My sister’s given name is Gloria, Gloria [inaudible middle name] Leong. [inaudible comment]

DG: Why did you want to stay in Houston?

JL: [inaudible comment]

DG: Why did your family want to stay in Houston?
JL: Well we were just- got here by the [inaudible name] Hospital and stayed here because, economically, I believe it’s a good place to be for all people, I think. Also at that time when we first came, my husband took a survey of all the cities in the United States, and Houston at that time did not have enough of a city [inaudible 1 word] to meet the needs of the city, and he wanted to go where the needs were, so that is the reason we accepted the appointment to come here.

DG: Would you tell me something about your parents’ education?

JL: My mother came from a small town called the [inaudible city name], California and because there were many Spanish-speaking people there, she spoke also Spanish. I believe [inaudible several words] and she had her education on that line and also in the line of office work(?). I believe she had high school but I don’t know if she completed it, but she spoke fluent Spanish and was very [inaudible 1 word] in being able to translate for others and she was eventually, when she and my father moved to Portland, Oregon, she was elected President of the Portland Chinese [inaudible 1 word]. And besides that she was doing [inaudible several words]. Of course at that time, when she was a girl, education wasn’t really stressed. [inaudible comment] but she still gave herself enough to manage and I think she got along pretty well. My father, his father died when he was a little boy and he was the head of the family when he was about 13 years old. And he shined shoes. He helped his mother during laundry. [inaudible comment] I think it was harder for him to get an education, harder for him than my mother, but still he managed to [inaudible several words]. He writes very fluently and speaks very fluently and I don’t know how much education he had, but [inaudible several words]. Yeah, I think he got along quite well, but I think that [inaudible comment] and I think it made him very strong. [inaudible comment]

DG: Do you remember anything about your school days?

[21:44]

JL: Yes, I remember my father. He wanted my sister and I to have a good education and so he [inaudible 1 word] my mother and at that time, he called his mother, our grandmother and [inaudible several words] rose garden [inaudible comment] just one block from a school, an elementary school. Me and my sister, all we had to do was walk down one block and go to school. [inaudible comment] He wanted us to have our education. [inaudible comments]

DG: How do you feel about the quality of education in Texas and in Houston compared to the [inaudible 1 or 2 words] in Portland, Oregon when you go to school?

JL: Well, I think that the quality of all education throughout the United States has improved and opportunities are much more than they used to be and women are more acceptable as far as becoming more than just housewives. They are [inaudible
and encouraged to go further than their mothers and fathers, and grandmothers and I think that I think it's a good thing. The recognition of the fact that girls' education can be just as important as boys’ education.

DG: Do you think your children have better education opportunities than you?

JL: Yes, I think so because they're inspired to become good citizens and they’re inspired in a country where there are more opportunities and I think that we learn from the past and we learn from research at every school, not only in medicine and business - I think in all walks of life there's been research, so I think the quality of whatever you go into is a bit better than it was. With each passing year we learn from the past and we benefit from that.

DG: Do you think the schools in Houston need any improvement?

JL: I suppose if one were a major in education, I believe that one would be more knowledgeable than I. Probably there would be some of the answers with someone who knows more about it than I.

DG: Did you need to stress the importance of education to your children?

JL: Yes, I think most Chinese parents do stress education to their children, and most Chinese people I think have been successful, because they want their own space to be a little better [inaudible 1 word] themselves and I think that most Chinese people realize that it is important [inaudible several words]

DG: Why is it so?

JL: Perhaps being a minority one feels that opportunities would be better if they had more education. [inaudible comment]. With each passing year, the opportunities open up and they want to take advantage of these opportunities.

DG: What is your religious preference?

JL: At the moment our family are Methodist.

DG: Is it the same as your parents’?

JL: My grandmother, when she was alive, we would get home [inaudible several words] and she religiously prayed [inaudible several words]. She was very religious, but she never made us children follow her own religion. It was something that was very personal. And my mother and father - well my mother more than my father, she leaned toward the Baptist church and eventually she became a Baptist Sunday School teacher at the Chinese Baptist Church, which was in [inaudible several words]. That was after we [inaudible 1 or 2 words] married, left the house, she herself decided that she would prefer to [inaudible 1 word] but my grandmother
never insisted that anybody become [inaudible several words] She always observed [inaudible several words].

DG: What is your attitude towards Buddhists?

JL: My attitude toward Buddhists, I believe, is- I guess, one comes to ones own religion according to his own- at the moment he decides he himself wants it then he will receive it. A religion is something that, I believe, one cannot force upon a person, because, I believe, it only causes resistance. [inaudible comment] I believe, that one cannot forcibly make [inaudible 1 or 2 words] a Pagan, or a Catholic, or a Buddhist, or any other person who desires that particular place as his own and then forcibly try to inject another denomination on someone else. I think it could only create...what should I say...eternal...

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[31:31]

Audio file part 2:

JL: ...is a very famous picture. He knocks but the latch is on the inside. It cannot be opened on the outside and he waits there but he never forces the door open and that is my belief so...my religious belief.

DG: Do you go to church regularly?

JL: Yes, I’m there every Sunday [inaudible 2 words] church in downtown Houston.

DG: Are you a member of the church?

JL: Yes, our family are members- we are all members.

DG: What church did you think most Chinese in Houston belong to?

JL: I understand that the Chinese Baptist Church has the most Chinese members.

DG: Do you feel the China-born members of the Chinese Baptist Church still maintain some old beliefs and customs even though they are church members now?

JL: I don’t know but I think there might be some old beliefs and customs that are a part our Chinese people traditional. It’s sometimes hard to erase everything in one’s background.

DG: Do you vote in the city [inaudible 1 word] election, state election, and presidential election?
JL: Yes, I’m a registered voter. I don’t vote in every election, but the ones that I feel are important I do go to vote.

DG: Do you ever go to political party meetings?

JL: No. Well, I like to read the newspapers and then make a decision, as a general rule. That’s where I make most of my [inaudible 1 word].

DG: Have you ever run for public office?

JL: No, I’m not that politically oriented. I believe it’s nice to know some of the political offices and those candidates and sometimes Mrs. Albert Gee through the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, when they have their meetings and we’re invited, we have the opportunity [inaudible several words] political people speak and that [inaudible 1 or 2 words] Chinese people the opportunity to vote intelligently.

DG: Why do you think that there are not many Chinese running for public office in this area?

JL: I don’t know. Perhaps if opportunities present (?), maybe if they’re more interested...perhaps, we as a people would feel it necessary perhaps to back one candidate if there was a [inaudible 1 or 2 words] movement for some particular cause, perhaps one day we might perhaps back a political candidate of our race, but thus far perhaps there hasn’t been anything that important that we want to emphasize as Chinese-Americans. I don’t know the reasons that [inaudible several words].

DG: Would you encourage any prominent, qualified, capable Chinese person to run for public office?

JL: Yes, because I believe we do see minorities in public offices. I believe we have [inaudible name]. We have a Chinese representative lady [inaudible several words]. More and more I think throughout the United States that there is a feeling that there are opportunities so I believe any Chinese would feel- who would like to go into the field, should. I believe I would encourage that person, particularly [inaudible 1 or 2 words].

DG: Do you speak any other languages besides English?

JL: Very little Chinese. Before I was 6 years old, I spoke nothing but Chinese because my grandmother spoke nothing but Chinese. After 6 years old and the fact that we were going to elementary school and my mother and father spoke English and then my grandmother died, I gradually lost my Chinese and spoke English, so I would say I speak very little Chinese.
DG: Did your parents put any emphasis on speaking the Chinese language?

JL: No. They did not send me to Chinese school. I believe many of the Chinese children in Portland, Oregon lived in Chinatown, went to school pretty regularly. They would go to the elementary school and then they would go immediately to elementary school, to their Chinese school, because it was very convenient for them at that time, if they lived in Chinatown, but it happened that our father decided to move out into the residential district in Portland, Oregon, so it was rather inconvenient for us, so we were never pressed to go to Chinese school.

DG: Did you have any problems learning English since you didn’t know English until you went to elementary school?

JL: I don’t remember too well, whether I had any trouble with it.

DG: What do you do in your leisure time?

JL: Pardon?

DG: What do you do in your leisure time?

JL: At this time?

DG: Yes.

JL: I enjoy writing for the Southwest Chinese Journal. It’s something that is not professional. It’s just something that I just enjoy as a hobby. It comes out once a month and [inaudible several words]. I write at it in my leisure time.

DG: Do you attend any classes now?

JL: No, I did- through the years there were some that I attended, but not at this moment.

DG: Do you have any hobbies besides writing?

JL: At the moment, I go to churches when they ask for [inaudible several words] dramatic presentations. I give the bible [inaudible several words] from the new testament. I’ve been doing this since 1969 for the purpose of world [inaudible 1 word]. The donations go to this women’s [inaudible 1 word] association. It’s a worldwide organization and at first, it went to the purpose of an orphanage in Taipei, but now since Vietnam and what happened over there, the donations have been going to the Indo-Chinese (?) people who are [inaudible several words].

DG: Do you socialize with your neighbors?
JL: Yes. Not a great deal, because we all have half-acre lots in this area. Most everyone has too much their own (?) privacy, but through the years, growing-up years, my children [inaudible 1 word] boy scouts [inaudible 2 or 3 words] carpools, school activities, through that avenue, we have not become acquainted and gotten to know our neighbors to participate [inaudible several words].

DG: Do you belong to any community clubs that are mostly Caucasians?

JL: I belong to the Baylor Medical Wives. That’s the faculty association of Baylor Medical College and [inaudible 1 word] Medical Society. The western branch of that society, one my husband practices, the western part of [inaudible 1 word], so we call it the Western Branch and I was their first program chair when they announced the organization. [inaudible comment]

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

JL: When we first came into the city, it was called the Chinese University Club and my husband was president one time and I was their social program director and for 5 years I [inaudible 1 word] the Chinese New Year’s program [inaudible several words] and some of the Chinese fairytale, I used to do that. At that time it was not as celebrated [inaudible several words] so the Chinese University Club [inaudible several words] decided to do something [inaudible several words]. At that time, almost all the people in that organization were students going to the University of Houston but they were not the professional people like they are now. So now the complexion (?) of that organization has changed. It’s been renamed the Chinese Professional [inaudible 1 or 2 words] of which my husband and I are still members.

DG: Would you say your husband formed the Chinese Professional Club in the beginning?

JL: He was one of the initial members. I don’t know whether I would say he formed it, because I think it was on its way before we came into the city, but he was one of the first people and used to meet right here in our home. This used to be almost like a clubhouse, you know. People that we knew, at that time, because of the small number of Chinese people in the city, they would all be able to come and this house would accommodate the number of Chinese people, whatever number would come to the meetings, and now I think it has grown to quite a number, so many that it would probably take a large house to accommodate all the members of the Chinese Professional Club. Someone told me that it was one of the largest Chinese Organizations in the city.

DG: What is your present occupation?

JL: Actually I [inaudible several words] I do enjoy writing. I do enjoy acting (?) but they’re not careers.
DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?

JL: Yes, sometimes we shop for special Chinese groceries that I wouldn’t [inaudible 1 or 2 words] nearby grocery stores [inaudible 1 or 2 words].

DG: Do you ever go to the Chinese theater?

JL: The Chinese theater, I don’t believe that the actual Chinese theater [inaudible 2 or 3 words] once in a long long time. The traditional Chinese opera comes once in 2 years. [inaudible comment]. I did go to the last one [inaudible several words].

DG: Are you interested in Chinese Opera?

JL: Yes I am. I enjoy it.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

JL: Yes I enjoy it.

DG: Are there-

JL: But I’m not- I guess as- a critic. My daughter is a better one [inaudible 1 or 2 words] taking full advantage of art. My daughter studied [inaudible 1 or 2 words] at Rice University and she can go through a museum and spend hours and hours [inaudible several words]. I can look at a picture and enjoy it, but it would take me a few moments to look at a picture. She could stand there and look at it for 5 or 10 minutes.

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese culture?

JL: Yes I enjoy I think all Chinese culture, because I am Chinese myself, and I guess I would say I may not know as much as other people, but I enjoy Chinese culture.

DG: Do you think the Chinese younger generation has lost some of its Chinese culture here?

JL: They have become Westernized, I believe, in many ways. Sometimes you cannot actually recognize [inaudible 1 or 2 words] look or [inaudible several words] and all the American ways of their lives and you can’t tell them from another American [inaudible comment] absorbed the American culture.

[20:40]

DG: Do you think they ought to uphold some Chinese culture?
JL: Yes, I believe the Chinese young people should respect that they do come from Chinese parents and they should enjoy it even though they are [inaudible several words] Westernized.

DG: Have you traveled to Mainland China?

JL: No, I've never traveled to Mainland China or to Taiwan [inaudible several words] because I guess [inaudible 2 or 3 words] my Chinese ancestors and my mother and father have not closely aligned with anyone in China. All they friends- or most all of their friends are (?) here in America.

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

JL: I think it would be nice. [inaudible comment]

DG: Would you like your children to visit China also?

JL: Yes. In fact, my daughter has [inaudible 1 or 2 words]. She and her husband would like to go back. [inaudible comment]. My daughter married George Yu who is also [inaudible several words] and they have expressed the desire of going back to China and staying [inaudible several words] so that they can [inaudible several words].

DG: Have you any relatives in China?

JL: No, [inaudible several words] at one time my uncle was there but [inaudible several words].

DG: Do you maintain any Chinese customs or traditions?

JL: I guess most of us do still believe in our Chinese New Year's, Chinese [inaudible 2 words] observing that time of year. That would be, for me, [inaudible several words].

DG: Does your children maintain any Chinese traditions or customs?

JL: Yes. During the Chinese New Year's times, they enjoy, like everyone else, [inaudible several words] and we are becoming- because of the large population, more [inaudible several words]

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

JL: Well I think I have never abandoned, I just have never picked up, my grandmother's rituals. That's the only way I can answer that question.
DG: What Chinese customs do your Chinese friends observe that you do not?

JL: I don’t know. I believe that we’re just all, as a whole Chinese population, we’re becoming more and more Americanized. [inaudible several words] and maybe our very old old grandfathers and [inaudible several words] the older people might enjoy- are enjoying some of the older customs. As far as I know, most of us are becoming more Westernized.

DG: Do you look upon the Chinese as an ethnic group in Houston?

JL: I guess so. We’re part ethnic and we’re part not. I don’t know.

DG: Do you think the Chinese are closely-knit as a group?

JL: I think most of us like to be with Chinese, we like to be more closely-knit. We look for them, even if we don’t happen to be in our own city. If we happen to be in New York or San Francisco or any other large city, we tend to go to Chinese restaurants, to Chinese grocery stores. It just [inaudible 2 words] own people. We are very closely-knit, more so perhaps than American people.

DG: Do you feel, observe, or any political division in the Houston Chinese community?

JL: A political division between Houston...

DG: In the Chinese community.

JL: Well, I guess there is a political division like...well, I guess some are Republicans, some are Democrats.

DG: I mean the Chinese community. The Chinese people themselves.

JL: Well, some of them are Republican. Some of them are Democrat. Some of them, I suppose, lean more toward Mainland China and others perhaps lean more toward the Nationalist [inaudible 1 or 2 words] on the island of Taiwan.

DG: Do you see any changes in political support among these two divisions with the U.S. opening relations with Mainland China?

JL: I believe that the political mending- or lending (?) of our Chinese people will fall in step with our government’s lending of relationships. Chinese people, I think, are loyal to the nation in which they live and I believe it will depend upon what we want as an entire country in this United States as to what will happen in the future as for our Chinese people in Houston. I believe the majority of them are very good citizens of the United States.
DG: Do you see - what is the most important Chinese tradition to you?

JL: The tradition - I don’t know whether I should call it a tradition -

DG: -or custom.

JL: I think that we’re more family oriented. We are, I think, through the years, the Chinese people want the best for their children and so you might say for that reason they’re more closely-knit and they strive very hard, work very hard when most of them were in the grocery business [inaudible comment] and now in the restaurant business, you see the whole family is working right in the restaurant. It's the togetherness - I think it’s a very good-

[audio abruptly cuts off]

[31:46]