Edward Chuck Ming Chen was born in 1937 and was one of the first Chinese-Americans to be born in Houston, Texas. He was raised in Houston where he helped with a local grocery store and eventually followed his uncles in going to Rice University in 1955. He has since had a career both in the chemical industry, working both with petroleum and NASA, and in teaching chemistry at both a high school and college level. By compiling newspaper columns such as "Golden Mountain on the Gulf," he has earned himself the title of unofficial historian of Houston’s Chinese-American community.

Interview:

The interview dealt with several aspects of his life, including childhood, family life, and professional accomplishments. He often gave his opinion regarding issues ranging from politics to parenting. He also often mentioned historic information about Chinese immigration to and presence in Houston.

[0:00:11.2] DCG: …[Ed]ward Chen and I would like to start out with you just giving me a little bit about your background. Where you were born and raised, and so forth. Just kinda give me your life story in a capsule if you would please.

EC: I was born in Houston, Texas on July 30, 1937. I went to school in Houston, went through all of my education in Houston. To elementary school, at Wharton Elementary, to junior high school, Sydney Lanier Junior High School, San Jacinto High School, Rice University, then the University of Houston, and in between times I spent two years in the army. Since then I’ve been working, first of all with, Ashton (?) chemical company here in Houston, and then with Sigma chemical company, where I was eventually the chief chemist, and more recently for the last seven years with the University of Houston, first at Victoria, and then at Clear Lake City.

DCG: In a capsule, there you are

EC: In a capsule, that’s it.
DCG: Ok, tell me something about your parents. Where they were born and raised, how they came to Houston and so forth.

EC: My father was born in San Francisco and he came to Houston in 1932 by way of New York City where he was editor of a Chinese newspaper. My mother came to Houston by way of San Antonio, and actually they were the first Chinese couple to get married, to establish a home here in Houston.

DCG: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

EC: I have one sister, she’s a teacher. She’s been a teacher since about 1957. She was the first teacher in elementary school here in Houston.

DCG: Okay, your parents came, you father came to Houston in 1932 by way of New York City…

EC: …and Galveston actually

DCG: … and you said he was born in San Francisco.

EC: San Francisco, right.

[0:02:13.4] DCG: How did he happen to come to Houston?

EC: The Chinese government established a vice consulate in Galveston in 1932, and actually they went there first, and then they moved to Houston in 1933 from Galveston, my father did. Now he wasn’t married at the time, and that’s the reason why he came to Houston because of the establishment of the vice consulate of the Republic of China.

DCG: Was he the first Houston… was he the first Chinese to come in to Houston?

EC: No, not at all, there were a lot more. I didn’t really realize that, how many there were, until I got into this study but there were Chinese back as far as 1880. In fact, this is the centennial of the Chinese in Houston.

DCG: Tell me something about your grandparents, where they came from, why?

EC: My paternal grandfather was in San Francisco and Los Angeles. He came as a merchant, he had a shop in San Francisco and then they moved to Los Angeles. My grandmother came, I can’t remember exactly when, I feel I should know that, but anyways, she was in the United States about thirty years, so I guess around 1910 when she came with my grandfather, as the wife of a merchant.

DCG: Came from China?

EC: 1908, yes. She came from China, it must have been about 1908 because my father was born in 1909.

DCG: Did you know your grandparents?
EC: I knew my grandfather, I remember him quite well, but I don’t really remember my grandmother because she passed away in 1940, and I was only two years old at the time. Although I do remember distinctly the funeral that was held when she passed away because everyone was so sad and they were wearing black armbands, and I remember that as a part of my childhood, but I really remember it, it’s a part of my… probably one of my earliest recollections, since I was only two years old. She was actually the first Chinese woman to pass away in the city of Houston.

[0:04:26.8] DCG: Do you have any favorite stories about why your grandparents came from China to this country?

EC: Oh, not really. That particular grandfather went back to China and was married. That was his second marriage, and then he came back to the United States so he was in the United States at a much earlier time actually, in the 1800s, 1870 or 80 something like that, and then he went back to China and married my grandmother, who was his second wife. Now I didn’t say anything about my grandparents on the other side either, of course. My grandfather came to the United States in the 20s, I believe. His name was Lin Don Ing. My grandmother came several years later, about three or four years later, after he returned to the United States and her name was Jen Xi Ing. And the names on my father’s parents were Yun Yi Chen and Lok Shi Chen. Lok was actually her last name I guess. Or Yi, actually, was her last name.

DCG: How did your mother get to San Antonio?

EC: My mother came to San Antonio as the daughter of a merchant. At the time of course there were strict exclusion, immigration laws, and you had to fall into a certain category before you could even come to the United States, so she came as the daughter of a merchant in about 1926, somewhere right around there.

DCG: Going back to your paternal grandparents. They came from China, went to San Francisco, how many children did they have?

EC: They had six sons and one daughter.

DCG: And the six sons were born in the United States?

EC: All were born in the United States, yes. My grandfather had two other sons, actually had three other sons but one of them died in infancy, and I believe on other daughter, by his first marriage.

DCG: And they remained in China?

EC: They were in China, that’s right. And this family was established in the United States.

[0:07:07.5] DCG: Are you in contact at all with the branch of the family that’s still in China?

EC: I’m not, no. Not personally, at all.

DCG: Eventually did all six sons and one daughter come to Houston?
EC: Actually, all of the sons did except for one who was, who passed away. He was killed in an automobile accident in California. So eventually the whole family came to Houston, including part of his first family who came to the United States later on. The two sons came to the United States, and then also another grandson came to Houston. In fact he came to Houston and served in the army during the Second World War.

DCG: So that the Chen family really has become, in essence a Houston family.

EC: Right, except for later on of course they went back, some of them went back to California but in general most of them are still here in… well I shouldn’t say most of them. A number of them are still here in Houston, yes.

DCG: Ok, if you would I would like you to give me the names of your father’s siblings who are here.

EC: My father’s brothers I’ll just give them all and the ones that are here, I’ll indicate. My father was the eldest his name was Edward Kin Tung Chen. The second one was Charles S. Chen, and he’s here in Houston. The third one was John, and he was the one who was killed in an automobile accident. These are brothers, first of all. The next one was George. He was in Hawaii, graduated from Rice, he was a chemical engineer, and he passed away last year. And then the youngest one was David, he’s in Los Angeles now he’s an accountant and he was, I believe the second one to graduate from high school here in Houston. And then the one sister is Daisy Chen Gee, she’s here in Houston.

[0:09:11.7] DCG: How many Chinese would you say there are in Houston today, approximately.

EC: Depends upon whether you want to include the ethnic Chinese who are Vietnamese, but in general I would say there are 15,000 Chinese who are essentially not ethnic, not including the ethnic Chinese. And then if you want to include the Vietnamese it’ll probably go up to maybe even double that because there are probably as many as 15,000 of them in Houston.

DCG: I’m not sure I understand what you mean by ethnic Chinese.

EC: They are Chinese who essentially lived in Vietnam.

DCG: I see, but they are Chinese.

EC: They are Chinese, that’s right. Now their culture may have changed a little bit and certainly they changed the spelling of the name, but essentially they are of Chinese ancestry. In fact of course all of that originally belonged to China. It was only taken over by the European countries during the, oh the late 1800s and early 1900s.

DCG: Do you include in that the Chinese who live in other parts of southeast Asia? I mean I understand at one time there were a great many Chinese in Cambodia, Thailand.

EC: There still probably are. There are a lot of them, and those are the ones that I would include in that other 15,000 essentially the ones that…It’s hard to break it down. I’m really talking about that other group being just the recent immigrants that have come over primarily from Vietnam.
Because Philippines, if you consider Philippines Chinese then you just consider them as Chinese and probably they would fall in the other 15,000.

DCG: And Hawaiian Chinese?

EC: And Hawaiian Chinese certainly. Well Hawaiian Chinese of course, are American citizens. So…

DCG: Yea. Well yea but in essence were talking about American citizens when we’re talking about people like you and so forth.

EC: Sure right, right, right.

[0:10:53.7] DCG: Tell me about yourself after you graduated from college and you got a job. Tell me whom you married.

EC: I married Eugenny Han, who was born in Han Chao and then was forced from the mainland and went to Taiwan, and then came to the United States from Taiwan to go to school, so we met and were married here in Houston.

DCG: You met where?

EC: In Houston. I was going to the University of Houston and she was also going to the University of Houston. This was before I went in the army. A year before I went in the army.

DCG: When did you marry?

EC: 1960

DCG: 1960

EC: 20th anniversary

DCG: And tell me, congratulations, tell me about your children.

EC: I have two children. Cara is attending Rice, she’s going to be an electrical engineer. She just finished her first year. And the other one is Edward San Don and Cara’s middle name or Chinese name are Su Mei. But Edward is just finishing elementary school and getting ready to go to junior high school. He finished Mark Twain Elementary School and he’s going to Perjing (?) Junior High School.

DCG: What, tell me, I’m assuming they were born in Houston.

EC: They were, well not really. My daughter was born in Huntsville, Alabama because I was stationed there during the time I was in the army.

DCG: And what date was that?

EC: That was May 1st, 1962. And my son March 11th 1968.
DCG: And he was born here in Houston?

EC: He was born here in Houston, that’s right.

[0:12:38.2] DCG: When you were growing, and you said you went to Wharton Elementary…

EC: Right

DCG: …and San Jacinto High…

EC: Right

DCG: …were there many Chinese?

EC: I was the only Chinese boy. My sister was going to Wharton at the time, but there were just no other Chinese people. In fact it was entirely… we were probably the only non-Caucasians, that I can remember because there were not very many Mexican-Americans, and of course at that time, the schools were segregated so the blacks were going to a different school from the Caucasians and Mexican-Americans and Chinese. But the Chinese were not included in the black schools, as they were in many of the Southern states. Not in Houston, no.

DCG: There were other, there were Chinese in Houston, they didn’t happen to be at…

EC: There were no Chinese in that particular school and at that particular time when I was going to school which was in 1943 there were probably only about 200 total Chinese of all ages, so of children at that time there were probably less, oh less than 50 I would say. But it’s true, it just so happened that the school that I went to did not have any Chinese in it.

DCG: Was there any consideration on the part of the Chinese community to establish separate schools for their children?

EC: Not for the English speaking schools. They did try to start a Chinese language school, in fact they did have a Chinese language school for a certain period of time. It was at the Quo Min Tang, which is the nationalist party of the Chinese republic. They had an office on Louisiana and they actually did hold classes, I remember going to them when I was six or seven years old. But it only lasted for two or three years or so.

DCG: Did you live any kind of prejudice, any kind of discrimination against you because you were Chinese in school?

EC: I think that there was not any overt prejudice, but obviously there’s a difference because there’s a visual difference. And I believe also that in the minds of certain people that they did not want Chinese to be classified as a typical member of a particular school. I remember one time that they had a nationwide radio show and they originally chose me to be on the show, but then they later cancelled me out because, I feel that it was a matter of racial prejudice. And I think that that was… it was definitely a situation in my mind at least because up to the very last minute when we were supposed to go on the radio I was under the impression that I was to go on and at the last minute they told me that, “No, we’ve got this other person.”
DCG: What about from the other children? Was there any prejudice?

EC: There was a certain amount of prejudice. Just from the fact that we were different. And they called us names, and they said my sister looked like an Eskimo because that was the only other alien looking person other than Indians that they had seen in the books in the schools. And so therefore, since that’s all that they were exposed to they essentially placed this particular stigma or this association with it. It was there, it was very difficult being the only nonwhite, essentially, in the school.

DCG: What kind of feelings did it give you, especially from the children, from the other children?

EC: Well it made you feel as if you’re not a part of the whole thing, and you don’t know why. And of course what you would try to do then is overcompensate and be especially nice to the people, or try to be, but then when it got no response then you strike out and essentially start rebelling against a particular system. But then, to a certain point then you have to say well, what can you do, there’s really nothing that you can do.

DCG: This was in World War II also…

EC: That’s right.

DCG: and most people are not, a lot of us are not very knowledgeable about the variations in the Asian peoples and I’m sure a lot of people assumed you were Japanese.

EC: No, that wasn’t a problem

DCG: You didn’t have a problem with that?

EC: That wasn’t a problem because in fact, of course the Chinese in Houston wore badges to indicate that they were not Japanese, and so that was one of the things that we had to, that we did have. And of course eventually the Japanese were all interned (?) so there were no more Japanese around to worry about, essentially. And they knew that everyone who was around (?) essentially was not Japanese. In fact there was a certain amount of sympathy for the fight against the Japanese because of course the Chinese were the allies. I remember that the policemen who used to cross me going to school, he would always call me Chiang Kai Shek, [DCG laughs] because of the association that they had with the fight against the Japanese.

DCG: When you got to college, had some of that dissipated? Some of that prejudice and bigotry?

EC: I really didn’t see a whole lot of it in college. I really didn’t see any of it in fact that I can really remember, but in college I was one of… at Rice there were… first year I was there there were two, I think three other Chinese. And then the last year that I was there, there was one other Chinese besides myself. And this was out of a population of 2,500 or 3,000 total, so we were still a small minority. And also in the second world war there were essentially, from 1942 till the time that I went to Rice there were probably fewer than 10 Chinese students who went to Rice entirely.
DCG: How would you evaluate the education you got in the public school systems of Houston?

EC: I think essentially that it was good. I cannot complain about the education that I got at all. As good quality as any. I especially appreciated the education I got at Rice after I went to the army because I was able for the first time then to compare myself and the education that I got with people who had gotten educations in other institutions and I found that essentially what I had learned there was better than the majority of the people that I was dealing with, and these people of course came from all universities, all over the whole United States and even some people from foreign countries.

DCG: I assume your children went to public schools in Houston for elementary and secondary.

EC: My children both went to the public schools, and they are going now of course.

[0:19:57.0] DCG: How do you compare the education they’re getting with what you received?

EC: I think it’s deteriorating to a certain extent.

DCG: In what way?

EC: I think that they’re not requiring as many things of the students. Even at Rice now, for instance they don’t require, they don’t require English, a course in English which I think is terrible. My daughter doesn’t have to take a course in English composition, because she passed the exam, but that doesn’t mean that she knows how to write.

DCG: Yea in fact we hear more and more about children who get to college and have to take remedial reading and remedial writing courses.

EC: Yea, well she can read of course, obviously, and she can understand the reading part. But as far as writing is concerned I think it’s a real art that has to be developed and there’s no effort being made to force these people to take the particular courses, which I think is, as I say, very bad.

DCG: What changes would you like to see in, let’s start with the elementary school. What changes would you like to see?

EC: Well elementary school I think that there’s, right now for instance getting back to the basics, they’re getting back to the fundamental things and they’re going to make sure that everyone has those. I think that they should also be sure that they don’t forget the gifted students. My two children were very good in school, but I think that they tend not to emphasize the gifted students as much as they should. I think that from a personal standpoint that’s something that they should be doing, but from a general standpoint I think that they should be giving the education to make sure that the people at least have the basics, and then the ones who need special treatments, even on the high end or the low end, should be given special courses. Of course that all costs money, it’s difficult to be able to implement those things, but somehow we should be able to do that. And also the parents ought to take a certain amount of responsibility to make sure that their students do, or their children, get the particular education that they have to.
DCG: Most of the Chinese that I’ve talked to either they or their children have been kind of super achievers academically. And you mentioned the parents. Is that why, because of the parents involvement in stressing the importance of education?

[0:22:18.8] EC: I think it is because the education is so important to the parents because it’s a way to achieve upward mobility. And the Chinese have always tried to, essentially, make the next generation better than the last generation. And this is the goal of each one of the families. I don’t know what happens when you finally get up to the top, I guess you have to finally plateau but as long as there’s still something to achieve then that’s then the objective of most of the families. It’s part of the Chinese tradition, if you will, part of the Chinese culture to go ahead and to try to achieve to the maximum ability. And I’m afraid that some of the younger people are losing that particular aspect, even within my own children.

DCG: Is it also related to the way Chinese children are reared and the emphasis upon, oh I’m thinking of family ties and also discipline.

EC: I think it’s that and it’s also that it’s given by example. The children see the parents, these children are associated with books and education, and they essentially want to achieve in those particular areas. And if they don’t do well, or even if they do what’s considered good for other people, then the parents will tend to criticize. In other words, if they make all B’s that’s still critical. And if they go ahead and try to achieve further they realize that they will essentially get praised for doing that, but I think it’s more, just really something that’s inbred in the particular culture. It’s part of the culture that has survived, there are a lot of things that haven’t survived but at least up to this generation it’s part of the culture that has survived.

DCG: Well some particular... normally when you’re dealing with Chinese children, you don’t have behavior problems to the same extent as when you’re dealing with Western children. In television I’ve noticed it. When I’ve done television shows with children, sometimes it’ll drive you straight up the wall, and I mentioned to a family yesterday who directed a show for me with Chinese children and he was saying what a difference there was, that they are behaved, they’re orderly, well-mannerly.

EC: I think it’s a matter of, their big thing that they want to do is to please their parents. And they know that their parents will not be pleased if they’re disorderly or don’t do what they’re supposed to be doing.

DCG: And this is inbred in ‘em. This desire to please the parents.

EC: I think it’s inbred, that’s right. Now somewhere along the line it gets lost because [EC laughs] like I say my children have lost some of that.

[0:25:08.4] DCG: What is your religious preference?

EC: I belong to the Baptist Church.

DCG: Is that the same as your parents?
EC: My father was originally a Methodist but he also went to Baptist Church. Essentially he was a Protestant. My mother really didn’t have much religion until she got married and then she essentially went into the Baptist Church and she attended the Baptist Church.

DCG: Was your father reared as a protestant since his father was from China?

EC: I’m not really sure how that happened. Of course in Chinatown I suppose there were churches that a lot of people attended and he did go to Church there. The Methodist church I remember, or I’ve heard, I don’t remember.

DCG: Do your children follow your religious beliefs?

EC: My son does, but my daughter doesn’t go to church at all. She doesn’t have any real firm religious beliefs.

DCG: Did that bother you at all when she went that way (?)?

EC: Not really. I think that she has to make up her own mind as to what she wants to do and I think that religion is, unless it is really taught strictly to the young people, it’s something that a person has to confront eventually as they get older actually. And it’s something that a person has to eventually come to grips with is the thing that’s beyond what this Earth is, with respect to whatever you want to call it, a God, a deity, or the order of a society or the order of the world, or whatever it is. That person has to come to grips with those eventually themselves and religion is one way to come to grips with that particular facet of living, in fact. And so I think, I wasn’t bothered when she did, I’m not that strongly religious myself.

[0:27:10.3] DCG: Are you actively involved in church activities?

EC: No I’m not.

DCG: How about any other members of your family? Your wife or your son?

EC: My son goes to church. He hasn’t become baptized or anything like that, and I think that it’s more to get with the people, the Chinese people essentially, that he does it. But that is the way it was primarily when we were young. The church was a focal point for all of the activities of the young people, and to a certain extent that’s the reason why we were, my sister and I essentially, were going originally, to accept some of the beliefs, and then of course as you get older those beliefs are molded by whatever you come in contact with.

DCG: There’s been a tendency, as you know, lately for some young people to kind of return to their cultural heritage. Do you see any returning to any of the Eastern religions on the part of the young Chinese?

EC: Not really. There is a Buddhist temple here in Houston, but I think it’s more supported by the people who were Buddhist when they came here, rather than the younger people going over to the Eastern religions.

[0:28:31.3] DCG: Let’s talk about politics a little bit. Do you vote in every election?
EC: Yes I do.

DCG: Do you ever go to political party meetings?

EC: I've been to some.

DCG: What political party do you belong to?

EC: Well of course, in the state of Texas if you don't belong to the Democrats you don't really have a right to vote so, I vote in the Democratic primaries and attended Democratic precinct meetings.

DCG: That's not really true, the governor of ____ is a Republican.

EC: Now. This is the first Republican governor, of course that we have.

DCG: Philosophically, do you feel you're more Democratic?

EC: I'm probably more philosophically Republican and if they had a strong enough party so that my vote wouldn't be lost, then I would probably work with the Republican party.

DCG: You plan to vote in the presidential election this year, assuming the candidates are Anderson, Carter, and Reagan who would you vote for?

EC: I would probably vote for Reagan, I won’t vote for Carter and won't vote for Anderson, it’s more like a protest though. I would rather have seen someone else other than Reagan but it looks like Reagan is going to be the candidate for the Republican party.

DCG: Whom would you rather have seen?

EC: Bush or Connelly.

[0:29:51.4] DCG: To my knowledge there have not been any Chinese running for public office in this area. Do you have an idea why that is?

EC: I think that there is certainly the concept that they really don't have a chance to win. Although there has been one state representative, Mr. T J Lee of San Antonio who has been elected. I think that the big concern is that they really don’t have a chance to win, and so therefore they don’t really even try. We are still a small minority.

DCG: But do elections have to be based on the standpoint of if I’m Chinese I’ll vote for Chinese, if I’m German I’ll vote for German, if I’m Spanish I’ll vote for Spanish,

EC: All you have to do is look and see how they want to balance the particular ticket. If you have a Californian you’d better get somebody from either Texas or New York to balance your ticket for the presidential election. And if you have a Catholic, you’d better have somebody who’s not a Catholic on the other particular position for your ticket. So I think that the answer is that people still have these basic loyalties essentially is what they are.
[Tape is interrupted]

[0:31:20.7] DCG:… Edward Chen. Do you speak any other language besides English?

EC: I don’t speak any other languages. I read French, German, Spanish and do […] for my technical work. I don’t really speak Chinese anymore.

DCG: Anymore? You once did?

EC: Well my grandmother, when she was living I had to try to communicate with her, and use Chinese but she passed away this year actually. And so I really don’t have anyone that I have to speak Chinese to and so I really don’t do much of it at all.

DCG: You don’t feel that there’s a disadvantage in not being able to speak it?

EC: Oh yes. Especially now the fact that there are so many other Chinese who still use Chinese as their native language. But of course that language that I should have would be Mandarin rather than the Cantonese, or really the village dialect which we used before.

DCG: What languages did your parents speak?

EC: My mother of course spoke Chinese and English. My father spoke French, Chinese, and in fact he spoke three or four different dialects of Chinese, and he spoke Spanish. He was studying German and Portuguese because he was originally going to go into the diplomatic field as a full time occupation and so therefore he wanted to be able to speak these languages that are, in fact to be able to think in these languages. So that’s why he was studying them.

DCG: What do you do in your leisure time?

EC: Oh I bowl. My leisure time is actually tied up a lot with my work. Recently I’ve been working on this project with the history of the Chinese in Houston, that’s taken up some of my time. But I normally do things that involve something that I think will come to a final fruition, in other words not just go off and essentially sit down and waste your time it seems like to me. That may be part of the Chinese tradition too. In other words you don’t sit around and do nothing, like publishing/fishing (?) or hunting although a number of my uncles do like to do those things.

DCG: Do you do any socializing with your neighbors?

EC: Yes.

DCG: What kinds of activities are you involved in?

EC: Well, in fact we’re in business with some of them and we go out to baseball games sometimes. Mostly taking the children. We go to their house and have dinner. Just normal type of social activities.

DCG: How about your working associates?
EC: Yes we do, very definitely. It’s the same sort of things. More social activities that have to do with work. For instance, parties and things that have to do with the students. Those types of things, rather than just going on a social get together to do things together.

[0:34:17.9] DCG: Is a great deal of your social life built around activities with your relatives?

EC: We get together an awful lot, my relatives do, that’s right.

DCG: Do you belong to any Caucasian clubs, community clubs that are primarily Caucasian?

EC: Of course. Not community, but professional associations. I belong to the American Chemical Society, I belong to the American Section of the Solar Energy society, I belong to the American Institute of Chemists, and other than that I really don’t belong to any of the American social activities. I know a lot of Chinese do belong to the Masons for instance, but I never did participate. Some of them belonged to the Houston Junior Chamber of Commerce when they were younger, of course things like that.

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

EC: Yes. I belong to the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, I belong to the Chinese Professional Club which was formed in the Chinese University Club. Of course I belong to the Chinese Baptist Church. I guess that’s about… Oh I belong to the Texas Taiwan Cultural Association, which is one that’s just recently started.

DCG: Do you have any idea who started the clubs or organizations that you belong to?

EC: Well the Chinese American Citizens Alliance in Houston, my father was the first president and the people who were instrumental in forming the organization were my uncle Sam Ing and my uncle Albert Gee and my father. Those were the first three people who actually decided that there should be an organization like that here in Houston and tried to work actively to get one going. And the Chinese University Club was essentially (which is the Chinese Professional Club now) people at the university Dr. and Mrs. Joyce Fann, my uncle Charlie Chen, my father, George Bolen, those were people who were active in getting the Chinese University Club started. I think probably maybe Rob Roy and her brother Eddie Wong.

DCG: What is your attitude about assimilation of the Chinese within the Caucasian culture?

EC: I think culturally the Chinese who are here for two or three generations for instance are becoming very much assimilated, but of course as far as the racial and visual identity is concerned, they are not because in general the Chinese have not intermarried, and so they have maintained their visual identity and that’s going to create some problems, especially with the newer Chinese. For instance people come up to me and whenever I start to speak they say, “Gee how long have you been here? Your English is perfect.” So, that type of a thing of course. You cannot get away from the visual identity. There’s just no way that you can do it. Unless eventually the families intermarry and some of them are trying to do that now.

DCG: Well what is your feeling about this assimilation? Would you rather see more maintenance of the ethnicity of the Chinese?
EC: I think that things that are Chinese that will always be there and I think that those things should be maintained, and they will be because that’s the way you live your daily life. They’re not necessarily overt type of cultural activities, although for instance I’ve got Chinese paintings and Chinese girls (?) in my house, I don’t really maintain the overt culture, but there are certain things that are gonna be there regardless of what happens. And I think that those things, like for instance the respect for the family, the desire for education, the constantly wanting to do something that will achieve and accomplish something rather than, as I said before just essentially wasting your time [EC laughs].

[0:38:43.9] DCG: What about intermarriage?

EC: I really don’t have any strong feelings about that. My father was very violently opposed to it. I personally think that as long you’re going to become a part of the American society, it’s going to happen. There’s not going to be anything that you can do about it. In the old days it was a stigma to essentially, marry outside of your race, but I think that with the generations moving on and with there being so much contact between the various groups it’s just gonna be something that happens. And essentially the United States, America is going to really be a melting pot.

DCG: Would it not bother you if your children…?

EC: I said it now and I think I mean it. I don’t really think that I would be that upset if my children married outside the Chinese race.

DCG: Do you celebrate, does your family celebrate any Chinese holidays?

EC: We celebrate Chinese New Year’s. That’s about all.

DCG: How active are you in your Chinese, in your family association?

EC: I was once president of the Chen family association. My father was also once president of the Chen family Association here in Houston and also in Washington D.C. My father was.

[0:40:08.4] DCG: What Chinese customs do some of your Chinese friends observe that you do not, but your family has probably…

EC: Well probably the most distinct one is the Red Egg Ceremony, although when my mother was living she wanted to have that type of a thing but we never did. And our two children, after a month you’re supposed to scrape off all the children’s hair and have a celebration that they’re, essentially they’re going to make it, is what it amounts to, that they’re going to be a part of the family. After a month, there’s not much doubt that they’re going to still be living whereas prior to that there might be some possibility that something might happen to them, so you know.

DCG: Your family doesn’t…

EC: We don’t do that at all.

DCG: Have you ever traveled to China?

EC: No I have not.
DCG: How about Taiwan?

EC: Neither one.

DCG: Neither one. Would you ever like to?

EC: I think that I probably would want to go back. Actually the both of them. I’d like to see Taiwan, I’d like to see the place that my family came from, essentially. I would like to be able to travel the same rounds that my ancestors did. I don’t know that we’ll be able to do it any time soon, but things have become, of course, much better and a lot of Chinese in fact are going back now.

[0:41:31.8] Are there any divisions, political divisions within the Chinese community because of the two Chinas?

EC: Not just because of the two Chinas, because you have to even really say because of the three Chinas, because there is of course the nationalist government and then there’s the communist government and then there are people who want to have Taiwan be an independent nation, which neither the communists nor the nationalists would like to see. With respect to those types of divisions they are there and with respect to the community there are a lot of divisions. There’s of course there are people who have recently come over from Taiwan, who are making their mark on the American community, there are the Chinese who have been here for a long time, the older generation, it’s the Chinese who have been here for a long time, there’s those generation like I am and there’s the Chinese that are the younger generation and so there are definite divisions with respect to groups and what it points out is that the Chinese are no different from anybody else. In fact, you cannot lump them all together, there are certain threads that go through all of the society but in fact each individual must be considered as an individual.

DCG: What kind of toys did you play with as a child? Were they different from what the other kids played with?

EC: They were typical American toys, I mean of course having grown up during the Second World War I remember one time very distinctly that I wanted my father to buy me a cat pistol and it was a long time before we got a cat pistol. I remember reading comic books. In fact one of my big treats was to go downtown to Guy’s newsstand to buy comic books on Sunday after eating dinner at [...] cafeteria. And then we’d come home and listen to Blondie and Bagwood on the radio, so those were the type of things that I did as a child, and they’re pretty much I think the same sort of things that everyone else did. I don’t think that they’re any different at all.

[0:43:34.1] DCG: Do you see your childhood as much different from your children’s childhood?

EC: To a certain extent, because my children have much more leisure time. They’re not having to do things all the time. For instance when I was young, from about the time I was twelve years old from the time I was twenty years old, or actually until the time I went to the army, twenty-one, twenty-two, I was working in a grocery store. A lot of the Chinese children did work in the grocery store, I worked for my aunt Daisy in the grocery store.
DCG: Do you think that the size of the Chinese family is getting smaller?

EC: Oh certainly. For instance, in my family I’ve only got two children. My sister’s family only has two children. Of course I mentioned my father’s siblings, and my mother’s siblings they had, let’s see: Richard is the oldest boy, the second is Jane, the third is Tom, the fourth is Butch, the fifth is Sam, and the sixth is Sally. So in total there were seven in that particular family. And of those now there are, let’s see, Dick, Tom, oh not Tom, Sam, Butch, and Jane. There are four of them and of course our family, five, that are essentially living here in Houston. One of them is living in Portland, Oregon, that’s the youngest daughter Sally, and one of them is living in San Antonio, that’s Tom.

DCG: Why do you think this decrease in the size of families?

EC: I think it’s a realization that the biggest problem in the world right now is going to be population. We will not have enough resources to support all the people if, essentially, the population was increasing at the rate that it was, so essentially we’re conforming to the fact that we need zero population. Of course the other thing is just the financial burden of having that many children, sending them to school and it’s going to be a real problem to be able to do that, whereas before they were not probably looking at getting that many people through college for instance.

DCG: Do you think that the new Chinese immigrants who are arriving now can expect to face more and more difficult problems than, say, your grandparents faced?

EC: They’ll be different problems. They are going to have a lot of the same problems, but I think in general they’ll be different because they’re going into different areas. For instance the Vietnamese with respect to the shrimping and they are essentially encroaching upon an area that has been established and they’re trying to establish themselves in that particular area. In the past the Chinese had essentially gone into areas where there was no competition, or as soon as there became any sort of a competition they would meekly withdraw and go into something else. For instance when the Irish whaler workers didn’t want to work with the Chinese they […] went into laundries. And then when the laundries got to the point where they no longer needed or wanted the Chinese in there they moved into the groceries and things like that, the restaurants. So, the new ones, if they continue to try to do the same things that they were doing, then they’re going to have different problems, and they’re going to be very serious ones. If they go into some other things, then they will not. The other thing is of course, a lot of the immigrants are not the cooly type people, they are educated, and those people will have a lot of different problems because they’ll have to fit into an educated society with a language barrier. In general I think they have done that. For instance, the ones that came over in the 1950s, they have in fact fit in, but they are a different type of problems from the ones that my grandparents had.

DCG: Do you have any suggestions on things we have not covered, in this oral history study that you think should be?
EC: Oh, I really don’t think so. Of course I’m writing this, I will be writing up the history and so there will be a lot of things that I haven’t said here that will be put into writing eventually but, in general the things that have been covered I think are pretty well comprehensive.

[0:49:03.5] DCG: Thank you.