Interviewee: Jackson Chang
Interviewer: Cathleen Chang
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CC: Oral history of interview of Jackson Chang at his home in Houston, Texas on March 5th, 2011. Interview conducted by Cathleen Chang for the Houston Asian American Archive at Rice University’s Woodson Research Center. So Mr. Chang um why don’t you tell me a little about your life back in Taiwan before you moved to the United States? You can talk about anything, such as your family life and what your parents did in Taiwan.

JC: Well, should I start right now? [CC: Mm-hmm.] I came here when I was fourteen years old, but before that I was uh in junior high over there in Taiwan. And life is different from what we have in the States. Uh students, you have to go to school, I remember, it's about 6:30 or 7 o’clock in the morning. And by the time I finished school and after school curriculum, it would be about 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening. And five and a half – well, five days plus Saturday, and basically just being a student and nothing else. And my parents, uh my father, he was a businessman, very busy trying to make a living to support the family. And my mom, she is uh—I have two more brothers, she pretty much took care of us and wanted us to be better person after we finished our education. And the question about why we decided to come over here, oh that wasn’t the question?

CC: Oh no, go ahead.

JC: Well, should I start right now? [CC: Mm-hmm.] I came here when I was fourteen years old, but before that I was uh in junior high over there in Taiwan. And life is different from what we have in the States. Uh students, you have to go to school, I remember, it's about 6:30 or 7 o’clock in the morning. And by the time I finished school and after school curriculum, it would be about 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening. And five and a half – well, five days plus Saturday, and basically just being a student and nothing else. And my parents, uh my father, he was a businessman, very busy trying to make a living to support the family. And my mom, she is uh—I have two more brothers, she pretty much took care of us and wanted us to be better person after we finished our education. And the question about why we decided to come over here, oh that wasn’t the question?

CC: Oh no, go ahead.

JC: Oh, ’cause you asked me...uh it all started, I remember in the early 70s. Well, my parents were worried about the situation of Communist China and Taiwan. Because in 1971, uh China took over the seat in the U.N., and replaced Taiwan as one of the permanent members in the U.N. And my father was worried about possible takeover of China, so he kind of talked over with my mom and feel that probably be better if we can send my younger brother and I to the State. And, first of all, we would get better education over here. And second of all, at least in case if the Communist took over, then there would be somebody out here in the State. And well, it's been more than what—30, 40 years, almost 40 years now, and Taiwan is still there. But the fact was I remember in ’75 in Vietnam, North Vietnam took over South Vietnam, and that did end the uh—South Vietnam. So I'm glad Taiwan wasn't a part of that; Communist China did not take over Taiwan. We were so glad. But anyway,
that is the reason we came to the State. It wasn't by my own willing, which I was too young to know anything
about it. My parents sent us here.

CC: Okay, so why was San Francisco chosen on the west coast?

JC: First of all, San Francisco is very, not very close to Taiwan. But um most of us would come to San
Francisco—L.A. or San Francisco. At that time my parents have uh um long distance relative. They came to the
State, probably a few months before us. And they bought a house in the San Francisco Bay area. And that is the
reason why we moved to the San Francisco area.

CC: Okay um do you remember, I guess, in San Francisco, where you entered first like the immigration process?

JC: Well actually, I entered in, well let me think; Okay, well yeah, arrived to the United States not from the San
Francisco entry point but was from Hawaii. So uh it was, let's see, in—it’s in Hawaii, so we entered the States
through the immigration of Hawaii. So by the time I came to San Francisco it was just uh, it wasn't international
anymore. It was just transfer from L.A.—I mean Hawaii to the United States. So, does that answer your
question?

CC: Yes so, I guess how’s the process of emigrating from Taiwan to the United States, because I understand
Taiwan was under martial law during that time. Was the process of leaving difficult for your family?

JC: Mmm, I don't think so. Again, I was so young back then, my recollection, or at least from my mind, is you
can leave Taiwan, but it was under martial law, but my, my mom came over here and left, I think left Taiwan. I
think the visa was some like business visa, and I, my younger brother and I, our visa was uh—we were the same
visa of my mom, and when we enter United States, I think we had a E-2 visa. And E-2 visa had something to do
with setting up uh office in the United States, a branch office or something like that. An office. That’s how we
got into the United States. So we talking about two issues. One is how we left Taiwan and the other how we
entered United States. So this is two issues. Martial law, I don't think it has anything to do with my, with my
parents; my mom took us here. But another issue is I was; see there was uh – because of mandatory military
service for men, so I think the age was fifteen. Anytime you were over fifteen, you have to stay there until you
finish your military obligations, so that’s why I have another older brother who was uh sixteen, and he had to
finish his military service before he came out.

CC: When was your brother able to come to the United States?

JC: After he finished education and had two years of military service, so he came over here after that.

CC: Okay, so I guess you could describe your life in America when you first arrived. Um I understand that you
came with your brother. Were your parents able to come too, or did your dad have to stay in Taiwan to work?

JC: We are, my parents or actually my mom, let me, let me think. Okay, I remember I was with my, my mom
and my younger brother and my auntie, which is my father's sister, the four of us came over here. And uh yeah
for the first year or so, six months to a year, um I was, what's the expression: young and stupid and naive and
don't know anything. And my English, my English was very very poor. I mean I had just like probably two
hours or three hours of English a week for like two years, and that is almost, you only know the basic ABCs,
and that's it. So school was uh the first year was very, very tough for me. And I remember even reading the
grammar school level uh newspaper; the newspaper for the kids in the ES—in the ESL program was very, very
difficult. And I had to use the dictionary to almost find every word because I didn't understand the meaning. I
still have the dictionary over there. That’s the dictionary I used uh when I came over here. Look at this
dictionary. I had to pull every word and look at every word and find out what’s the meaning of it, so. It was
very tough. Go ahead.

CC: So I guess when you came to high school it was difficult for you, but then afterwards you were able to go
to USC. How was your, was your college experience different from your high school? And why did you choose
USC?
JC: High school, in the high school—in the United States, the uh school led you by the hand. So you practically you don’t have to do any study. And the one who is study a little bit—like I had to do a little study and you get to go to college. And uh—but college experience was totally different. I remember in the first few days in college, the professor would just say, ‘Okay here's the book, you need to read it out, we have a test next month.’ And that's it. And even though I had a couple years of English by then, but my reading skills wasn’t that fast. So I had a hard time in college trying to finish a book within a week or two. That was very, very difficult for me. And as far as—as far as why I chose University of Southern Cal, um I had a classmate of mine who came from Taiwan too. He was one-year senior; and he applied for USC. And uh yep, there was a counselor, or I didn't know anything about it, and I didn't fully utilize the counselor. Or maybe the counselor thinks I’m just a new immigrant here probably [believe] schooling is not that important. So the truth—I don’t think I got anything that much from the counselor. He didn't tell me, I mean he didn’t sit down with me, and tell me what school to go to. And basically I had to do everything myself. And uh my father is an architect, so my choice was either architecture or engineering. And yes, I only applied two schools in my senior year. One is engineering, civil engineering with uh UC Berkeley, and the other is the Uni—architecture with uh University of Southern Cal, and I guess because my, my uh the grade wasn’t good enough, because I just came over here, that was three years earlier when I came over here, so some of my grade that involve English, uh the grade like the class like English or, or history, I did not do that good of a job, because that require a lot of reading. But uh some classes involved like numbers, uh statistics, mainly chemistry, history (?) math, I got all A’s on those. So the—I didn't get into Berkeley because my grades weren't good enough. I was redirected to another UC system, which I didn't know anything about it. It was UC Irvine. So I didn't go to UC Irvine. Instead, but I did—at the same time, I got accepted to uh University of Southern Cal so in architecture, my father's profession. I guess I just have it in my blood to be an architect, and so I took architecture instead.

CC: Okay. I see that. So when you first, I guess, came to the west coast were there many other Taiwanese nationals or Taiwanese Americans in your high school or college experience?

JC: In high school there are some, but area where we stayed—we did not have that many um Taiwanese or Chinese slash Taiwanese. By the way, back then, most of the Chinese came from Taiwan or Hong Kong. Barely hear about anybody come from China. And in my gr—in my um year, we had like 300 students. And I think all of 300, maybe less than four or five Asians. And what, no maybe, less than five to six Asians. And then three, four, two, three are from Taiwan.

CC: Okay, I guess were you able to visit Taiwan during this time, ever since you moved here since age 14?

JC: No, um the first time I went back there was after I finished graduate school and for two reasons. One, earlier in the interview I told you that anytime after you turn 14, or 15, actually, uh the government don’t want you – don’t want you want you to come out until you finish serving the – in the military. So in my mind, I know that if I go over there uh before a certain age, then I have to be detained and serve in the military. And the other is I know that I’m the kind of person, I set up to finish all my education first before I’m taking any break. So ever since I came over here, I did not take a semester even the summertime, I either worked or take summer school. So that's why I didn't spend—I mean I did – it wasn’t going back to Taiwan wasn’t part of my plan. Uh just want to finish my education, my education first, not like nowadays—

CC: Uh so I believe in the last question, you were answering the reasons why you did not visit Taiwan prior to coming to Houston. And, you said that it was because of the military service, and you wanted to finish all of your studies before taking a break. And do you have anything else to say about this?

JC: Well, yeah. Um I’m a very determined person. When I am doing something, I’ll finish it before I go on the next task. So when I was uh—when I came over here, my understanding is I want to finish my education first. All of it, uh high school, college, graduate school, before I go back. Unlike nowadays uh kids are under so-called much stress that they want to take a day—I mean a year off before they enter the graduate school. So I guess compared with kids nowadays, I’m more determined and want to reach my goal.

CC: Uh do you remember what year it was when were you able to visit Taiwan?

CC: Late summer 1984? [JC: Mm-hmm.] Okay, so uh was—this was after you moved to Houston?

JC: Yes.

CC: Okay. Well I guess we can start talking about Houston then.

JC: Sure.

CC: Um why did you decide to come to Houston all the way from the West Coast?

JC: Earlier, you know uh my background is architecture. I was in Southern Cal. And actually, let me go back a little bit. After—right after I graduated from high school, um I got a um license, real estate salesman license, in California. And um I always want to make some money, do something. So—and my parents, they supported me. So actually, the first time, in California while I was in college in the late 70s, California wasn't doing that well. So I had a chance to come to Houston and look at the real estate. And real estate back then was just started booming, but very inexpensive, unlike California expensive, and you can't really do much unless you have a lot of capital. So I came over here maybe twice before I graduate and then—eh from college, and then I had my mind set on, well if I want to do anything, California might be a little bit um too labor—I mean capital intensive. Since Houston is a new territory, and you don't need that much capital, so I—that's why I picked uh Houston. But I just, I was just getting ready to graduate from the uh undergraduate, so I need, well you need a graduate degree. So I only applied to Houston the reason is Houston I can get the graduate education, also I can do some real estate business over here.

CC: Okay, so did you already have a network of people in Houston before you came? Or did you just come by yourself?

JC: Mm, I—when I came over here before I—well I came over here before I moved here, I had a business, I met somebody who was in real estate business, and she is very instrumental uh helping me. And she um—yeah she's like a big sister, who was uh probably about 15-20 years senior. And uh she helped a lot. So she’s only—her and her husband—they are the only family I know. So that’s how I got start—in fact, she found me the first uh summer job in Houston working for an architect.

CC: Okay, so um describe how life was like for you in Houston.

JC: You mean—

CC: When you first came here…

JC:—when I first came over here?

CC: Your first thoughts and everything.

JC: Everything is bigger in Texas, and the weather is so hot. Uh L.A. is dry, so it's not hot, so the moment you step out of the airport, you feel like you are swimming in, in air. And uh at the time it was summertime, so the moment you go out, you feel like uh it’s all soaked — your body is wet. Again, coming from L.A., which is very dry, and here it’s very wet—uh the humidity. So that’s a very big experience. Even right now I still cannot get used to the heavy humidities. And also, um Houston is more of a like a go-getter. It’s more of like a very, very vibrant, people getting up early and try to do things. And unlike in California, you know it's more of like a little bit laid back, I think.

CC: Okay, so I guess you touched a little bit on the social culture in Houston how it's different from San Francisco’s. Uh how about the labor or the working climate here?
JC: The working climate? Like in my first job I was working for an architect's office. Uh one thing I realized—I have a supervisor, and his name was Dan Evans. He’s from Mississippi. And I had a hard time understanding his language. His Mississippi accent. And as far as the working ethics, I don't see that much different then. But then it’s like um, as time goes on, I find out here, we have a lot of influence from um south of the border. So a lot of laborers from Mexico. And does that answer your question? I don't know exactly what, what you talkin’ about—what’d you wanna know about.

CC: Well, I guess um the project that we are working on, it's mainly looking on kind of labor and employment in Houston for the Asian American community. So um I guess I was just trying to get an idea or your perspective on how the labor climate was like when you first came here, in the 80s.

JC: Oh I see. I did not actually know that many Asians in the 80s, so I couldn't really tell you that much about the climate here. Uh most of the people I know after I finished school or later on in that time, I don't know. I don't have that much to tell you about the labor—I mean the Asian employment in Houston. And even today most of the people I know, Asians, they are self-employed.

CC: Okay, well um I see you mentioned before that you were working under an architect. Uh was this also while you were studying for, at the University of Houston?

JC: Yes, that’s uh that’s uh yeah only in the summertime because during the school year, I couldn't really work because the school work, the load is very heavy.

CC: So after you graduated with a master's in architecture, right, from the University of Houston, um how’d you go about founding your company?

JC: Well, that's a long story. Do you have about an hour?

CC: Go for it.

JC: Okay. [laughs] I gradu—the time I graduated in '84, Houston was having a very, they're having a big economy problem, downturn. By the way, that was only for Houston, not the whole nation. So right after I graduated, I couldn't find a job anywhere. And not even you know with a master's degree. I remember I sent out a lot of resumes to different architect’s offices and to anybody who was a developer or anything. Got nothing. So I took 4 months off. I went back to Taiwan—first time. And stayed over there. When I came back it was almost toward the end of the year. I was thinking about, you know after you graduate, you’re going to do something. But it was very, very difficult to actually doing something for full-time. So I spent probably close to, after I came back, so probably about six months to identity what was my goal. And one of them was uh I remember, maybe do something like senior citizen living or something like that. But that eh—when I look back right now, which is—I didn't have enough uh expertise. Not enough knowledge about those, I’m glad get into (?). So, at that time I had a friend who was looking for a house uh to buy. And she wanted me to become—she want me to be her agent, so I took her to different properties. And then I saw this particular area in Houston that has uh—is very close to the city and has a lot of potential. And the price wasn't that high. So after my friend, uh my friend, she did not buy a house in that area, I mean did not—it wasn't successful. So, and then I was uh…uh looking at some properties, and then stopped by the old houses. Then with the understanding of building new houses because you know I’ve always wanted to do constructions. So I start from one lot, two lots, three lots. And then I gathered some lots, so and I start— [inaudible] yeah so actually, to answer your question, I started that company in 1985. And...

CC: The Pan Jackson Company?

JC: Yes, the Pan Jackson Company. And just go from there, doing—lot of acquisitions and then constructions. And while at the same time, uh we had some property that we bought um before the downfall in '84, '85; and we had, I was still managing those properties too.
CC: Uh where was most of the construction taking place in Houston?

JC: In the city of Bellaire, close in the area. And that’s, yeah that occupied most of my time in that period.

CC: So where did you find most of the capital?

JC: Uh fortunately enough, in our tradition, the Chinese—in the Chinese Taiwanese tradition, a parent always, I mean, of course within their means, of course, always support their kids. And uh I have my capital support from my father. Uh he felt, he felt that since my background is architecture, and I need to uh develop career closer to that end, I couldn't find a job in the architect because there wasn't any business. So he uh so I guess he gave me some capital, and we started buying some properties. And again, this is in the Chinese slash Asian tradition, and my parents did it for me. And I would do the same thing for my son and daughters, so again, I advise them, go study, and you need a degree, more than one degree, but after you graduate I will help you within my means. If you want to start uh a computer whatever or even lawyer firm, I would help them as much as I could financially.

CC: Okay, well according to the questionnaire, you’re involved in a number of the like Asian community related business associations. So um can you talk a little bit about how you became involved with…?

JC: Before—even I came here, I was uh twenty, I was twenty-two. But I didn't have a chance of going—to meet those Taiwanese or Asian businessmen until later on, um I got married and have kids and then had my business established. In 1980, I had the chance of a friend of mine gave me a ticket and invited me to the Taiwanese Chamber function.

CC: In 1980?

JC: In…yeah, in 1980. 1979, 1980, along that time. And I was so impressed, I’m sorry 19—1990. Oh wait a minute, yeah 1990. 1990. And I was so impressed. There’s a lot of businessmen from Taiwan and uh and I feel like wow you know those are my own kind. And you know, let me, let me go back a little bit. Before that, when I came over here, my father did tell me, you don’t want to be associated with the Taiwanese over here. The reason for it is earlier you mentioned that Taiwan, Taiwan is under martial law. And a lot of Taiwanese here are very anti-martial law, uh very pro-independent. And, that time if you were pro-independence, you would be on the blacklist. So my father warned me, if I came over here, just do my own business, don’t go to a Taiwanese gathering area, because you do not know who is out there. There might be somebody who wants to recruit you to become a uh separatist or the uh independent thinkers. Uh or there might be somebody who might be a spy from the government. So I was pretty much doing my stuff until that first time when again, in 1990, when I join—when I went to that Taiwanese Chamber function. And I was surprised. A lot of businessmen and then people did talk something against the government. And by that time, again, Taiwan, the uh political climate changed too. Um within the not in (?), within the abolishment of martial law in 1990, or ’86 or ’97, something like that, and Taiwan is opened up. So, that is why I feel more comfortable to enter the uh—to go into Taiwanese community. And once I entered there, I found out, wow, um I’m not ashamed of myself to be a Taiwanese or Asian. And I guess I’m very um easy to be with, and I was always very uh enthusiastic, enthusiastic about helping the community work, so one by one, start from Taiwanese then Chinese then Asian. It was twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two years now. And so I got to know a lot of people in the community.

CC: So do you believe I guess the political situation in Taiwan helped other Taiwanese nationals to come out and join more of these organizations as it did with you?

JC: No. You need to understand most of the people from Taiwan: I don't know that much about from other Asian countries, but from Taiwan, they came over here after they become an adult; that means they finished education and served in the militaries. And probably worked for a couple of years before they came over here. Their mind is—their thinking is different than my thinking. And in Houston area, I don't think I can find that many uh Taiwanese like me who came over here in the teenage years and, and, and still stayed here. ‘Cause I guess what I’m talking about is that most Taiwanese I met over here, um they are older and then they came
from Taiwan after graduate, when they became adults, their mind is pretty much concentrated on their own stuff—like Taiwan and also their work. And in order to be doing this thing with the community, either with the Asian community or with the, with the mainstream community, language is a big problem. And when I say a big problem, I don't mean they don’t speak the language. It's they don't feel comfortable. Not as comfortable as I am in using uh English to uh you know to, to, to uh soc—to uh use as a social tool. So I don't find too many Taiwanese doing what I’m doing with the community.

CC: Back then?
JC: Back then.

CC: How about now?

JC: Now, again, I find that there are more younger one, younger than my age, probably 35 and up. And there are a lot of second generations. When I say second generations, some of them are born here, and some of them were like, came over here uhhhh with their parents in the early 80s or early, mid-80s. And um you see some of them are more— some are more Asian or Taiwanese getting into the community. But again, their mentality is different from mine. They are too much Americanized. What I mean by that is that they might look Asian, or but they came over here very, very young or were born here. So they pretty much don’t have that much of the uh old, old, I guess the old country with them. So again, I would be, if I classified myself, I would be somewhere between what we call the FOB, someone who uh came from Taiwan after they turned adulthood, and somebody who was born here—which is pretty much Americanized. So that's why I have a dual function here: I can get along with the uh the Taiwanese immigrant, I call immigrant—the one who finished, uh the who came over here in their adulthood. And I can uh associate with them because of the uh the teenage years I spent over there. On the same token, I can associate with the younger crowd, the one who were born here, because I've been here that long, and I, I can communicate, and I have pretty much, I pretty much know their thinking. So that’s why people like me, in our community, we don't have that many of them in Houston.

CC: Okay, I see. So uh you were talking about, would you say that there was a change then in the Asian American or Taiwanese community in Houston, especially with the second-generation immigrants or with um...

JC: It's—yeah, the second generation is coming up, but let’s, let’s goes back a little, talking about Houston Asian communities. Houston Asian communities, is if you look at it, yeah they were here. I mean I know the Chinese Americans they came over here probably uh forty years, there are a few. People like the State Represent—the uh-council member and State Representative, Martha Wong, who was born here, and she is over seventy years old now. But back then, you had the Chinese over here and they pretty much, doing their own thing. It's not until—I have a friend of mine who is in his mid to late 70s, he told me that when he came over here um what the ‘fifty-something, and he want to go rent an apartment, and the apartment manager don’t know what to do with him. He's not black, and he's not white. So they didn't know where to place him. But I would say that everything, the Asian, what I call the Asian power, is in—it was not until the late 70s, early, probably starting early 80s, or just early to mid 80s, just by the time I reach—I came over to Houston, that you see there is something going on with the Asian community. And with the last twenty years, you have now in every election, the politicians, they know the importance of the Asian vote. But before that, I would say before twenty years ago, uh not much to the Asian community as far as the political power is concerned. 

CC: Would you say political power was correlated to the types of jobs Asians had, or just the sheer number?

JC: Um Asians, we have different uh political uh needs. And for that, we always say we pay the same amount of tax, sometimes even more. But we just want to get what’s our share of benefits of um well yeah benefits and responsibilities. And basically, Asians, especially Chinese, under the Confucianism, such a long time, where most of us, we were taught, it’s in our blood, just be a good citizen, and you do not question the government. And sometimes that's not right. So still nowadays in the community, you see some activists, and I would consider myself a very vocal one, and for our own for the Asian um issues. A majority of them are like, ‘I’m too busy, I need to do my work, or I’m too busy working, and I don't have time to associate with any type of political um issues.'
CC: Would you say that’s more with your generation, the generation prior, or the second generation? Just—or everybody…?

JC: In general, but of course the older the generation, the more they think, ‘No that’s none of my business.’ Again, when you’re looking at their language skills, that’s the biggest drawback. And a lot of them have to work, so they do not have time to go to a lot of meetings and be in organizations. That mainly is the problem. We do need more activists; we do need more uh we do need more people to help out in the community, I mean to speak for the Asian community. For instance, let me give you an example. Remember a few years ago; the downtown had the rail—building a rail on downtown South Main? And those businessmen, I mean a lot of them could not survive because the construction was two, three years. It killed most of the business. Now come back to 2011. The Chinatown area, the Bellaire Boulevard, Boulevard, there is no light rail going to be built over there. But they are going to rework Bellaire Boulevard to put new underground line, underground the uh drainage and the sewer line and the uh utility line. And then widen Bellaire Boulevard in the Chinatown area from three lanes to four lanes. Well, yep we need that, and it's uh uh progress. We welcome that. But we don't want the same problem with what happened in Downtown, where we know it’s gonna be—it's good for everybody. But businessmen need to survive in the interim. So what do you do? Now move back to Chinatown here. So some of us, we are pulling our resources together; in fact it's going to be happening next month in April. Um we want the city to know yes, we welcome the uh development, but you need to be more sensitive, not like coming over here, block the streets and kill all the business. We need them to more attend to our needs. The need might be, uh first of all, when you do construction, you put proper signage and don’t do all construction at the same time. And then don't just care about uhuh how the construction will go smooth or not, and don't listen and don’t care about the citizens—how they make their living over there during this constructions. And one other issue for instance, you might have utility cut-off. And you know, if you own a restaurant, and you have your water cut off for uhuh you know a couple of hours, you basically have no business. So those are the big issues. And we know you have to cut utility to do something, but you can always do coordination. You can always have somebody who's gopher with the—that coordinate with the city with the contractors and with the community. So this is what we want to do. We want to minimize the cos—the loss of business. And that’s why, but I tell you, if some of us we don’t come out and, and address this issue, the city they’re gonna say, well what the heck with you, we're going go ahead and do what we want. And this is what I call ‘Asian Power.’

CC: Would you say that the city's handling of construction would've differed if it was in a different ethnic neighborhood?

JC: Uh let me give you an example. This happened probably eight or ten years ago. They were doing the Westpark Toll Road. And that stretch was umm—uh you know uh uh Westpark Toll Road; you have Beltway 8 and Gessner. And the place, there was uh umm uhuh gosh what's that street, the uh from Chinatown to the TECO cultural center—Ranchester, Ranchester. Yeah, I use that every day. So Ranches—anyway, the plan was to county—was to close Ranchester, cut where the toll road is going to be. So people from south of the Chinatown would have more difficult way to go to north Chinatown, I mean to go into the Richmond and Westheimer area. They had to take a detour to Westheimer. And the culture center just located on the border, which is locate north of the uh toll road. But, a lot of senior citizens live in the Chinatown apartments, just south of the uh toll road. And after we found out what happened with the closure of Ranchester, some of us we went to the city we invited the news media the TV station and all that. We were over there pleading; we cannot cut off this the uh Ranchester because there are a lot of senior citizens. You basically you just closed; you cut off the line, so the senior citizens cannot walk anymore. They have to go and walk probably another thirty minutes to an hour to go into Harwin and Gessner to go to the cultural center. But anyway, because of our, how uhuh we addressed our needs to the media, the county agreed. And then uh—I have to thank the county and county commissioner, agreed that—a lot, a lot of money, I was told, probably close to a million dollars, to do the underpass for Ranchester to the cultural center. And we were very, very happy that the city or in this case, the county listened to the citizens. And again, if that time none of us got together and addressed this issue, I would guess the city would just think oh you don't have an issue, you don't have a problem. Now I have another um the uh the Asian uh Asian thing to share with you. This is negative.
CC: So did you orchestrate most of these?

JC: One of the—there was like three, four people, attorneys, and I was the chamber president. So all of us used our connections, and we, we pulled it off. I was so proud that I was one of the original guys who instigated this issue. And, but I said earlier, Asian people; we pretty much doing our own thing. We don't want to get into other people's, other people’s business. And we take it, whatever the city dumps in our lap, we just take it as face value. Another thing is this is why I don't like sometimes Asians mentality. This is from the Westside uh the common station—the police uh the Police Captain. You know what he say, he told me one time is that when he first um took—this is maybe ten years ago, when he first took the uh Asian—I mean when he first took the to be the Captain of Westside common station, he had an open house for mainstream. A lot of people showed up. Uh for the black, well uh the African-American showed up you know to meet with the captain. And then Hispanics—a lot of them showed up. But then when he called for the Asian open house, he said almost nobody show up. So in his mind, he was telling me that oh so you Asians have no problem then?

Okay, now go back two years ago, three years ago. We had a police Assistant Chief, Norman Wong. But he retired. And our Mayor and Chief weren't ready to appoint another Asian. But people like Martha Wong and us and me, a bunch of us, we went to the City Hall in front of City Council, and we said that we need an Asian because Asian chief he knows more about our need and our concern. And I remember Mayor White's response was ‘Well, there was a proper procedure, there’s a proper way that you cannot just uh uh the uh promote a certain Asian to that position.” And you know what I told him in front of city council, I told him, ‘Mayor I appreciate— I know your concern, but frankly, that's not my concern. Because my concern is we want some representation in the police department. Somebody who understand us.’ So what two weeks later a new assistant chief was um recommended, a—announced uh from Mayor White. So now as you can see, if we didn't show up and to the City Hall and to get all the news media and talk about this, I will tell you, we probably would not have another Asian uh assistant chief right now. And because of that after that incident, the police chief, he had the uh the uh new Assistant Chief uh, Chen. Every month, we have a group, an advisory group, and we meet with them every month and try to see if there are any issue, any Asian issues.

CC: What is this group called?

JC: Uh the Asian Community Crime uh uh Crime Advisory Board, something, I think something like that, yeah I can uhh…

CC: Here you have the HPD's Asian Crime Advisory Board.

JC: Yes, that’s the one, yeah, that’s the one. If I—I think you were in there a couple of times. Uh and that was very, very good and because through that we had meetings. Three days ago, I had a meeting with the H—the FBI chief, at the Houston uh, what they don’t call chief—Director. And we talk about some concerns in the community, and again this is all through the cooperation of all Asian communities.

CC: So when you say ‘all,’ like all the different eth—Asian groups in Houston?

JC: Well, you know, when you look at bigger picture, what’s Asian? Not just Chinese, even though Chinese a majority of the population here—and the Vietnamese. But Asians compose of, of uh Chinese, Vietnamese, uh Filipinos, Koreans, so they try to get everybody together. So we form an Asian something. So if you go up to speak or represent, and say you are an Asian group as opposed to a Chinese group, I think you would get more name recognition. And, so that’s why we have organizations. And, and we look at what we can do to benefit our own Asian group, but at least to do what’s ours and our right and things we should get as a member of the Houston community.

CC: I see. So uh before you mentioned how uh the light rail that went through downtown ruined Asian businesses—

JC: Not just Asian businesses. The regular business along the downtown South Main area; the Main Street area,
it killed a lot of business. Those are not necessarily Asians.

CC: Oh okay, well I guess then I want to ask you a question about how the new Chinatown that happened—that kind of grew in the 1990s on Bellaire, I guess um [JC: Mm-hm.] that wasn't really here when you first arrived in Houston.

JC: Uh actually...uh yeah, you’re right. In 1982, ’81, ’82 there’s a sprinkle of stores over there and supermarkets. But just uh, one supermarket. And then from nothing, a few stores, then you got people from, in 1980 there’s a lot of immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan and occupied. I mean, there were two Chinatowns back then: one Chinatown in the downtown area, and one Chinatown in this old southwest Chinatown. And the old Chinatown, you had some business over there, but it’s in the Warehouse District. And that time, the George R. Brown Convention Center wasn't even in yet. So you have some business during the daytime, but in the nighttime, it’s the Warehouse District. You don't have any business at night. So most of the immigrants, when they come over here, they select southwest Chinatown because they live closer over there. And that’s how—see anytime you develop some sort of neighborhood, or business, you need residents to support. So Chinatown in the downtown area—nobody, I don’t think anybody live in the downtown Chinatown area, I’m not even talking about Chinese, I’m talking about anybody. But southwest Chinatown, you have more people. The more people that live over there, the more store openings to support those people. So the southwest Chinatown went from almost nothing to what is today.

CC: I see—how was the transition from I guess movement of people from old Chinatown to the new Chinatown—aside from just residents?

JC: It’s more of a transition. If you know about again the uh uh the city, Houston, even today, if you look inside the Loop, I don’t think you can find more than a couple thousand people who live inside the downtown area. And...now when you look at a city like San Francisco or Los Angeles, Los Angeles downtown—uhh the downtown area—here’s nobody live over there. But, San Francisco, it’s more to [inaudible] you have people living in the San Francisco downtown and you have people who work in the downtown area. So area like that can flourish after the business hour. But Houston downtown: it’s very busy, but after six o’clock and on weekends, there is practically almost nothing there. Yeah, you have some Jones Hall uh some of the uh bars, or something inside, but still majority people still uh do their entertaining or whatever outside of downtown. Same thing happened in Chinatown. Now the Old Chinatown served the mainstream, because Chinese food—a lot of people like Chinese food. And so that’s why in Old Chinatown there’s some, mostly the restaurants, but at night there’s nobody there. But when new Chinatown started, uh there’s immigrants those people who moved from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, or Vietnam, they stay in southwest Chinatown area. And that is why the area keeps on growing because you have people who stay in there stay in the same location. Answer your question?

CC: Uh would you say—Why would many of the Asian immigrants be attracted to southwest Houston? Is it because of the housing prices or...?

JC: Several things: I have heard many, many people say some like, ‘Oh, I want to live closer to Chinatown; well you know, it's my own neighborhood; food is cheaper; and we can shop over there, we can eat over there.’ I mean just few—it’s just human nature, bird of the sa—uhh something flock. [CC: Birds of the same flock] Yeah. Birds of flock together. And if you are Italian, you tend to go to Italian neighborhoods. So if you are Hispanic, you go to Hispanic neighborhoods. So if you are Asian, you go to Asian neighborhood. That’s the way it is. You feel more comfortable.

CC: I guess I was asking what attracted, uh initially, people to the southwest area. Because you said it was the attraction of the southwest area that led to new Chinatown.

JC: Oh okay. Again, if you look at the uh Houston uh the population growth and the population density, the southwest Chinatown area is within the main Houston southwest. And Houston southwest has a majority of the population in there. You have a lot of support—supermarket, business, schools, everything. So obviously, the—a new immigrant, they don't want to move to a area where there’s no uh business – there’s no support for them. In downtown, like I said, doing business might be fine, but where do you find school? So people move to
southwest Chinatown. A lots of – a lot of Chinese and Asians move to Sugarland, but Sugarland—Chinatown is not that far. Fifty minutes, twenty minutes, and that’s it, not that far. And there are a lot of schools and parks in Chinatown area. Now—but I say, people like me, I’ve never lived in an area that’s heavily uh populated with Asians, even when I was in California. But again, I am just one of very—one of the that uh – example that very different from the regular Asians because I don't work with Asians for my livelihood.

CC: Tell me a little bit more about that. Your, your uh-

JC: I don't, I don't do Asian business. I mean, you know, in my business—uh uh construction, real estate, most of my clients—you know, I have Asians, but it's not like I pick Asians, or something, it's that when (?) will come to me, work with them. And most of my clients will be Anglo-Saxons. So I don't depend on Asians for my business, so I that’s why I don't have to live closer to Asian areas. And I don't depend on – well I like food, but I don't necessarily have to eat Chinese food every day. In fact, even right now, I very seldom say I want to go to Chinatown, eat Chinese food. And look at my family, for example. Even at home, we don't speak Chinese. And my kids, they can survive outside of the Chinatown area. So basically I am just like mainstream Americans with Asian face. So I don't really depend on the Chinatown to survive. But a lot of people, new immigrants, they do have to live there, uh or at least go over there and work there. Uh, it's a place to be social, to meet friends, and a place you feel comfortable in. And that is why Chinese, Vietnamese uh growth. You know, the funny thing is, even though I don't go over there that much, but I bet you even my kids, if they go over there, they feel comfortable too. Foods, friends...even though they were born here. So, okay.

CC: I see, well isn’t you’re—you’re very active in the Asian community in Houston. Would you say—did your real estate background help you at all in the activities that you did or the organizations, the issues that you addressed earlier?

JC: I always say, to be more effective and more beneficial to an organization or to a group of people, you need to take your self—um selfishness out of it. What I mean by that is people would treat you more—will, will, will respect you more if you don't have any personal gain to it. And I can tell you, very proudly, my business and my um I guess community work—nothing—they are like a hundred percent different. So, I guess what I am talking about is: I don't do business with friends; I don't do business with uh people I associate with. I classify them: okay, this is a potential customer but no this is somebody I consider a friend or I consider somebody in the community. So to answer your question, I got no business, and I don't intend to, to have my business and have my community service intertwined together. It's not a good idea. People would always say, ‘Oh you do this because of personal gain—because something you want.’ Example would be like the construction in Bellaire Boulevard. If I go out and say, ‘You all, we all need to care because da da da, this and that.’ Somebody might say, ‘Yeah, that Jackson, he has a business over here. Yeah he’s just looking after himself.’ But without that, I can come out and say—if I, a few times uh I work with HPD and try to get people to come out there to listen to what HPD has to say, and I hear people say that, ‘Well, you know Jackson, you need to do this...you need to do that.’ And my re—my response is that you know, ‘So-and-so, you work in this area. I don't. You have more to gain or more to lose than I do. So don't tell me I have to do something. I'm doing this because I care about this area.’

In fact two days ago, when I was in the FBI um Houston branch. I told the Director exactly the same thing, ‘I don't work in Chinatown, but I want to make sure our community is not forgotten.’ But even though I don't work in Chinatown, I go over there and eat, too. And I want to make sure my family is safe, and I’m going there, I’m safe. So with that in mind, that is why I’m so...

CC: Okay, so the uh last question I had before the [JC: The last question already?] Or not—the question I had before was uh: would you recommend for your family to migrate to the United States? And you said that most of your family—immediate family—are already U.S. citizens?

JC: Mm-hm. Uh I was going to tell you, if this were twenty or thirty years ago, yes a lot of them are going to come over here, but you have to look at the economy situation. United States isn’t doing so well. In Asia, especially Taiwan, is doing so well. Why would you want to come to an area that’s depressed?
CC: Even Houston?

JC: Yeah. Even Houston. I just came back from Taiwan, and it is ohh, at least many many times better than Houston. So the only reason I would...I—a lot of people—some people come over here uh for—not for economic reasons. That’s true—that is very true for people from Taiwan. Come over here not for economic reasons, but for stability of the family life.

CC: And they would not be able to have a stable family life in Taiwan?

JC: What I mean by stable family life is: Taiwan is like New York. Uh place is very small, crowded, a lot of people. Uh you don't get that environment like what we get in the States.

CC: In Houston?

JC: Oh, yep. Especially in Houston. We have very—um we have very big area. Houston is six times the size of the city of Taipei, where I was grew up—where I was born. And the whole state of Texas is nineteen times the country of Taiwan. So obviously, if you want a good life, driving big car, live in a big house, this is the place to be. And for the same amount of money, you can’t get that in Taiwan. But now this is just for Taiwanese now. But for Chinese, that is a different story.

CC: Okay.

JC: You have two kinds of Chinese from China. One is that was businessman, like the one I was just describing to you. One who wants a good life and everything. Want to come over here, they have no problem, they live a very comfortable life. There is another type, where they come over here, chasing the rainbow. Uh they are the ones who think here will make a better life for them. And those are what I’m talking about, illegals—the snakeheads. They get them over here. The ‘coyotes’, Mexican coyotes, uh the human trafficking. Those are laborers; those are the things that we can do um so of try to eliminate that kind of problem. I'll give you a typical example. Take some lady or gentleman from a village in China. And the uh smuggler would tell her, okay, hey, United States, now you're going to make big—nice place to be. You can make a lot of money, you know that's where the gold is. But we will charge $15,000-20,000 to come over here. And where would they get $20,000, you know, $15,000-20,000? Either they borrow from friends or borrow it from the snake—the, the, the traffickers, the human traffickers. They say, ‘Okay, why don’t we do this. It’s going to cost you $20,000. I'll let you borrow. You give me $5,000, and I’ll let you borrow fifteen, you pay it off when you come over here.’ So they smuggled you. But, do you know how they smuggle those people? First of all, they, those people fly from China to Cuba because China, Cuba—communist countries. You don't need a visa; you can go to Cuba. And from Cuba, smuggled to South American countries. And then through the help of the coyotes, the, the South American, the human traffickers, smuggled through the Rio Grande River, and from Mexico to the United States. Now, after they got over here, uh those people, the smugglers, would put you in the house or um apartment. You might have twenty people live in a one-bedroom, two-bedroom apartment. Then [inaudible] yeah those people are here illegally, I mean illegally, but on their own will, they want to be here. But then the smugglers would tell you, okay, now you need to work in the restaurant to earn that living. Because you owe me so much money. So they will put you in a restaurant or put you in oh what else—whatever else they can use. And telling the restaurant to allow the people to work there and you give me the, the, the money. Uh wherever you work, if you work for a week (?), the money you give it too... And so when the time the money— uh after they get paid, the smuggler would say, ‘Okay, look, you owe me that much money. And the interest rate is ticking; and the food you eat wherever you have it, [inaudible]. So I’m gonna give you something, but most I will keep.’ So you treat those people like slaves. They will never work out enough time to pay off their $10,000 or $15,000 debt. Now, those are fortunate ones. For less fortunate ones, you have young ladies, nice looking. They put you in uh the uh um prostitution ring.

CC: So would you say human trafficking [JC: Exactly.] is a problem in Houston?

JC: Yes. This is uh—I was so surprised and shocked when I heard from FBI. They say—the FBI says that out of the corps, they have uh 800 number in the whole United States, in the United States. All of the corps, the
human trafficking, 46% are from Houston area.

CC: As in most of the trading happens here or most of the...

JC: The, the tips and everything. Most of reporting are of human trafficking. 46% is from Houston. But you know what? Asians. And we don’t—I was shocked. I didn't know anything about it. And they say, this is a time bomb ready to explode.

CC: Wow.

JC: I didn't know. So I told him, look, in the next month or two, two three months or so, we need to get together and identify where the problem is before it becomes worse. [CC: I see.] Another example, they say that well if you go to a nail place, a lot of places, those girls working in the nail, nail salons those are illegals. Those are, not only illegals, they were forced to do that to pay off their debt. Shocking. And surprising, too. So I don't want to make this too long, you know as I say, Cathleen, you can give me 24 hours, and I need 30 hours. So.

CC: I see. I mean, you touched on a lot of issues that are very relevant to the Asian American community. And um I really want to thank you for giving your time for this oral history interview.

JC: Actually there’s more topics we didn't touch on the Asians in real estate. But that’s another interview I guess.

CC: Uh well, I guess since the topic is about labor [JC: Okay.] and Houston for Asian Americans, [JC: Yeah.] I guess, if you could uh talk about that for a little bit.

JC: Asian, again, uh the most of the Asians I know are Chinese, and most of the Chinese I know are from Taiwan. I would say the Taiwanese community does not have the labor problem. Are you talking about labor problem or underpaying? Or you talking about not being treat—uh treated fairly? Or what are you talkin about?

CC: Truthfully, just anything. Just the theme of this oral history archive [JC: Okay.] happens to be...

JC: Are you talking about history or talkin about nowaday?

CC: Anything. Just from these oral interview—would be able to maybe help find a theme, in personal narratives...

JC: I don't know who else is being interviewed, but I can tell you that in the Taiwanese community, most of them does not work in labor-intensive business, because most of them have high education. Most of the Taiwanese I know have at least a college degree and some have, you know, a lot of them have post-graduate, doctor degrees. So uh even if you go to Chinatown area, people you see in the restaurant business or labor intensive business, a lot of them are not Asian—are not Taiwanese. The owner might be Taiwanese, but uh they are not. So in the—the problem of labor, I don't think it's that much in the Taiwanese community.

CC: Would you say it's because of um immigration policies in the United States? Or [JC: No.] most Taiwanese who have had higher education are able to come to the U.S?

JC: Uh both. There are two types of Taiwanese, uh actually, three types if you classify them. One is…came over here after college and then to further their study and stay here. And the other one is like uh me, who came over here when we were young. And the third type is uh the one who came from Taiwan right after they became adults and come over here. But you don't find that percentage that high. See the ones who come from Taiwan directly; most of them are middle income. They are not going to be in low, labor-intensive field. And the ones who came over here um after they had graduated with a college degree back home, you know they are of course they are not going to be working in labor intensive field. Then like my type, we pretty much mingle and assimilated into the community. So, it's not a problem. See, I credit that to the Taiwanese, Asian education.
Education would solve a lot of problems. Do you know Asians, Chinese been in the United States a hundred and fifty years, from the—the railroad days? You have other people brought in doing pretty much probably worse than Chinese, doing the laborer you know whatever. But I have not yet seen somebody nowadays complain about because the Chinese were not treated right, that's why you as America, you owe us. You never heard of that from the Chinese because even when those people came over for the railroad, after they came over here they know how important education is. They tell their kids, you need to get do you need to get good education. You don't want to be like your parents, diggers in the railroad, or doing whatever. So the kids always stress—and the parents always stress education, so after a couple of generations, those railroad workers, their grandson their great granddaughters might be lawyers and everything. So again, but I cannot say the same thing for another ethnic group. But, Asian Chinese, it's always education. That can solve a lot of labor problems because higher education, you get a better prospect in the business world.

CC: I see.

JC: I just briefly touched upon that. So um…

CC: I see, I see. I guess the interview started with you coming to the United States. Have you considered moving back to Taiwan? Because of the economy?

JC: Yes. For two reasons: one, the economy, like I said, is not as good. Let's take thirty years. Yeah, I know the U.S. has not been that good for the last two, three years. But let's take the last thirty years. If you do business, my business, real estate in Taiwan, and you do business thirty years in Houston, you probably would do much better in Taiwan, if you take the last thirty years. The other issue is that the welfare system, the medical insurance, um the, the...the you know, I'm not getting any younger. So, people my age, we have to worry about the health care issue. United States—very, very, very, very, very expensive. In Taiwan—very, very, very cheap. And I have healthcare insurance in Taiwan too, national healthcare. It don't cost anything. Well, it costs something, but compared with over here, it is probably one-hundredths of what I pay over here. And the benefit is not that bad. Then again, well that's another issue. Everything here costs so much. For the same operation, if it costs $10,000 here, it's only $1,000 over there. Anyway, that's another issue. So because of those two, yeah I see a lot of my friends—they didn't move back to Taiwan permanently, but after their kids turn you know, adult, they will probably go back and forth, and probably stay a few months over there, and a few months over there.

CC: I see, I see. Well, um do you have any closing remarks that you’d like to add to the interview or…?

JC: Gosh. I don't have any because uh there are so many things I want to say, but if you want me to have closing remark, I don't have one. Unless you want to ask me more stuff, I can talk about more stuff.

CC: I guess that means we should get another interview for you for the Center.

JC: Yes. [both laughs] I’m always available, Cathleen.

CC: Well, I just want to thank you for your time, Mr. Chang.

JC: You're welcome.