Interviewee: Jing Qian
Interviewed by: Stephen Wang
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Interview Transcript:

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SW: Oral History Interview of Jing Qian at Fondren Library in Houston, Texas, on March 9, 2011. Interview conducted by Stephen Wang for the Houston Asian American Archives at Rice University’s Woodson Research Center. Okay, so, um Mr. Qian, if you could uh maybe begin by just talking about your background, a little bit about yourself.

JQ: Uh I’m currently a research professor at the Baylor College of Medicine. My research is focuses on brain disease, uh especially epilepsy. That’s the uh the work I’m kind of doing. And before, prior to that, it’s I’m—I graduated also from the Baylor College of Medicine as a PhD, majoring in neuroscience. Yeah.

SW: Okay, um. All right, well I was looking at your questionnaire, and you, you came to the U.S. after you were married, and I know from, from Dennis that he was not born in the United States, [JQ: Yeah.] so um maybe you could tell me about your, your background growing up, maybe your education in China.

JQ: Uh starting from which levels?

SW: Okay, um. All right, well I was looking at your questionnaire, and you, you came to the U.S. after you were married, and I know from Dennis that he was not born in the United States, [JQ: Yeah.] so um maybe you could tell me about your, your background growing up, maybe your education in China.

JQ: [laughs] Uh um, my, my, my childhood life was not very simple ‘cause the ‘cause uh at the—you know the—when—let me remember, when I was probably the—seven years old, right time when I should be in the elementary school, right—and then, the because you know the—at that time, probably the seventies, yeah in the, in the, in the—late sixties, early seventies, probably around 1969 some time, you know the Soviet Union had a conflict with China at that time. So the whole country was kind of in the mode of be prepared, be prepared for an attack from the Soviet Union. And then so the government shift the, the important the factories, important kinds of services to the—much more inland, in the mountain areas [inaudible 2+ words]. Because it was supposed to be safe. You, you’d get some kind of protection from a first round attack, right? And then, so my, my parents at the time, was uh—they were all chemistry teachers in uh in uh in some in middle schools. My father was a chemistry…in middle school, but my, my mother was uh a chemistry teacher in some kind of special schools, kind of. It’s—it’s you know, that uh China also had a system like the Soviet Union’s. Each, industry, like say, for example, the post office system or, say, all the major industries, they all have their own school systems. The purpose of such kinds of schools is to train their students to be, like say, the personnel or technicians work in telecommunication companies like that. So my mother at the time was a chemistry teacher in such a school. And the because the, the conflict with the Soviet Union, and then the government shifted those
important institutions and factories go to—much inland, and there—of course, that included telecommunications. So the, the major part of telecommunications in Shanghai was transferred into the mainland, because the government transfer many military-related industries into the inland, so the telecommunications need—also need also need to provide such services for such companies. Because at that time, and then my mother was recruited as uh kind of—forced to be service in telecommunication companies to provide service for those military industries. So my family relocated from Shanghai to, I think in the Anhui province, yeah, some kind of remote areas. So because at the beginning, there were no schools, because those areas were very remote areas, like in mountains, surrounded, so in those schools so I had to be separated with my parents, and so I went to my grandmother. I lived—and there I lived with my grandmother and grandfather for my—almost my entire childhood, from the elementary school until the high school, until the last year of high school, at the end, because the, the whole system kind of end, so my parents they move back to Ch- to Shanghai at the end, start to enjoy both of my parents [SW: I see. So.]—the last year of my high school. [SW: Okay.] So almost for my whole childhood I kind of—I actually lived with my grandparents. Yeah.

SW: Hm. So, you’re originally from Shanghai, though-

JQ: Uh-huh.

SW:—and then your parents were relocated, but you stayed in Shanghai with you grandparents?

JQ: No, I did not stay in Shanghai, but I moved to another city, because my grandparents they live in another city, Nanjing. [SW: Oh, in Nanjing. Okay.] yeah it’s probably two hundred miles away from Shanghai.

SW: Oh, I see.

JQ: And then I was there for—over fifteen- how many years- let me see? Six years of elementary school and uh middle… probably twelve years, eleven to twelve years.

SW: Okay. So then, after, after that program ended, then…

JQ: Yeah, after that program ended then, it probably in 1977, and then at that time I was in my last year of high school, and then the, you know, the universities start to recruit the students. Before that, there’s no…say the coll- the high school students cannot go to the university because you have to go to, say it’s a farmer, to kind of—you know the, either—most go to the, to the rural areas, to the eh, to the suburbs, and then you, you kinda service—work over there like farmers for a certain period of time, and then. But that—at that time that program also ends, so universities, colleges start to recruit the new student from high schools. Yeah. And then, that was my last year in the high school, last year. And then we—and then we—I prepare, prepare for take tests, those kinds of things. Yeah you wanted to enter into the university.

SW: And so, when that program ended, and uh at the end of your high school, your, you said your parents came back, and-

JQ: Yeah.

SW:—and did you move back to Shanghai, or?

JQ: Yeah, [SW: Okay.] we moved back to Shanghai.

SW: Ah, I see.

JQ: Yeah.

SW: Okay, so, at that point you were applying for university?

JQ: Yeah, I applied for the universities, and then of course, you need to take a test, the admission test, which is not like here, because you have—it’s SAT you can take multiple times, right?

SW: Right.
JQ: And then in China there’s only one time. Now one, one time. So, so all students just concentrated, ‘cause that’s the big focal point in your life. And then if you did good, you go to a good college. If you screwed up, then you go to a bad college, or maybe you cannot be accepted into the into colleges. So every student worked very hard, and, and fortunately I, I was get uh accepted by a top university in China, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, [SW: Oh wow.] and uh—also in Shanghai. And then next year I, I got to—went to the university for study, in biomedical engineering for five years. ‘Cause that major—the regular majors is only four years, but that major, biomedical engineering, which is was uh—was a new discipline at the time, so it required five years to finish the program, including one year study in medical school, because the purpose for that major at that time was to join knowledge from two different fields—from engineering field and also from the medical field. And so we were required to take a course in medical school for one year.

SW: Wow.

JQ: Shanghai Jiao Tong University is actually an engineering school, but uh in—for students in this major, they were required to take one year—course in medical school, studying physiology and all those kinds of things. Yeah.

SW: Interesting. Um. So did you always—so you went to study biomedical engineering, but did you always know you were um going to focus on neurobiology, neuroscience at the end?

JQ: Oh, no, no, not at the time.

SW: So that was much later that you…

JQ: Yeah, that was much later. [SW: Okay. I see.] Of course, you cannot foresee [SW: Right. Uh-huh.] what’s going to happen down the road, even ten years later, right? At the time is—the reason I picked that major was because I’m, I’m kind of interested in the—actually I’m very interested in medicines. ‘Cause my uh—my first, my first choice, if say, if my parents let me choose, [SW: Yes.] would be a surgeon rather than be an engineer. [SW: Oh.] So I’d like to be—so I’d like to say—be a student in medical school. [SW: Oh.] But my parents said, ‘Oh, no, no, no, that’s not good for you.’ [SW laughs] You know, the, the, the, the Chinese now like the say—people like ‘Hey, I got—this student much more freedoms, they want—they can pick what they want, right?’

SW: Right.

JQ: I, I’m, I’m pretty sure their parents probably don’t agree that you picked political science, [Both laughs] but you picked, right? So they respect your choice.

SW: Right.

JQ: But China—it’s not the case, and parents have much power in controlling what they, they, they wish their child should do. So, so at the time, the parents suggested—maybe not suggested, maybe ordered— maybe engineering is much better for you, rather than be, be a surgeons. And so and then—but so—but I picked some kind of field kind of—some kind of—have some kind of relation with medicine, [SW: Right.] so that’s why I chose biomedical engineering. Yeah.

SW: Okay, interesting. [both laugh] Hm. So after—so you studied biomedical engineering for five years—um I guess you were around your mid-twenties by then?

JQ: Uh let me see. Five years six—16, when I was [SW: Oh.] 16, yeah, I enter into the colleges, so five years later, I was 21. And then, and then you know the—when I graduate right, from my undergraduate, at that time—’cause the—all the top students they want to go to graduate schools, so the—now I faced uh a choice—to go to, either to directly go to work and find a job or go to graduate school. But I select—I chose to go to a graduate school to pursue my master’s degree. And then I didn’t stay in uh in um biomedical engineering; rather, I picked the computer engineering [SW: Oh.] ’cause the—I was kind of interested in computers at that time—you know, the personal computers [SW: Right, right.] started to emerge. And uh I, I remember very clearly when I wrote my first program code, it’s, it’s not like right now, you typing and see something, right? Actually you punched holes in these pink strips.
SW: Actually, my mother did that too, yeah… [laugh]

JQ: And you punch holes in the pink strips. And if the system says screwed up, what how, you’d have to start over again. So it’s very time-consuming, and then so it’s—yeah I think it’s probably over two years, 79 maybe, or ’80s. Personal computers were like that. And so you punch holes, you write your code, and then you translate, you look in the book. You translate into which positions, and you punch it. And then you get, get the holes inside and let the computer read the whole code, the whole strips. And then you—it finally printed out the results. It’s very simp- it’s very kind of simple calculations, but I’m really interested, because, gee, it’s really funny, right? And, although the computer occupied the whole room. And then—but by the time I graduated from [inaudible 1 word], the personal computer kind of develop in kind of—very—the—high level because you start to see the small keyboard, you have the monitors, you have the [inaudible 2 words], the graphics. So at that time I’m kind of very interested in coding, in writing code, because you can control everything, right? Everything is under your control. And then you write code, and you can instruct the machine to do this or that. So, so I thought, oh, this is very interesting, and then so I’d like to, to get more involved. So that’s why I picked the computer engineering so—and then kind of spent two and a half years to finish my master’s degree on computer engineering.

SW: I see.

JQ: Yeah.

SW: And then, eventually you moved into neuroscience though.

JQ: Yeah, but, see that, [inaudible 5+ words] but I’m still ‘cause, the more involved in computer engineering, because my, my master’s thesis is the is artificial intelligence, because, you know, the computer engineering, artificial intelligence is you kind of, say, write your programs, right? And uh deal in some kind of intelligent ways, interfaces in some way with computations. So um so at the time I was interested in artificial intelligence, so that’s the topic of my master’s thesis. After I finished my thesis, and then—then because I was always fascinated by the human brain, because during my master’s thesis, I realized artificial intelligence, right, even cannot do very simple things—you know, even very simple things the human brain could easily handle things. Artificial intelligence it’s really hard, because those areas and then… they always look like very cramped, not very smart, even very simple tasks. So although they can do things in a faster speed but—for simple things, but for complicated things, the artificial intelligence can uh cannot…so I’m fascinated for the—how human brain works, because the human brain can easily handle things, right? [SW: Right.] Pattern recognition—it can easily handle it. Kinda, just kinda—it’s like a reflex. So, so I’m—I was very interested in the human brain. That’s reason why I pick the—try to say, get some kind of knowledge about how brain works, those kind of things, and eventually got accepted by Baylor, majored in neuroscience.

SW: I see. [both laugh] Well just, a bit on the side um so you said you’re really interested in artificial intelligence, and I heard from Dennis that you really like to play Go, weiqi. [JQ: Yes. Yeah] Yeah, actually I really enjoy that too, but I’m not very good. [both laugh] Uh so—is that related to your interest in artificial intelligence or is that before that?

JQ: No, no it’s, it’s uh—the Go is actually something I picked up in—during my college years…

SW: Oh, I see.

JQ: Yeah. Well, I know that—say(?) Go is… artificial intelligence can handle the chess very well, [SW: Right, but not-] not Chinese chess, but not Go.

SW: Yeah. Okay. I see. Well, so um so, after you studied computer engineering, then you applied to Baylor. Um and were you applying to other schools in the U.S. too?

JQ: Uh I also applied to, say… because, at that time I had two choices. Either I could, say, go to engineering school, say continue my studies on artificial intelligence. I can’t appl- I can’t go to say, I want, I applied also… let me recall, which school I applied… I applied to UC Berkeley, I think, and also the, the, the UC Berkeley, UCLA, UH probably also on my list. A couple other schools, Duke, probably, also. And al- on…yeah in the southeast… maybe, Duke, Duke, Clemson—Clemson—at the time, artificial intelligence kinda, kinda leading—is the leading field in that school(?) . So, Duke, Clemson, yeah also the UT Austin. But I also—but uh
I also picked the Baylor because of neuroscience, as a, as a—like the backup, because my—at that time my—the major interest was in artificial intelligence and also the computer science, so I wanted to pursue those directions. But Baylor was a backup because the, 'cause the say, if I cannot get accepted into engineering schools, probably the, the medical school was also my second choice, particularly for neuroscience.

SW: So, just to clarify. So you were applying um not just for the neuroscience program—programs around the United States, but also computer engineering, [JQ: Yeah.] which was your main focus at the time. [JQ: Yeah.] I see. Okay, um was there any particular reason why you wanted to study these fields in the United States?

JQ: Uh which one—the computer science?

SW: Um I guess, so well, you were considering um education in the United States, um and not just computer science and computer engineering, but also neuro, neuroscience, um so was there a particular, particular reason why you wanted to study one of these—sorry in the United States?

JQ: Uh see the- because that—at that time the United States was kinda training all the top students who wanted to go overseas and wanted to study overseas. I think another reason is—probably because they want to—because stay in the United States, 'cause, at that time, you know the—compare to China, at the time, United States kinda have—is much better place for living [inaudible 1 word]. So almost every student wants to actually, not only wants to get education here in the States but also sometimes stay here and continue their life in the United States.

SW: I see.

JQ: Yeah.

SW: So when you were…

JQ: The reason I picked computer science is probably, because uh IT technology kinda is kinda is, kinda a field that welcome those kinds of foreign students. Yeah.

SW: So when you, when you were also applying for these, were you also thinking that you wanted to live in the U.S. in the future as well?

JQ: Uhhh, yes, I was, but I’m not sure I can.

SW: Right. Okay, but that was your idea?

JQ: Yeah, I think, yeah I think every student at that time they want to [SW: Live here.] yeah live here.

SW: I see. Um…so everybody wanted to live in the U.S. after you know graduating from these schools and maybe finding education here too, and um—but were you also concerned that there would be problems leaving China for the United States? Um what do you feel about that?

JQ: Of course, of course. See, the—the first thing you encounter is separation from your family—

SW: Right.

JQ: ‘cause, ‘cause at, at the time, Dennis was probably two, two and a half years old, and then ‘cause, and then I, I I’m just said(?)—although I’m pretty sure I can have a reunion with them years later, at that time I was just a single man being here. So, and then—six months later my wife joined me. And then one year later, Dennis joined us. [SW: Okay.] Yeah. And then, so that’s the first problem; it’s that you face separation from your family [inaudible 2+ words] well I think like you can come across(?), because you—I, I expect they come to the United States to join me. Yeah.

SW: Alright. Well, sounds like it must have been tough, but it wasn’t so bad.

JQ: Yeah, it’s not so bad.
SW: Yeah, it was sooner than you’d expected.

JQ: Yeah, because as a student here I got financial support from my school. So the, so the—the immigration consulate, they had me write for my wife and son to come to the United States to join me.

SW: Oh, that’s good.

JQ: Yeah, so.

SW: Um. So I think you mentioned on the questionnaire, did you say you have siblings as well?

JQ: Yeah.

SW: And did they also come to America?

JQ: Uh. No, well, I have a sister-

SW: Okay.

JQ:—who’s six years younger than me.

SW: I see.

JQ: She lived the whole time in Shanghai.

SW: Oh okay. Um. So how did you also feel about separation from like your sister, maybe from your parents as well?

JQ: Uh, of course the—as I mentioned, I grew up with my grandparents, [SW: Right.] so I don’t have very close ties bound with my parents and also with my sister, because my sister lived with my parents, because she’s six years younger than me, so when she was eligible to go to elementary school, the school was already there.

SW: Right.

JQ: So my parents—so she just lived with my parents all the time. [SW: Oh okay.] Yeah, so that’s the difference. And then so I lived with my grandparents all the time, almost all the time. And then last year in my high school I joined my parents, but one year later I went to college. So I didn’t spend much time with my parents, so I think not very close ties, you know. Because the—before I entered elementary school you don’t remember anything. Almost probably you’ll forget this kind of stuff, because you’re too young. But elements—start from elementary school I kind—much closer with my grandparents, yeah…my aunt, my niece, my cousin. Yeah.

SW: Right.

JQ: So not—it was not too hard to, to separate with my parents [SW: Right.] and sister.

SW: Um. But—okay so—also, so did anyone else in your family consider moving to the United States?

JQ: Uhhh. Not to my knowledge at this time, because my parents once lived here. They spent one year with us and eventually they moved right back to Shanghai because they don’t like life here. ‘Cause maybe the the language barrier, those kinds of things, and then without a car you cannot go anywhere, because it’s not New York.

SW: Yeah or Shanghai! [both laughs]

JQ: So, so they lived in Shanghai and were kind of used to the lifestyle in Shanghai.
SW: Right. Okay, um...so you talked a little bit about your concerns about separation with your son, your wife, um but um also did you have... well, that’s kind of negative about your concerns, but did you have any expectations? Um, like so, you wanted to find an education, you...

JQ: Of course, of course. Of course, you have high expectations. You know once you graduate from school here, probably can get a nice job here.

SW: Right.

JQ: And then, it, it—you’re—so because the U.S. dollar at the time probably... for the same amount of dollars you own here, and then you get a much better life here compared to what are you(?) life in Shanghai. So of course you have high expectations here. ‘Cause that’s the truth, ‘cause you’d definitely have a better life here, at the time. I mean, at that time.

SW: Right.

JQ: So, so it’s uh that’s, that’s why it’s no surprise everybody they want to move to the United States.

SW: And sorry, which year, again, [JQ: Which year?] was this that you first moved to Baylor?


SW: And then, so a year later, your whole family was here, in 1994.

JQ: Yeah.

SW: I see. Okay. Um. And you said you were applying to a bunch of other schools originally, um were you also considering the cities these places were in? So, I mean, Duke is in Durham, North Carolina, and Berkeley is in northern California, and these are all very different from Houston.

JQ: I had no idea at the time, [SW: Okay.] ‘cause I only pick the schools from Newsweek. [SW laughs] I had no idea how the city looks like [SW: Oh okay.] and then what kind of environment the city is. So I had no idea. So the reason I chose Houston as, as a, as a target was because of Baylor, ‘cause I pick, I pick Baylor—at the time, when I pick Baylor, I even no—I don’t know that Baylor was in Houston, [SW laughs] so basically I don’t care which city it’s in. I care the school, [SW: Right.] at the time. And then, so, so the so the—I get accepted into Baylor and had also applied for UH. Yeah, so. So the—so that’s the, that’s the yeah, that’s the situation.

SW: Um. So when you decided to come to Baylor and you didn’t know before that that it was in Houston, in Texas, did you—were you also considering that maybe there were possibly a lot of other people from China coming to Houston, or to Baylor? [inaudible 3+ words] Or was it just purely the rankings?

JQ: No, I have—any kno- idea [SW laughs] what Houston is look like.

SW: Uh-huh. Okay, so that—after you were accepted did you research maybe a little bit or did you just-?

JQ: Yeah, I did a little bit of research, and then the oh the Baylor actually... because at that time ‘cause we have you know, sometimes we have—people have confusion, because we have a Baylor College of- we have Baylor University [SW: Right, and it’s not-] in Waco, so actually, it’s not the Baylor is actually in Houston. And then the, the—I did some research and found out Houston is somewhere here in Texas, and then, that’s, that’s pretty much the whole picture I had. I had no idea about cowboys or those kinds of things yet.

SW: I see. [JQ laughs] So, so then when you came here, then, this whole thing about you have to drive everywhere, that was kind of a shock then.

JQ: Yeah, it’s, it’s [SW laughs] really kind of a shock. The, the—see, when I, when I applied...when I first come to here, right, I even not book my apartment, because I thought once, once I book—’cause in China it’s different, if you—you accepted into the college, right, college provides a dorm for you, [SW: Right.] so I thought Baylor would provide a dormitory for me. So I, I even not reserved apartment, you know. So at uh—
first, when… my friend pick me—it’s—actually, not a friend, it’s just someone I’d talked to on the phone because I got accepted by the department and then the department asked if you need some kind of help, to see if there were any Chinese students, and by chance, there was one Chinese student there, and then I talked, talked—I talked to her over phone and asked her to come to the airport to pick me up. And uh—first time—so she come to airport to pick me up, and then she said, ‘Do you have an apartment already booked?’ And I said, ‘No, why do I need an apartment? The school should be providing the, the, the housing, right?’ And then she said, ‘No, this is not the case.’ And then she drive me around and she said because you need transportation, so you have to find an apartment near the bus line. So she drive me around near the Bayou and eventually find a, find a one-bedroom it’s kinda—it’s open, so I moved in. And on the same day I landed in Houston, I moved in that apartment. [both laughs]

SW: Wow, so you found your apartment very quick then! [both laugh]

JQ: Yes, very quickly!

SW: I see.

JQ: Actually, it’s not—it’s, it’s a it’s a three-bedroom shared by with by the three different people. Just one bedroom was open because one person had just moved out.

SW: Oh, I see.

JQ: So yeah.

SW: Uh so how long did you stay in that first bedroom?

JQ: UH once the—let me see, three months later, because my wife come to here, and then I could not stay in that bedroom. Then I start to look for a single one-bedroom apartment. Yes, in the—part off (?) Biessonnet somewhere, Biessonnet and Bellaire. And I found a uh single one-bedroom apartment. And so we moved into that apartment. [both laugh]

SW: Um…hm.

JQ: But still on the bus line ‘cause at the time, I didn’t know how to drive. [SW laughs] And so—that time, in the end of ‘93, and then we had a winter break. So and then I looked into the newspaper to find a driving school and then in Chinatown there are driving schools, so I attended driving class over there, and one week later I got a license. [both laughs] And once you have a license, you start to, to look for cars and to buy a car.

SW: I see, but originally you had to take the bus, [JQ: Yeah.] and, and was that okay?

JQ: It’s okay, ‘cause in China we, we, we took the bus regularly, [SW: Right.] or you ride the bicycle. Actually, I, I, I, I ride the bicycle for quite a long time, for a couple months. Yeah. [laughs]

SW: I see, um but you nev—did you ever feel—how did you feel about trans- transportation, in terms of—like, was it, was it okay with your job, would you see other people having a problem with like maybe from China, and—oh, you need a car to get places here. Would that prevent them from—

JQ: Oh, the transportation is—see, on first day, ‘cause the transportation here is kind of different from- [SW: Yeah, totally different, right?] Yeah, in China, you know, every bus stop, there is a uh place marking the station name, and basically it’s a map of the whole route. [SW: Right.] You have stops, stops, you know which stop and which one is next stop. And on the first day I ride of course, I ride the Bellaire 2, I remember clearly, and then I go to the Medical Center. And then the—no 68, 68, it’s not Bellaire. The 68 goes to Stella Link and then go to Medical Center. So I ride to 68, I ride the 68 to, to Medical Center on the first day, right? It was no problem at all, ‘cause the—right at the front door of my apartment there was a bus stop. So I, so I arrived and go to Baylor, and uh and when I came back, right to finished everything—and the first day was just administration—come back to the apartment I, I, I jumped on 68. And 68, because the bus sign there’s no stop right, don’t tell you which next stop is, so I just jumped on 68, actually, that 68 is, is in the opposite direction, it goes to Hermann Park. [both laughs] And so I… and in the morning I don’t see a park, along the driveway(?)[both laughs] and suddenly I see a park. It definitely was in the wrong direction. So I asked the driver to stop
and then get out, and take the opposite direction back to the apartment. So that’s the, the big difference because in China you can count—even say you don’t know—you can count the stop, you know which stop, you know the direction very clearly. Here, ’cause you don’t have the—first, you’re not familiar with the surrounding area, right, you don’t know which direction you should go to get to your place. Actually, you’re kind of blind, which direction I should take in the Medical Center right, if you are not familiar with the route.

SW: Actually I was very lost there when I first got here, too. [both laugh] Um yeah, so—also uh did you ever feel that um maybe because you were from China and so you weren’t a native speaker of English, did you ever feel that that was a problem? Especially, like maybe on this first day, you know, you were kind of confused about transportation—did you feel like if your English was better, maybe, then you could have figured this out sooner, or…

JQ: Uh of course, if you speak English very well of course you can ask people for help, right? So maybe, you, you, you for example, say, if I ask people say, if I get off the bus, I can confirm is this direction is right. ’Cause on the first day, I, I don’t remember the street name; that’s what the question is. So I only remembered the rough directions, say, away from the Medical Center or going to the Medical Center. Those two things. So of course you can ask the driver for help, but unfortunately I didn’t. [both laugh]

SW: Well, well, maybe, I don’t know, did you feel that maybe it was your personality, like—oh, you just…

JQ: Uhhh, I think in that case it’s probably just because I thought that’s the way—that’s the direction I should take.

SW: Oh okay. I see. Um. Also, about more on the language thing, did you ever feel—how did you feel about the classes you took here? I guess they were taught in English, right? So did you ever feel like that was a problem or…[JQ: Of course.] of course, right?

JQ: There was a huge problem. And then ’cause the, it’s—it’s—we learned English, say, listening to tapes, and later we learned English by looking—by watching movies, those kinds of things, so and so but—and listening to the radio. I think at that time it was called the Voice of America, particularly for, broadcasted towards the Chinese audience. They have two versions, one the Chinese version, another is the English version. The English version is, say the host speaks at a very low speed, so it helps you to understand the whole sentence. [SW: I see.] And then by comparing the Chinese version and English version, you can quickly learn the language, you know, English language. But so—because everything was on a slow pace, right. But here it’s different. They speak in the native ways, and everything comes out naturally. So and I could not even [SW laughs] recognize what they said. Yeah what—I, I, I they answer, even say—the, the, the, the, the teacher said what kind of homework you should do, and they don’t write it on the blackboard. [SW laughs] They just said it. And then I even cannot write down which homework I should do, and then—but I was very fortunate that I had a classmate—she was also from India—and she gave me a big help. She wrote down everything for me, and…

SW: That’s great.

JQ: Yes. [both laugh]

SW: So, yeah I mean I have some international friends here as well, and they also say when they first come here you know they’re not used to [JQ: Yeah.] having English at this speed. Um so maybe how long would you say that it took you to get used to this, then?

JQ: And then so, when I realize so this is a really huge problem, right? I started to listen to the, to the… I immediately started by buying a TV ‘cause, ’cause I needed to listen to the language on a regular basis, and particularly I listened to the ESPN, because they speak very, very fast, right. [SW: Right.] [both laughs] And then, so probably a few months later I start to kinda, kinda gradually, gradually catch the pace.

SW: Right, I see.

JQ: I think at least three months later.

SW: Okay.
JQ: First three months.

SW: Yeah. [both laughs] I see, okay, um and then—so how long did you study at Baylor, then, for neuroscience? Before you finished your PhD?

JQ: Uhhh, my PhD—five years.

SW: Five years, okay, and then you finished in 1998?


SW: I see. Okay, and then after that, well, yeah after that, um you were applying for a job…

JQ: Yeah, after that I applied for a post-doc.

SW: Okay.

JQ: So I ap- I, I got a position in the department of neurology, also in the Baylor College of Medicine. I did my post- with Jeff Nobels for how many years? For…three years, probably, and I was promoted to instructor, and several years later I was promoted to assistant professor.

SW: Wow. Who did you say you did your post-doc with?

JQ: Jeff Nobels.

SW: How do you spell that?

JQ: Jeffrey. J-E-F-F-R-E-Y N-O-B-E-L-S.

SW: N-O-B-E-L-S?

JQ: Yeah.

SW: I see. So it seems like um it was pretty like a smooth smooth transition. You did your PhD, and after that you just did your post-doc at Baylor, also, [JQ: Mm-hm.] and you just—you were promoted to various jobs there.

JQ: Yeah, yeah.

SW: Oh. That’s very nice.

JQ: [both laugh] Yes.

SW: Did you ever consider um like a different job somewhere else though after you earned your PhD, or your post-doc?

JQ: Uhh. Uh I did, because the—once I did want to go to pharmaceutical companies, those kinds of things, and then, not just limiting myself in the academic field—area- field, and then. But that depends on the—whether you have the opportunity to do that.

SW: So what made you decide that you wanted to stay in academia then?

JQ: Uh one thing is the research itself was kind of interesting, because the—you face challenging things, and then the industry probably more routine work. Research may be kinda more challenging and interesting sort of thing.

SW: Right. But maybe, do you—so you considered you know, a job, I guess, in the private sector as opposed to just education, but, maybe, did you um think of anywhere else that you wanted to go into research or academia, like somewhere besides Houston?
JQ: The, the, the, the, the post-doc position, I was also thinking about some other labs, and the one thing(?) is Stanford. But, well, so compared to Stanford with Baylor, I decided would probably be much better. I also had another choice, the NIH, in the—in Maryland, and comparing everything, I decided to stay in Houston. There are a couple things why I stay in Houston. ‘Cause, I have family, and at that time my wife was a UH student. So if I moved to other city, she’d also need to transfer to other universities, so maybe it would have been a big problem for her at the time. And then, another thing is, in terms of living costs, is Houston is so affordable. And Stanford, don’t think about it if you’re earning money from a post-doc positions. [SW: Right.] So that’s the reason is the—I—that’s another reason why I chose Houston.

SW: I see. Uh… You’ve continued to stay in Houston for some time now, right? Um uh. Is there—but, did you ever consider moving later like—because, I mean, now your son is in college, and, and your wife is, you know, not going to be a student anymore, so did you, did you ever think, well, ‘I could go somewhere else now?’

JQ: Uh, no, I don’t think so. I don’t think I would, I was able to move somewhere else, because I kind of like Houston. [SW: Like Houston.] Yeah. And although it’s hot in the summer, but say, compared to what I was—I experienced in China it’s much better, you know, you say the because you have air conditioning every place. And the weather is hot and humid, but you don’t experience it. Actually, is a—if you don’t walk in the sun, nothing will bother you, right?

SW: And you drive everywhere. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, you drive everywhere, so the bus has air conditioning also, so…so it’s—the malls have air conditioning. So it’s not… I think hot weather don’t bother me at all. Yeah, so. [SW: Well, that’s good.] And also the living costs are kind of cheaper here.

SW: Um. So, okay, also you said um when you first came to Houston, you didn’t know anything about Houston, you didn’t know how many Chinese people were here, or anything, but afterwards um do you feel like you got in contact with the Chinese community in Houston?

JQ: Yes, [SW: Yeah?] yeah.

SW: Um. Could you maybe describe a little bit about it, like when you first moved?

JQ: So when, when I was first here, right? Actually, there are, there are, there are—uh in Houston there are two Chinatowns.

SW: Right.

JQ: One is in downtown. Another is in the, the, the other way, [SW: On Bellaire.] over there. But, well, on the 1993, not many, say, shopping malls over there. Probably two major places, Welcome Food Center and another food center. So—and then, parking lots—there weren’t many cars over there. Right now, it’s, it’s completely…and so we avoid shopping on Saturday and Sunday afternoon, because you don’t—you cannot find a place to park your car. So we’re shopping on Saturday evening and Sunday evening to avoid the traffic. Just so many say, the, the, the new restaurants and shopping malls have appeared within the last ten years. And also many, I think many Chinese people live in Houston. [SW: Right, right.] The Chinese population probably, I think, maybe doubled in the last decade. I don’t have the real numbers, but I’m pretty sure, ‘cause the, the parking lots are big, is big evidence.

SW: [laughs] Lots of new restaurants these days.

JQ: Yeah, lots of new restaurants these days, and even just looking into the parking lots, you know the population’s… [both laugh]

SW: Right. Hm. Um so this uh this growing Chinese population in Houston—do you feel like um do you feel like people are now more used to having Chinese people around, like non-Chinese people in Houston? Like do you feel that’s affected you and your work and your studying maybe?
JQ: Uh I don’t think so, because the uh, uh—you mean the … when I was a student in Baylor, right, there are not that many Chinese people, right? And then when I was a post-doc, there were many, because in the lunch-time cafeteria, there were many Chinese people sitting around. And the—right now you look into the Baylor labs, every lab has Chinese, either students or employees. So it’s, it’s, it’s many people over there.

SW: I see. Um. But did you feel like being Chinese affected your, your work?

JQ: Uh I don’t think so. [SW: You don’t think so?] Yeah, yeah, [SW: Well, that’s very good.] I don’t think so. I think in the academic field, I think it’s pretty much fair, because you do your job, and then your, your, your—the—your contributions will appear on papers—those kinds of things. Yeah.

SW: Right. Interesting. Mmm. Outside of that, as well, like maybe when you’re looking at housing or just living in the Houston community, did you ever feel like, there were any—I guess, there are struggles you may have had as an immigrant initially?

JQ: Uh. Let me recall… uh in what kind of aspects?

SW: Um I just mean, um…like… hold on, can you give me a second. [both laugh] I know it’s a very broad question um, um —I guess, if you were—if you feel like you were treated like everybody else.

JQ: See the—see the, I’ve been in the academic field, probably I don’t experience the same kind of discrimination, those kinds of things, very much, but my wife did, because she worked in private companies.

SW: Oh okay.

JQ: She felt those kinds of things, ‘cause she was a software engineer, right? And then she felt the company, say, treat the people differently, and for certain persons, because they don’t have, they don’t have much talents—they are not much talented, but they get promoted.

SW: I see.

JQ: And they don’t have much contributions to the company, but they get easily promoted because of race, those kinds of things.

SW: I see.

JQ: And then, so I think that she clearly felt discrimination.

SW: Do you think it’s, it’s changed since you first moved? Um maybe gotten better or about the same?

JQ: Uhhh, I don’t think it’s gotten better, just stayed the same.

SW: I see. Hm. That’s too bad… maybe in the future, what do you think might happen about that?

JQ: Uhh. See, see that’s the—in my opinion, right?

SW: Sure.

JQ: That depends on the whole culture, you know, how other people look at you. And then—unless you change the whole culture around, so and then—I don’t think that people will, say, easily change their mind.

SW: Right, yeah, it’s very difficult. I see. Umm. Okay, sorry, let’s go back, so, after you moved—you first came here, you had your bedroom and your shared apartment, and then your wife moved here and you got an apartment um to yourself. Then, where else did you move after that?

JQ: Uh, after that we bought a house.

SW: I see. When was that?
JQ: 2003?

SW: 2003, okay.

JQ: And then we moved into the house.

SW: And you’ve been in there since 2003?

JQ: Yeah.

SW: Wow. [both laugh] I see. Um, Houston is very big, right? And is there a particular reason why um you chose that location?

JQ: My current house?

SW: Yeah, like it’s pretty close by, right? Um.

JQ: Its uh—the reason I choose that location is because the—my son—let me, 2003—my son would be in high school—let’s see, 2003…—uh yes the—2003, yes the—probably the next year my son would be in high school, ninth grade, so we needed to pick a place close to the Bellaire High School, because we wanted him to go to Bellaire High School.

SW: I see.

JQ: And then the current location is kind of close to the high school. He can even walk to sch- to home after school. So we don’t even have to send to pick him up. [laughs] That’s a big problem, because it’s too short. The school bus doesn’t even provide transportation. Within the two miles of the school it doesn’t provide transportation. So that’s, that’s why we picked the location.

SW: Okay.

JQ: Because we knew Bellaire High School is good.

SW: Right. And now that he’s graduated from high school, are you thinking of moving anywhere else in the future?

JQ: Uh no, probably not, no, because we like the house.

SW: [laughs] I see. Um…

JQ: Maybe say maybe after we’ve retired, and then we’ll probably move to say, more suburban areas, because the—in the current location is much more convenient to, to go to workplaces. Yes [SW: Right, okay. I see.] We don’t need to drive on highways. It’s all local, for, for me and for my wife.

SW: Right. Um. So these different places you’ve lived in in Houston—how do you feel about um how your neighbors? Have you interacted with them, seen them as friends, or acquaintances?

JQ: Eh see, before we moved into our new house, we basically lived in an apartment. And in the apartment, is, is uh probably over eighty percent are Chinese, all come from—the majority of them having come from Mainland China. And I liked to live in a small, convenient place. My kid played with all the other kids all the time, so… so it’s, it’s, it’s say and we kinda had close ties with the neighbors. So it’s like a very close community, in a way. And then after we moved to our newer location—it’s, it’s a gated town house, and then the—you don’t have much communication with neighbors ‘cause the—it’s not like an apartment. Everything just say, people handle things by themselves, no very tie, close ties with neighbors.

SW: I see. Um have you kept in contact with neighbors from back when you lived in an apartment?
JQ: Uhhh. Sometimes. ‘Cause the—all my neighbors at the apartment probably they all moved out… to Sugar Land, Pearland…yeah, so we have some parties maybe to come together for holidays.

SW: Huh, umm, hmm… uhh… not sure if I have anything else, [both laughs] but I’m trying to think. Uh. Okay, so um about your status as your immigrant, as someone from China, um you said in academia, there’s not very much discrimination, but do you feel like it could possibly even an advantage at any time, or maybe it was just neutral? Um, like what do you feel about that?

JQ: Advantage?

SW: Sorry, so do you feel like um being an immigrant, being Chinese, has um given you, maybe, an advantage, in some way, in academia or your studies here?

JQ: No, no. No.

SW: Everything was about neutral, then?

JQ: Yeah. Uh you, you don’t get any advantages for being Chinese in here. ‘Cause the—I remember clearly when I wrote my—my grant applications. There’s a, there’s the category that said grant for specific for minorities. I saw that and thought I’m Chinese, right? And then, I should count as a minority, because if you count the Chinese population here, not many. And then, when I filled in my grant and submitted to the to department, and the department chair said ‘no, you are not qualified for, for, for such a grant’. I said, ‘what?’ So clearly Chinese is a minority in the United States, right? And uh the department admissions said it’s not. The minority means the—minority in the presence of the academic field. The Chinese are not a minority present in the academic field. Hispanics, yes. Black people, yes. So that’s the, that’s the definition for minority in that case. So being Chinese does not give you an advantage as a minorities, because probably many Chinese people are already in the academic field. So in statistics they have a more share of the presence in the whole academic field, so you’re not a minority anymore, in that context. [both laugh]

SW: Huh. Okay, um I guess, okay, uh so you said when you first thought about moving to the United States, uh you wanted to pursue your education, and in the long term it would be nice to live here as well, because you, you thought that the quality of life is better. Um so would you say now that all these hopes—they’ve been fulfilled?

JQ: Yeah, I would say, I would say—this is probably still say a yes. And—but you know things can start to get changed. You know the—if you compare, say, the living conditions right now here compared with the living conditions in Shanghai, there’s probably not much difference right now. Twenty years ago, a huge difference. Ten years ago probably also true, but uh right now, it’s not much different—even sometimes, Shanghai has better life quality than Houston here. For example, transportation is much better in Shanghai compared to, to Houston, because they have a subway network underground. You can go to anywhere in Shanghai by riding the subway. Very quick, very convenient. So things have started to get changed. [laughs]

SW: So it seems like one thing you’d really like to change about Houston is the transportation. [laughs]

JQ: Yeah, I would say that. But what I love is the—most love—is the, the quality of air. There’s not much air pollution here, but huge pollution in Shanghai. Maybe just the automobile exhaust is everywhere, and you can smell it clearly. So yeah. [both laugh] That’s what I don’t like. Everything else I think is okay right now over there.

SW: Hm. So, it sounds like, I guess, if Shanghai fixed problems like air pollution, would you consider moving back?

JQ: Uhh. Probably yes. Yes, because that…in that environment you kinda be more natural, because, you know, the—all the people… you have other family members over there, relatives over there. You have parents, sisters, other relatives, over there. You’d have more communication with people. Here we just, you have party—holiday parties. Besides that, not much communication with other people, or maybe, you have the—only communicate with the people in your workplace. Besides that you don’t have much, but China probably
different because you really have so many cases to attend parties, or the—visiting this family or that family, yeah…. but not, say, in say, I don’t think I’d go back, say, within the next ten years. Maybe after retirement I’ll think about it.

SW: But not, not while you’re still working?

JQ: Yeah, no, no.

SW: I see. Huh. Um.

JQ: If, if the, the air pollution gets much better over there.

SW: Right. But what if Houston also improves their own transportation in the mean time? Like became a lot better.

JQ: Of course. Yeah, yeah.

SW: Yeah it seems like there are a lot of advantages for moving back, about the things you said about your family is there, things like that. But, I guess, also transportation is also a big consideration, like you said, so I guess if Houston transportation became a lot better, it more enticing to stay here as well…?

JQ: See, that all depends on your lifestyle.

SW: Right.

JQ: Say, if you—and then, I don’t know say twenty years later what kind of things I put on top of my priorities. Right?

SW: Yeah.

JQ: I just can’t foresee that. So maybe say when I’m old I’ll start missing my hometown—maybe, that might be a driving force, say, say to push you back to Shanghai. And maybe, say, when I’m 65, maybe, oh, I’m thinking I’m still okay and thinking I still like this place… yeah, so it’s hard to say that.

SW: [both laugh] Yeah, it’s hard to say, yeah…

JQ: Yes, because you don’t know, fifteen years later what you look like or what you think about.

SW: Right.

JQ: Things just get changed quickly.

SW: I see.

JQ: But, but um—say, for a short time living over there is, is the—always an option for us. Yeah. But not say—I don’t think we have a long term plan to move back. Yeah.

SW: Okay, okay. Well, [JQ laughs] I don’t really have any other questions for you, but, I don’t know, if you want to say anything else…

JQ: No, that’s pretty much it.

SW: That’s pretty much it. Okay. Well, sounds good. I’ll stop this now.

JQ: All right.