

## **Houston Asian American Archive**

### **Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

Interviewee: Eleanor Tinsley

Interviewer: Andy Lai, Edward Chen

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Transcribed by: Ariel Heiblum

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#### **Interview Summary:**

Andy Lai and Edward Chen interview Mrs. Eleanor Tinsley, a member of Houston's city council, on a radio show. Mrs. Tinsley spoke about her campaign for the city council position and gave advice to people who wanted to be heard by the council. She also spoke about some of the problems and possible projects that the council was facing at the time, including the impact the new convention center might have on "Little" Chinatown, and how the Chinese community might be heard by the city council. She spoke as well about her personal involvement with affirmative action for women in Houston.

Transcription:

[0:00:00.8] Andy Ligh: ...and progress of the new city council. The so-called new city council, which is only ten months old. The current status of several city regulations and audiences, and followed by some intelligent discussions on the problems that need to be resolved in Houston's city to make this city (?) of bigger cities. Just this particular city council member has made a recent trip to Taiwan and participated in the (?) celebration. Actually, we would also like to hear from her about how she feels about the island country and the lovely (?). Tonight's community forum will be anchored by myself, Andy Ligh, and Nai Tin Chao, sitting on the country board, and Dr. Edward Chen who will assist me in the first part of the interview.

Edward Chen is a very recognized leader in the Chinese community. A Rice undergraduate, but finished his Ph.D at University of Houston. He is presently a co-chairman of Texas Taiwan Culture and Trade Association, which is very much similar to the Texas Taiwan Chamber of Commerce. He was the president of the Houston lodge of Chinese American Citizens' Alliance, and the president of Chen's Clan Association. It is my privilege to have Dr. Chen to help me to interview this distinguished council member of Houston's city. We'd better start. It's all yours.

Edward Chen: Ok, thank you very much Andy. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to your audience the intelligent, vivacious, and beautiful Mrs. Eleanor Tinsley, member of the Houston City Council. My family has known her family for over twenty years. My aunt, Jane Gee who will be introduced later and went on the trip to Taiwan, also worked on her campaign when she was elected to her school board position. Her husband and my father were colleagues at the University of Houston in the History and

Political Science department, and recently Dr. Tinsley has agreed to serve on a committee to select the recipient of a \$500 scholarship for a Chinese student at the University of Houston, in honor of my parents. She was recently elected as the Woman of the Year in Houston and she is a Baylor graduate, but she's looking forward to going to the Cotton Bowl, although all of us like Owls and Cougars would really not like to see that happen. But anyway... Mrs. Gee and Mrs. Tinsley, as we said, just came back from a trip to the Republic of China, Taiwan, and the second half of this program will be talking more about that. But in the first half we want to basically find out some things about the Houston city government, and how we as Chinese Houstonians can play a more active role. So here's the first question:

[0:03:13.2] Eleanor, what is the city council and how does it function relative to the mayor's office?

Eleanor Tinsley: The city council is a legislative body. We meet every week on Tuesday and Wednesday. The mayor prepares the agenda. He recommends large, small items, many times contracts. He recommends the individuals who will be the department heads. He has a fairly large stance in reviewing mayor's assistants. And all of these he recommends and we either confirm or deny (?). So it's what we would call a "Strong Mayor" form of government. It has worked in Houston for probably the last 20 years.

EC: I notice that you're elected "at large." What does the term "at large" mean and what are the differences? For instance, we have numbers besides each one of these little "at large" things and I'm not really sure what those numbers mean. Could you explain exactly what "at large" means?

ET: Last year the justice department said that they had a way of electing council members, which was for everyone to be elected "at large," discriminate against minority groups because there really was only one minority representative. Justin Robinson, Jr. So that we had to come up with a new plan for better representation. And so the plan that Houston came up with was 14 council members, rather than 8.

EC: That's such a big increase, from 8 to 14.

ET: Oh yes. Tremendous increase for one year. Nine of those are by district, and that means that the city was carved up so that minorities would be represented and each of the nine people would represent their district. And then five from that "at large." And so I ran for one of those "at large" positions, and that meant that I campaigned all over the **city** and hoped I got a lot of Chinese votes, but I'm trying very hard to represent our Houstonians and have tried very hard. But that's the difference. Of course I'm interested in what happens in each of the districts, but my fundamental concern needs to be the city as a whole. And for the district council members, their first priority needs to be what's going to happen in their district. How can they best care for the citizens of their own district? And of course they're also interested in the city as a whole. So that's some of the difference and it is brand new. It's called nine five, and that's what it means.

[0:06:09.8] EC: Are there any differences between the "at large" positions or are they all the same? Everyone "at large" essentially represents the whole city of Houston?

ET: That's right. There are five positions, I'm position two, but all five of us represent the city as a whole.

EC: I see, position one up to five... (?)

ET: And the others are A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I

AL: How many voters are required, the votes required to get elected to be a council member "at large" versus a council member for a special district?

ET: Many more. A lot more, because you are just like the mayor, campaigning for the whole city. So it takes a lot more dollars too, to run "at large" than it does to run for any district.

AL: You need a lot more voters (?), and also after all you're responsible for the whole city so, not just one particular **district**

ET: I think this is a good system though, in that both groups are represented. And when I say both groups I mean each district should be better represented than it was because it has a council member that people can come and say, you know, "Why is my street not fixed? Why is the water leaking? I can't get through to a certain city official, and would you please help me with that?" And my office also gets a lot of those calls, but they would primarily go to the people in that district.

EC: I think it's a really good mix.

AL: Yeah.

ET: Another comparison would be that it would be like a Senate and House of Representatives, because the Senate would represent a larger group of people than the smaller representatives. They would have, just like our district council members.

EC: Right, correct. Andy wanted to run for city council, what would you have to do in order to become a city council person? In other words, what precisely do you actually have to go through in order to become a city council member. I guess you would be the right person to ask, I guess because you are newly elected.

ET: You pay a following fee of 500 dollars, that is not returnable...

EC: Hahaha, not refundable.

ET: ...and last year's election, there were 99 people running for the various positions.

AL: My goodness, I think that's a good indication that they show interest in public affairs an empathetic attitude towards...

[0:08:52.5] ET: A lot of interest. Out of those 99 I was the only one competing incumbent, and so, that says how horrible our tradition rate in Houston, to beat incumbents. I think it takes the ability to raise money, particularly if you're running at large. I know a (?) council member who ran for a newly created

district position, and he just had to raise about \$2000, and successfully ran that race. And that race, cost her 150,000.

AL: Oh, my goodness!

ET: A mayor's race, to give you another comparison, is over \$900,000. So, you need of course to be qualified, and you need to be interested in the city. I think, Andy, you need, like you and many others have already done, to already have shown some interest in the city. I think it's sort of a waste of time for people, all of a sudden to say, "I wanna serve our city council," and then just present themselves and think that the voters are going to accept them. Because it doesn't work that way, you need to have proven yourself to at least a chunk of citizens, and be able to have a backing of some individuals. Because no matter how skilled someone is, you can't ring all the doorbells, or make all the phone calls, or do the counting things that a candidate... you need office. So you have to have friends, relatives, supporters of all sorts...

EC: You can't go without the recognition of the community, and you have a well recognized and not well received, I guess, like I said, no matter how skillful you are you just wouldn't be able to achieve that in a short campaign period of time.

[0:10:53.5] ET: There's just no way that I know of, of doing it. And that's why I always encourage people to get involved. Rinse out (?), investigate all the other off-year campaign, other campaigns, learn how they're run and what has to be done, and then work your way up in various civic organizations. There's civic **groups** all over town...

AL: Right

ET: ...that desperately need people to work. And then they go to the race and you need to be qualified, you need to be able to raise those dollars, because not many of us anymore are the rich people of the past who could, in effect, put down either a thousand or a million dollars of their own.

AL: I think that's made the game a little fair, like I said, you know it's more citizen's participation and that should be the way the game should be played. The listeners who are interested in running for public offices I guess, we may be able to get Mrs. Tinsley to open up a workshop for them. \*laughter\*

ET: Well, I do think that people need to learn about appearing on radio stations, such as this one. Very few of us even in that very large budget that I had, I couldn't afford even one minute of TV time. It is very expensive, we did have a good radio time, and we did have other forms of communication.

AL: It does take a lot of time and a lot of effort to learn the political process. In Chinese American communities, stronger and stronger winds of the political process however they have a way to go. So I'm pretty sure Mrs. Tinsley would be able...

EC: to help lead \*laughter\*.

AL: How do you feel about being one of the first two women in the city council? Do you think it's more advantageous? \*laughter\*

ET: I think it's a tremendous honor. At first it's like you're in the elite field. I had to prove myself, I think even more than the men coming out of council, because they were not used to a woman being in council. And so I think that any time any of us, whether it's a Chinese American being accepted by the total society, or whether it's a woman, in this case, being accepted by a group...

AL: That used to be a male-dominated...

ET: And, I think you do have to work extra hard to show that you're qualified, and show that week after week you do your homework, and then I think you are accepted. But it doesn't come automatically.

[0:13:54.8] EC: What do you think is the biggest problem, as far as Houston is concerned right now?

ET: Probably the biggest problem would still be the traffic that we have. The mass transit board, METRO, actually is over that. But, if we ask what is the biggest problem for our city of Houston, I think that's what it is. We've got to get a grip on our being able to get to and from anywhere. So, that's the biggest problem. One of my frustrations, day after day, is dealing with the countless problems like the garbage crisis, or the water mains that break, or the water that we didn't have in the summertime. All those things, the services, the potholes, and people will write me letters that they just had to spend eight or nine hundred dollars on their car because they didn't see a pothole because it was not, do not barricade really. So basic services should be done. We shouldn't have to worry about those. So I'm hoping by the time I go out of office, it will do a little better.

EC: Well do you have any projects that you really want to work on, since you don't really like this day-to-day thing, is there anything you'd really like to see the city council do?

ET: Well, I worked on the affirmative action for women. In the past, in Houston, women have not been paid the same as men, and it has been a \$4000 difference at the top level. So it's not just a little bit of money, it's a lot of money. And all up and down the line, women are paid less for doing the same job. And so I've documented that. And the difference in a woman being on the city council, instead of complaining from the outside, is that I have to review every budget that comes. And when the department heads know that I'm going to be reviewing their budget, and I'm going to be saying, "Why don't you have more women in administrative positions? Why don't you have more women in this position? Why are you paying these women so much less?" Then they know it. They're going to have to answer those questions, so I think that there will be some changes made next year. The goals and timetables (?) for affirmative action were supposed to be turned in last August 1<sup>st</sup>, a year ago. Most of them by the time we did our budget in the spring of this year had not been turned in yet.

AL: My goodness!

ET: But I think, partly as a result of my efforts, this year they were turned in in a timely manner in August and early September...

AL: That's a big accomplishment.

ET:...and so I think the department heads will try very hard to meet those codes. They're the ones who set them, and I think they were meant.

[0:17:09.0] I've also been interested in the renovation of the water on the eastern side of our city. Anyone who lives on the western side of the city, you can just draw a line down the middle of the city and figure whether you're on the eastern or the western side. But if you live on the western side, you have what we call natural water. We have about a hundred different wells serving that side of the city. And so you get various amounts of chloride already in your water. But if you're on the eastern side, you're what we call surface water, or lake water that comes from Lake Livingston, Lake Houston, and that water doesn't have any chloride in it. And so, many of the children in that side of town very badly need that chloride for their...

EC: Is that a bit of a conflict?

ET: There's been problems. They are putting it in after 20 years of delaying they're putting this matter out. All the contracts have been met, council has (?), it should go in soon.

AL: I'd like to read one paragraph from the Houston Chronicle, which reported, it says, "the city council's vote on flow (?) renovation indicates a new political climate." And then it took note that, "It was council member Eleanor Tinsley who spearheaded the drive for flow renovation."

EC: I think that's your big accomplishment.

AL: Big accomplishment. Because the people in this part of town definitely appreciate very much.

ET: Well, I think whether they realize it or not, in the future their children will have better teeth. There have been many people in the United States now who are on chlorinated water. And the improvements particularly for three and four year old children are really very noticeable. Just helping them prevent tooth decay.

AL: This (?) preventive type of care.

ET: This happens to be the week that is celebrated as Prevention of Tooth Decay Week.

[0:19:32.5] EC: There's a study going on, as far as the new convention center, adjacent to the east ex-freeway, and actually the city council has authorized this particular study. When are they gonna have the report out, and what will be the next step in the process once the report comes out?

ET: We've had an initial report and we now have a consultant who is looking into it a little more deeply. I would think in another month or so we'll put out a final report. And so then council will either vote for it or against it. Then the architects would be hired, finding a contractor. Parcels of land would be bought. Right now, the Texas eastern area has given 20 million dollars worth of land for this, and there have been many areas under consideration and this committee has worked about a year and a half and finally has come up with this as being... no site is perfect, there are things against any of the sites that they

have earmarked for this, but this seems to have more of the things that they want in it. They need exits to restaurants, to stores and I would think in the long run what we call the little Chinatown there would benefit from this. I don't know whether you feel differently about that?

EC: No no, the question is, of course it could impact by the land being condemned (?) and then essentially the city taking the land where Chinatown now exists. Ultimately, the original plans show that in four or five years that the convention center would expand over the **Eastex** ex-freeway and take over some of that land and so, I really would like to know how the Chinese people can essentially make their opinions known as to how they feel about this particular situation. Is it going to be a good situation? Is it going to be something that they really want to do? Or might it essentially destroy the Chinatown? I don't really have a consensus of opinion right now, but how can we get that opinion to the city council?

AL: (?)... Chinese community about this development. I guess the point Ed's trying to get across is, will the Chinese voice be heard, by the city council through this process?

EC: How will it be heard?

ET: So far I have not heard from the Chinese community at all on this matter. The way one is heard is that they come before council every Wednesday morning, and anyone can speak just by calling the city secretary's office, and they report by five o'clock and you can ask for one, two, or three minutes. If you want to get on first then you ask for one minute, and then council members can answer your questions about whatever you're saying or they might not. But we have a couple hours there when any citizen can speak on any subject and that's the time to come. We were talking a while ago about building leadership. People should come, not just when...

EC: when problems arise

ET: They should come whenever any other interest. Whether it's mass transit, or whether it's something else. You shouldn't wait until just you have an interest that would not be an interest of the total community. But you need to establish a rapport with council and you have to know council members the rest of the year. And when you have credibility, when you're wanting council to do something, and...

AL: That seems pretty fair.

ET: I think that I would say this to you and to all other groups. It's so sudden that anyone comes to see anyone else or writes any letter. For instance, commending us for anything, regardless what it is.

EC: For fixing the potholes. \*laughter\*

ET: People need to establish that rapport so they'll be listened to when their issue comes. And this is practical politics. That needs to be done. And so I would urge you, in the next few weeks, to study those plans very carefully, to see what effect you think they might have on the Chinese community, and bring that concern before council and you might even think up a way to get several council members to drive through that community. Or to have lunch there. Whatever will let us see firsthand exactly what area you're talking about, and what would happen to it.

AL: So to be, I think that's a (?).

[0:25:00.8] EC: Can you tell us something about your family and your background? I didn't really have much to go into this. About your children and what they're doing now, things like that.

ET: Well I have three grown children. All of them live in other states. Our son Tommy lives in Cleveland, Ohio. We visited there a couple of weeks ago with his wife and their one year old daughter. And we helped celebrate that daughter's birthday. We have one daughter, and her husband who live in Boston, she's working four or five years (?) there. She graduated from Baylor in the summer. And then a third daughter who was with us this past week. Kathleen and her husband live in a little town right outside of Tulsa: Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. And they have two children.

EC: So you have three grandchildren?

ET: I have three children and three grandchildren. When we were in Taiwan, I had lots of people to buy for, so I was spending a lot of my time and money buying for these relatives.

AL: I can see that around Christmastime you would be a really great family reunion. We'll have to take a break here to do some of the news updates.

[0:26:35.1] (speaking a Chinese language)

[0:26:46.9]