

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Annie Chen

Interviewer: Ran Chen

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Translated from the original Chinese by: Niky Bao, Ran Chen, Yimo Chen

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Background: Annie Chen was born in Fujian, China in 1948. Her family moved to Hong Kong one year later upon the founding of People's Republic of China. After graduating from an American college preparatory school, Annie Chen came to University of Oregon as a sophomore majoring in mathematics, and met her husband there. They moved to College Station to study in Texas A&M after obtaining their degrees, and Annie Chen enrolled in a master of engineering program on operations research. She obtained Engineer in Training (EIT) Certification during her study. After getting her master's degree, Ms. Chen married with her husband and moved to Houston with him. She started as a petroleum engineer in Cities Service Oil Company in 1973. After six years, she followed her boss, who left Cities Service with a few engineers to join Longhorn Oil & Gas. She obtained a broker license and founded Lyn Realty in 1981. Two years later, Ms. Chen was laid off in the mid of the 1980s Oil Glut, but quickly became a full-time realtor. Her company keeps a diversified business portfolio, specializing in residential & commercial sales, leasing, and property management. Her fluency in Mandarin, Amoy, Cantonese, and English also helped her develop a diversified clientele. Beyond doing regular businesses as a realtor, she helped her clients in various ways- filing tax return forms and insurance claims for new immigrants, sponsoring cultural Activities, arranging hospital visits, etc., which won her the friendly title of "auntie Annie". Now, at the age of 65, she is still working full time, but has been trying to gradually transfer Lyn Realty's businesses to her daughter, Julie Tam. In her spare time, she loves gardening in her backyard, challenging herself by growing all kinds of veggies and fruits.

Setting: The interview centers on the areas of labor and capital to develop a working history around the context of childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities. Much attention is given to Ms. Chen's navigation between work and personal life, and her career transition from an engineer to a realtor. The interview was conducted in Ms. Chen's branch office in Golf Green Condos in Houston Chinatown area. It lasted one an hour and a half and was done in Mandarin. She gave a chronological narration of her life experiences from childhood in Hong Kong to different jobs in Houston. In particular, Ms. Chen gave insights to how a Chinese immigrant could establish and expand her social network. She is a good example of how an Asian immigrant accumulated and utilized her human capital to achieve career success and to live a comfortable life.

Key:

AC: Annie Chen

RC: Ran Chen

...: speech trails off; pause

RC: What's your name?

AC: Annie, Annie Chen.

RC: Where were you born?

AC: Xiamen, Fujian.

RC: Xiamen, Fujian, 19...?

AC: 48.

RC: But in the pre-interview, you said you grew up in Hong Kong?

AC: Yes, I moved to Hong Kong when I was one.

RC: What made your parents to move to Hong Kong after the People's Republic of China was established?

AC: At that time, the Communist Party came to China, so many people escaped to Hong Kong.

RC: Escaped? Does that mean a lot of people from your hometown escaped with your family? A lot of neighbors?

AC: I guess so. I was just a baby, so I didn't really know.

RC: As you grew up, did your parents tell you what their lives were like in mainland China?

AC: I just heard from my mom that my dad didn't want to escape at first, because after all it was our China. But later they were scared that other people might hurt him, people in the Communist Party.

RC: What did your father do for a living?

AC: He was a professor, but he was a politics professor.

RC: Where?

AC: I don't really know. Probably in the University of Nanjing or the University of Xiamen. I don't really know.

RC: So in Hong Kong, were your neighbors mostly locals or people that had escaped from China?

AC: Mostly locals, people from Hong Kong or Guangdong.

RC: How did you learn Mandarin then?

AC: My mom doesn't speak Cantonese. She learned after she got to Hong Kong. So she mainly spoke Mandarin and Amoy. The church we went also spoke Mandarin.

RC: What's your religion?

AC: Christianity.

RC: Oh okay, that's why you went to church in the mornings.

RC: Did you start to learn English from a very young age? Because it was a bilingual education in Hong Kong back then.

AC: Yes. Students in Hong Kong started to learn English from the first grade in the elementary school.

RC: At home did you speak Mandarin or Cantonese?

AC: We spoke Amoy and Hakka to mom at home. Among siblings, we spoke Cantonese, because we learned Cantonese at school.

RC: How many siblings do you have?

AC: One older sister, two older brothers.

RC: Are they all in the United States, or are they in Hong Kong?

AC: My older sister is in Canada. She was in the U.S. and stayed at the United Kingdom for a while. One of my older brothers is Houston, and the other brother passed away because of brain cancer 7 years ago.

RC: Did they come to the United States before you, or later than you?

AC: Only one of my brothers came later than me. The other brother and my sister came earlier.

RC: What experiences in your younger years would make you miss Hong Kong? Things you would miss after you came here. School, places, or events...

AC: You can say that every time I go back, I go for shopping. Because I don't have any relatives or friends in Hong Kong now. You know, everytime, we just go to Nathan Road in Kowloon, which we are quite familiar with. We would walk through, eat through, and shop through that street.

RC: Do you usually go back with your friends or relatives? Go back with your siblings or by yourself?

AC: Always with my daughter. Sometimes we meet friends we got to know here who were from Hong Kong. There were also Taiwanese friends we can meet up with in Hong Kong.

RC: So no family reunion in Hong Kong?

AC: No. there is no one in Hong Kong. Sometimes we go to Hong Kong as a quick stop to other places.

RC: Did you go to a private school or a public school in Hong Kong?

AC: I went to a Christian school for middle school and high school for college prep. I went to a Catholic high school founded by Americans.

RC: So your English reached another level?

AC: Yes. There were classes in high school and college prep taught in English and the textbooks were in English sometimes. For example, we used English textbooks for math.

RC: Was your family well-off? So they could give you the best education?

AC: Like what my mom always said, my dad made a living in education. So we couldn't make tons of money, but we wouldn't starve to death either.

RC: Are you closer to your mom?

AC: My dad wasn't in Hong Kong, because he had to work in the Philippines.

RC: Work? So he wasn't a professor?

AC: He was the president of Cebu Eastern College. The Cebu Eastern College offers education from primary school to high school and two or four years of college. It is two years of college I think.

RC: So basically your mom raised you during your childhood? When did your father leave?

AC: When I was very young. Because my dad didn't speak Cantonese, so he couldn't teach nor establish a school in Hong Kong. He had to go to the Philippines because the Philippines spoke Mandarin and Amoy. It was for Chinese, Chinese education.

RC: Did your father return to Hong Kong eventually, or stay there?

AC: Nope. He went to Taiwan for some time. He shifts back and forth between Taiwan and the Philippines.

RC: What about your mom? After the children all grew up?

AC: She immigrated to the United States and then moved to Canada, because my sister and the brother who passed away were in Canada?

RC: Vancouver?

AC: No, they are in Toronto, Ottawa. She lives in a small city next to Toronto called Hamilton.

RC: Are both of your parents there?

AC: No, just my mom.

RC: So your father stayed in Taiwan?

AC: In the Philippines. He didn't retire until he was very old. He had to retire because he had a mild stroke and his health started to deteriorate. The school even built a house for him to leave.

RC: Because he worked in that school for such a long time?

AC: Yeah.

RC: So your parents were pretty much separate?

AC: Yes. Almost like that.

RC: I find that your family's work ethic is very strong. Do you think that is because of family influence or under the influence of the American's strong work ethic?

AC: My father wrote a lot of books besides teaching. Schools in Taiwan and Chinese schools in the Philippine all used his books. His books are about politics and history. I think we all inherit a little bit of that. We like studying and writing.

RC: That must have influenced how you raised your daughter.

AC: Yeah, a little bit. I just wanted to give her the best education.

RC: For sure. So which college did you go in Hong Kong?

AC: I went to college in Oregon.

RC: So you went to the United States as an undergraduate?

AC: I had been a sophomore when I went to Oregon. It was the second half of sophomore year when I entered University of Oregon. It accepted the Advanced Level scores, so when I went to Oregon, I was already done with two years of college. Eugene, Oregon. University of Oregon.

RC: University of Oregon. Why Oregon?

AC: What?

RC: Why Oregon?

AC: Oh, why Oregon. At that time, in the church, many friends of my mom sent their children to Oregon. The college might have scholarships for students from Hong Kong. So the kids went one after another, kind of like the ones already there helping new ones getting in.

RC: Those children mostly knew each other through church?

AC: Yes.

RC: Have you always been interested in math?

AC: Yes. I always got the first place in math back in college prep. I really love math.

RC: Did you ever think about what you would do after college with a degree in mathematics when you went to Oregon?

AC: No, I switched to operations research within engineering discipline, which is closely related to math, but it would make it easier for me to find a job. Because math gets too “pure” and the path would be getting a PhD and then teaching plus researching.

RC: Did you prefer to work in the private sector?

AC: I barely knew anything back then, and hardly anything about the American government. I also thought about studying statistics, which also makes it easier to find a job. But at that time Chinese students studying in the U.S. just studied what they like with little consideration for job finding.

RC: You were kind of naïve back then. I know that your daughter was very active in social activities at Rice. Did you have any kind of cultural shock when coming to the States?

AC: No. It was okay because there were some Chinese students in Oregon. There was also a couple of professors who held family parties and invited Chinese students over every week. So I didn't feel that I was alone.

RC: Was the majority of international students from Hong Kong? Few from the mainland China?

AC: Yes. The mainland hasn't opened its door yet. It was 1969. But there were many students from Taiwan.

RC: Many students from Taiwan?

AC: Yes. But the Taiwanese usually studied abroad after graduating from college. So there wasn't any Taiwanese in undergraduate. Many of them were already doing graduate school.

RC: Did you talk with American students?

AC: Yes. Because I lived in a dorm. So some communication.

RC: When you chose operations research, did you think about work in oil and gas sector, or did you just choose an engineering discipline that is closely related to your math undergraduate major?

AC: No. Operations research needs a lot of calculation. It happened that after I got my master's degree it was the time of oil booming. You've got an engineering degree, and every oil company needed engineers, so it would hire you and train you to be a petroleum engineer.

RC: During your undergraduate years, who financed your education? Scholarship or your family?

AC: Both. I had a scholarship back then.

RC: Did you work?

AC: Yes. Well, no. I didn't work during the school days, only during breaks and summer. But at that time college was much cheaper. My parents financed some. The financing wasn't as difficult as today's. Also, back then, we didn't need a car. It was not like today when everyone thinks they need a car. It was enough for us to have something to eat and a place to live.

RC: Did you do any internship in graduate school?

AC: I had a research assistantship in graduate school. You would pay the same tuition as the American students, so it was very cheap. You just needed around 200 dollars every month for food, housing and tuition. At that time you just needed around 80 dollars to rent a place with utilities included.

RC: Did you cook when you were in school?

AC: When I lived in a dorm, I ate at the school's servery. When I lived off campus, I cooked.

RC: Did your mom teach you how to cook when you were in Hong Kong?

AC: No.

RC: Did you learn later?

AC: In Hong Kong, just like other Chinese parents, they had to go out to work. So we cooked for ourselves.

RC: How did you feel about Oregon? Compared to Hong Kong.

AC: Hong Kong is a big place. Oregon, Eugene is a much smaller place. But I liked it, the countryside feeling.

RC: Were the people in Oregon more exclusive? Unlike people in big cities like New York and Houston, who were much more open-minded?

AC: No. The Americans in Eugene were very friendly to the Chinese. Because Eugene was a college town, the people there were used to seeing international students. They smiled when they saw you. There was this kind of friendship family. Every international student was adopted by a family, and they took you to dinner or go outing every month. The American families in Eugene were pretty friendly to the international students.

RC: Did you also have that kind of family?

AC: Yes. I did.

RC: Were you in contact after?

AC: No. Not really. After I left, we didn't keep in touch through letters.

RC: Did you ever feel discriminated?

AC: No. Now I recall that the friendship family was only for your first year. When you were done with your friendship, they adopted a new student. So we didn't keep in touch.

RC: So they helped students to settle.

AC: Yes. When the first year passed, it was no longer me. They adopted a new student.

RC: So after graduation, did you come to Houston directly?

AC: I went to College Station. I went to Texas A&M for graduate school. I did operations research. Originally, I was pursuing a PhD degree, but after two years, my advisor, Dr. Maya, left for Iowa.

RC: Your advisor left for another university?

AC: Yes. He went to the university of Iowa. Later, he became the president of Iowa. He recommended me to go to the University of Texas at Austin to work for his advisor for PhD, Dr. Briton? I don't remember his name any more. Anyway, I went there to study. Later, because I got married, I gave up my PhD program and left with a master degree.

RC: Where did you meet your husband?

AC: Oregon. Eugene Oregon.

RC: Where's he from?

AC: He is from Hong Kong.

RC: Did you meet there and then he went to the Texas A&M for master together with you?

AC: He was already doing a master in Oregon. So he went to A&M for PhD.

RC: Did you choose A&M for your husband, or probably, your boyfriend at that time? Or did you go there because the program was appealing?

AC: Yes. Of course. Originally, I was planning to apply to Wayne State University in Detroit to do a master in statistics. After some consideration though, I chose Texas.

RC: And then you moved from Texas to...

AC: I moved from Austin to Texas in 1973. I left with a master degree and came to find a job in Houston.

RC: To find a job in Houston? Did Houston already build up its reputation as an oil center?

AC: Yes. So you got hired on the job. I remember I went to interview for a job in industrial engineering and didn't get it. So I switched. I was interviewed for a job in petroleum engineering and ended up getting hired on the job. Because they really needed engineers. If you have a engineer degree, they hire you on the job.

RC: So you started job searching after you got to Houston? Or were you already interested in some companies before?

AC: No. My ex-husband got a job offer in Houston, so I...

RC: Followed him?

AC: So I decided to give up the PhD program and moved to Houston with a master degree.

RC: In retrospect, how do you think your decision of giving up the PhD program?

AC: We were thinking that if I got a PhD degree at that time, it would be hard for us to get jobs in the same city. I mean if both the husband and the wife were PhDs. But if I only got a master degree, well, if I had gotten a PhD degree in industrial engineering operations research, the oil company would not have hired me and trained me to be a petroleum engineer. They thought a master degree was not that advanced and you could be trained. Still, thinking back, it was a little bit of a loss. At that time, my parents thought it was a loss to give up the PhD degree, but the road is just made that way.

RC: Your ex-husband got a PhD degree?

AC: Yes. He got a PhD in geophysics. So he worked for oil company.

RC: How long did you spend finding a job? Relatively easy?

AC: How long did I spend finding a job? It was very easy. Not long. It was probably one to two months. I found a job really quickly.

RC: How long did you work there?

AC: The first company was called Cities Service, now Citgo. I worked there for six years. At that time, many independent companies were trying to get people from the major oil companies. They really needed engineers, so they offered really good deals.

RC: Contractors?

AC: No not contractor. You are still employee. Independent oil producer. I remember that my boss in the Cities Service went to Longhorn Oil and Gas, an independent, smaller oil company. He brought a bunch of engineers from Cities Service there, including me.

RC: When was that?

AC: After six years. So it was probably 1979. I worked there for four years, and I got laid off in 1983. Because oil prices dropped and independent oil companies got affected first.

RC: Yep. Because they were small.

AC: Yeh.

RC: Were you happy being an engineer?

AC: Yes.

RC: Were you stressed?

AC: It was okay. I had a sense of accomplishment. Because there weren't many lady engineers.

RC: Even fewer Asian lady engineers?

AC: Yes. So my boss treated me better instead of treating me worse than others, because he thought you were special.

RC: So your coworkers were mostly white?

AC: Yes. Young ones. The engineers were all young. My boss was older.

RC: Did you go to the happy hour after work?

AC: No. I didn't drink.

RC: Did you hang out little with your coworkers?

AC: During lunch. We went out during lunch. Because we made good money in the oil company, so many service company needed our business. They would come to bring the engineers out for lunch. We would also celebrate each other's birthday together. So during lunch, there was a lot of getting together. But less after work.

RC: You didn't have a child yet?

AC: No. My daughter was born in 1981.

RC: That was when you were in the second, new company.

AC: Yes.

RC: Did you ever consider staying at home for your daughter? You just gave birth and took care of her for some time and then got back to work?

AC: I didn't consider staying at home, because I would have to give up a lot. We were also lucky. We found a really good nanny, live-in. She lived in our home, so we felt okay of leaving our daughter home. If we had had sent her to daycare, I wouldn't have felt okay doing that.

RC: Do you need a break to check your message?

AC: No, I'm good.

RC: What is the biggest difference between Houston and Oregon?

AC: Eugene is a college town. It felt very different. You could pretty much walk to all the places. The houses were pretty old, but very clean. It was a very small town. When I got to Houston, however, it was a big city, even though it was not as big as it is today.

RC: Which place did you prefer? I think Houston is more like Hong Kong.

AC: Yes. Houston is more like Hong Kong. But I like both places. There is not much a difference to me. Houston has a lot going on. But I am not the type of person that needs a lot going on, going to shows, or to concerts. I'm not like that. Oregon has less offering in those cultural things.

RC: Where would you prefer though? Houston?

AC: For the long term, I would prefer Houston.

RC: More resources.

AC: Yeh.

RC: Did you go back to Hong Kong during those days?

AC: Yes. A few times.

RC: Did your mom come here to visit you? For graduation?

AC: My mom immigrated here after I went to graduate school.

RC: Immigrated to Canada?

AC: She moved to the States for some time and switched to Canada. She stayed with some American friends for some time and left for Canada. It was very different in the past. The flight tickets were very expensive. Students didn't get to go back to home every summer. When students studied abroad, many of them didn't go home for four years. They only went back after they found a job.

RC: After you found a job in Houston, did you have sponsorship and immigrate step by step? Or was there any special government policy, affirmative action?

AC: Oh, for immigration, my sister was born in the United States. In 1938, the Chinese government sent my dad to study in the United States.

RC: And met your mom?

AC: No. at that time, the Chinese government sent him out to study. Two students in total. Study abroad. He came here by himself, but my mom's family was rich. So my mom's family sent her abroad with their own money. And then my parents lived in Champaign, Illinois.

RC: Studying in UIUC?

AC: My dad was doing a master in the University of Illinois. My sister was born at that time. Later, my dad went to UC Berkeley for PhD. Then, China was in war. The government called him back. So he didn't continue his education. So my sister applied for our immigration. She also applied for our mom's immigration.

RC: Did you and your ex-husband go to Chinatown often? Did your activity center on church or your work?

AC: When I moved to Houston, there was only the old Chinatown, on the east side of the downtown. Over there, it was several generations of immigrants from Guangdong. I remember at

that time two Chinese restaurants started to sell dim sums, and people were lining up for it. We did go to Houston Chinese Church. For Chinese students, there were many in A&M but much fewer in UT. Many graduate students from A&M were in Houston. So they would hold parties sometimes and we all got together.

RC: Like the New Year and Thanksgiving?

AC: Yes. Those Chinese families would all get together.

RC: Do you still celebrate the Spring Festival? Or do you only celebrate the Western holidays like the Christmas and the New Year?

AC: We didn't celebrate that much. After the Diho Market was opened in the old Chinatown, more and more Chinese people came. Later, more Vietnamese came, immigrants and refugees. So there started to be more and more Chinese celebration. Chinatown developed larger. Chinatown has Chinese and Vietnamese and many other activities could happen because of this.

RC: Did you go often?

AC: Sometimes. Because I am not the type that has to go to Chinatown for shopping and eating. I am used to going to the American supermarket and enjoy other countries' cuisines.

RC: What were your thoughts when you were laid off? Thoughts about the future?

AC: After I was laid off, I didn't try to find a job in an oil company again. It was hard to find such a job. When I was laid off in 1983, I actually got a real estate broker license in 1981 in order to invest myself. My husband and I bought investments ourselves. If we had a license, we could earn our own commission.

RC: What led you to invest? I know people in oil company earn more than others in general. Did you invest because of other people's influence or more yourself?

AC: The Chinese always have this idea of investing in real estates. The Chinese love real estates. They buy houses to rent. So it would generate profits. There is such a habit in China. When I was laid off, because I had the license and an opportunity to work with some friends who established a building company. It was a company founded by the Chinese and Americans. They built houses. When the layoff began, the building industry was still booming. The real estate was left behind a little. So I went into the real estate and worked as a controller in that company. I am good at math, so I had no problem doing accounting. So I helped them with their financial accounts. I was also doing real estate. So I changed my career at that point.

RC: How long did it take for you to go into this new company after being laid off? Was there a period where you had nothing to do?

AC: No. I started that work pretty quickly.

RC: Did you ever think to go back to the oil industry? When you entered the real estate industry, did you like it very much and want to continue it?

AC: First of all, it wouldn't be easy to go back to petroleum engineering. They hired new graduates from college later. Besides, doing real estate gave me some flexible hours. When my daughter had some programs or events, I could drive her; when she was sick, I could also be with her at home. So there was much less restriction on schedule.

RC: Did you also have financial consideration?

AC: I went out to do real estate, yes. I made efforts doing real estate. So I could earn a steady income. Because I started to do property management right from the beginning. So that was a fixed income, a base salary. And then I did sales. If I could sell houses, that would be a bonus. Not like many realtors who only do sales. If they don't have sales, they would earn nothing, zero income. I also did rental and leasing, you know, instead of waiting for a big deal or a huge commission, I earned less when doing rental and leasing. However, you keep having an income. So I think the path I took, compared to other realtor. You know, many other realtors would say the income is not enough after doing it for a while. But because I did management plus leasing, on top of sales, we could have a steady income.

RC: Did you and your ex-husband split up during this period?

AC: Yes, after I started to do real estate.

RC: Could you tell us why?

AC: I'd rather not talk about it. Yeh.

RC: Your daughter is in real estate as well. Did she become interested as she saw you doing this or did you persuade her to do that?

AC: She went to private schools, so I needed to drive her. Plus, she was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities like ballet and Chinese school. So she always joked about how she grew up in my car. We are together a lot of time. So when she saw me doing real estate, she developed an interest in it. Secondly, my company has expanded and now manages almost 200 buildings. We think it would kind of be a loss if I retire and end my business with the property and clientele. I didn't force her. We sort of have this mutual understanding that she should consider take over my company when I retire. One good thing about doing real estate is that you never have to 100% retire. Many realtors do real estate until very old. But you can slow down.

RC: Have you been slowing down in recent years?

AC: No, still full time. Because our business gets better, because more and more people buy investment, property and give us to manage.

RC: Buy houses in order to invest?

AC: Yes, because we also manage houses. This is the convenience for the investors. After they buy our houses, we help them manage. They don't need to worry. So our business has become better not worse. But my work schedule is crazy. Now I want it to slow down gradually.

RC: It was a big transition from being an engineer as you had to do what other people told you to do to a realtor. Do you feel it's different to be an entrepreneur?

AC: Yes. Many differences. Although I am the boss, my clients are my boss. They dictate your time. They call to ask for things. Like when you manage a house, the owner is your boss. Your tenant also calls you to ask for things. You have to deal with them yourself.

RC: So you have some initiatives, but your clients are still the God.

AC: You can allocate your own time, but other people also demand your time. This is also a challenge. You have to make your business successful. Not giving up, just keep doing it. I also had this idea of selling a large quantity at a lower price.

RC: Do you have a larger sense of accomplishment when you were an engineer or when you became an entrepreneur?

AC: In retrospect, being an engineer gave me a sense of accomplishment. But I don't regret not going back to do engineering, because the road is just made this way.

RC: What I wanted to ask was that after you started to do real estate, do you feel like doing business gave you more sense of self achievement or doing engineering?

AC: The two are almost the same. One is about academic achievement; another is about the achievement that I have built up a business. Since business administration involves a lot of accounting, math knowledge is very useful as well, not just buying and selling thing. You are looking at a lot of numbers when you administrate or invest. It would make the knowledge I learnt useless.

RC: From education to jobs, do you think in terms of numbers and mathematics, you as an Asian from Hong kong are more advantaged than local Americans? For example, you mentioned you got a 99 percentile on EIT exam while many engineering students might be far behind you?

AC: Yes. At that time, my boss thought highly of me. I am not a student with a strict engineering degree because operations research is more "math" than engineering. For some of those students with engineering degree, some of them didn't pass until second try; some had seventy-ish percentile. I don't know if Maths majors have an advantage on exams, because engineering involves a lot of calculation and quantitative analysis.

RC: Do you still think your advantage is from your Math major, rather than your strict college prep, and other education in Hong Kong? I mean, Hong Kong's education in middle school, high school are stricter than those in the U.S.? What factor would you think attribute more to your success?

AC: To some degree, because the competition among Hong Kong students are fierce. I remember I had to take first place on exams, get the highest score or straight A. That's why Chinese parents or Asian parents in the U.S are the same. They want their kids to take first place on exams or get straight A's.

RC: How about you? How about your daughter's education?

AC: It's the same. It was very important at that time. I'm not forcing her to study. There were more aspects to studying than merely schooling. She went to the best ballet school when she was studying ballet, not just some random teachers. She had to learn from the best. She also had the best training when she was preparing for an opera competition and needed to take the top 3.

RC: Do you think you were pushing your daughter or she was a very competitive kid and very strict to herself?

AC: She was very competitive. And now in retrospective, it was a dream that we wanted her to get into Rice. Because they said it was very hard to get into Rice as a student from Houston because every top students in Houston wanted to get into Rice, but Rice could take students only from Houston. Therefore the competition among students from Houston is more fierce than those from out-of-state. It seemed when those kids were in high school, the whole program from elementary school to high school is geared towards getting into Rice. Some people say, "Every

kid can learn to play the piano or learn ballet. But to Rice, or other elite universities, it is not special.” So I sent my daughter to the Ballet Academy because it was a professional ballet school. She could receive special training. When applying for college, they would think that this is a good accomplishment. It was the same to her competition and volunteer work. She would try to make a difference from other students and be very outstanding.

RC: I think it is very different from your old experience? Asian students are more about academic performance.

AC: Yes. A lot of them do not know that when good universities recruiting. Good universities look at multiple accomplishment, including your special talent or volunteer work etc. They do not like students who can only study and get straight A's.

RC: I know your daughter performs ballet and sings very well and is good at sports as well. What hobby do you have after work?

AC: I myself? Or she?

RC: Yourself.

AC: I love gardening. I can say I am a family gardener, quite a successful one. I learn from others and do research on my own. It is not a big skill but I understand everything I learn. A lot of friends do not know what I have grown everything. I can grow a lot of weird things, like bamboos, peanuts, gingers, you know, not like standard tomato or pepper. I even studied sugar canes. You know, whenever people told me how to grow something, I try it out. So this is my hobby and it is a very healthy one.

RC: How long have you been doing this?

AC: I've been gardening for over a decade. I'm getting much better at it now, gradually improving.

RC: Could you describe your experience living in Houston? How many times have you moved?

AC: I've been living in the northwest since I got here. And I've gotten used to it. So my house was built in 1985. it's been about thirty years now and I've always lived there.

RC: How about after 1973 and before 1985? Where did you live?

AC: I lived in the northwest as well. I stayed in an apartment with my ex-husband for about a year. You know, Chinese always buy houses immediately. The house in the northwest Houston is my main office as well as my starting point. I have a branch office in chinatown. I live in both houses.

RC: How's is your neighborhood in the northwest?

AC: It's a middle-income, you know, neighborhood. Our street is United Nations. My neighbors come from Pakistan, India, Vietnam, Mexico, America, you know, different kinds of people.

RC: Are they professional, business people, or....?

AC: I don't know. But some people have lived there for two or three decades. Some are retired now.

RC: Then it should be quite a mature neighborhood?

AC: We are good. Our neighborhood's been secure and well managed. I think the most important in a neighborhood is for everyone to keep the order. If not, the houses would be dirty.

If the streets were messy and filled with litter, this neighborhood would run down. No matter who lives in the neighborhood, everyone gotta keep the neighborhood clean. So our neighborhood has been almost thirty years and it has been pretty good.

RC: Do you usually do community activity? Do you go to Houston Chinese Church?

AC: I go to Houston Chinese Church. They have a Guangdong department, which speaks Cantonese. I help with the department a lot.

RC: Do you have a lot of volunteering activity?

AC: I don't volunteer a lot. I just go to, you know, on Sunday our church would have a Cantonese family fellowship reunion. My clients from real estate all have become my friends. I volunteer a lot in this sense. A lot of them do not speak good English and have trouble doing taxes, going to doctors, children's education or going to the court. I always help them translate or give them advice.

RC: I can totally understand this. When I first moved to Vancouver with my parents, our real estate broker helped us a lot. But do you notice a change in the composition of your clientele. For example, when you started out in the early 80s, was there less clients from mainland China?

AC: Yes. But since I have an advantage. I can speak Cantonese and Taiwanese, my clients would not be limited to only Hong Kongese. Now, I have a lot of clients from Beijing, North Eastern side of China, Shanghai, all over the place. In addition, I can speak Taiwanese, a lot of people from Taiwan are very close to me. So I have a lot of Taiwanese clients. It's definitely an advantage.

RC: What about people from other places? White, local Americans?

AC: I have. You know, doing real estate means I have a very diverse customer profile. I know a lot of people as well. Sometimes, you do small things, rental, leasing or property management. You would know more people. You only know one person when you trade houses, but if you... We now have about 180 clients, less than 180 landlords since some people own more than one. So I have such a large client base. It's a very large circle.

RC: How about the proportion of your clients?

AC: I think eastern people are the majority, about two third. But in terms of landlord and investor, eastern people are the absolute majority. Tenants include all kinds of people. Recently I've found out that there are a lot of people from countries like Nigeria. There's a lot of immigrants. We have a lot of Nigerian clients now and have learn to have to deal with them. Their culture is quite different.

RC: What about other Asian countries, such as Vietnam, India, other?

AC: We do have. Because I have a Vietnamese agent, so I have those clients as well.

RC: I've heard that your business is doing very well. But isn't there economic crisis? Does that have any influence?

AC: Are you talking about real estate?

RC: Yes.

AC: Our business has always been going up, not down. Because we, if you, when the economy is bad, people would say it's time to buy since they are really cheap and there's a lot foreclosure.

They buy in. And I think, always tell others, there is not a house that you cannot rent, you will rent it out if you can manage. Our management is always quite stable. We've been increasing houses and managed to always keep them full. But trading is like, when real estate is bad, there's much more foreclosure and more people to buy. Recently, it seems that there has not been a lot of foreclosure. The price increases, and the job market in Houston is getting better and better. Sometimes you need to snatch the houses. So our business has been going up this two decades. But we are not like some other real estate company that only do well when the market is booming. They say because we do property management and leasing, only sales would drag us down a little bit. We can only do so much. But we just steadily gradually going up. But some real estate fluctuate with the economy--that's why a lot of realtor go bankrupt because they don't have a basic income.

RC: Is it because your business strategy keeps your business growing at a steady pace, your business is influenced less by the economic situation?

AC: Yes.

RC: How was the company financed? Did you friends put together the fund or did you take out a loan?

AC: Real estate does not really need investment if you know how to do it right. That's why my home is always my real estate office. You can do from home. Your main job is to go out and meet people. You can do real estate with only a home base and a car. But a lot of people feel the need to set up an office, or rent one at shopping center or office building. That is a risky move. You invest a lot and have the risk of failing. However my style does not involve much investment. You can always continue. We don't have employees. We only need part time job. All agents we need are independent contracts. The majority of my agent has another job. So I don't feel much pressure.

RC: How about your co-workers or agents and other business partner. Are they mostly Asian?

AC: Yes, we have a policy that I don't want now... Of course there's lots of 100% real estate company. They want to work for my company. They would take 100%, but give monthly fee to me. They have to buy commission liability insurance themselves. But I am always quite conservative. I only take in agents if I know them. If agents make mistakes, brokers will get penalty as well; sometimes license will get canceled.

RC: So your career development is now based on your own business network?

AC: Yes. But you know, my daughter always says, when Martha Turner opened an office, she recruited a lot of agents, put out a lot of advertisements and took in a lot of customers. But I feel like my business model is more like a family style, like referral. I don't want those I don't know working for me. My clients came through referral as well. They don't just walk in. If you do things that way, there is a greater chance of getting sued, higher liability.

RC: What's your source of referral, your existing clientele and maybe your church and your friends?

AC: Actually, my clients refer people to me. I told people that I could draw a family tree, from my first client, through a lot of referrals, to now over a three-digit number of clients. I don't seek for business at my church.

RC: But you won't refuse if they come to you.

AC: Yes. They sometimes come to me, but I don't advertise around church. Because I don't think it is proper to look for business in a church. Some people don't care. They go to church to chase their business opportunities, sending out business cards and advertising. I don't like to do it that way. Most of my friends come from clientele as well. Because I provide good services for my clients instead of saying bye-bye after the house is sold. When kids want to rent cars, get sick, or even house decoration, you know, I always help. So they would refer me to others. Of course there are lots of walk-in rental and leasing business, but for sales, the investors in the clientele are referred.

RC: Did you help them for the sake of community service or does it really benefits your business? Do you have any special consideration in doing those, or it's very natural?

AC: Very natural. You just want to do some good things. You are Christian and you are supposed to help others. Of course a by-product is that people would thank you and refer businesses to you. Sometimes we dine together, and some ask me to go grocery shopping together. You know, you just become friends.

RC: Do you attend professional broker networking events?

AC: I don't join other realtors for this kind of networking. Because I feel that many of them are not like me. Their business is business. Like many Chinese people, and Asian realtors, they make me feel that they are just doing business. I think I do more than business. We are like a big family. So many of my clients call me Aunt Annie. They started as my clients. Now they call me Aunt Annie in a very intimate way. When my daughter is not in Houston, many young clients would come to ask how has Aunt Annie's been doing, or whether I'd like to dine with them. Clients became friends.

RC: Do you have lots of competitors from China now?

AC: Yes, sometimes we cooperate. We do have other Chinese realtors. Asian, not necessarily Chinese. Of course there are lots of American realtors, and many American realtors know me as well now. They've seen me before. For example. Once my daughter went to an open-house event hosted by Martha Turner's company. They said, "Oh, Annie Chen, we know her. We co-op before." I didn't expect such large company, Martha Turner, would have people who know Annie Chen. So we now have lots of communication with these American realtors. My daughter just found out that, when she was dealing with business, many people would say, "Oh Annie Chen, we know her." I forget many of them though haha.

RC: So your daughter is more American. Do you expect her joining in your company would bring more local American clients?

AC: Yes. Se is more high-tech. She wants many things computerized.

RC: You prefer a more traditional way of doing business?

AC: Yes, I am more traditional. She does online banking. I am not used to it. I like things in old fashioned way. My clients would sometimes make jokes that if you change things to high-tech, we might not be used to it. We are very used to your old fashioned way.

RC: I guess the average age of your clients tends to be higher?

AC: Oh no. Now we have many young clients.

RC: Do you have any problem communicating with them?

AC: No. Many young clients call me Aunt Annie. We are very close.

RC: Are your daughter's business and yours gradually being separated to two branches or still together?

AC: It's a business partnership. Of course she also realized that mom is a little bit old so she might do less, but retirement is not in the near future.

RC: You don't want to retire, or you can't retire.

AC: I don't want to retire. I don't need to retire fully, actually.

RC: Yeah, real estate industry doesn't need full retirement.

AC: Many times our old customers called to ask for me. Sometimes my daughter is frustrated, but those people only want to find Annie. My daughter would say she is Annie's daughter, her partner and agent, can I help you?

RC: Still need mom to support this business. When did you get the name Annie?

AC: I grew up having an English name. Since my sister was born in the United States and named Anna, my mom wouldn't just name her children Chinese names. She chose Anna, Annie, just like how sisters should have similar Chinese names.

RC: Oh I see. Does your brother live in Houston?

AC: Yes my eldest brother lives in Houston. The other brother passed away.

RC: Do you meet with your siblings often?

AC: Yes. We have reunions. We meet once or twice every year, in Canada or Houston.

Especially since one of my brothers passed away, my siblings and I think we should get together more often.

RC: You have a daughter. Do your siblings' families have more children?

AC: My eldest brother and his wife didn't give birth to any child. My sister has two children, one son and one daughter. She also has a granddaughter. My sister's daughter also adopted two girls, siblings. So my sister now has three grandchildren.

RC: She must be very happy. As a realtor, what's your requirements for your neighborhood? Besides having order and keeping the neighborhood clean.

AC: I am not very active in my neighborhood. Once the owner of the house across ours passed away. The house wasn't sold so it was in foreclosure. The tree and grass were growing everywhere. There were also a lot of litter. My daughter called the neighborhood to complain, but they said they couldn't do anything because the owner of that house passed away. Later, we complained to the county, because county has a goal of keeping its neighborhoods clean. If a house is too dirty, it would cause problems, like mice, snakes, diseases, terrible smell et cetera. The county solved the problem later. People in our neighborhood worked together to find people

to clean the house, at least the yard. Now the house was sold, and the new owner came to clean the inside. So my involvement in my neighborhood is like that, not very actively. Instead, in my office, Golf Green Condo, I am the bought president. So I am very involved. Our condominium has association dues every month, and I am very involved to keep it down, not letting it increase. Whatever we do in my business needs me to approve the budget. So I am more involved in my business area instead of the neighborhood where my house is.

RC: Have you ever felt any inconvenience as an Asian female realtor, or special difficulty in dealing with counties and agencies?

AC: I guess it depends on how you feel about it. Of course sometimes. Landlords are not usually the problem. It's the tenants who sometimes bully you, because you are a woman, Asian. So you know, you have to put them into the right place. If your English is good, you can reason with them, not quarreling. And you must know the property code. Some have tons of requirements. Some say that your air conditioning isn't good enough and they want to live in a hotel. Then you must tell them that you won't give them money to live in hotels only because there's no air conditioning for one night. We have the experience to handle such things. Of course they would "try" you, shouting and bullying, but you always put them in the right place. I know what I'm doing.

RC: You've lived in Houston for 39 years, have you got used to living here and do you still miss the life in Hong Kong?

AC: No. I feel the life in the U.S. is more comfortable. There are just so many people in Hong Kong, and the air quality is bad. Going back is like, having fun, packing with people, going shopping, eating. It's really fun, but for the longer term, I don't think I could have survived in Hong Kong that well. America is, you know, you can relax here. It's more flexible.

RC: Why from the very beginning, did you decide to come to the United States?

AC: Because my sister came to the States for college at 19, because she is a U.S. citizen. She was born in the U.S.. So she came to the United States and we followed her steps.

RC: Would you identify yourself as a Texan or American, Hongkongese or Chinese? Do you have a clear sense of identification?

AC: Well, sometimes I say that I'm...because I was born in mainland China, when we moved to Hong Kong, they wouldn't accept us as local people. Say you now come to America and are recognized as American citizen, but you are still Chinese. So sometimes I think, anyway...I live a comfortable life in America, and consider myself as an American. But Hong Kong is the place where I grew up and sometimes I want to go back and see there. As for mainland China, I've been there twice, couple of days per trip. But now there are many clients from mainland China, I gradually feel closer to it. Oh, I once went to Shanghai for several days. So I think I can belong to anywhere.

RC: Do you think keeping a cultural identity is very important?

AC: No. I don't have the sense of "I don't belong here" living in America. I feel that I belong here.

RC: Then do you have some family tradition or holiday, food, special things you keep in your family?

AC: Nothing particular. For example, we still celebrate Spring Festival, but American's Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, we celebrate too. So I feel I belong to two places, two countries.

RC: But you don't travel to Hong Kong or mainland China for business, just for fun and relaxation, right?

AC: Not particularly for business. But when going to Hong Kong, mainland China, or to Taiwan, I met many clients of mine who are from those places. For example I went to Shanghai because I have friends there who invited me to see the World Expo. I met two other clients there as well. It's not by accident. As I told them I was coming, they would welcome me. My Taiwanese clients treat me in Taiwan too. Every place I went is because I had friends there, so it turned out I would meet my clients when I travel.

RC: Your language skills really expand your clientele. Your Taiwanese clients are close to you because you speak Taiwanese?

AC: Sometimes when I hang out with my Taiwanese clients, they would speak Taiwanese and think I don't understand. I would make jokes that "You shouldn't say anything rude about me, I understand Taiwanese."

RC: Do you have any preference for clients, for example some groups are easier to deal with while others are more troublesome?

AC: Not particularly. I used to have a partner, also an agent. He's an overseas Chinese himself. He always said overseas Chinese are more generous, better. I have a bit of feeling too. Overseas Chinese seem...

RC: What's your definition of "overseas Chinese"?

AC: It's those people who are Chinese, but did not grow up in mainland China, Taiwan or Hong Kong. They lived in Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam. Some of them are generous. I think it's because living in a foreign country requires them to cooperate. That's why Chinese people get along easier. My agents really thinks it's easier to deal and trade with Chinese. They are kinder and more generous. I don't really think there is a big difference, maybe a little bit, not too extreme.

RC: I know that your daughter enjoys travelling and has been to many places. What about you? I know you are busy but what about traveling for fun sometimes?

AC: Yes, I like going to visit different places, different countries. I join those tourist groups. Not like my elder brother who likes to travel alone. For example, in London, he lived for a week and enjoyed himself. I'm not like that. I like joining tourist groups, just to look around. But after coming back, as my brother used to say, "I would often forget what I've seen. For instance, you always see those churches in Europe, but you'll forget about them when you come back. For another example, if you travel in Asia, you will see temples everywhere, but again you'll forget where you saw which temple afterwards, even their appearances. You always see temples in places like Thailand, Hong Kong, Macau. I like eating very much when I was young, trying

different cuisines in different countries. But once I read an article in Houston Chronicle, saying that you can travel around the world in Houston in terms of dining. Because Houston offers foods from all around the world, even the smallest countries. You can get special foods from places like Argentina or Russia.

RC: Usually do you cook more or dine out more? If you cook, do you make Chinese food?

AC: During weekdays, I cook more, because it would be more healthy, but I don't only cook Chinese food. Mine is like a fusion with different countries' cuisines.

RC: It sounds like you are not planning on stepping down at all? Are you going to continue as long as you can?

AC: I also want more time to relax. And now I really enjoy. I often tell people that my second job is as a farmer, and my hobby is farming and gardening. Sometimes I got frustrated when my cell phone keeps ringing when I'm gardening. Answering calls interrupts my gardening and later I have to rush to some appointment. So sometimes I think it would be the best if no one bothers me for half a day so that I can focus on my gardening. Sometimes I do think so. But it's not possible right now. It takes time.