Interviewee: Faye Chin  
Interviewers: Alisha Zou; Melissa Verne  
Date/ Time of Interview: May 28, 2013 at 4:00PM  
Transcribed by: Alisha Zou; Melissa Verne  
Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/12/2017)  
Audio Track Time: 1:19:14

Background:  
Faye Chin was born in Amarillo, Texas in 1936, to Chinese-American immigrants, and has lived most of her life in Houston. She studied at the University of Houston before moving to San Francisco, California for twenty years, and it was there that she began a long career in the hotel business. She has worked for many hotels in both San Francisco and Houston, and enjoys the service industry. She does a large amount of volunteer work for a handful of Asian, Asian American, and Chinese organizations in Houston, and is currently employed at the Asia Society. She enjoys cooking and ballroom dancing, and feels very connected to her Chinese heritage, despite having never lived in China. She is married and has one son, who lives in New York.

Setting:  
This interview delves into Faye Chin’s life as a whole, with a focus on labor and capital. Much attention is given to Ms. Chin’s long career in the hotel business, as well as the differences in her experiences living and working in San Francisco and Houston. The interview was conducted in the café at the Asia Society, which has its Houston branch office in the Museum District near Rice University.

Interviewers:  
At the time of this interview, Melissa Verne is a rising junior at Rice University, majoring in Asian Studies and Political Science. She is originally from Raleigh, North Carolina, is of European descent, and spent a year living in Taipei, Taiwan, where she began to study Mandarin Chinese.

Alisha Zou is also a rising junior at Rice University, and is majoring in Asian Studies and Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality (SWGS), as well as minoring in Business. She was born in Morgantown, West Virginia, and grew up in Beijing, China and then later Boston, Massachusetts. She is of Chinese descent and is very interested in the exploration of the Asian-American identity.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

| AZ | Alisha Zou            |
| MV | Melissa Verne        |
| FC | Faye Chin            |
| —  | Speech cuts off; abrupt stop |
| …  | Speech trails off; pause |
| Italic | Emphasis |
AZ: This is Alisha Zou.

MV: And this is Melissa Verne.

AZ: We’re here today on—

MV: May 28.

AZ: May 28, 2013 at the Asia Society to interview Faye Chin for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history project. Well, thank you so much for being here.

FC: You’re welcome. [laughs]

AZ: Um, so just to start off, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? Just, like, even if it’s a summary of your life. [laughs] Just a quick summary.

FC: Well I’m a native Texan. I was born in Amarillo but I moved to Houston when I was a year old. Uh, when the population of Houston was probably around 200,000. Uh, we moved to Houston from—uh, I was born in Amarillo, and we moved to Houston in ’38—1938, when I was a year old.

AZ: What prompted the move?

FC: My father didn’t like the snowstorms and the sandstorms in Amarillo. And we had relatives in Houston also.

AZ: So what kind of neighborhood did you grow up in?

FC: Well actually, it’s really interesting because, uh when we moved to Houston, we lived at 800 Bell Street, which is where the Exxon Mobil building is right now. We lived in a duplex. And that used to be residential [laughs]. And uh then after we—uh, my father was in the restaurant business on Fannin and Lamar, and then, uh, as each of the, uh, relatives went back and got wives and families, we all—they all sort of decided that this one restaurant could not support all of these, uh, families when it had been supporting bachelors before. So then we had a grocery store in the Fifth Ward, uh, which is, uh, almost downtown now. And then after that we had a, uh, tearoom in—on Westheimer, and I waited on tables when I was eleven years old there. And then we moved the restaurant to South Main, where, um—I think the Fiesta—is there now. It’s right there where the—the point is, where the Taco Cabana, and South Main and OST meet. Our restaurant was there. And then after that, let’s see, I went—I went all through school here in Houston. Went to the University of Houston, and then when I reached twenty-one I finally decided to leave Texas, and I moved to California for twenty years.

AZ: Why California?

FC: I don’t know, it just seemed like a good place to go, everybody’s moving to New York now, but I moved to California, bec—and it was kind of an unheard of thing back in our generation because girls just didn’t leave
home before they got married. But we did, my roommate and I, we decided we—she was having a hard—she had
gotten a college degree in finance and she was having a hard time finding a job that she felt was, uh, you know,
qualified for her education. Because of the, um, the prejudice—you know, people were very prejudiced in Texas
at that time, ‘cause we were still the South.

And so we moved to California, simply because it was a larger Asian population, and we felt that the Asians
probably out there were a little bit more established—didn’t matter to me, I could work anywhere, but she
needed a certain type of job, you know she needed to be in management, all that sort of stuff, so that was why we
moved out there.

AZ: Could you elaborate more on this prejudice, discrimination that you were talking about?

FC: Well the main reason that we had a grocery store in the Fifth Ward was because, um, my father—I’m first
generation Chinese—my father came to the United States when he was thirteen, and, um unfortunately he wasn’t
able to get an education, although, uh, there was a gentleman, uh, a pharmacist who wanted to mentor him and
send him to school, but his relatives that brought him over to the United States wouldn’t let him go, so he had to
stay and work in the restaurant. He was raised in the restaurant business. So when we uh, branched out and he
decided to go off on his own we did a grocery store in the Fifth Ward because, uh he felt that his, uh, language
skills were limited, and rather deal with, um, the whites who were, you know, good ole boys, kinda rednecky
[laughs], and they—they’d give Asians a very hard time.

Uh, back when I was, uh growing up, the thing that we did not do—if you can believe this—we didn’t drive
through Rosenberg or Richmond or Pasadena and have to stop for gas, because they may or may not give it to
you. They may not sell it to you. Things were pretty bad, because you know we were also having the war with
Japan, so just Asians in general were sort of the enemy. And you know we all look alike, so they didn’t know
whether we were Japanese or what.

So that was the thing. But my—like I said, my dad came over when he was around fourteen, uh and he uh—he’s
basic—he was basically a Texan, but he was also sort of a vagabond, so whenever he got mad with any of his
relatives, which he did often, he would just take off and move. So he lived all over the United States, he went up
to Alaska and worked on the canneries, and then on his way back to—from Canada, he worked on the railroads,
and he worked in the dining car—that’s where he learned to cook, and decided that that’s what he really liked
doing. He was an excellent chef. And then when he went back to Amarillo, before my mother came over, he
went to work in a country club, so he was luckier than a lot of Asian, Chinese cooks that he learned to cook more
than just Chinese food. He was really a uh gourmet cook.

So he went back to China and got married to my mother in 1921 but he couldn’t bring her over because of the
Exclusion Act, they couldn’t bring their wives over. So he left her there until 1935, and then I was born in ’36,
when he finally brought her over. Well he didn’t bring her over, my mother came over all by herself, on the
steamer, on the ship, was sick the whole month that she was on this, and she just had a little thing on her jacket
that said ‘destination Amarillo, Texas’ and so she got on the train from the ship when she got off in Seattle. And
she came by herself, she couldn’t speak a word of English, so she was a real pioneer woman [laugh].

AZ: Could you tell us a little bit more about that? Like so, she was prompted to leave her—country?

FC: Well, no, see what happened was they got married in ’21, and they—he couldn’t bring her over, well I—
either he couldn’t afford to bring her over—but there were also laws that they were not allowing the women to come over. And so, it probably, in 1935, they really had not lifted that, but because he had a job, and he was a partner in a business, uh, they were able to get, let her come over, because he was supposed to be an established business person by that time. So, you know, she came over fifteen years after—they got married in ’21, she came over in 1935, so after being separated fourteen years she finally came over. And then she went to Amarillo, and then I was born, and I don’t think she liked Amarillo very much. She may have been the reason they decided to move—I don’t know, they never talked about it. But I said to dad, ‘Well, why did you leave Amarillo?’ He says, ‘Too many snowstorms, too much dust storms.’

So they moved here and then my sister was born here in ’39. At 800 Bell Street. She was actually the first Asian—one of the first—well, Martha Wang—you guys have heard of Martha Wang, you know, she’s very famous, she was probably the first—she, because she’s a month older than my sister, I think she was born—maybe she was born in Memorial Hospital. But I think my sister was one of the first Asians born when the, uh, maternity ward was opened in St. Joseph’s, in 1939. So.

AZ: So going back to your move to California; would you say that it was more of a welcoming environment when you compare these two—States?

FC: Well, there were just so many Asians out there. You know, you felt like—it’s just like when we got there we were so overwhelmed because in Houston, because my father had lived here so long, and he also sort of felt like, uh, it was his responsibility to welcome every new Asian, every new Chinese family that moved into town. So it was—we were so used to whenever we would meet another Chinese in Houston, we just automatically spoke to them. Nine times out of ten we knew them, you know, we knew who they were, so when we got to San Francisco, you know it’s—we were in, on Grand Avenue, you think all these hundreds of Chinese people that were there, and they would just look right through you like you were a piece of glass and we felt [laughs] sort of slighted because we were pretty well known in Houston, and we were nobody in San Francisco, but it was a fun experience for us because, uh, at that—at that time a lot of our generation decided to break—uh, move. And most of them that were in San Francisco had actually gone from Mississippi, because Mississippi was much worse than Texas, about treating the Chinese. The Chinese could not even go to white schools, they had—they either had to go to private school, or they had to go to the black schools, in Mississippi. At least we were able to go to white schools, even though it might’ve meant that we were not going to the school in our district, but they didn’t make us go to black schools, which, you know, it was not that—because segregation was not until, what, 1960-something? When all that stuff started with the lady that got on the bus.

Uh, anyway, yeah, because when we left in 1957, there was still, you know, signs that said ‘white water fountain,’ ‘white restroom,’ you know, it was still like that. By the time I came, I moved back to Texas, in the 70s, that was all over and done with. They were still trying to be integrated by that time. The blacks could finally go to the white restaurants to eat, and all that kind of—it was, it was a real segregated town, and the, and the Chinese were a part of the segregation. They weren’t treated as badly, but there was def—you could definitely feel segregation. You know, so. My father was very defensive. He, because you know he wouldn’t take anything off of anybody, so all you had to do was look at him cross-eyed and if he didn’t like the way you looked, then—that was it.

We had, uh, we never had any problems in our grocery store, because one time he caught somebody stealing, and he just took the man and turned him upside down and everything he stole fell out of his pockets, so nobody ever stole from us again. So. We had some really interesting stories, like that. We felt very safe, uh because when we lived there in the 40’s and the early 50’s, we used to walk all around Fifth Ward, but, uh, I don’t think that a lot of white people would do that now, they—although, you know, because the, the black people just—back in those days, they still were just overcoming the fact that they were just getting out of slavery. It had been almost fifty to
seventy-five years, but they still had that attitude that the white person was the master, and they were the servants, you know, and then we were just one—the Chinese were just sort of one step above them, because when we came, when my father’s uncles came over they all came over to work on the railroads, so they were treated just as badly. Back in the late 1800s and the early 1900s they were treated just as badly as the slaves were.

MV: So would you say that the relationship between Asian people and black people was better than the relationship between Asian and white? Or—

FC: Well, I think because they were both treated, uh as, as inferiors by the whites, they sort of bonded a little bit, you know, but there was still the attitude, uh, my dad used to tell us, as he would say, well we have a store in the black section because we don’t have to speak perfect English, you know, and uh, but the very fact that we’re trying to be our own boss, you know, and the black people respected us, and if you were nice to them they were very nice to you.

I mean—you know, we had a very good relationship with all of our customers, as I said, we—the one man came in and he stole from us and the word got around the whole neighborhood, you don’t steal from Wong’s grocery store [laughs] because he, if he catches you you’re gonna really be sorry. So, but—you know, it was uh, most of the Chinese in the ‘40s and the ‘50s did have grocery stores in the black neighborhoods. The ones that didn’t have grocery stores had restaurants, and most of the restaurants were in the downtown area. Now you see a Chinese restaurant on every corner, every neighborhood, right?

AZ: Yes.

FC: But no—they used to all just be located in the, in the downtown area, the—which is where, you know, between like Congress and uh, Bell, right in that area. The downtown area. That um, there were—there must’ve been six or seven restaurants down there at that time when my father had his.

MV: Now um, did you grow up speaking Chinese at home?

FC: I didn’t learn to speak English until I started school.

MV: Okay.

FC: Yeah. Uh, because otherwise my mother wouldn’t talk to me.

MV: That’s true. Did your, um, did your mother end up learning English?

FC: Well she had to learn English, I mean she didn’t become real, real proficient, but she certainly could make herself understood because she worked in the store.

MV: Right.

FC: Yeah. And then when she moved—when they retired to San Francisco she just forgot all of her English because everybody in San Francisco—they lived right in the heart of Chinatown, so she went to Chinese grocery stores, she dealt with only Chinese merchants and so when she got sick and ended up having to go to the hospital,
and she had a Caucasian doctor, I told her, I said, ‘You’ve gotta talk to the doctor,’ I said, ‘I can’t be here all the time to translate for you,’ so she did pick up her English again. But, uh, and she could make herself understood, but you know she was—her accent was so heavy that you had to uh, you had to acquire an ear for it. It’s just like our neighbors used to say, ‘You know, once I got to understand what your mother was saying, it was really easy, but it took me a long time to understand what she was trying to say.’ You know. She spoke very broken English.

AZ: We actually noticed that you have a really long list of impressive jobs, so would you mind starting—

FC: [laughs] What jobs do I have?

AZ: —starting from the beginning, and just listing them out?

FC: Okay, well I went to the University of Houston when there was only two buildings there—have you been to the University of Houston? It’s such a huge campus now. And, uh, then my first job was with the City of Houston, and I worked there until we moved to San Francisco, uh, then I went to work for an attorney CPA, which I didn’t like at all, and after that I went to work for Foremost Dairies which was a lot of fun because I worked in public relations and did press releases and things.

Then I worked at the San Francisco Hilton after that until we moved back to Texas, that’s when I started my hospitality career. And then when we moved back to Texas, I—I worked in practically every hotel in Houston. Uh, starting with the AstroWorld, before it became the Crowne Plaza, across the street from Reliant Stadium. And then I went to work at um, what is—what was the Stouffer’s which is now the Doubletree Hilton on in Greenway Plaza. Then I went to work for country clubs, I went to work for Memorial Country Club for about six years, then I went back to work in the hotel business. I was at the Adam’s Mark, which is now the Marriott Westchase, for ten years. Then I was at the Westin Galleria Hotel for about three years, then I retired. [laughs]

I retired, and then I just—then after I retired, I um was helping people with—I was a wedding consultant, or an event planner, so I was helping someone with their wedding and I went to work to help them at the InterContinental, which is now the Royalton, that’s the—and he was working—the man that I used to work for had gone to there, and it was really funny because he says, ‘I’m working with this bride, and she’s making me crazy. What are you doing now?’ And I said, ‘I’m retired!’ And he says, ‘Well you need to come back to work.’ He says, ‘You need to come back to work, and take over this—this bride.’ So I went back to work for him until—and I just worked for them until they found a full-time, uh, catering manager. But, you know, catering management was what I did. And the—basically when you work for something like this, it’s all service oriented, public service oriented, people-oriented jobs. I’m a service person.

AZ: So what got you into the whole hotel business?

FC: It was really—that was a—that, that’s a story in itself. I was working for Foremost Dairies, and my first husband passed away, so the man that I worked for didn’t like me [laughs], because I—I was more—he, I was working for another gentleman and they, uhh, hired this fellow that worked for the newspaper because they thought that he would be able to do more, a better job of PR because he had all these connections with newspapers, but you know how you inherit someone? You know he inherited me—he inherited me, and so he really wanted to bring in his own person, so it was perfect, because when my first husband passed away, he said, ‘You know, I think this is a really good opportunity for you to make a change in your life,’ because he says, ‘When something like this happens, it’s time for you to move on, and you need to just forget about—’ And I had,
I had wonderful friends at this Foremost Dairies and I just loved working there. So basically he just asked me to retire, I mean asked me to leave. So, I did, and then um, a month after I left, they fired him. But by that time I had gotten a job at the San Francisco Hilton.

The man that I worked for at the San Francisco Hilton was a showman, I mean the man was on the Mike Douglas Show once, and Mike Douglas, do you—you guys don’t remember Mike Douglas, but he used to be like Jay Leno, and he—but he had a daytime show, and he said, ‘This is the first time I’ve ever had—a—a guest on our program that took over my show.’ But that’s the way he was, you know. Did you guys watch that Liberace program the other night? ‘Behind the Chandelier [Candelabra]? Well this man that I worked for had clothes just like Liberace, minus the rhinestones. And I used to tell—tell him, I says, ‘Well, the only reason you don’t have the Liberace clothes and rhinestones is because you know you can’t sit on them, because you know they’d hurt your skinny ass,’ you know. [laughs] Anyway, so, but he—he—he was such a showman. I sat there, I—I—my interview, I—my appointment to see him was at 10:00 in the morning, and the hotel is really frantic, it’s just all sorts of stuff going on, and he kept me waiting until 3:00 to even talk to me, and I thought to myself several times, ‘Why don’t you just get up and leave? You don’t have to sit here and wait for this man.’

But it was so entertaining just to watch everything that was going on. I thought, ‘Man, this is pretty interesting business.’ So finally when he talked to me, he says, ‘Well I can’t pay you as much as you were getting,’ he says, ‘but I’m gonna pay you more than I was willing to pay the last person.’ So I said, ‘Okay, but tell me, what are my benefits?’ So, you know, that was fine, because they provided you lunch, they provided you free parking, so it got a lot of extra perks but you didn’t get the price, so it kinda made up for it. But working for him was a really, really exciting experience, because at the time he was the General Manager of catering and sales, Director of catering and sales, and while I was working for him he got promoted to General Manager of the hotel, and then he was made Western Region Vice President, which meant that he had all the properties that—all the Hilton properties up and down the West Coast.

And while I was working for him, that’s when we met Conrad Hilton, he came to San Francisco, and that’s when he met with Mecam, who used to own the Hotel ZaZa, when it was the Warwick—yeah, that was the Warwick, before it became the Hotel ZaZa. So Mr. Mecom and Mr. Hilton were the two people that started the hotel and school at the University of Houston. They’re the ones that gave them the endowment for that, so I was working for, uh, Hiltons when that endowment took place.

And so, it was really interesting—it’s uh it’s really fascinating. I think that, uh, I like the hospitality business because it’s very forgiving. If you’re in engineer or a doctor, you know, you make a mistake—you’ve either killed somebody, or they’re sick forever [laughs], or your bridge falls or your building caves in—as long as nobody gets food poisoning in the hospitality business it’s very forgiving.

MV: Um, so, what did—what did you study at the U of H? Did that influence your career choice at all?

FC: My father wanted me to become a doctor, but I didn’t think I was smart enough, so I just took business, and I learned to become a secretary, because I didn’t want to be a school teacher, and in those days you either become a school teacher or, you know, you work in an office, and [clears throat] just another example of how problem—how problematic things were, Exxon, which used to be Humble Oil before it became Exxon, they didn’t want—hire anyone but white people. So we had this community and because I had taken, learned short-handed typing they wanted me to go and apply for a job at Humble Oil, and they said, ‘If you don’t get the job, we’re gonna all turn in our credit cards and cut them,’ and I said, so my father was very sensible, he said, ‘I don’t want her to be the one that goes to work for Humble, if they don’t want her there, they’re going to make her
miserable.’ He says, ‘You can’t use her for a scapegoat.’

And then when I went to work at the City of Houston, it was really funny, because they wanted me to—to, to be hired, but I don’t take typing tests very well, so ever—I kept failing this forty-five-word-a-minute typing test but they let me take it over for, three or four times, and finally, you know, just had me just memorize it, right? But, and this is a terrible thing to say, but it—there was another lady who was applying for the job, and it was between me and her as to who’s going to get the job, but it just so happened the other lady was a black lady, and they definitely preferred to hire me over the black lady. I mean that’s how things were back in the ‘50s, I mean, there’s just no getting around it. There was a lot of prejudice back then.

And then you just have to overcome it, because for instance, we wanted a house on Peden Street, which is right there in the Montrose area now, which is not really very fancy area, and the houses are really small, really old, but then our real estate lady told us that we couldn’t live there because we were not white. She says, ‘But, there’s a law against it—there’s a federal law against that,’ and she says, ‘I think we can, you know, we can get you in regardless.’ So my dad was very sensible, common sense, ‘No, we don’t want to live in a neighborhood if our neighbors aren’t going to like us,’ so we didn’t, we didn’t force the issue. We moved to the North Side instead.

MV: What was your neighborhood like in the North Side? Like what were your neighbors like?

FC: Ah, our neighbors were all real blue-collar people, they were just all real, real nice people, you know, just like us. We were all blue-collar people, you know, middle income. But, I think back in 1940 our two-bedroom, one-bath house cost $6000, but it was all brick [laughs]. You know, and—every little house was just a little bungalow. It was really interesting because when we lived on this street, we had this German lady that lived across the street from us, and she had no children, but she was a real strong lady, and you know she was almost like a man. Well she ended up buying all the houses up and down our street, uh, and then she rented them out, and when she had no heirs, so when she died, whoever was her tenant, if they had been living in her house for three or four years, they got the house. She willed it to them. And she bought our house, too, because my parents retired to California. She called, she said, ‘Hey, your—your, you keep losing your tenants, why don’t you just sell me the house? Because I live across the street, I can watch the tenants better, I can be care—’ So my dad sold her the house, you know, and, and whoever was living in it when they passed away got the house.

And they were really nice neighbors, we—we had one neighbor who, that was really funny. I didn’t even realize, I’m so stupid, I didn’t realize, you know, when the Communists took over, and all that stuff started, I had this one neighbor whose daughter was real good friend of mine, and she says to me, ‘I just never thought I’d see the day that China would turn against us,’ and I didn’t even know what she was talking about, you know, I thought, ‘What is this woman talking about?’ ‘Cause I think I was around the seventh grade, and I thought, ‘What in the world is she talking about?’ I just had no clue what she meant, but, you know, it was because the Communists had taken over, and so, they were afraid we were gonna go to war and all this kinda stuff. But I—I’ve always felt very safe here, being in the United States, I’ve never really felt real different. I know my father did, a lot, but didn’t bother me. ‘Cause you—I was born here. And I felt very secure here.

AZ: So, I understand you moved back to Texas in the ‘70s?

FC: ’74.

AZ: ’74. What prompted that move?
FC: Um, everybody was having a recession except Houston, and my husband got a job that was—that paid him 20% more than he was making in California, the cost of living here is about 50% less, so it was like getting a 70% raise, and he’s from Boston originally, and he, we—we sorta tricked—well, we didn’t trick him, I told him, I said, ‘Are you sure you wanna do this?’ Because we came in November to visit relatives, and this man that he used to work for in California had been transferred by the, by the company that they both worked for. Well as soon as he got here, he was offered a job by another up—upstart company, so when we came to Texas on vacation at Thanksgiving, well we had dinner with them, so he offered my husband a job, because they had worked together at this other company, so he offered him a job at the new company. So my husband liked this guy a lot, they were really close, so he said, ‘Well would you like to move back home?’ I said, ‘Doesn’t matter to me,’ I said, ‘But you’re not gonna like the weather there,’ but he didn’t believe me, because November’s beautiful here. So we moved back. And we’ve been back since. And he stayed with that one company for ten or twelve years, and then, uh they—the, the underwater, uh, hydraulics stuff kinda fizzled out, then he went to work for Cameron, and he stayed there until he retired. So he, you know what, actually only had two jobs in Houston.

AZ: So how did you meet your spouse?

FC: My husband?

AZ: Yes.

FC: As a blind date. Because he’s from Boston. See, my policy when I lived in San Francisco, then he went to San Francisco, he really went to San Francisco to look for a wife, I think, [laughs] but we—we had this rule: Okay, if they’re from San Francisco or if they’re from the Bay Area, there’s gotta be something really really wrong with them if they can’t find their own date, right? But, if they were from out of town, we’d make a concession, and we’d meet them. And he was from Boston.

MV: And that was your second husband?

FC: That was my second husband. My first husband was from San Francisco; he was a native San Franciscan.

AZ: So were they both of Chinese heritage—

FC: Mhmm. Mhmm.

AZ: —as well? And just if you could tell us a little bit about your family. Do you have any children?

FC: I have one son, that’s still not married. Uh, he lives in New York. He’s been in New York since 2000. Um, he’s a graphic artist, and um, he lived in Brooklyn for ten years and he just bought a house in the suburbs because he didn’t want to stay in Brooklyn anymore. I guess he’s outgrown it [laughs], I don’t know, but he—he says he’ll never move back to Texas—he hates the heat.

AZ: And how old is he?

FC: He’s forty-three. And he’s still single.
MV: How, um, did he—so he went to school in Houston?

FC: No, he actually went to University of, um...what’s the name of the school in Denton? [laughs] He went to Texas, uh, it’s now part of the Texas system, but um, I don’t even remember the name of the school. The women’s school was there, you know the women’s college, but he went to the other one. So he graduated from Denton. And then he worked in Austin for five years, after he graduated. Uh, he was doing, uh, some sort of graphic work for the University of Texas. And then he decided that he wanted to move to California. He’s uh—he went to Austin because of the music, you know the—that band stuff. So he, then he also went to New York for the same reason, because he was, his first love is really music, he only does the graphic art so he can eat. [laughs]

MV: What sort of music is he—does he do?

FC: I don’t know; I don’t listen to that stuff. [All: [laughs]] I went to one concert that he was in, a ‘Battle of the Bands’, and I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll never come to this again.’ It’s, you know it’s that real loud, hard, hard stuff. I’m hoping that by now he’s mellowed a little bit, but I don’t know. He plays clubs. Whatever you young people hear when you go to clubs. [laughs]

MV: Um—

FC: And whatever those things are that they have in Austin that they have twice a year. What are those big battles of, you know, music things? He does—

AZ: Battle of the Bands.

FC: Yeah, yeah, he does all that stuff. Whatever that kind of music that is.

MV: And can you tell us about your hobbies?

FC: What are my hobbies? Well, let’s see, I took ballroom dancing for ten years, and I competed. Um—

MV: When was that?

FC: 1985 to 1995, and then I had a catering business, uh, I’m an event planner, mostly for—not for money, just for love [laugh], and, uh, I like to cook, I like to read, I volunteer a lot. I volunteer for about ten organizations. I only work here three days a week.

MV: Can you list the organizations that—?

FC: Well, most of the organizations that I happen to volunteer for right now are Asian are—I volunteer for Asia Society, and that’s how come they hired me, and then I volunteer for Chinese Community Center, uh, Asian American Family Services, uh, I used to volunteer for Asian Chamber of Commerce, but I don’t do that anymore, I just did a Multicultural Alliance, which is another, uh, they help refugees, I am a member of Asian Women Empowered, which is a group that Asian women join because they—it’s a networking thing, and we—I, I mentor younger professional women. And, uh, what else do I do...Oh, I—Chinese Professional Club, which is a sixty-year-old club, it was—it started out as a club that the, uh, Chinese youth got together, you know, the young
people, and then when they all graduated then it just became a professional club because most of them stayed together as a social group. So I belong to that group. I belong to Chinese American Citizens Alliance. They're both sort of advocacy groups—well Chinese Professional Club’s not an advocacy group, but Chinese American Citizens Alliance is. Have you heard of it?

[MV and AZ shake heads]

**FC:** It was formed in, uh, 1985…1895 in San Francisco. They’ve got chapters all over the United States.

**AZ:** Is there any organization that you were more partial to? That you’re more attached to?

**FC:** No, some of them—it’s, depending upon the time of the year, and what position I happen to hold, uh, I work harder for some organizations, but no, they’re all, they’re all really good, they’re all worthwhile organizations. They all sorta have different goals. This one’s fun, because everything is so pretty, so new. And they’ve got so much money. [laughs]

**AZ:** Um, you said that you like to cook. What kind of cuisines do you cook?

**FC:** Actually I like to collect cookbooks. And I have probably a thousand cookbooks, and I feel that if I cook one recipe out of the book it’s worth whatever I paid for it, but some of the books are really expensive. But, yeah, I like to try new recipes, and they tell you, never try knew recipes on guests, well, when else are you gonna try a recipe for eight people, for—when you know there’s just two of you at home? So I always experiment, you know. My guests are always eating something I just cooked for the first time.

**AZ:** Do you cook any traditional Chinese foods?

**FC:** Uh, I do, but it’s so easy to go and buy it, and it’s so much work. So no, mostly I do Asian—uh, Caucasian food. I like to bake—I love to bake. You know, cakes, desserts. That’s the reason I’m so skinny [laughs].

**AZ:** Um, so how big of a role do you think your Chinese heritage influenced you, as you don’t cook Chinese food that often, but—

**FC:** Well, we eat it, you know, we go out to eat—it’s just too easy to buy it, you know, it’s so cheap to buy it, uh but I like to cook it, you know, it—it’s wonderful because there’s just my husband and I, so usually, I would say five days out of the week I just throw something together, it’s more or less stir fry, so I guess it’s more Asian than anything else, because you can just put everything in one pot.

But um, I—I’m really proud of my Chinese heritage, I—I’m, you know, I think that, uh, historically it’s just such a beautiful, beautiful, uh, culture. And everything about it is so soft and kind, you know. I like it because, uh, [to AZ] you’re Chinese, right? It’s really neat, because in the Chinese language, you know exactly which side of the family you’re talking about, which side of the family you’re referring to, because everybody has their own special titles. I think that’s really neat, I think that everybody, everybody should try to develop something like that.

And it just made it really easy, um, my mother was a stickler for etiquette, you know, respect your elders, and
now I forget that I’m an elder, and some of these people don’t respect me, and I really get upset about it. [laughs] You know, because I remember when we were—went out to eat, ‘Okay, let all the older people go through the line first,’ or ‘Serve them.’ Now, you know, we go anywhere and those young people that are in the line, and they’re eating before we even get through the line. But they forget I’m an elder also. [laughs] ‘Cause I’ve been around for so long.

MV: Did your upbringing by your parents, in particular you said your mother was strict—did that influence the way you brought up your son?

FC: Actually I’m a pretty Americanized mom. He never came home after he went away to college. He only comes home at Christmas. He moved away, and I talked to these friends of mine, ‘How many times a week do you speak to Craig?’ I said, ‘I speak to him maybe three times a year.’ No news is good news, that’s our philosophy in our family. You know, he’s a grown man, you know, he’s not gonna—I, I you know, he talks, you know—because his dad is older, he does talk to his dad more, you know, because he feels the necessity—he does, he says to me, ‘Well mom, you’re so busy, I never know where you are,’ or you know, he has a really hard time keeping—catching up with me. So I don’t, I—I cut the cord a long time ago.

I have my, I have my cousins that talk to their children three or four times a day, and they’re in their thirties, and I tell them they’re crazy, but no, I—I am, I’m probably more of, I’m probably more of an American mom. But we have a really good relationship, I, I feel very, very fortunate as an only child, he’s very well adjusted, you know, he didn’t act spoiled. My son shops at Goodwill, because he can’t stand the price, he says, ‘Why would anyone want to pay $50 for a shirt? That’s insane.’ So he goes to Goodwill, he goes and buys the bag of clothes, and every Goodwill’s not this way, but they have clothes in, some Goodwills they set clothes up by sizes, and you just go and you pay $5 for the whole bag of clothes, right? It’s a great big shopping bag, but he takes them home, he dumps it on the bed, he picks out a couple of things he wants, and he says, ‘It’s definitely worth more than $5, Mom,’ and then he puts it back, and the next time he goes to Goodwill, he takes it back and he gives it back to them and buys another bag.

But that’s the way, that—you know, he has some nice clothes, but most of his running around things for playing in the bands, and for going back and forth in New York, he does—he says because you, he says, ‘You don’t want to look too prosperous, somebody’ll mug you.’ And he’s always carrying his instruments and everything, and he always says he wants people to think that they’re instruments that are really beat up and stuff, but they’re really very expensive instruments, and he doesn’t care if the cases get all battered, but the insides are fine. But he’s a, he’s a really good kid. We only see him once or twice a year. But I’m an Americanized mom. And he doesn’t speak Chinese at all.

MV: Oh, he doesn’t?

FC: No.

MV: That was going to be my question [laughs].

FC: He doesn’t speak Chinese at all. Now when he took Chinese, his teachers asked him if we were from China, because he evidently has a very—he has a gift for languages, uh, he’s just like a little parrot, you know whatever you teach him, he can make it sounds—I tried to take Mandarin, [to AZ] you speak Mandarin I presume. She told me, ‘Uh-uh, that’s not right, I hear the Southern inflection, that’s not good,’ so I said, ‘You know what? I’m
gonna give up on this.’ ‘Cause that’s the only thing that I know. It’s too late for me to learn Mandarin. But I wanted to learn it, just so when all these Mandarin friends of mine would talk to each other, I could catch maybe a couple of words, and get the gist of the conversation, but I only took the class for a month, and I just gave up. It’s hard [laughs].

MV: Um, growing up, were your friends mostly also of Chinese descent? Or did you—what were your friends like?

FC: Well, it was really strange, because we went to church, we went to a Chinese church, and so on the weekends—and I socialized mostly with the Chinese, uh, kids that were from church, but then I had my group of friends at school and they were all Caucasian. But, I couldn’t do things with them, you know, socialize with them. We went to school together, we did whatever we did together at school, and I had one friend, that we’re still friends, uh, she would do—her mother was very, very broad-minded, and she used to have these teenage parties all the time. I could go to her party because my mother liked her. But, that was the only person whose party was that I got to go to. And we’d do slumber parties—I could do slumber parties at her house, but most of my friends were the friends that we had from church, so they were the Chinese friends, and they’re still the friends that I still see, the ones that are still alive, you know.

MV: Um, why are—are you religious now? Do you still go—

FC: Mhmm.

MV: —to church?

FC: I do. I go to Asian American Baptist Church. And it’s an English speaking church only. Because it’s the generation that, uh, you know, probably your mom, your parents’ age. I’m the oldest one there. [laughs]

MV: Were your, um, because your father came over from China, and your mother—were they religious at all? Or—

FC: Well my mother was Buddhist but my father did become a Christian, uh, the last five or six years of his life he became a Christian. He was very active in his senior group at church. He was kind of like me. He—he was busy all the time. He had had a stroke, and uh, it paralyzed his whole right side, but you know, I don’t know if this is true in, where your parents are from, but in China you’re not supposed to be left-handed, right? They—they frown on that. You have to eat with your—everything has to be—so Daddy was actually a left-handed person, but because they made him do it right-handed—so luckily when he had his stroke, it was very easy for him to do everything, switch over to being a natural left-handed, so he taught art classes after he had his stroke, and we were really surprised that they were—he was pretty good, because, you know, okay his whole right side is paralyzed, he can’t write—he, he did learn, his signature and everything was different, but it was still okay, you know, it wasn’t like some people can’t adjust to being a left—because I used to remember he would be nailing things with his right hand, he’d get in a corner, and he’d just switch over to the left hand, and he would saw and, you know, do anything with his hands, and then he’d get in a tight corner, it would be no problem for him to switch—so he was very ambidextrous. Yeah.

MV: Um, where in China were your parents from?
FC: They were born in uh, how do you pronounce it now, Guang-juu?

AZ: Oh, Guangzhou?

FC: Yeah, in Canton, China. [laughs] It was much easier when the Cantonese had—we had more, more Cantonese here. I can’t understand the Mandarin spelling or pronunciation.

MV: So they spoke Cantonese, then?

FC: Yeah. Well, they spoke a dialect. They spoke—they were, uh, Tuisan [Taishanese], which is the main village uh, dialect that most of the people that were from the south spoke before, um, you know, the, the Mandarin speaking folks started coming—because the Mandarin speaking people came over for education. Our—my relatives, my father came over to get away from being oppressed. They were very poor, so they wanted to come here. That’s why they called the United States the gold mountains, because they were looking for the gold that was supposed to be in the mountains.

AZ: Well, I don’t know if you know but our theme is actually labor and capital. So, if you don’t mind could you tell us your starting pay at your very first job and—if you can remember—

FC: In Houston, I was—I had my own private office but I got paid 250 dollars a month—which was considered a good pay. When I moved to San Francisco, uh, I only worked for the city for about a year and a half then we moved to San Francisco and I was getting paid three-hundred dollars a month and our apartment was 80 dollars a month. And that was what, forty dollars per, because I had a roommate right, so that’s 40 dollars per—but it was a furnished apartment. And then when I finally worked my way up to about 500 dollars per month—that was a lot of money then!—but um, this was in 1957 and ’58 and so uh, when I moved back to California, and I went to work for the hotel, I was making around 450 at the Dairy where I got—where the man asked me to resign and then I went to go work for the Hotel and I went back to—I dropped my salary down a hundred dollars—back down to like 400 dollars a month from 500.

And then, I never did make a lot of money because I always got fringes uh but my sister, she’s another story. She’s from—she’s lived in Tennessee and then she divorced her husband, so she moved out to California and she went to work as a secretary. And she was getting—this was in 19—let’s see; my son was born in ’69, so she moved there in ’68. So she went to work in ’68 for around 600 dollars a month. So how much is that a year? 6 times 12 is what? 36,000 a year? No. 600 times 12—yeah—it’s 7200 right? Yeah. Anyway when she retired at age 55 she was making 60,000 dollars a year. As a secretary! [laughs] You know, so.

That, that’s just to give you an example of the difference in—and then of course she was in California also, but I guess if she had been in Houston it would’ve been the same thing because she—what she did, she worked her way up to, uh, administrative assistant. She wasn’t a secretary anymore. She was, um, she was an admin. But you know she was making 60-65,000 dollars a year! So that, her salary went from like 600 dollars a month, er, 70 - 7000 dollars a year to almost ten times that. And she didn’t have a college education because she got married when she was nineteen.

MV: Was she also married to someone of Chinese heritage?

FC: Oh, her first husband was Chinese and then she, uh, divorced him. And she didn’t get married again, she -
when she divorced her girls were in the third and fourth grade and I think that her oldest daughter graduated from high school before she married this gentleman that worked with her. He was, uh, director of ground—he, uh, Oakland airport grounds stuff, he was in charge of all that but he was uh, he was Chinese, he was a mechanical engineer. But he was from California.

AZ: Was your sister your only sibling?

FC: Mhm. Yeah she’s my only—she’s younger than I am—two years younger than I am. Now, they both retired before they were sixty and they go on two cruises a year because it’s the only way that she’ll travel ‘cause she doesn’t want to pack and unpack her suitcase every day. So they, they stay on the ship, you know, they sleep on the ship and they get off and do whatever their things are.

MV: Have you or your sister been back to China?

FC: I went back to Hong Kong in 1977?

MV: Why did you go back?

FC: Well actually, my cousin won the Miss Chinatown pageant in San Francisco; she came in first-runner-up, so she won the trip. And her dad wanted to go because he had not been back to uh, China, since he was 16—when he came over to the United States—and so he wanted to go. So, she didn’t want [laughs]—they didn’t want—she didn’t want to stay in the same room with her parents so she asked me to go, and so I went with her, so that I could be her roommate, so that her mom and dad, you know. But it was, it was a nice trip because it was a VIP trip because she went as uh, she went as Miss Chinese Chamber of Commerce so all the people were, you know, we were wined and dined and banquets every night and everything. So it was a fun trip. Got to know my way around Kowloon and Hong Kong really well. Knew how to hop the ferries really well. [laughs] We were there for almost ten days. We went to Taiwan first, and we were there for about four days and then we were in Hong Kong and we were, we were not supposed to be there that long but since he hadn’t—my uncle hadn’t been back in so long he wanted to stay. And actually that is kind of sad because if we had gone the following year, we could’ve gotten a special passport and he could’ve gone into the interior of China, but he didn’t get to go. So, we just got to stay in Hong Kong—which was okay with me! I’ve never been back and I hate to say this but I don’t really care to go back. I thought it was too crowded, I thought it was dirty, and I thought it was hot. Cause we went in July. [laughs]

AZ: So, when you went back to Hong Kong, how did it feel in terms of looking across the city and seeing all Chinese people?

FC: Oh! It was, well, we had gotten used to it in San Francisco already. Uh, but it was fun. You know, and, of course everybody spoke Cantonese and I didn’t speak Cantonese, like as I said, we spoke a village dialect. But they could understand me, but I couldn’t understand them. And it was really awkward because, uh, I think by that time both of my parents had deceased and so when both of my parents passed away, I just didn’t have anyone to speak Chinese to anymore cause all of my friends are English speaking. So it was very clumsy, very awkward. [laughs]

MV: Do you have a particular political affiliation?
FC: I’m an Independent. I vote for the person. I think I’m a registered Republican but that doesn’t mean I always vote Republican. I think when I started voting the person that was running for president was a Republican that I liked, so I registered as a Republican. Are you finding that most Asians are Democrats?

MV: Uh, I haven’t.

AZ: My parents are Republican.

FC: Yeah. My dad was a Republican too. And even though he was a blue-collar person he, but everybody thought he should’ve been a Democrat. [laughs] But um, but you see all the Asian attorneys in Houston are Democrats.

AZ: Why do you think that is?

FC: I don’t know. I think it’s—it’s interesting—it’s not anything that I’m really into. I’m not a, I’m not a very political person, and I just don’t even—my friend Rogene Gee Calvert is getting ready to run for city council so I have to help her with the election. She was my boss when I worked at the Asian Chamber, but she worked for the mayor’s office, she worked with Mayor White for a long time, so, she’s always been into politics. And she’s an advocacy person, I’m not an advocacy person either. I just believe in living that life. [laughs]

AZ: So if you could happily retire, with, like all expenses paid, where would you want to be? Like, in this entire world? Where would you want to live?

FC: I’d probably stay here. I don’t mind—you know I’d like to go to certain places—I’d love to spend the summers in Colorado, where it’s cool but I don’t think that the altitude agrees with me. But I understand even the Bay Area has gotten hot this summer, I love the weather when we lived in California, that was one thing I did miss about California—was the weather. It, I’m still—we’ve been back here since ’74 I’m still not used to the summers. I dread them. So I just stay in air conditioning all the time. That’s the reason I keep working because if you’re not working then you have time to run around in your car and you’re out in the heat and all that kind of stuff so I’d rather be working in an air conditioned, comfortable building. And this building is like, cold. [laughs]

MV: How do you feel that Houston has changed since you left to go to San Francisco and when you came back? Or even, to now?

FC: Well, I noticed, especially since I work here, that the, a lot of the Asians are really making names for themselves. Uh, I probably shouldn’t even tell you this, but there was one time that they had no Chinese in the Asia Society. None. And there were a couple of people that tried to work for the Asia Society and uh, the former executive director had a reputation for being a bigot. They didn’t last very long.

But uh, it’s really different now cause half of the board is, is, you know, Mr. Chao, Anne’s husband is on the board. Um, and the rest of the men that are on the board have Chinese wives. [laughs] So it’s pretty strong! It’s pretty strong Asian now. You know like Charles Foster’s wife was Chinese and uh, Eddie Arnold’s wife is Korean. Yeah so, I think Sun, the, your first lady at Rice, she’s on our board. She’s a real sweet lady. Great. She used to be on the Chamber board too—that’s how I got to know her.

MV: Do you feel like the different um, sort of, ethnic Asian groups are harmonious in Houston?
FC: They try to be. Especially the ones that are active, uh that are active in the communities, and you know, that are—that belong to a lot of nonprofits, they belong to the same nonprofits. They seem to have a lot of purposes. Each of them like uh, each of them usually are a little bit stronger in the one that they—you know—like if you’re Korean, you’re usually more, uh, active in that group. You know, they have this group called KASH that’s supposed to be very, very uh, well represented by the Korean community. Um, Randy Sam who does a lot of their Korean festivals—Discovery Green has a two-day festival—it’s a huge success. And um, Japan festival. You know, Glen Gondo’s Festival, I’ve known Glenn since he first moved to Houston, so I’ve been very fortunate I’ve gotten to where—one of the reasons that—[laughs] that I’m even doing this interview is simply because I’ve been around so long.

And I was fortunate enough to know a lot of the people that were here first. Cause my dad used to just take me everywhere. And so I got to know all these elders, most of them their wives weren’t here, or they weren’t married yet, or they hadn’t gone back to China to get married—because in 1948 there was a mass exodus. All my favorite uncles—or what - who I called uncles—they all went back to China and got married. And I was so disappointed with them because they were all my uncles and they went back and got wives and started families of their own, because I was very possessive of them. [laughs]

But anyway, that was fun, you know, cause I had a really really good time with all of them. And when we had our restaurant on Westheimer, and most, most of the folk—the guys weren’t married yet—every Sunday we had this bunch of bachelors that would come over and my dad would feed them. And my mother got furious because he wouldn’t charge them. You know, but that’s just the way he was. ‘They don’t have any money!’ ‘They are just working for a living! It’s just one meal a week! So don’t worry about it.’ So, anyway. That was, that was when we were brought up.

And um, I had—I have a pretty good relationship with uh, I know people in every community, you know. Like, Glen Gondo and Donna Cole. They’re very very strong in the Japanese community. The Japanese community is the most low-key of all the Asian communities because I think they have fewer people here. And then the ones that are here are so busy doing their own thing that they don’t really get active and the community stuff except for Donna and Glen. And they’re very very active.

And then uh, of course, there’s a lot of Chinese that have gotten pretty high-key and high-profile. So, but, yeah they seem to all get along well. They all came to this thing—they all came to the Tiger Ball! [laughs] As for Mrs. Chao said, ‘I’m going to send an intern to talk to you because we’ve gotta get all this stuff down!’ Because we, I’ve been working on this for over a year. But my cousin Glenda Zhou, she’s supposed to be interviewing me, but she doesn’t—she didn’t—she says I ramble too much so, she said you guys just need to ask me the right questions and I’ll answer ‘em. Because when we’re talking we’re talking about our relatives, and trying to fit them together.

MV: Is there a favorite project that you’ve worked on with the Asia Society, recently?

FC: Recently. Uh, no, actually when uh, I’ve been volunteering for Asia Society probably for about six or seven years. The Tiger Ball. And then, [Clears throat] when I volunteered to do the Tiger Ball last year when they opened, then I was sorta helping them with lining up volunteers because the gentleman who was trying to get volunteers wasn’t in town, I think he’s from someplace else, and so, uh, Martha Blackwelder and uh, some of the other people said well, ask Faye!
Because I work with volunteers, I have to—I—my, my strength seems to be coordinating volunteers for all the different galas that I do. Like, I’m doing a gala this Friday, I did one last Friday. I do about ten galas a year. And I usually do the registration. So, that’s why I recognize a lot of people, and uh, that’s the reason why they like for me to do registration because most of the people I recognize on sight. Cause of, the same people go to all the galas. There’s a gala mentality crowd.

AZ: So what happens at these galas?

FC: Well, each of them has a different cause. Like, this one, the Tiger Ball, was really nice because they had a tent set up out here. And they had no speeches. And then they used the whole building, and each room was decorated differently and everybody sat in a different room. It was like going to a restaurant and eating in a private room, you know. And uh, it was continental service. Jackson Hicks catered it. And it was really great because five waiters stood at the table and they all put the food down on the plates at the same time, you know simul—it’s called ‘continental service’ and it was really interesting. But, the galas are—this gala is really spectacular. It’s really—uh it’s the crème de la crème. The rest of em just—they just sort of haphazardly do them and hope they make the money but like, uh, this one they charged 750 dollars a person. But they made a lot of money. Most of the galas make about one-tenth of what this one does. But this is their only fundraiser that they do.

And then of course they have the membership, they have about 15,000 members and the members are very good about paying their dues. So, that’s where they get their money from. And then, because most of—like for instance, we had Chinglish here for a month. And, we have a beautiful theater and we never got more than a hundred people there except the last day, I think they probably had a hundred and fifty. Did you see the show? Did you hear about it? It’s kind of an interesting show. Black Lab Theater put it on so, it’s here, it was about this man who was trying to go to China and get acclimated to doing business over there, but it was a cute show.

So they do a lot of nice programs here, um, I got to hear Henry Kissinger, and that was really great. He was, he was awesome. Uh, because he’s older than I am but—bless his heart he’s just so sharp still. He reminds me of the man that I used to work for. In fact, if I closed my eyes I thought it was him. Because they’re both Jewish and they have that little, Jewish accent. And it’s very nice.

So there’s a lot of opportunities here, and it gets really good programs here, that are worth seeing and worth participating in. And uh, we just have to, the public just has to be more aware that it’s around, you know. Uh, but you know this building is, is so fantastic. You’ve been here before? Yeah so. Everybody says to me, ‘Oh my god you’re so lucky you work there! Cause it’s such a beautiful building!’ And I say, yeah, I know.

AZ: So do you have any relatives that you keep in contact back in China?

FC: No. No, I think most of them are gone. Uh, most of my relatives didn’t get to come over to the United States, so, I just had my sister. She’s actually my only, well, my husband had—is from a pretty big family, but there’s only three left in his family. Most, all of them have deceased. All of them. So, yeah. But we—I have a lot of friends. Do they count? [Laugh] No, I don’t have any immediate family. My sister’s my only immediate relative.

MV: Did your husband ever, um, like, financially support any relatives back in China? Or keep in contact with them in any way?
FC: No he didn’t. My mother used to do it. When she was here. Uh, when she was alive. She had a brother and a sister that she would send money to. Not regularly, but just whenever she had extra money. She, she and then she brought her nephew over and she died not speaking to him because he never sent money back to China. So she was really upset with him because he wouldn’t take care of his parents.

MV: Um, do you—

FC: So I guess my father must have sent money to her, the fourteen years they were separated, I guess. Didn’t talk about it, but I—somebody must’ve taken care of her. [Laugh] What were you going to say? I’m sorry.

MV: Oh no, no problem. Um, do you feel as if there’s any sort of uh, prejudice against Asians in Houston now?

FC: It’s subtle. They try not to be. But, you know, yeah. Don’t you hear Michael Berry talk about China all the time? [Laughs] You know, yeah, it’s very subtle. But you know, I think because uh, so many of the Asians are so successful—they really are—I’m really surprised how successful most of them are. And then the ones that came over, like your parents’ generation, I’m sure they came over to go to school. And so they all came over to just get a better education so they’re all smart anyways, so the most of them, if they don’t want to go back it’s because they’ve gotten a good job and they—they’d just rather stay here. No, I, so, it’s definitely a land of opportunity. And I wouldn’t go anywhere else. [Laughs] And if people are prejudice against me, I don’t care! [Laughs] You know, doesn’t bother me. It’s their loss!

MV: Um, do you feel as if there’s any sort of pressure, because it’s as you said, uh, so many of the Asians are very successful; do you feel like that sort of pressures peers—other Asians to be, like, the most successful?

FC: Well, I think there is a lot of rivalry. Uh, in whatever age group is—I’m beyond that now. You know, I don’t, I can’t get into that rat race. I’m ready, I need to retire again! [Laughs] You know, cause if you’re going to be 80 years old, you just don’t need to get into that kind of rat race, so I just, you know, we just have to be comfortable in our own skin. Uh, fortunately my husband, he’s so tight that he squeaks, but he’s always been afraid—his father lived to be 100—so he’s always been afraid that he would outlive his income, so he’s always been very, very conservative. So, you know, we—we’re not wealthy, we’re not in the category as some of these other people, but he doesn’t care. You know, he just wants to be comfortable himself. And he wants to make sure that he’s okay. See like, for instance, instead of going to a regular doctor, he goes to the VA, and he—he’ll wait, but it’s free, so he goes. [laughs] And he’s entitled, so he goes.

But, yeah there’s a lot of peer pressure, but I’m sure there’s always saying ahhh, I’m sure there’s those who want to keep up with the Jones’, saying ‘Gee, I wish I could do this as well as they do’, and you know, but hey. What-oh-I think that whatever anybody has, they really worked for it, and they’ve earned it. You know, like, I, I’m really proud of them. I think they’ve—I think it’s really great that so many of them have done so well. And I’m certainly not jealous of them, cause they’re real nice to me! [laughs]

MV: Did your father ever talk about facing any particular hardships coming over, when he first came over, being particularly because he was from China?

FC: Oh it’s raining guys. Um, he—[laughs] he, he, oh yeah, when he came over, it was terrible. You know, they, they called him names, they, and my dad was really, uh, as my uncle who—we had one uncle that was uh, just a
few years younger than him, and he was the first one to go to college—and, and of course he was very uh, nice and he was very refined; my dad was tough. He went to the shipyard and he, if you didn’t, if those people didn’t like the way he looked, you better not look at him wrong because he’d just as soon hit you as look at you. He wouldn’t take anything off of anybody, but um, but that same token, if he liked you, and people were nice to him, he was really a good guy. But he just, you know, he just didn’t, he just wouldn’t take any guff off anybody. And then being in the restaurant business, people would come in drunk and then they would call him nasty names and they, you know, ‘ching-ching’ things, you know, just say things, they just—he just didn’t want to deal with it, you know.

So, he’d shut ‘em up. He carried a gun. He was a sheriff. A deputy sheriff. So that he could, uh, he got deputy sheriff—he became a, well, he wasn’t on the force, but he, that was only way that they could get a permit to carry guns. So he always had a gun. And a lot of Chinese men still carry guns. Because they just didn’t know what, which neighborhood they were gonna be in, and what, who’s, who’s gonna say something to them. Because people are still cruel. You know, they—if you look different, you know, I’m sure that even in your generation, you guys are still going through a little bit of that, right? I mean it’s not perfect, it’s not a perfect world yet. I doubt if it’ll ever be a perfect world, we just try to—make people do things like this so hopefully people can understand a little bit more about us.

I had this one civics teacher when I was in high school, I’ll never forget her. Oh, she was a real bigot, but she was adorable. [laughs] She would say, she’d get up there, you know, we had no blacks in our class, she would say ‘I don’t know why these black people think that they’re equal, they were all born slaves and they act like slaves!’ She says ‘Look at the Chinese people! They’ve had a culture since before the white people even existed!’ You know, she went on and on about that, but oh she was such a bigot. And I thought, oh Ms. Fowler was going to shoot you some day. But, you know, that’s the way they, they felt that. Back in the fifties.

You know, it was really bad. Even the school teachers felt that way. And that’s the reason, you know, they, some of them I’m sure got very—most of the teachers that were teaching when I was going to school retired when integration came in, although they were still young enough to teach. The high school that I went to, now, is the hometown of restaurant magnet schools. We went there for our sixtieth year reunion the other day and the students cooked for us. It was amazing. And it was a wonderful place to put the school because the majority of students are Hispanic and Black. Now, that was uh Jeff Davis, and it’s in that neighborhood, that’s where I went to school.

When I went to high school, only one percent of my graduating class went to college. Can you imagine I was one of the one percent? [laughs] Anyways, because we just—it was a blue-collar neighborhood, you know, and everybody got out of school and they just went to work. Mostly were factory workers or unskilled laborers, stuff like that. But that, that was the high school I went to. But my high school had the lowest college entrance of any school in town.

MV: Why did you decide to go to college?

FC: ‘Cause my father insisted I go to college. In fact, he wanted me to be a doctor, remember? And I said, no dad, I’m not going to be a doctor. And then he says, ‘You want to be a pharmacist’ and I said I don’t want to sit there and count pills. So, he says, ‘Well, you’re going to go to school’, so [laughs], I went to school. I didn’t really apply myself. I think that, uh, I was so tired of school, you know, after 12 years of school I was ready to stop. But uh, now that I’m much, much older, I think that uh, if I had applied myself, I probably could’ve, eh, become a junior level executive. Cause I know I’m not stupid. [laughs] But I’m just lazy.
AZ: Um, you mentioned earlier that your father was originally, had the opportunity to be mentored—

FC: He was, yes, a pharmacist wanted—liked him, and when—this was when he was in Brownsville and he wanted to, he went to the uncles and said, you know I think he’s—my dad would’ve loved to have been—to become a doctor. And he—had he was really smart. Even my uncle, the one who had the college degree, said ‘Your dad was really really smart, it’s too bad that he didn’t get the opportunity to go to college, because he was probably—cause I know my dad had really, a lot of common sense. Everything that he said made sense. He had a reason and a rhyme for everything. And it was always—’yeah dad you’re right, you’re right.’ And he was, you know, he was a smart man. But this pharmacist wanted to, says, ‘I will take him under my wing, I’ll pay for his college and everything, I’ll make sure he gets tutored so he can go ahead and start on the high school level’ and the uncles said no. So my dad got mad. That’s when he got—went up to Alaska to work in the canneries.

AZ: Why did the uncles say no?

FC: Because they said he had to pay back, uh, bringing him over, to the United States. So, he just got mad and quit. But he had a bad temper. So he quit, and then he would just send them money, and finally when he paid them off he said ‘Now I can do anything I want.’ But by that time, the gentleman, you know, he was really upset—but then, the gentleman, he was too old, and because it took him several years to pay back how much it cost to bring him over, I guess. But that was the way they did it. They brought ‘em over, then they had to work for them to pay back what it cost to bring them over. And then if they were lucky then they could start a business of their own. Which is what they did.

MV: Did you insist on, er, not necessarily insist, but did you pressure your son to go to college? No? You just wanted to—

FC: Well, in his generation, in the eighties, everybody just went—he went to, he went to Memorial, and that’s, everybody, that’s, ninety-eight percent of the people there go to college. [laughs] So, but see, my husband did want him to go to A&M or Texas, and he didn’t want to go there. He went, he said, that if he went to Texas he would’ve just ended up being a party boy, and he would’ve probably flunked out. So he went away to a school where he didn’t know anybody, but of course it also had a good music school and a good photography school. And that was the reason he selected that school. What is it? It’s Texas, what is that? Texas? In Denton. I think it’s the University of Texas in Denton. It’s part of the Texas—UT system now. But it wasn’t when he went there.

Cost my husband 1700 dollars a year to send my son to their school. And I understand that Rice is 54,000 a year. [laughs] ‘Cause I just checked into it for a young man who wanted to go, he’s from California, and he’s—he wanted to go to Rice so bad but he couldn’t get financial aid and he couldn’t get a scholarship, so he’s going to San Luis Obispo instead. Yeah. 54—that’s more money than I’ve ever made in my life! In a year! [laughs] That’s what my husband brags about. That he’s, ‘Craig only cost me seventeen thousand—seventeen hundred dollars a year to go to college!’

And he moved up to New York and he, you know, he’s up there with all those high-finance people. He’s doing okay. He didn’t—I think my husband was disappointed that he didn’t become a doctor. And I said, you just do whatever you want. You don’t have to be a doctor. So, he’s happy. He’ll never be rich, but he’s happy.

MV: Did your son ever complain about any sort of uh, prejudice against him? Or—
FC: My son didn’t even know he was Chinese. [laughs] All of his friends were uh, Caucasian. He didn’t run—he never ran around with Chinese. He went to church for a while. And he did date a couple girls in high school, but ever since he’s always dated Caucasian ladies. He thinks he’s Caucasian, which is okay. He’s just now starting to appreciate family because it’s like, when he comes home, he likes to sit there and listen to us talk about things that we did when we were growing up and it was, you know, how it was different and everything.

So I mean, but um, he’s always been a part of the Caucasian scene, you know, going to Texas and living with a bunch of boys from high school, they went to college together and so, but most of the time he’s always had his own apartment. He doesn’t like living with anybody. That’s probably why he’s not married. [laughs] But he’s easy going! I don’t know why he’s not married. He’s very easy going...Just don’t want me to be a grandma, I guess.

MV: Does that disappoint you?

FC: It does! [laughs] I love kids! And he does too! He has another business and it’s called Kidders and Critters. You can look it up on the website. All he does is take pictures of children and animals, ‘cause he doesn’t want to deal with adults. That’s his little side business. He’s got some cute pictures on there... How long is that thing?

MV: It’s at one hour ten minutes.

FC: Oh okay.

MV: We’re going good.

AZ: Um I know personally, my mother would force me to learn Chinese and force me to memorize all these Chinese etiquette, and it was very important for her to instill that in her child, even though Chinese is—my Chinese—is at a middle school level.

FC: Mm-hm.

AZ: Did you ever feel that need to also push that onto your son? Or was it, whatever he wants?

FC: The only thing that I, uh, tried to do was try to instill a little bit of etiquette: always speak to your elders, speak to people when you see them. Because that was just ingrained in me from my mother, you know, every time we went anywhere, and I was very well-mannered. I mean, I was, I was everybody’s little darling because ahh [laughs] I always spoke to people first, and I, you know, I don’t know how they say the manner, but I always addressed all of my elders first before I would sit down, and so, my mother would walk in behind me ‘Did you speak to so-and-so?’ and they would always say ‘Of course she spoke to us! You know she spoke to us! Why do you ask her that every time you follow her in?’ [laughs]

You know but it was just part of it—so I tried to do that with my son, but I could never get him—I could never get him to address people by their names. He would just figure, okay, hello, how are you, he just thought he was being very friendly when he did that. But that was okay! You know, but he’s like, ‘Mom I can’t remember all these people that you know’ and I—he says that ‘They’re not my uncles and aunts! Why do I need to call them Uncle and Aunt!’ You know, because out of respect you don’t call them Miss or Mister somebody, when you’re
really good friends. And he said ‘I don’t really have that many uncles and aunts!’ and I said, ‘No, you don’t, but it’s just out of respect.’ So, some of the people he does call Uncle and Aunts, but he doesn’t like to because he says ‘They’re not my Uncle and Aunt!’ [laughs] He’s so—he’s very logical. Now that he’s 43 years old, he doesn’t think it’s necessary either. [laughs] Yeah, uh, my mother was probably a lot like your mother. It’s really important, you know, that—the whole saving face and all that kind of, like my daddy didn’t care but my mother—oh yeah, she was a real etiquette freak.

MV: Did that ever cause any sort of tension between you and your mother?

FC: Uh-uh. No. No, we actually got along pretty well. She was very, my mother was very soft-spoken because my dad was just the opposite. He was very boisterous and outgoing, and uh, but um, you know, he always—it was always up to her. Anytime we wanted to do something, ‘Ask your mother.’ He would always tell us that it was up to my mother. If my mother said it was okay, it was okay. But! When we got disciplined, when we had to be disciplined, she would say ‘Your dad’s gonna discipline you’ because she felt like he was stronger. More effective. And he enjoyed doing it too.

MV: Um, is your sister as involved [FC: No.]—in the Chinese community?

FC: My sister is a vegetable. All she does is travel. She’s gets—she says ‘Every time I think about what you’re doing, I just get very tired’ and her husband says the same thing. [laughs] He says ‘I don’t know how you do all of that stuff!’ My husband said the same thing the other day, ‘I didn’t know I was tiring him out. I didn’t even think he noticed.’ [laughs]

MV: Why do you think that is?

FC: What?

MV: That there’s such a difference between yourself and your sister, in that respect?

FC: Well, it’s really funny. Because she’s always saying—she always throws it in my face, ‘Why does everybody remember stuff you did when you were little?!’ I said because you were boring! [MV and AZ: [laughs]] Because every time somebody would say ‘You wanna go?’ or ‘You want do something?’ you’d grab mom’s leg and start crying! Who wants to take a crybaby anywhere? All they’d have to say, ‘Faye, you wanna go?’ and I’d say—I’m out the door before they are. I went on trips with uh, relatives before I was five. You know, they’d take me away for the summer, and my mother was probably glad to get rid of me, getting me out of her hair. They’d say, ‘Faye do you wanna go with us? We’re going to go on a trip? Da-da-da-da-da’ and I’d say, ‘Can I go mom?! Can I go mom!’ And she’d say, ‘Yeah, I’ll go help you pack.’ So I’d be gone for the whole summer. But anytime somebody wanted to take me some place, I was, I was ready to go. And my sister wouldn’t, you know something? She was clingy. And that’s why people didn’t want to take her! [laughs] But now that she’s older, ‘Well why did they always take you and they didn’t take me?’ and I’d say, cause every time they asked you if you wanted to go, you’d grab mom’s leg and cry! [laughs]

MV: So did your family travel a lot when you were younger?

FC: Well, we were pretty lucky. You know because, in my generation, most of the families were big. You know, most people had five or six brothers and sisters, but there was just my sister and I. So uh, my dad used to always
use the example, he’d say, ‘No, we’re not rich, but when you have a piece of pie and you have to cut it into 12 slices and then you only have to cut it in half it seems like you’re getting a lot more!’ And you see, he was very wise. He was always using examples like this.

So, you know, like I had gotten my—I got a car before my friends did, I had a bicycle before my friends did, because you know they all had six or seven siblings! You know, but it was just my sister and I. But then my sister didn’t want to learn to drive, she didn’t want to learn how to ride a bicycle [laughs] and so, but I was very daring and all. I, I was just ready to do anything.

Then I went through a phase where I thought that—I became very self-conscious and I-I didn’t feel comfortable, you know, I didn’t feel like I was an—I don’t feel I’m naturally an extrovert. I think when I was a child I was an extrovert, and then you go through this awkward stage when you’re a teenager, you know when you’re kind of clumsy and things, and I think I became kind of introverted because I felt like I wasn’t as pretty as my friends or I wasn’t as skinny. But, I’ve gotten over that too. [laughs]

MV: Um so we’ve talked quite a bit about, uh, your identity as a Chinese-American, but how—did you ever face any sort of pressures as a woman? In the workplace?

FC: No. Because I never had that. The jobs that I had were never that, high. You know. I didn’t, I didn’t ever worry about the glass ceiling, or anything like. Because my dad used to always tell us, he says, ‘If you go to work, just do the best job you can. Then people don’t have anything to criticize you for.’ And that’s what I always felt. That was more important. I see, some of these young ladies now, they work like my - I have a little cousin who’s 30, she’s an attorney. She works until ten o’clock at night and nobody even walks her to her car! And she’s parked in a building across the street from the building downtown, and I said, I cannot believe that they make you work until 10 o’clock at night and they don’t even walk you to your car! While I worked until 6 or 7 at night, and that was very rare, somebody would always walk us to the car!

You know, it was just a different uh time. And it was safer back then when I—you don’t know what’s going to happen to you—I keep telling her, you need to get a concealed, uh, weapons license because you’re out at 10 o’clock at night downtown Houston. You know? But, and these people, these kids here, they all work sixty hours a week. And my philosophy always had been, well if you can’t get your job done in forty to forty-five hours, there’s something wrong. [laughs] So, so because they should be only giving you so much work. I mean, there were times when we had, uh, deadlines that we had to meet, yeah, but you know that’s just occasionally. But, I don’t understand all these people having, you know, billable hours. I don’t know what is a billable hour. All these attorneys talk about billable hours, so everything is so much more competitive.

No, I didn’t feel pressure like that, because I never had such a high level job. You know, I was uh, catering manager, was about the top, top of the line for me. Which is fun. ‘Cause you’re dealing with people and you are in management, but it’s not like being the director or anything like that. And I never wanted to be. I was, fine.

MV: Well do we have any more questions? Any last questions? I guess as one final question, um, how do you feel the Chinese or just Asian community in general plays a role in the overall Houston community?

FC: Mmm, they’re pretty visible now, aren’t they? [laughs] Yeah, because of the diverse thing that Klineberg has done—the study—it’s really amazing, that, how many of them have uh, come over because like, for instance, uh, my, my father’s generation that came over, and there were so few, and then in 1975, when all the Vietnamese came over, and I don’t know the Koreans just sort of drifted over slowly, they’re just all of a sudden, just so
many of them. And uh, I think they’re quite visible just because we look different, you know? We’re visible.

And, I just think the main thing that we always were, it was always ingrained in us, when we were growing up, is you don’t want to do anything that’s gonna make your parents ashamed of you. And that’s probably the only thing I kind of said to my son. But, I didn’t beat it into him. You don’t want to do anything to embarrass us!

[laughs] I heard that a lot. Do you ever hear that?

[laughs] So they still say that, huh. But it was very important to them because you, we didn’t want to—nobody, in my generation, hardly anybody ever went to jail.

I mean, it was unheard of for any Chinese to ever be arrested or anything. But of course now, they have the, the gangs and stuff like that so there’s a lot of them that get in trouble. So that’s really sad to me that they, they have to run in groups like that and, and make trouble because we, we were sort of um, we were sort of goody-goody, you know? Kind of nerdy. But, we tried to stay out of trouble. Simply because our parents would have, they wouldn’t have stood for anything else.

But, uh, I think, I like being in Houston, uh because it’s just diversified enough that you still can be an individual, because like, if you’re in San Francisco, you’re just part of masses. But here, you know, uh, it’s really nice when people come in and recognize you or they’ll say, ‘Gosh, I can’t believe you’re not working behind the registration table, Faye!’ you know, if you’re going as a guest or something, ‘Why aren’t you working behind the registration?’ So, you know, you have that sort of recognition. Uh, and people sort of remember you for various reasons.

MV: Is there any last thing you’d like to tell us about yourself? Or—

FC: I just hope that all this has been helpful! I don’t know if it has been or not.

MV: Oh yeah. It’s been really great talking with you.

FC: Okay!

MV and AZ: Thank you so much!

FC: You’re welcome! I wish the café were open, I would’ve bought you a cup of tea. It closes at two.

[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]