

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

Interviewee: Gordon Quan
Interviewers: Connie Wang (Junior); Alisha Zou (Junior)
Date/ Time of Interview: June 25, 2013, at 10:30PM
Transcribed by: Alisha Zou and Connie Wang
Edited by: Chris Johnson and Patricia Wong
Audio Track Time: 0:57:31

Background:

Gordon Quan was born in Guangzhou, China in 1948. He moved to San Antonio, Texas at the age of three and grew up in the United States. The eldest of five siblings, Gordon grew up in a Baptist household. His father immigrated to the United States from Guangzhou, and his mother is from the US. Gordon studied at the University of Texas and graduated with a degree in history and government. He then received his teaching credentials and taught in the Houston Independent School District for many years.

During his time as a teacher, he earned his master's degree in guidance and counseling at the University of Houston, as well as his law degree at the South Texas College of Law. He has served on Houston's City Council and continues to work as an immigration attorney. He was one of the founding members of the Chinese Baptist Church and continues to remain active in the community, devoting time to organizations such as the Asia Society Texas Center, Houston Greeters, East Houston Redevelopment Authority, and Catholic Charities.

Setting:

This interview focuses on Mr. Quan's involvement in the Houston community as a City Council member, an immigration attorney, and a man of faith.

The interview was conducted in Mr. Quan's office and the interview took approximately an hour.

Interviewers:

At the time of this interview, Connie Wang is a Rice University undergraduate student majoring in English and art history and minoring in business. She is originally from Lake Forest, California, and was raised by Taiwanese immigrants.

Alisha Zou is a rising junior at Rice University, and is majoring in Asian studies and the 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:

GQ	Gordon Quan
CW	Connie Wang
AZ	Alisha Zou
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

CW: This is Connie Wang.

AZ: And this is Alisha Zou.

CW: We're here today on June 25th, 2013 in the office of Gordon Quan to interview Gordon Quan for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history interview project. Could you begin by telling us a little bit about yourself?

GQ: Well, um, I was born in China. My, uh, parents had gone back to China after World War II. My father had served in the U.S. Army. And so, he used the G.I. Bill to study, uh, in China. And so, um, I was born in our native village near Guangzhou. Uh, because of the revolution in China, my parents, uh, decided to return to the United States.

Uh, we initially lived in San Antonio because my grandfather had at one time a grocery store in San Antonio. Um, and their goal was actually to continue there. But when they tried to buy a house, uh, the owner—the realtor told them that the owner would not sell to Chinese.

So, um, they had another relative who had bought a store in Houston and knew there was a store down the street from his store that would be available. So they moved to Houston. And so, my parents moved to the East End of Houston. We had a store called Eastern Food Market near the ship—Houston ship channel. It was a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. And like so many Chinese at that time, we lived behind our grocery store. And, uh, my grandfather lived with us too to help my parents with the business and caring for the kids.

Uh, I'm the oldest of five children in the family, and, uh And so, that was kind of the basic [laughs] education in—in the East End. Uh, went to graduate from Moby High School here in Houston, went on to University of Texas from there. Okay. Do you want me to continue? [laughs]

CW: Whatever you've got!

GQ: Okay! Uh. At—at—at—I went to UT during, I think, a very turbulent time in the 60s. It was a great period of time to me in that, you know, it was, uh, kind of hippie movement, a belief that we could change the world, and Johnson was president of the United States during that time. And so, there was a lot of student unrest. The University of Texas—demonstrations against the administration, the

government, the war in Vietnam, everything like that.

Um, so when I graduated—um, I ended up with a degree in history and government and didn't know what to do. So, uh, I got my teaching credentials and began teaching, uh, in Houston Independent School District. I was assigned to an African American school. This was the first year of desegregation in Houston, and so they would send the Black teachers to white schools, and then the non-Black teachers to Black schools [laughs] to kind of integrate the system. So, um—so I was sent to a school called E.O. Smith, which is on Lyons Avenue in the Fifth Ward, which is probably one of the poorest areas of Houston. Um, I taught school there for three years.

At the same time, I felt like I needed to improve my educational background. And I went to graduate school at the University of Houston at night. Earned a master's degree in guidance and counseling because I felt like students there really needed more help in as far as their, uh, career goals and not just education, but somebody to—to really listen to them and provide help for them. I was a Boy Scout leader and, uh, just did a lot of different clubs at—at that time.

But after getting my master's degree I felt like it would be too slow to change people one at a time and that possibly more impact could be done if I could change the law. And so I just had to go to law school. And, uh, I ended up going to South Texas College of Law at night, while still teaching in the daytime, and then clerking with a law firm later on. So, went to night school for like seven years [laughing] earning my master's and my law degree, which was kind of painful, but at least it got a—I got—accomplished a lot in a short period of time. [laughs]

So, end up marrying my wife, who was an inter—while I was in graduate school, she was an international student from Hong Kong. And, uh, I took my citizenship for granted because I just felt like, you know, I'm a U.S citizen. My parents are U.S. citizens, but then I had to prove I was a U.S. citizen [laughing] because I was born in China! And so, I didn't know any of this process. So I had to go through what we call an N-600, a certificate of citizenship. And uh, that took a couple of years before we—immigration ever got around to finishing that. Then I had to spo—sponsor my wife after that. [laughs]

And so, I began to see the complexity of immigration law and how people, even though educated, often times have no idea what's involved in the process and can get easily lost in the mazes that they had. And then while my wife and I were fairly well-educated—she was having—getting her bachelor's degree and I had my master's degree and my law—[laughing] law school, it was still very confusing.

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So, um, I ended up graduating from law school and I thought I was gonna go into really (?) personal injury and workman's comp, but it seems like immigration blossomed at that time as a field of law, and I ended up going into immigration law. I felt that I could empathize with the plight that people were having. And it—I found it rewarding to be able to help them navigate their way through that maze. So, kind of—that's where I [laughs]—where I am now, practicing immigration law still.

So, uh, um—so anyway, I guess—I've been fortunate to see the growth of the Asian community here in the city, growth of our immigrant communities. Uh, and it's been really beneficial to me because some of the—the immigrants that I helped early on later became leaders within their own community, you know? So, like the early Indian engineers I helped became heads of either companies or the Indian organizations and the Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans, and, you know, Taiwanese, Chinese,

you know, whatever! Uh, so I had a chance to meet them early on before they really kinda got their careers going, when they were getting their green cards.

And so later when there was an opportunity to run for City Council I always believed in civic involvement. But, um, I think that gave me an edge because there was a whole generation to me of people who had established themselves in this city, but who didn't feel like they were part of the city yet because they didn't—there was this distance between them and—and their government. So, that's kind of why I ran for City Council because I felt like I wanted to make sure the people felt like they had every right of—of citizenship in the city of Houston as anybody else. And at least they could say, "Hey, I know that guy! You know, [laughing] he was my lawyer before! And I can talk to him about my problems, and I can speak out."

And, um—and so, you know, um, I was fortunate to have won that election. And, uh—and I also felt like it was important that we, as a community, having matured, reach out to other communities, whether it be African American or Hispanic or—or Anglo, to show that we care about those communities as well. That we're—we're—just weren't (?) insular. Like, "Oh, we'll just take care of our own." And that even though I was, like, the only Asian on the Council at that time, trying to go to events that were not Asian-centric. But—and I still had to go to Asian events too or else the people—the community would feel like I had abandoned them too. So.

So, it was, um—it was challenging. But it was rewarding, too. I think we got more funds for health clinics in the Asian community. We got more employment in management positions by Asian Americans. We got, uh, you know, uh—able to build coalitions of understanding too, I think, during that time.

So, uh, but it's very demanding on your time and on your family too. Uh, my wife has this saying that I kind of like. "Just—just because it's your dream, doesn't mean it was my dream!" [laughs] And so [laughs].... So, uh—so after my six years on Council, I decided not to run for another office, but to come back to the law firm.

And, uh, I did run later for county judge, but that was because I felt like the state of Texas was turning—what? Maybe purple. Okay, it's a very red state, of course, but, we saw what happened in Dallas. County became—becoming Democratic, San An—um, Bexar County, San Antonio is Democratic; El Paso, the Rio Grande Valley, only Harris County remains pretty red. So, that if we could change Harris County, we could change the state, and—and maybe the nation, for that matter. But anyway, I didn't win. [Laughs]

But, it didn't matter! That was okay. I was—you know, I just felt like we have to show that we're—we really—we as a community really want to be involved! And we can be involved in every level of government. And—and we're not—we're as capable as the next person of holding positions and—and, uh, respected and being involved, and so I still continue doing a lot of civic work.

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I chair the East Houston Redevelopment Authority. We built the Dynamo stadium. We're rebuilding the Chinatown area. Um, chair an organization called Houston Greeters that—that talks about what a wonderful city Houston is and gives people greets about different cultures. We're using—I'm looking at that as a kind of a cultural bridge so people can know more about each other's communities. While the, um, uh—while Rice University has said that we're the most diverse city, I often find it's hard to like So, how do you get to know people in other communities, okay? We're—

we're diverse [laughing] but you don't just like, walk into a temple and say, "Hey, tell me about your culture." You know? [Laughs] So, uh, that—that—that Greeters would be that organization to kind of help bridge different cultures and understanding.

I think we have a—a wonderful city that is open to the stranger, that—that welcomes diverse opinions, and, uh, I want to make sure we nourish that and we develop good leadership within our community, who, uh, can—can be a part of that. Uh, so I see my role kind of at this time as maybe more of a senior statesman being able to help young people who are looking into going to government or law and—and see how I can help them get going. So, uh, that's kind of my *raison d'être* at this time. [GQ and CW laugh] Okay, so that's—that's a long story! [laughs] But, okay. So do you have some questions?

CW: Um, you've mentioned a little bit about your views on diversity as it pertains to Houston. Um, what is your personal experience with diversity, or racial dynamics, while you've been in the city?

GQ: Initially, I—I—you know, you always feel somewhat, um, ostracized if you're not in the majority, you know. Growing up in a Hisp—predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, I didn't want to be different. I wanted to just be like every—every other kid. And, you know, when other kids were like, you know, you know, these jokes like, "How did you get your name? Do they really drop pans from a stairway, and it's 'ping pong ding dong.'" [laughs] All this stuff, you know. And—which, you know, obviously, you don't [laughing] like those jokes.

But, uh—but, um, you know, I—we had—we grew up in this neighborhood that we—I look back at it—was a very nurturing neighborhood actually. You know, we, uh—the customers would sign their little tickets. This was before credit cards. [laughing] And would come in on Friday and pay their—their bill. And everybody knew each other and, like, they would call my grandfather "Grandpa" and—and knew my mom and dad. And—and it was very gratifying when I ran for office that people would say, "Oh yeah! How's your mom and dad? How's your brothers and sisters?" You know, stuff like that.

And um, I guess I didn't appreciate the neighborhood as much until later on that—that people felt that there was a bond amongst each other, that we're all really neighbors and it didn't matter that we were the Chinese family and they were Mexican, that we were just, you know, people in the same neighborhood.

Um, and working in a Black community was—was really eye-opening to me too because, as you can imagine, you know, Asian American parents always expected you to make As, maybe a B sometimes. But in a—in a Black school where they didn't necessarily know [laughing] where their parents were all the time—and—and just the challenges that a lot of these kids had really were—was—was eye-opening to me.

So, uh—uh, so, this multiculturalism that we have and how these different races are—are blending together for a common cause, I think is such an interesting situation here in Houston. That, uh, when I ran for office, uh, some people would say to me, you know, "We think you're a very qualified candidate, but who's gonna vote for you? You know? The Asian community's only like five percent." And then they're like, "How many of them are even citizens? And how many of them are even registered to vote? And how many of them even vote?!" [Laughs] You know? "You'll never get elected!"

And I think I got elected because people felt like, "Hey, it's important to have an Asian voice at

the table. This is an important community, and, uh, while I don't know him personally [laugh], I may know somebody else, and I think, 'Hey, she's qualified. And I know John, and he's Asian and so maybe he's qualified too!'" So, that was the theory that—that, uh, one—[clears throat] one of the professors at Rice came out with: that—that it wasn't so much that they knew me, but that they knew people of our ethnic group and that they had a positive opinion of those people! [Laughs] They kind of imputed that upon me!

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So, anyway, um, I—it was important to maintain that positive opinion too! So they didn't say, "He was an idiot! [Laughs] Why did we vote for him?! These—these people are not—are not qualified or not capable." You know? But instead I wanted them to—to think, "Yes! They are qualified and capable! And—and, uh, there's nothing wrong with an Asian American being the mayor or vice-mayor or whatever." So uh, anyway, I hope that answered your question kind of, at least.

CW: Did you feel like they were identifying with you because of your race? Or they identified you by your race rather than you as a candidate?

GQ: Um, I—I—you know, I thought it was interesting when we first ran that campaign, my, uh, campaign manager said, "I don't want to put your picture up." And I thought—and I was kind of offended, [laughing] a little bit! [all laugh] Was I that horrible looking? But, uh, [all laugh] he said, "I want you—them to get used to your name because it's not a common name, [laughs] you know?" And so—so we were doing billboards instead, like, you know, "Gordan Quan," you know, "Key to Houston's Future."

And we did a commercial. I thought it was funny that we did this commercial and we had the—the—the speaker was the voice of Wolf Brand Chili, and so he had a very good Texas drawl. Like, [in a Texan drawl] "Gordan Quan, raised in the East End." You know? [Laughs] So, she wanted me to come across as, "Hey, he's just one of us. You know? He's not different." And then I had to speak at the end of the commercial so that I didn't speak with an accent. I—I—I could speak perfect English, you know? [Laughs] So they didn't think, "Well, he's some foreigner." You know, "He's just an American!" And—and we ended the commercial with walking toward the Houston skyline with all these multiethnic children, saying, "This is Houston's future." And—and so [laughs] I thought it was a—was a good commercial! Because you kind of like thought, "Okay, he's one of us. He can speak English, and he's looking at a future of multiethnic kids, and—and a multiethnic society." So, uh—so when you ask me, "Did they look at me because my ethnicity or as just a Houstonian?" We were trying to move it both ways, kinda. That, "Yes, he's ethnic, but yes, he's just Houstonian."

CW: Speaking of your name, do you happen to have, like, a Chinese name?

GQ: Yes. Guan Jin Poing. Um, you know, so my family name is Quan [laughing] as you can imagine. And, uh, Jin is, you know, the—all the males of my generation in our family are Jin. Jin Lun (?), Jin Luk (?), Jin, uh ... all my cousins, you know. And then, you know, the Poing is this bird. Uh, it's like a phoenix and it's supposedly a powerful, rising bird, you know. And—and, uh, so yes, that was my Chinese—that's my Chinese name. [laughs]

CW: Rewinding very far back –

GQ: Mm-hmm.

CW: Um, how did your parents first move to America?

GQ: Well, they probably had, uh, the same immigrant experience as many others. And I guess I—the statute of limitations is run on their, you know, legality. [Laughs] Okay! My, uh—my grandfather left, uh, southern China, uh, in the early part of the 1900s, but because of the Exclusion Act, he could not come to the United States. So, he ended up in a laundry in Mexico, uh, in Ciudad Juarez. [Laughs]

And, uh—and what happened is that, you know, the San Fran—the great San Francisco earthquake in 1904 occurred. And, well I thought this was clever; it turns out it was a common scheme. Uh, a number of Chinese men at that time would go back to China and say, “Hey my—my birth certificate was destroyed in the earthquake. I’m—I was really born in the United States in San Francisco!” [Laughs] And so, the story inside it (?)—used—if that story were true, every Chinese woman would’ve had 150 sons. So, uh, apparently a lot of people used that story. [Laughs] And so, he got the village elders to testify that he was born in the United States. And, uh, so he became a citizen. And, um, so he was traveling back and forth as one of the sojourners making money in the US, right, sending it back to China.

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So, he came back to San Francisco initially, and he found it to be very cold. And so—having lived in, you know, Southern China, having lived in Mexico. So it was also an interesting story in that, at that time, uh, General Pershing had an expedition into Mexico, chasing Pancho Villa, and a number of the Chinese helped Pancho—helped Pershing’s troops, provide supplies and services and things like that. As a result, Pancho Villa ordered that those men—those Chinese be killed because the—their help with the U.S. army. So, Pershing had to petition Congress for special bill to allow this group of Chinese to come to the United States, and so they were resettled in San Antonio. And so some of those guys were my grandfather’s friends. And so when he thought San Francisco was too cold, he contacted his friends in San Antonio, and, uh, that’s how we ended up in Texas. ‘Cause he moved to San Antonio. And, uh, so later he brought my father, who was born in China, who went through Angel Island and had to prove he was my grandfather’s son. And, um—and so yeah, that’s kinda how we got here.

CW: And your siblings, what kind of jobs did they end up taking?

GQ: Well. I—I—I’m—I’m pretty proud of my siblings. [laughs] Uh, again, I’m the eldest. My sister, Wanda, was—is a, uh, school teacher. She taught in HISD for about 30 years. She’s retired now. My sister Beverly, uh, earned her master’s—her doctor’s degree in nutrition. And she’s assistant director for minority health at, uh, M.D. Anderson.

Um, my brother Rick, became a—went to UT in—in radio TV film. He became a sportscaster, and, uh, he’d been initially in Hawaii and he won sportscaster of the year. Then he moved to the Bay Area. And he was one of the first Asian males on the air—in front of the camera, as opposed to behind the camera, uh, with the CBS affiliate for many years, and he was voted most favorite sportscaster, but

in the Bay Area, *The Oakland Tribune*. And—and he’s won some Emmy awards for his work. And my brother David is also a lawyer. And, uh, he’s been a part-time municipal court judge here in Houston, and is, um, in private practice now in labor and employment law. So that’s—that’s our family. [laughs]

CW: And what about your wife? What does she do for a living?

GQ: Uh, my wife has been, uh, a great blessing to me. She helped with establishing the firm with finances and—and, uh—and administration. She left the firm last year. Now she’s the business manager for, uh, a lighting company that’s developing LED lighting. Um, so, she’s busy at that too.

CW: And how did you meet your wife?

GQ: We met at a Bible study at the University of Houston. Uh, she’s Catholic and I’m Baptist. And she had moved—she’d done her first two years at Miami and transferred to U of H in—in hotel restaurant management. And so, they were celebrating Chinese New Year’s at the Bible study, and they were having Chinese food, so she saw those—[laughs] those signs that were on campus and came to that Bible study and we met there.

Um, so her family actually—well she’s from Hong Kong, but she was born in the Seychelles Islands off the coast of Africa. Her—her parents had been merchants and her grandparents had been merchants. So, um—so I was intrigued ‘cause she was saying that she was born in Africa, and I thought, “Oh, who’s this Chinese African woman?” You know? [Laughs] And, um, so then she started coming to Bible study at Chinese Baptist Church, and we started dating and got to know each other from there.

AZ: Are you still involved in the Christian community?

GQ: I’m—I’ve been on the board of Catholic Charities for the last ... 10 years? Uh, either on their board or on their advisory board. And so, uh, I had taught Sunday school at the Chinese Baptist Church for like, 20 years, and, uh, because my wife was Catholic and my daughters later became Catholic, I—I started attending some Catholic masses, but during—when I first ran for office, one of the things is going out to different churches and, you know, worshipping, especially in the Black community, in different communities. And so, I liked kind of the fact that there was more, more racial diversity in Catholic churches, that you had people from all backgrounds.

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And so, um—so I’ve been attending more Catholic churches, but I feel like I’m more ecumenical in that if I want, I can go to any church, [laughs] any time and still get a—a lot out of it. I—I was going to the Unitarian Fellowship for a while, and, uh, I—I thought those—the Unitarians are pretty cool, in that they just believe everybody has their own path to God and nobody has any right to tell ‘em which way to go. And, uh, so for a while I—I—we’d give ‘em—when I was on City Council, they’d invited me to come out and speak about what’s going on at the city.

And so, um, I just think it’s—it—I—I—I really enjoy different religious experiences and I still consider myself a Christian. But, I go to mosque. I go to temples. [laughing] I go to any—any place

that, you know, uh, has people who are seeking wisdom from God and—and trying to do good.

CW: How did religion become a factor in your life?

GQ: My—my mother—I told you about (?) my father's side of the family. My mother's side of the family actually, um, uh, an historian was doing a study about—my mother grew up in Georgia. She was born in the state of Georgia. And, um, her father was a very strong Christian and started the Sunday school for Chinese—uh, the Chinese community in Augusta, Georgia. They'd go around and pick up people—kids to go to Sunday school. And, uh, so my mother was deeply rooted in the Baptist faith and, and—and so she ever since we were little would, you know, read Bible stories and—and [clears throat] take us to church.

And we were founding members of the Chinese Baptist Church here in Houston. So, uh—so yeah. So [laughs] I kinda grew up in that faith, but I—I began to question like: if I hadn't been born into that family environment, if I had been born into a Buddhist or a Hindu family, would I have been any different? You know? And—and I think that oftentimes we're a creature of our families in that we—we dare not deviate too far from that because our parents would not be very pleased. [Laughs] So, I've been—always—I've felt kind of a rebel to an extent, challenging these things and saying, "Hey, well, what's wrong with that?" I mean, what are their faiths? What are their beliefs? So, um So yes, I—I—I that's how I kinda got going, but I've always been—have—have felt like questioning mine too.

CW: Also speaking of your mother, did she do any work? Or, what did she do for a living?

GQ: Well we all worked in the grocery store. [laughs] You know? We had no choice but to take turns, shifts, work in the store, doing homework, stuff like that. Soon as you're old enough to like count, you can ch—give change, and stock shelves, and stuff like that. So—so Mom and Dad were always working together at the grocery store.

Until we sold the store and they retired. Then, um, my dad became active with the Asian American Bank—with the first Asian American Bank in—in Houston. And, I know he—he felt like they wanted to create this bank because the growing wealth in the Asian community and helping their children to be able to get mortgages and have more financial abilities. Um, so he later became, um, the chairman of the Asian American Bank and then worked for Metro Bank as well later on, before he—he had a stroke and couldn't work anymore.

CW: Is the bank the reason why he sold the store?

GQ: No, he sold the store unfortunately because of increased violence in the neighborhood. For a long time, we didn't lock our doors. We knew everybody. It was like, you know, just easy. But—and then, drugs started coming into the neighborhood, and he started getting robbed. And—and, um, he had to make a choice as to whether to arm the store, or to get rid of the store. And so, he did not want to have an armed guard or anybody. He felt he'd rather just sell the store.

It was interesting that we sold the store to a Vietnamese family, and that family was Hubert Vo's family. So, State Representative Hubert Vo, then his family lived behind the store. So, it's a small world.

[0:30:11]

CW: So what has been your experience with the changes in Houston since you've been here?

GQ: I think they've been very positive, [laughing] to tell you the truth. Um, I don't think that Asians are considered an oddity. I think that they're considered a part of the fabric of Houston. I think that we, uh, have welcomed, uh, their participation. But—and—and I think that we have better race relations, uh, than ever before. I mean, I think that, um—you know, organizations have been fully integrated with African Americans and Hispanics, and we—we look to these different communities for—for guidance and leadership too. We have a great deal of respect for them.

Uh, I think there's a recognition of a global marketplace and that talent can flow anywhere in the world and that we're better off having people of skills here in Houston than having them leave because they're being discriminated against or being prejudiced.

Um, I thought it was interesting and very—I was very supportive of, like, the Mandarin language school, MCLIMS. You know, the HISD had adopted, uh, um, a model school here on Bissonnet where children spend half day in Mandarin, half day in English, and starting in kindergarten going to like third grade now. But it will continue every year adding another grade. That 20% of the students are Asian, but that means that [laughing] 80% are not Asian, which is great to me, because it—it—20% are also Anglos, which means that the res—other 60% are Hispanic or Black.

And I went to their Lunar New Year festival, um, and the Black parents were all dressed in Chinese outfits and so proud of their kids being able to speak Chinese, you know. I thought that's so great! Um, my granddaughter is, uh, at that school. She just finished kindergarten, and—and she wants to learn Chinese. She—she relishes learning Chinese, where I remember, when my parents tried to get me to go to Chinese school, I was like, “No, I don't want to learn Chinese! I don't—I'm here in Houston, Texas, why do I need to learn Chinese?” [Laughs] But, uh, so she's really happy about it, and her—her little sister is now gonna start preschool there. So—pre-kindergarten. So—so yeah, and I just thought, it's just like natural, you know. It's like it's not something weird. It's just something that people want to do because they realize this world is changing. So, I think the changes have been for the positive, by and large.

CW: Can you recall still any specific or personal incidents of discrimination?

GQ: Well I had this one episode. It was kind of weird. I don't know. I—'cause I learned a lesson from it myself. I—I—I was—I loved to play softball, and I was I always had—had convertibles too, so I was leaving a softball game one night, and I was in my convertible. This group of young boys drove by and said, you know, something like, “Ching ching, go back home where you belong!” Or something like that.

And I thought, [laughing] “What the hell! Who are they telling me to go back home? That I—that I don't belong here, you know? And I—I was—I guess I—maybe I was—was younger and hot—more hot-headed. I was like following that car, thinking I'm gonna bash their car with my baseball bat. [Laughs] And I was thinking—later on, I said With, you know, there's like three or four of [laughing; CW laughs] those guys and just *me!* What am I thinking I'm gonna do? I mean, you know?

But—but I was so offended that—that they would think—that they could say, “Hey, you know, you don't belong here. You're—this is not your home.” Um, and so I can see how some people can get

involved in rage, [laughs] their emotions get carried away, even—even though it's not logical to do that. So, um, I guess that was one thing.

[0:34:23]

Um, maybe also when I was on City Council, there was an episode where, um, a US plane was forced down by the Chinese on Hainan Island. It was a kind of a spy plane, and they were held for several days. And then, uh, there were some calls on the radio to, like—“Let's boycott Chinese restaurants. Let's not let Chinese come to Minute Maid Park to [laughing] watch baseball games.”

And I thought, how ridiculous is this! These Chinese Americans, these people have decided to live in the United States. They're not your enemy. They're your—your neighbor! And, um, so I had to—I spoke out against that. And was on the, you know—kind of the radio show that—where the—the DJ had said those things or—and, uh, yeah, and it was kind of weird. [laughing] I just Anyway. So, you know, just trying to, like, I guess, say that—you know, let people affirm that we're American as much as the next guy.

It's something, uh—when—when—when I see imputed beliefs, like I—I spoke out against the invasion of Iraq. And, uh, I wanted—I pushed for a city resolution that we not send troops to Iraq unless we find weapons of mass destruction. And, uh, I lost on that 'cause they felt like, “Hey, come on! The president wouldn't do anything wrong.” And, you know? So—[CW and GQ laugh]—so, um, there was people who were saying, “Well maybe he's got—he's—he's still a communist or something, or maybe he has relatives in China, or—or the Chinese government's controlling him.” I'm like, “Hey, these are American soldiers I'm trying to defend against dying needlessly!” Okay? So anyway, I—I—I—I—it offends me when people impute certain beliefs just because your ethnic background.

CW: This might be off on a tangent but—

GQ: [overlapping] Okay.

CW: You said you had a convertible?

GQ: Yes.

CW: Was that because your family was well off or just 'cause convertibles were kind of par for the course at the time?

GQ: [Laughs] I saw *The Graduate* in school [laughing], that movie *The Graduate* when I was in—in college, and I thought it was cool to have a convertible. So, I—I—I—so I—I bought—my first car was an MG Midget convertible. It was cheap, but it was—it was nice to have—to be able to have a convertible. And then—so then I moved to a Rabbit convertible, and then later to a Mustang convertible, and now I have a Porsche convertible. [Laughs] So, just But, um, I like the—the sense of open air. The—[CW laughs] you know, you're not inhibited; you're at (?) the whole sky. And, um—and yeah, so I don't know. There was another immigration lawyer who used to have a convertible, and—and so, I thought he was a cool guy. [GQ and AZ laugh]

AZ: Have you ever gone back to visit China?

GQ: Yes, I have. Uh, I went with my family, probably now it's been, uh, maybe 12 or 14 years ago? We went back to our native village with my father before he died. And—and, um—and, uh, saw where I was born, and—and, you know, saw the properties my grandfather had before he—the—the revolution and stuff like that. So, yeah.

It was—it was—it was pretty meaningful to me to see what he had kinda given up because of the war. And uh, to hear stories from aunts and uncles about—about him. Uh, I knew him, uh, fairly well. And he lived with us until I was maybe 22, 23. And he passed away. But, you know, I only saw him as this older man who wore dark sunglasses because his eyes were fading and worked in the store and cooked our meals, and, you know. And to kind of learn about him as a younger man and what he—his—his entrepreneurial ability and his charity work was—was meaningful to me.

CW: Speaking of your family, can you tell us a little about your children?

GQ: Oh! [GQ and CW laugh] I'm, I guess, a proud parent as anybody. You know, my—I have three daughters, and my oldest daughter Caroline, uh, is a chiropractor. Uh, she—I think it was kind of because of my wife's belief in—in holistic medicine. She decided she didn't want to necessarily (?) go to medical school, but she wanted to be in the healing arts, and so she went to chiropractice because it's non-invasive, and her specialty really is—is neo-natal chiropractice, working on little babies, when their, uh—oftentimes their spine is not in place and they're—they're just crying because they don't feel comfortable, and—and being able to—to kind of ease that situation. And—and so she—she's taken classes in that, but—but So she's been pretty successful. She has her own clinic, and—and it seems to be growing.

Uh, my second daughter, Kristen, is a lawyer, and she's, um—she's married to another lawyer. And she works for our firm. She wo—she headed up our Washington office until she just moved back to Houston recently to have her second child. Uh, my third daughter is Katherine. Um, she just got her master's in theology last year, and is the managing editor for a magazine for the Catholic church in Washington.

[0:40:16]

So, they each picked different routes. I mean, the—their own interests. Nobody followed each other. And so, um, you know, I'm—I'm—I'm very proud of them. They—they're—they're—I think they're, uh, capable young women, who, um, are strong, and, um—and—and caring. I mean I think they—Caroline's on the board of the Girl Scouts, and, uh, Katherine is a member of a number of organizations. She was a cantor at her church, and, uh—and she does a lot of charity work. And Krissy is—well she's kind of consumed with her two little girls right now. She—she's also a very kind-hearted person who does things for the community.

CW: When they were growing up did you speak Chinese, um, at home a lot?

GQ: [overlapping] No. Rarely, rarely. They—they attended Chinese school after church on Sundays. Uh, my wife taught Chinese school. Um, and—and so, they—Caroline did pretty well. She probably hit

first or second grade level of Chinese or Cantonese. Um, the other two girls really—uh, Krissy was more interested in Spanish. She took Spanish. And—and Katherine took Mandarin in college.

Uh, but I remember Katherine wanting to drop out of Chinese school, and I finally said, “Okay, if it’s so miserable for you, you can drop out.” And her teacher then coming to me saying, “No, you can’t let her drop out. If you let her out, all the other kids will be out! [laughing] Do you think these kids want to do this? You know? They’re all there because their parents are making them to come to Chinese school!” So—[laughs]—so I think she had to go back to Chinese school, even though I was—I was willing to let her drop out. But I think, you know, she later appreciated it. I mean, you know, she took up in college on her own.

So, um. So my—my—my oldest daughter, Caroline actually went to—well she was at UCLA—went to, uh, Chinese University in Hong Kong. That’s where she met her husband Patrick, who’s, uh, Anglo from North Carolina. Patrick was at Georgetown in the Foreign Service school, and he was trying to pick up Mandarin, and she was trying to improve her Cantonese, and they met in a similar program there.

Yeah. How’s it going? Okay.

AZ: Um, so I’m guessing your parents spoke Chinese to you.

GQ: They—not that much. Because my dad came over when he was like 13, and my mother was born in Georgia. While they spoke our village dialect, Toisan, uh, they did not impose that upon us so much because, again, our neighbors, our customers were Spanish-speaking, so we had to speak some Spanish more than we had to speak Chinese. And so, while they wanted us to go to Chinese school, and—and we learned some basic rudimentary Chinese, it wasn’t mandatory. And so we didn’t grow up in a Chinese-speaking environment.

AZ: Did your parents keep any Chinese customs or traditions?

GQ: Yes. I mean, they—they—I did enjoy the fact that my—my father would tell me these stories and these kind of, you know, uh, historical stories and poems about China, you know? Like—and sayings, like, you know, “Once you say words, a thousand horses cannot re—retrieve the words” and—and, you know, just kind of little axioms like that. And, you know, um . . .

You know, like Chinese New Years, of course we celebrated that. And my parents were members of our Little Gong Family Association, and my dad was active and—very active in the community. He was president of the joint family associations, and active in the Chinese-American Citizens Alliance.

And so they grew up in a period of more—of more racial segregation, where, uh, they wanted us to marry Chinese because they felt like, you know, “Oh what would your kids be? They don’t know their identity, if they don’t—you know, if you marry somebody outside of your race.” And, um, kind of conservative in that—those areas. But, uh—and it turned out I guess we all did marry Chinese, or at least half-Chinese people. [Laughs]

But, um—but, you know, um, we—we—we—my—my wife was amazed by some of the customs. She said, “They don’t do that in Hong Kong anymore. I mean that was 50 years ago!” [Laughs] So I think that any group, uh, that migrates to another country kinda is locked in the traditions of when they came over.

[0:45:20]

And so, uh, she was just laughing the other day at how—the terms we gave for different Chinese pastries. That she said, like, like “chung—chung te” you know, uh; we call it “gai chung te” in our village. And she said, “But there’s no chicken in there. Why do you call it ‘gai chung te’? [laughing] I mean, it’s just ‘te’. It’s just long, you know, pastries.”

And, uh—and so, anyway, yes, I think our parents taught us different things. You know. And we try to maintain those customs, and—and today, even, you know, my daughter just had a child and my wife’s making, you know, pig feet and beer and, you know, whiskey to cleanse the mother’s body. And she can’t—she’s not supposed to go out for so many days and do all these different things. So, we still maintain a lot of the traditions it seems like.

CW: And so how do you view your own racial identity?

GQ: You know, I think of myself as just a Houstonian. [Laughs] I mean, I know that’s kind of generic. But, um, you know, I feel I’ve been very fortunate having grown up in a Hispanic neighborhood, having taught in a Black neighborhood, having been raised as a Asian American, and yet in a—probably in a profession that’s probably more Anglo-dominated. Uh, but—but that that’s who we are [laughing] as a society, this mixture, this amalgamation, of all these different ethnic groups, and, you know, picking the best of each and learning from each. And that’s—that’s why I think I’m just a—just another Houstonian. I mean, I could have been born anywhere in the world. And I—and blending in and trying to do what I can.

I know my—my sister once asked me, she says, “Don’t you feel weird that when you go to these events you’re like the only Asian there?” [laughs] And I’m like—you know, I just take it for granted, you know, sometimes that [laughing] I’m the only Asian there. And if I see another Asian I’m like, you know, attracted to that other Asian, thinking, [laughing] “Oh, why is somebody else here too? That’s great! Let me—let me get to know them!”

I mean, uh, this weekend, we—for instance, we had, uh, uh—you know, it was Juneteenth, the celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation coming to Texas. And—and so, my wife and I—I got my wife to go. We went to, uh, the African American Museum for a lecture, and then there was a walk to the Holocaust Museum where a professor talked about the history of African Americans in Texas. And of course we were the only Asians there. But—but, I just, like—I want—I don’t mind it! I want it! I want them to see that—that the history that they have is not limited to themselves, but that others appreciate it too. And, um—and at least [laughing] there’s one or two of us [indistinguishable] who will go to these events.

I was in Freedman’s Town on Saturday for their celebration too. And—and, you know, of course, I was the only non-Black there, but that’s okay too! I—I—I don’t mind. I wanted—I—I—I want to make a statement that—that they’re appreciated; they’re respected by all communities. I mean not that I represent everybody, but [laughs] that others want to share in their celebration. And it’s not because I’m running for office, or because I want something alternative, or you know, I have an ulterior motive. I just think that it’s cool that—that, uh, they can—we can celebrate the oldest African American community in the state, you know? So—so how I define myself is like—is just a Houstonian who appreciates the different cultures that have settled here in Houston.

AZ: Have there ever been moments where you felt more kind of lost, with your identity? Like throughout adolescence, or as a young adult?

GQ: Clearly. Yeah, throughout adolescence probably, you know? Um, it—I don’t know. Maybe you’ve had this episode too where you thought, “I don’t”—I was trying actually to deny my Chinese-ness [laughing] early on because I w—didn’t want to be sticking out and be kind of stereotyped and stuff. And—and, uh, I—I actually thought I probably not marry a Chinese person, but—but, uh, marry an Anglo or Hispanic person [laughs] because I just felt like, “Hey, I’m—I’m not bound by this.”

[0:50:18]

And—and also I felt like, uh I don’t know. Just searching for who I was and my identity. I guess that everybody goes through that at some point in time. And, uh, you know, I felt like my family—I—you know, I love them. My father I felt was an Eisenhower Republican, and kinda [laughing] This was back in those—whereas I was like a Kennedy new—new-era Democrat. And, uh, that this is a new world and that we had, you know—we were not bound by the past.

And, uh, so, you know, shows how old I am, but, you know, when I was in junior high school I went—I was in the honors society. And Kennedy gave his speech at Rice University about going to the moon, and—and so they bussed us over there to hear that speech. And I thought, [laughing] “Yes, this is the type of guy I can believe in!” I had a Kennedy-Johnson sticker in my—my desk one time at school and my teacher said, “I’m gonna pop you for every letter on that sticker if you don’t put that away!” [Laughs] So, anyway. So I—that was fine. He was just teasing me, but still. I felt like I was—that was kinda the early beginnings of my activism and—and desire to like be part of—of a bigger society.

CW: Oh yeah, you said that you went to university during a “turbulent time”?

GQ: Yes.

CW: Did you ever participate in any activities that came out of that turbulent time?

GQ: Well I think I marched during that time, but I didn’t like burn my draft—draft card or, [CW laughs] you know. Uh, I mean everybody was like smoking marijuana; I didn’t do that, okay. [Laughs] But, it was pretty prevalent during that time.

And, um, so, you know, I—I just thought it was a very great time to be at Texas. We won the national championship in football. We were—it was this—it was just like we were a bastion of liberalism in a state that was pretty conservative. So, Austin was a good place to be. We would have coffeehouses, and, you know, folk music, and all this other stuff. And—and, um, so it was—it—you know, to get away from home and being in an environment like that having come from an Asian s—Asian family that was kind of conservative was—was great. [laughs]

OK? Got it? [Laughs] Any other questions?

CW: Oh, just to wrap up.

GQ: Okay.

CW: In accordance with the themes of our interview—

GQ: [overlapping] Okay.

CW: So in university did you hold any jobs?

GQ: I worked at the bookstore. So, um, uh, that was my main job. But I think it was—it wasn't like all the time. I think it was more like my junior and senior year. I started wanting to earn some money. So, yeah.

AZ: If you don't mind, do you happen to remember how much you were paid?

GQ: \$1.65 an hour. I think that was minimum wage at the time. [Laughs]

CW: And your first few neighborhoods, what were those like?

GQ: Poor. [Laughs] I mean, my—my neighborhoods I lived with my parents, or I lived with my own, or which ones?

CW: Both?

GQ: Well, [CW laughs] when I—when I moved out from the store. When—again, my parents initially lived in the East End in a poor neighborhood. We lived behind the store. When I was in college, they bought a house in a nice neighborhood. And my dad wanted me to move in with him in the nice house. And I'm like, I'd rather live—it was hard to go back and live with your parents after you'd been in college. So I said I'd rather live behind the store still with my grandfather. So I stayed there until he died.

And then, I, uh—I got an apartment in the Montrose. And so when I was in law school, I—well, I was (?)—I needed to assert my independence. I couldn't be under my parents' rule. [laughing] And so, it was a modest apartment. I think it was like \$95 a month or [laughing] something like that. I mean, things were cheap back then, okay? [laughs] And so, um, you know, I was teaching, and so I could pay my rent, and pay for my car note, and still had some money left over. [laughs] So, um—so, it w—they were—you know, it was—it was good. It was modest, but it was—it was fun. [Laughs]

So um, yeah. So that was the question, right? What neighborhoods did I live—what were my neighborhoods like? And then later on, you know, as we had kids, we moved to Spring Branch. Good schools, you know, just like—we were like always looking for better schools. Then after the kids moved out, we moved in Inner City so that we could be more in the action. So, yeah.

[0:55:28]

CW: Do you have any final questions, Alisha?

AZ: No. Do you have anything—anything left to say?

GQ: No, I think—

AZ: About being an Asian American—

CW: We usually end with, um—

GQ: [overlapping] Okay.

CW: What do you consider your greatest accomplishment? [CW and AZ laugh]

GQ: Uh, my greatest accomplishment, ugh.... Okay, maybe. You know, when I first ran for City Council, nobody wanted to run because they said, “Oh, gosh, you know, there’s so much—uh, it’s—it’s gonna be too tough.” And different people were supposed to run, and they p—backed out, [laughs] and so—so—and I kept saying, “No not me. I don’t—you know, I got a successful law practice; I don’t need it, you know.” But I felt it was important to do it. But I guess my accomplishment to me was not that.

It was that the second term I ran we had 8 Asian Americans [laughing] running for city—for city office. And, you know, only one of them won, but, you know—but I thought, great! You know, at least people felt like, “Hey! If Gordon can do it, I can do it!” And, [laughing] you know. And so there’s gonna be a lot of failures before the successes, but at least people were willing to try. And I thought that was to me, a great accomplishment that—that people felt like there was no ceiling. There wasn’t—you know, doomed, that I didn’t have a chance, that people can’t win. But since, like, hey, we can do this. And—and, uh—and so I—I look to that. I mean, it’s not like registered anywhere, like any numbers or anything. But I just felt a sense that, you know, we had arrived as a community, and we did not—we no longer felt like we couldn’t accomplish anything. We could accomplish whatever we set our minds to.

CW: That’s amazing. Well thank you for your time. I think we’ll stop it here.

GQ: Okay.

[0:57:31]

End interview