

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

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Interviewee: Stephen Chao

Interviewers: David Lam (Sophomore); Graham Hogg (Junior)

Date/ Time of Interview: March 30, 2014, at 1:00PM

Transcribed by: David Lam and Graham Hogg

Edited by: Chris Johnson, Sara Davis, and Patricia Wong (6/16/16)

Audio Track Time: 1:16:06

Background:

Stephen Chao was born and raised in Clear Lake, a suburb of Houston, Texas in 1979. His family moved to Clear Lake due to his father's employment at NASA, and he grew up socializing with other Chinese American families at the local church and visiting Chinatown on the weekends. He attended Rice University where he completed a degree in biochemistry and policy studies and got involved with many different organizations such as OCA-Greater Houston and the Houston Asian American & Pacific Islander Film Festival, both of which he is still involved with today. Afterwards, he attended medical school at UT San Antonio and currently practices as a family physician in a low-income clinic in Sharpstown Gulfton. He is on the faculty at Baylor College of Medicine and is involved with many health care advocacy groups such as Health Care for All Texas and Promotores in San Antonio.

Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of labor and capital to develop a working history around the context of childhood experiences, career, and community advocacy. Much attention is given to his time in his career and his role in advocacy organizations.

The interview was conducted in a study room in Fondren Library on the Rice University campus. The interview required under an hour and a half. He shared several stories of his childhood and college years to give us an idea of his experience in Houston. He provided context to many of the Asian American and health advocacy organizations with which he has worked. Dr. Chao spoke comfortably and recalled many humorous stories alongside the more serious issues that he presented such as race, identity, and immigration.

Interviewers:

David Lam is a student at Rice University from Arlington, Texas. He is majoring in health sciences and minoring in sociology and plans on working in the field of public health. His research interests include health disparities and minority health.

Graham Hogg is a student at Rice University from Santa Cruz, California. He is majoring in anthropology and minoring in biochemistry. He plans to pursue a career in medicine after university and hopes to eventually combat urban homelessness.

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Interview Transcript:

**Key:**

<b>SC</b>	Stephen Chao
<b>DL</b>	David Lam
<b>GH</b>	Graham Hogg
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

**GH:** Okay. Um, I guess we should do a brief introduction—

**DL** Yeah!

**GH:** —of just names. Um, my name is Graham Hogg.

**DL:** My name is David Lam.

**GH:** And today we'll be interviewing Dr. Chao.

**SC:** My name is Stephen Chao. So, glad to be here.

**DL:** Okay, um, I think our first question is just, you know, tell us about yourself and whatever you want to let us know.

**SC:** Oh, um, well, let me see. First of all, I'm a graduate of Rice, uh, class of—should have been class of '01—but, uh, graduated in '02. And I am from Houston, uh, native Houstonian, uh, born and raised. Uh, I was raised in Clear Lake, which is a suburb of, uh, Houston. That's where the NASA Johnson Space Center is. And I was born right across the street at Hermann Hospital. And currently, uh, I'm a family physician. Uh, I'm on the faculty at Baylor College of Medicine. And, uh, where I work is in Sharpstown Gulfton, which is, uh, the part of Houston, uh, probably closest to Chinatown. So—and I work within the, uh—it's the, uh, low-inc—uh, the—there 's a system of low-income clinics, uh, uh, in Harris County that provides for the indigent population of Houston. So that's a little bit about me.

**GH:** Um, then in Clearwater, is that a predominantly Asian American community suburb?

**SC:** Uh no, Clear Lake.

**GH:** Clear Lake. Sorry.

**SC:** Two words, Clear Lake. Uh, Clear Lake is predominant—uh, I guess predominantly, um, uh, Caucasian. Um, it was founded, I would say, I think in the 50s and 60s, uh, because when they created the manned space center at that time, uh, they needed somewhere to put all the—the

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astronauts, the engineers for NASA. And, over time, especially after the 60s and 70s, uh, more and more Asian families moved in. Um, uh, I don't know the exact percentage, but it's not a majority Asian pop—uh, population over there.

**DL:** So, I guess, um, since you were born and raised in Houston, could you tell us about your experience growing up in Houston and your childhood?

**SC:** Sure. Sure. Um, let me kind of back up and talk about my parent's experience and why, uh, I guess they ended up in Houston.

**GH:** Sure.

**SC:** Um, my parents, they, uh, uh—they're from Taiwan. My dad was born in Taiwan. Uh, my mom was born in China, but, uh, I think when she was a couple months old, uh, her family left China because of, uh—I guess during that time, uh, the communists were, uh, taking over China; so they went to Taiwan. Um, they grew up there, and in 1973, uh, they were allowed to come here as, uh, international students. So after they finished college and my dad finished his military service in Taiwan, um, they first ended up in Baltimore. Uh, he had gotten into the PhD program in electrical engineering at Johns Hopkins University. Uh, and, uh, we could have ended up in California, um, but, uh, at that time I think they gave him a scholarship and Stanford didn't. So he ended up on the East Coast.

Um, after he graduated—um, actually he didn't—uh, after he graduated, it was hard for him to find a job that would sponsor him, uh, for his visa. There were a couple medical equipment, uh, device manufacturers on the East Coast that were willing to hire him, but not sponsor his visa. NASA would, and that's why he came to—to Texas. Uh, at that time, the Ford Company, uh, had a division called Ford Aerospace, and that's what brought him here initially was that he worked at mission control, kind of behind the scenes as an electrical engineer. Uh, they settled in Clear Lake because, you know, the NASA was there.

Um, now they came to Houston I think around maybe '77 or '78. Uh, from what I've been told, um, he actually didn't finish writing his dissertation. He finished it, um, while my mom was pregnant [laughter] 'cause I was born in '79. And so, uh, he typed his dissertation on a typewriter and slipped it in the mail to Baltimore, and he never actually went and got gowned, you know, went through his PhD graduation 'cause by that time, they had had a kid, which was me.

**[0:05:13]**

Um, so I was born, uh, 1979. Um, I, uh, was born, uh, I think two months early. I was born at 32 weeks. And I think it's interesting—it's—I link immigration and all of that, uh, to my birth because, um, I think if it had been under different circumstances, um, it would have been very different. Which you have to understand, as—as a government related employee at the time, they had basically gold-plated health insurance. So, because I was born early, uh, uh, the hospital in Clear Lake did not have a neonatal, uh, intensive care unit. So I was actually flown via Life Flight, uh, the helicopter, the air ambulance. And I think Life Flight, uh, had only started in 1978 or 1979.

**GH:** Oh!

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**SC:** And so, they flew my mom—I was in utero, uh—to Memorial Hermann. And, um, I spent the first three months of life, basically, in incubator [laughs], uh, because I was like 2 1/2 or 3 pounds or something like that. Um, and I think they're very lucky because, uh, by virtue of having been sponsored by NASA, being an employee, they had, you know, uh, uh—Ford—and still does have that gold-plated insurance. I mean, you know, I think a million dollar hospital stay, uh, would have bankrupted, you know, a young family.

So I think it's, uh, a unique but not uncommon immigrant story, um, that they sought, uh, stability and security, you know, for—for a—a new family. Um, and, uh—so I'm very grateful for that, you know? Uh, I think part of understanding that history, um, makes me, uh, feel compelled to do what I do today, which is, you know, work as a physician, uh, particularly in the, uh, underserved immigrant, uh, population.

**GH:** Awesome. And then your, um—your childhood growing up in Houston?

**SC:** Sure. So—so, what I can remember, uh, there were many Asian families by that time in the early '80s in the NASA area. Um, some of the first families, um, had been really pioneers. Uh, there's a—there's a well-known scientist. The name is Frederick Dawn, uh, D-A-W-N. And, uh, he's recognized as, uh, being, uh, the guy who created the, uh—the space suit. Uh, so for the first space walks and everything, uh, he created that space suit for NASA. And he was—he was, uh, one of the first Chinese families—his was one of the first Chinese families in Clear Lake.

Um, so growing up, you had other Asian families. Um, Chinese families predominantly. Uh, mainly socialized through the church I guess. Uh, this—the church is still there. It's called Clear Lake Chinese Church. It is a church plant of the main Houston Chinese Church down here on South Main. Uh, they had initially met at different churches in the Clear Lake area, and, um, uh, I remember that. I remember going to like Chinese school, uh, on the—on weekends. Um, and, uh, I guess it's when I look through pictures of like kindergarten through fifth grade, not many Asians. Um, I would probably be the only, uh, East Asian person in a class at a time. But, within a school, no, because there would be others as well. And I remember—well I see pictures from birthday pictures and stuff like that. So, definitely the—there weren't a lot of Chinese families but they were close.

[0:09:50]

Uh, I also remember, uh, coming to— [DL sneezes] Bless you.

**DL:** Thank you.

**SC:** Um, the—the—the south—[DL sneezes]—bless you.

**DL:** Thanks.

**SC:** —Southwest side of Houston where Chinatown—the new Chinatown is, uh, every weekend. So, um, when—I have a younger brother. He's 3 years younger. And what I remember is that, um, uh, our parents would shlep us into [laughs]—into the car and take us to, uh, down Braeswood, um, in the morning to this Russian, uh, piano teacher named Miss Kurinets—K-U-R-I-N-E-T-S. Um, and she was a mean woman. [All laugh] We hated piano. I know I hated

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piano. Um, but she was this very strict Russian lady, uh, with very dark hair. And her piano—her studio was in this two-story strip—strip shopping center and, um, sometimes roaches crawled out of [laughs] her outright piano.

**DL:** Wow! [laughs]

**SC:** But you could focus (?) like, she would hit you if, you know, scared—ran out 'cause of a roach. And, after the piano lessons, then we'd go to Chinatown, and my mom, she would buy groceries and go eat somewhere. We would go to the Di Ho supermarket—D-I-H-O—uh, which now is JusGo—J-U-S-G-O. But, at that time, that was the first large Asian st—supermarket in town and everyone—that's the routine. You know, you—you take your kids to whatever, like language school on the weekend, to whatever instrument lesson, um, and then you go and buy your groceries for the week. That's if you live in the suburbs. Um, and you know, you know, I guess idyllic in that respect that you were able to be in both world—worlds during the week. You're going to school, um, uh, elementary school, great teachers, and then on weekends you go to Chinese school. So [laughs], um—so it was—it was really good. Yeah.

**GH:** Do you have any particularly fond memories of—of that time?

**SC:** I remember [pause] I remember fourth grade. Um, I think I sucked at math. So by that time, fourth grade, there was actually some more Asian people. And, uh, I remember one of my friends, uh, he finished, uh, the multiplication tables before I did, like the tests and everything, and [laughs] I was behind. My parents were like, “What's wrong with you?” [laughs] Um, and, uh, they had a gifted and talented program in that school, and I guess my parents were a little concerned. They're like—I think it starts in third grade or fourth grade and then I was lagging a little behind. Um, they're like, “Oh shoot! What's wrong with him?” Um, and, uh—but fifth grade, uh, I was able to get in and, um, it was two classes. There was one that was, um, uh, I think anatomy and dissection. And I really like that one. They let you dissect a fish or like a—a frog. I remember when I was dissecting the frog, I sliced my finger open. And—[laughter] and—and I think the teacher was freaking out. It's like, “Ooh that's interesting.”

**DL:** Wow. [laughs]

**SC:** Um, and I also remember the other one was, uh, computer science. Uh, there's this programming language called BASIC, and, uh—or Logo in BASIC. And my dad, uh, by that time he was working for ExxonMobil. So he's a geophysicist. He basically programming, and he said, “You're gonna take this because [hitting table] I want you to learn how to program.” I was like, “But I don't wanna do—” “No you're gonna take that!” [All laugh] And I think probably my interests at that time already were kinda leaning towards like the—the life sciences. Uh, but he didn't want to hear that.

Um, other distinct mem—memory I have, um, was that, uh, I was in the school safety patrol. So you got to—in the morning, you got to come late to the first class because you were doing the safety patrol, and then you got to leave early. So you get to put this orange, you know, like, uh, vinyl thingy across you with the badge and like, “Yeah, I'm on safety patrol.” [All laugh] Um, and that was a lot of fun, um, 'cause I guess for those who were in it, you have this sense of like duty but also like looking out for your fellow students.

Um, and I guess one other thing. We had a—we had a babysitter ‘cause my mom had started working. Uh, she's an accountant, uh, by training. And so, I think she gave up kind of her hopes of going on to get a CPA or to get a master's. She actually got into Texas Tech in Lubbock and decided not to go. Uh, but she was working, uh, for ARCO Chemical at that time, I think. There's chemical plants, uh, a little bit north of Clear Lake between Deer Park and Clear Lake. And, um, um, so she—both of them were working full time. And we had this babysitter, and the babysitter, uh, was Italian, but her husband was Iranian, and then their family was Baha'i. So, it was kinda interesting interacting with them. Uh, not only because of that, but because, um, uh, they were all—it was a family of artists. And so it was interesting ‘cause I just recently reconnected with our babysitter on Facebook of all places [all laugh] after—after what? Probably like 24 years?

**GH:** Wow.

**SC:** Yeah, it's incredible. So, uh—so all in all, you know, just those memories. You know?

**[0:16:24]**

**DL:** Sure, um, I guess we can go on to talk about maybe your Rice experience. And—

**SC:** Well let me preface that by talking a little bit about, uh, I guess, my middle school and high school experience—

**DL and GH:** [overlapping] Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely.

**SC:** ‘Cause that's actually really crucial—

**GH:** [overlapping] Okay.

**SC:** —I think, to—to—to—my story.

**DL and GH:** [overlapping] Okay. Sure.

**SC:** So, in the early ‘90s, um, in that area, um—I think this is kind of reflective of Houston as well—um, there was significant school overcrowding. Um, since Houston's a development-driven city, um, uh, the tax base wasn't enough to expand the schools rapidly enough for these rapidly growing suburbs. So what happened was that, uh, uh, all the families who had already had children earlier—many of my peers, um, that I knew from Chinese school and whatnot, um, had older siblings. And when it came time to send us to middle school, um, they had to choose. So the ones that already had siblings in middle school or high school, they were allowed to bring their younger siblings along to the—the good middle school over there. If you didn't have an older sibling, you got sent to the not-so-good middle school. And, um, there's a part over there in the same district, which is called Seabrook. Uh, if y'all have been to the Kemah boardwalk, uh, that's where, uh, mainly people who might have been working the shrimping industry or the chemical plants, uh, they lived, I guess you could say, on the other side of the tracks. And so

because I didn't have an older sibling, all my friends went to the good middle school, Clear Lake Intermediate, and then I went to Seabrook Intermediate.

Now actually, it was a really trying time. Uh, in contrast to earlier, uh, in elementary school, uh, middle school was really tough. Um, I think it was my first, uh, encounters with, uh—with bullying. So I got bullied for, uh, pretty much all of sixth grade. Uh, so not only was the school overcrowded, but the bus was overcrowded. We had one bus, uh, for this neighborhood, uh. And, uh, um, you know it was basically 3 to a row on both sides on this bus. And it was a 45 minute bus ride to that school. Um, and here you have this skinny Asian kid, um, and, uh, some of the kids on that bus were from the, uh, I guess, the lower income—I mean, this is the suburbs. Um, you know, again, you have a lot of professional, uh, parents, [sneeze in distance] you know, work for NASA, work for oil companies. [sneeze in distance again] You also had some, I would say working class parents in the—in the adjoining neighborhood. And so they're all on the—we're all on the same bus. And so you had basically who I would call poor—poor whites. Um, I had two bullies, and they were—they were pretty relentless. Um, you know, I was in the orchestra. I had to haul this cello home sometimes. You know? Um, um, it was a really tough time for me. Um, and I—also wasn't really sure where I fit because in that school, there was basically one or two classes of like, um, the advanced, uh, sixth graders or seventh graders, and the rest of the school, uh, was regular classes. So you basically saw all the same people the whole day, um, but in some of your other classes like P.E. or whatever.

**[0:20:39]**

Um, uh I think it was a eye-opener for me, um, particularly, you know, for—in terms in class, in terms of race. Um, and, um, you know, in seventh grade, I spent a lot of time alone actually because I wasn't sure where I fit in that school. So when I rejoined my, uh, elementary school classmates, um, in—in high—in eighth grade and then in high school, I think—uh, I thought I had a very different experience compared to theirs, which was I think a little more sheltered. That they had all been in orchestra, been in all the same classes, um, um, but didn't have those experiences.

Uh, ironically, it, uh, was the, uh, working class chi—uh, the children of the working class whites from the local neighborhood of that school and plus, uh, uh, some of the Latino, Black students from that neighborhood who I remember once in the P.E. class, um, there was one of like the bullies in my P. E. class. And, uh, I think they were trying to pick on me that day, and the—the—the—the kids from that neighborhood, uh, they stood up for me. They said, “Knock it off!” Um, you know, “Just stop it.” And—and I think I—I—I carry that with me today, which is, um, um, a recognition of, um, um, um, I don't know, I guess ... how sometimes people how have misunderstandings of each other. Um, but also how we can break down those barriers of class or color and come to understanding. So—so that—I think that overall experience made me, um, think a little differently about the world basically.

Um, so when I went to high school, uh, um, uh, I was very curious about, uh, uh, other things. Not just life sciences, but I—one of my favorite classes in high school was government. Um, around that time, it was the—1994, and it was the time of the Clinton health reform. And, you know, the President Clinton at that time had said, “You know, I want to provi—be able to provide healthcare for everybody.” Um, and I think that really resounded with me. Um, but when it went down, when it failed, um, I think it had an impact upon me which was, you know, why can't we help everybody?

Um, and, uh, um, when I came to Rice, I came kind of with that vision, which was, um—I thought I would probably do something life sciences-oriented. So I think I wrote on the paper that y'all gave me that I started working in a lab, um, doing research, doing dissection and stuff like that, um, biomedical kind of research, which is usually—which is not your typical summer job I guess. Um, but I guess having that experience . . . Um, I had a very nice high school biology teacher who encouraged me and pushed me. She said, “You know, hey, I thought of you for this program. Do you want to apply for it?” I was like, “Oh, sure.” Um, and, uh—and then that kind of led me down the road to—to—to medicine. And—but the—the government class, uh, and the things that were going on that time led me kinda down the road to what I’m doing—a lot of what I'm doing today, which is like universal health care advoca—advocating for healthcare, you know?

**[0:25:15]**

Um, back to what you were saying about Rice. Um, so I had applied all around the country. Um, my dad, very traditional Chinese dad, um, he, um . . . I applied early. Uh, and when I got in, I knew some friends that were already at Rice and they encouraged me. “Oh yeah. It's a really great place.” And, um, um, I think another reason was that, uh, my parents—while they were both working, they didn't have a lot of money. Um, um, you know, I do—I do feel that money was tight, you know? They were stressed out a lot about that. And, um, um, my brother was gonna be going to college in a couple years, too. And so I remember, I talked to one of my best friends. He’s like, “Oh, we're both going to apply to UT and Rice.” And, uh, so, uh, Jonathan—his name, uh, Jonathan Gooding—he—we're both cellists. We're both in the cello section. We're like, “Oh yeah, we're gonna both go off to UT. We'll room together.” And, uh, uh, he wrote this four page long essay [laughs] for his application. I said, “Hey, Gooding, *don't* submit that one.” Then, he said, “No, I'm gonna do it.” [All laugh] Yeah, we see what happened, uh—what happened, uh, to him.

But, uh, so I got in, and I very clearly remember my dad. He was like—when I got the big envelope—he said, “All right. But we're gonna wait for Harvard and Yale.” I was like—

**GH:** Oh.

**SC:** And I was shocked because we had this differing expectations. You know? I had gotten into the school I really wanted to go to, but he still had this, um, you know, kind of tiger dad mentality, which was, “Well, that’s not good enough.” Um, and when I chose to come here, to Rice, I remember my mom and I had this conversation. She said, “You know, we don't have a lot of money. Um, we're okay, but if you go off—” So I also got into University of Pennsylvania. Um, and, um, [laughing] and I looked at the—at the price, and she was like, “No.” And then she also said, um, “You know, your brother's gonna graduate in 3 years and I don't know if we can afford to send both of y'all to somewhere like the Ivy League.” I said, “Well, okay. Uh, then I'll go to Rice.” And so I did.

Um, at Rice, I guess I came in and I decided to get really involved. So I tried to apply to be one of the reps for the—the SA. Um, I was at Will Rice, like we talked about earlier. Um, I was in a triple in old—in old dorm [GH laughs], um, which—

**GH:** Was that first floor?



SC: First floor.

GH: First floor.

SC: Yeah. And I would say [laughs] by the end of the year, I regretted that [GH laughs] because the two guys that I roomed with, um, I think they were best men [laughs] at each other's weddings. And then one of them actually married somebody from—from Will Rice. Um, and, uh, I'm a little sad. I—I didn't stay in touch with them, but they were very much into the Will Rice, uh, residential college culture. And I didn't want to feel limited by that. So, um, I moved off campus. So I moved off campus for three years, um, my sophomore, junior, and fifth year. Um, but I guess looking back, you know, although I didn't have maybe what you would call the prototypical Rice experience, looking back, uh, I enjoyed it a lot. You know, and it's—in many respects, Rice has kind of—has shaped me to be, um, who—has, um, affected who—who I am—am today as well. Yeah.

GH: Um, going back to the formative, um, years of your life in middle school, do you think that was at all affected by the—the race riots in—in L.A. that were going on around the same time? I think that was in '92.

[0:30:10]

SC: Yeah, um ... I don't think so. I think more it was a product of, um—or I imagine it to be more a product of Houston and, um—and its economy. I think Houston at the time was coming out of a oil bust, in the late—mid- to—mid 80s, Houston was a oil bust town. You know, people lost their jobs. And I think that's, um—well actually, I'll tell a story. So, my dad, um, uh, he was working for ExxonMobil at the time. And he won't tell me this, but his, uh—we'll talk about OCA later—but there's a lady on the board of our OCA, um, who will tell you this. That at that time, uh, '80s maybe early '90s, uh, NASA and the oil and gas companies were going to lay off people. And it came out that they had these lists. And at NASA and at the—some of the major oil-gas companies, the lists, maybe like of 50 people, 30 to 40, uh, 30 or 35 of them would be Asian that they were planning to lay off. Of course they kept it a secret. And my dad was on one of those lists.

Um, and so I think, uh, when economy was bad, basically, they were gonna [laughs] lay off the people that could easi—most easily lay off without anyone raising a fuss. But I think for the—the locals as well, you know, because the economy was depressed, you know, you had many young people who—their families, they were struggling. Um, that, um, they may have been like chemical plant operators or what—who, I don't know—I don't know those families. But I think a lot of families were struggling, uh, during those times. So not directly as, you know, related to the L.A. riots, um, but, you know, kind of a product of the general malaise around the whole country. 'Cause Bush was the president at that time, right? He was saying stuff like, “Read my lips; no new taxes,” and then he raised taxes.

Uh, and then you had all this crazy stuff going on like—like south central L.A. I mean it was a very, um, heady time in the U.S. Not only that, overseas, um, you know, you just had, uh, 1989; so Tiananmen Square. Um, my dad had wanted to take us to China because their story is—is that, uh, when the communists came, uh—well first it was the Japanese. And they're from northeast China, my dad's side. And so there's this whole set of—part of the family that got left

behind. And so he has half-brothers and sisters that he had never met. And so, um, they had connected, you know, uh, in the mid-80s when China opened up. And they were gonna take us over there. And then it happened that Tiananmen Square happened during the exact month that he was gonna take us. So—so just a lot of world events I think were going on, you knows, in those years. I think when—you're right—when I was in middle school from, you know . . . . [quietly] When would that be? [indistinguishable] So, yeah, probably '90 to '93, uh, but I wouldn't say—I wouldn't say direct relation, yeah. That's a good question.

**GH:** Did you end up going to China, um, on that trip?

**SC:** Uh, no. So we stayed in Taiwan, and went on a weeklong road trip of Taiwan, [laughs] which, if you know Taiwan, it's not that big. [GH laughs] There's only so much you can do with like . . . 6 kids in a van in a hot and sweltering tropical climate. Uh, it was my cousins and me and my brother. So yeah, uh . . . . But, we didn't go to China until, uh—until I graduated from Rice in 2002.

**GH:** Mm-hmm.

**SC:** Yeah. Yeah.

**[0:35:04]**

**DL:** Um, so you mentioned earlier about your experience with OCA and other advocacy organizations. Could you talk about like how you got involved with them and, um, how you are involved with them.

**SC:** Sure. So, when I got to Rice, and I had mentioned that I was off campus. Um, and when I got involved at Rice, I tried to be in SA. I, uh—I was in the MOB, um, played the cymbals. And, uh, I also was the Beer Bike parade coordinator, uh, my sophomore year I think. So I guess I tried a lot of different things, and that's one of the great things that Rice is for, um, that it's small and you can try a lot of different things.

And one of the things I did was—was be in the Chinese Student Association. Um, and I was their fundraising chair and then I think I became the advocacy chair my junior year until I graduated—a co-chair; there's two of us. Um, and I had a couple mentors before me. Uh, there was two in particular, uh, Jennifer Lynn and Anderson Lee. Uh, they're both from, uh, Texas. Jennifer I think is from Memorial, uh, and Anderson is from Port Lavaca I think. Um, and they had had the impetus to start doing kind of these advocacy kind of discussions that—to talk about race, ethnicity. Um, they had actually helped a graduate student who is half-Chinese, Shannon Leonard, um, uh, start a film fest—Asian American film festival at Rice, which ran for about three or four years. Um, and they also had this professor who was in Asian studies named Chiu-Mi Lai—C-H-I-U-dash-M-I-space-L-A-I—um, who—her background was mainly Chinese literature, but she had an interest in Asian American studies. And so all of them kind of worked together. And from the student side, they tried to have discussion roundtables about different topics like discrimination, like interracial relationships, like, uh, whatever, relevant to students. Um, and, um, I guess I started to follow them and be mentored by them.

And, uh, I think a large impetus was seeing my peers—my peers who, uh, I guess had difficulty coming to terms with their identity as .... Am I Chinese? Am I American? Am I Asian? What does all this mean? Um, you had people who were from small towns coming to Rice, first time they may have seen a lot of Asian people. We may have people from—from California or from—from Sugarland who was—who were actually used to being around a lot of other Asian people, but ironically sometimes they were actually trying to get away from that, say from like California. They were coming here thinking that [laughs] there weren't gonna be a lot of Asian people [all laugh] at Rice but there were!

**DL:** Yeah.

**SC:** Um, so I think hearing this from my peers, uh, some of us decided, “Oh we wanna create this forum where they can—people can talk about this.” And, um, for that, um, we did that through the—the advocacy, um, roundtable I guess. Um, but there's certain problematic things with that because if it's gonna be Chinese-centric, um, alone (?) are you gonna include people who are South Asian or Southeast Asian or people who might identify as, uh, queer, LGBT? Um, and so is—I think it was difficult to do it within that framework, um, at times. Uh, you had students who may have felt marginalized by the other Asians on campus, or you might have thought—have students who felt just marginalized by the campus culture in general. Uh, like, for example, uh, oh, “I may not like my residential college.” So either—sometimes people say, “I want to switch colleges to be where my friends are” or you move off campus. Another thing that happened was that, um, uh, I think, uh, a couple of hate-based incidents happened on campus. And that's where it kind of became a, uh—an awakening for me, uh, because where I grew up, not a lot of, uh, Hispanic or Black, uh, families in Clear Lake.

**[0:40:13]**

Um, but here, uh, it was a real awakening 'cause, um, one, um—one of my roommates off campus—he's—he's a Black German. Um, and, um, uh, let's see. So I had a Black German roommate for, uh, fifth year. And we were—we both had singles on the same floor at Will Rice my senior year. Um, and then my other roommates were from Wiess, and one was Russian, um, one was Mexican-American, and one was Vietnamese. Um, so—but we were all just nerds. [laughs]

So, um, but I think the political consciousness came in when those incidents happened on campus. And I met friends who were—were the Black Student Association officers, or people who were officers in HACER, uh, uh, who incidentally were Wiessmen, actually. Um, and I think that really infused sort of a consciousness of—of, um, I guess the culture at Rice, how they felt, how they felt like they weren't, um, um—they didn't feel that their social lives, you know, were based in—on Rice. Sometimes they went—they would go to UH and TSU because they had Black fraternities or sororities over there. Um, so I think that was, uh, I guess a further development of my own consciousness, that, “Oh!” You know, I think, uh, uh, the different groups, um, have some common experiences, um, and so we came together and—uh, along with, uh, there's a Native American group, and also the GLBT queer group on campus. And we came together and started to push for, uh, ethnic studies on camp. And, um, what we had heard was that it had been tried two or three times previously, uh, since the 80's, um, that Rice was not very receptive, uh, to those kinds of initiatives.

Um, so I would say my last two years on campus became quite politicized that, um, uh, 9/11, uh, September 2001 happened my fall of my fifth year. So a lot of discussion on campus. You know? Uh, what do we do? Is there just war? You know, how to respond to this? Um, the presidential election had just occurred, where, you know, Bush and Gore, he had won in Florida by some hanging chads, right? So among the progressives on campus, there was a lot of discussion. You know, what do we do? How does—how do we respond as a community at Rice?

And that's where I got really involved then, was that, um, I got, uh, through the advocacy work I was doing, um .... Um, uh, my co-chair was part of Leadership Rice. And, um, he—one year in Leadership Rice you're supposed to find like an internship spot, uh, for the incoming—the following year. And so, uh, he knew of OCA. He knew there was a national internship based in D.C. and he approached a local chapter, uh, who I previously had not had contact with. Um, and said, "Oh, um, you know, I think there's somebody that wants to maybe to start—maybe to do this an (?) internship." And so, he talked to them. He talked to Leadership Rice, and they offered it. And, um—and I previously didn't know them actually. Uh, people who were actually other interviewees in this archive, Rogene Gee Calvert, um, Kim Szeto, um, these community leaders, uh, who have been involved with, uh, OCA, uh, for a long time, I became connected with them because, um, they wanted a Rice—they wanted a student to be on their board. And so, as a college junior, uh, I was going to these community board meetings. And that's how I started to get involved, uh, in the community, uh, off—off of campus.

**[0:45:17]**

**GH:** Just for the record, what—what does OCA stand for?

**SC:** So OCA was started, I think, in maybe early '70s? Uh, originally it was started as the Organization of Chinese Americans. Um, as the community has grown, they're trying to rebrand themselves, uh, to encompass the greater Asian American community. So right now they're calling themselves OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates Incorporated. Um, there's a lot—been a lot of discussion [laughs] that's gone on behind that 'cause you have older generation Chinese, who are like, "No, we're Chinese." In fact, the old design had like the—the chop, like with the Chinese letters. And, uh, um, they're very adamant that they stay in that. And, um—and they weren't so comfortable about, uh—even though its been the mission all along to advocate for Asian Americans, um—they're still kind of, uh, wary about changing the scope. Uh, but originally it stands for Organization of Chinese Americans. And actually OCA was one of the groups that advocated when NASA and those oil-gas companies, did the—the—proposed to do the discriminatory lay offs. And at that time OCA was one of the local community groups that—that—that stepped up. Um ...

**DL:** Awesome! Um, I guess we could follow that question up with, um—

**SC:** Sure.

**DL:** —are there any changes that you personally want to see in the, uh, Asian American community in Houston, or just in the nation really?

**SC:** Um ... there's a lot of stuff. [All laugh] Um, I'd say, locally, um, now that I'm more in the health arena, um, um, I think it'd be nice to see, um, some of the local organizations—for

example the Hope Clinic, which is a federally qualified health center that was founded in the early 2000s, but, um, uh, is now only in the past couple years on more stable footing. And it was created specifically to help the, uh, indigent Asian populations that live in and around Chinatown, who may not have, uh, access to, uh, linguistically appropriate care. So many people of course live in Chinatown because, um, uh, they're (?) limited English proficient. Uh, um, and it makes it hard for them to, uh, not only see the doctor, uh, but to handle normal business, like, you know, uh—you know, legal documents, um, get a job, that kind of stuff. So they primarily stay within, I guess, I would call the ethnic economy. They live in Chinatown 'cause they can speak their own language; go see a Chinat—local doctor who speaks their language and stuff. Um, but, uh, because many of them don't have health insurance because they work for themselves; they work in a restaurant; they work maybe in a garment factory or whatever. Um, um, their options are limited. So Hope Clinic has been a great step towards that.

But that's a not for profit. They have to, um, uh, raise a lot of their own money to stay open. So, uh, some of the forebears in our community, uh, uh, Rogene Calvert, Beverly Gor, um, uh, who really have been tireless advocates, uh, for the health needs of our community. It's still a struggle, uh, because I think the mainstream medical community, or—uh, would say, “Oh, Asians, yeah, they all do really well. They don't have a lot of health problems.” Uh, it's the whole model minority myth. And in reality, there are a lot of problems. You know? You have people who have chronic diseases: uh, hepatitis B; mental health is a big one; you have people who, uh, smoke too much. They go to—they go to Louisiana, and they're, uh—they're, uh, uh, uh, uh, addicted to gambling. You know, there's a lot of hidden stuff that goes on, um, that doesn't get seen.

Uh, there's another organization called A—Asian American Family Services, um, that Kim Szeto—S-Z-E-T-O—founded. And I think it's always difficult to make the pitch to the local community. Uh, “We need this. Um, *you* may not need it, but someday you might. You know, your kid may have, you know, problems, or you might have someone in your family that, uh, may want to commit suicide. Who are you gonna call upon?” So it's been very difficult I think to get resources for—for the community.

[0:50:31]

Um, I personally would love to see a—a legal advocacy center started. Uh, there's—human trafficking has been a big issue, and has a lot of visibility. Um, but I went to a forum about a month ago sponsored by the Chinese Community Center, and, uh—and, um, it was supposed to be geared toward the Asian community, um, but there was [laughing] very few Asian people there for that—that forum. And, uh, I think it's been a challenge to create awareness of these, uh, less visible aspects of the—the community, um, um, in comparison to other places, say like New York or San Francisco or Seattle or LA or Chicago. Um, but I think we're making progress.

Um, nationally, um ... hmm, I think everyone talks about more political power, more political visibility. Um, I'm not always sure that's a—that's a blessing, um, because I guess I feel like I come from, uh, sort of like a progressive tradition now, that the way that I was politically socialized and became politically conscious at Rice was from progressives. Um, to kind of question the traditional—traditional levers of power, that it's really about the people; it's really about community. It's not about, you know, how much politically you can give or who, you know—who can pull—pull favor for you. It's about movements, and it's about people. Um, and I

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really hope that there can be a greater movement towards what we might call social justice, um, for people who are poor, uh, for people who, um, um, have limited opportunities overall. Um, so I think, um, for the greater Asian American community, I really hope that we can, um, become part of that dialogue, especially a progressive kind of dialogue and movement.

**GH:** Mm-hmm. Just to go back for a second, at—when you were at Rice, you said that, um, you—did you spend 5 years as—as an undergraduate at Rice? Um, was that—did you use all 5 years for academics or what?

**SC:** [overlapping] Yes.

**GH:** Okay.

**SC:** So—so I started as a biochem and political science, uh, double. And, uh, I quickly dropped the political science. [laughs] Um, um, but I kept, uh, an interest, and then I found the policy studies major, which was really great ‘cause basically kind of a create your own major. And I'm still friends with Dr. Ostdiek—O-S-T-D-I-E-K—um, who's the director of that program. ‘Cause it allowed you to kinda create, you know, “Oh I had interests in health policy and sociology, and some Asian American stuff,” and it just let me explore. Um, the biochemistry ... well you had to have a second major [all laugh] with—with policy studies; so I guess I had to keep it. Um, but that's part of why I—I took the fifth year. Um, part of it also was that I put off taking the MCAT for—for a year. Um, so then I was kind of off sequence. Um, but it was—it was fruitful because I got to take some stuff I wouldn't have gotten to take: um, uh, medical communication, uh, some other School of Public Health classes. Um, I think, uh, that's one of the great things about Rice is that—that you can kinda choose your own adventure. You know?

**[0:55:05]**

**DL:** [quietly] Yeah. Um, let's see, what are some other relevant questions we came up with?

**GH:** Um, do you think your, um, experience as a Chinese American plays a role in your, um, day-to-day life?

**SC:** Absolutely. Um, I think being the son of immigrants, um, where I recognize that they had to struggle very hard, um, to just focus on, “Am I gonna have a job? Um, how are we gonna raise our kids? How are we gonna keep the roof over our heads? How are we gonna get these kids through—through school and through college?” Um, for them it's always been about survival. It may not have been the refugee experience, which is very different. You know, they're basically immigrants for educational, econo—economic opportunity. Um, but I think I carried their ethos with me as well, which is, um, you know, you have to work hard. Um, they even chide me when I do the community work that I do. Like, “Why are you doing all this?” Um, uh, um ... “Why are you wasting your time like that?” But to me the work that I do is about helping those people who had to struggle like that, who may not have the opportunities or the English ability like they did. Um, and, in a certain respect, um, um, I think part of what I do is trying to honor their experience, um, um, of being immigrants.

So in my—in—in my daily life, what I—where I work now, so I work in Sharpstown Gulfton. Um, when I went off to—I went to med school in—in San Antonio, one of the UT, uh, uh, medical, uh, branch schools. And, um, uh, I chose to leave Houston actually because, um, um, I felt like I needed to get away from the community for a bit. Um, here, uh, the medical community is very focused on the medical center. And when I made the decision to go to medical school, um, which was after my first year in college, um, uh, I did campus—Rice EMS, um, and, um—and I also did—took a lot school—classes at the School of Public Health. And what I learned—what I drew from that was that, um, we really need a better health care system that focused on prevention and primary care. And I knew I wasn't gonna get that here. Uh, so I needed to go somewhere where there was more focus on—on primary care. And I think San Antonio was a great place for that. Smaller town, um, and a lot of family doctors actually, um, and I had great mentors there.

Um, but, uh, going back to what I do every day, when I decided to come back, I knew I wanted to work in a place where I would be able to use my medical Spanish and Mandarin, uh, to help, uh, immigrant, uh, population, and that's the setting that I work in. Um, the clinic that I work in, uh, is probably 60% Latino. Most of them are first generation, uh, immigrants from, uh, El Salvador, southern Mexico, Guatemala, or they may be refugees from Cuba. Um, the remainder I would say probably 20% Asian, lot of, uh, Indian, Pakistani gas station owners, housewives, um, uh, more recent refugees from Bhutan, from Burma, uh, from Ethiopia, from Iraq, uh, lot of, uh, first and second generation—uh, mainly first—uh, Vietnam and China, um, and I have a lot of Chinese, um, just immigrating past couple years. They're elderly. They followed their children here. Um, many of them [their children] are researchers in the medical center, and, uh, they came as international students or postdocs. And now they've had their children, but now they're bringing their parents, as they have those childrens to bring their parents—and their parents are taking care of them. And they live in senior housing, uh, in and around Chinatown, but in *all* parts of Harris County. And I have patients that come from as far as La Porte or Cypress, um, to come to my clinic 'cause I'm the only Mandarin-speaking, uh, family physician, uh, within the Harris County hospital district system, uh, just because they feel that connection, um.

**[1:01:17]**

So even as an American born Chinese, who is a Chinese school drop out [all laugh], um, who did not so great in Chinese 211/212, here at Rice, um, you know .... Uh, I feel really blessed, um, from—from, um, those experiences from my past, and also here 'cause I took Spanish and [laughing] Chinese, um, that I use, uh, on a—on a daily basis, um, and—and identify as a Chinese American who's working, you know, to help, you know, um, I guess other immigrants or children of immigrants. Yeah.

**DL:** Awesome. Let's see. [to GH] Um, do you think that's good?

**GH:** Hmm? Um, let's ask a couple more questions.

**DL:** Sure.

**GH:** Um, [quietly] I like this question. Do you have any, um, hobbies? [All laugh]

**DL:** [overlapping] Uh, let me see.

**GH:** Not work related.

**SC:** Not work related

**DL:** [overlapping] Yeah.

**SC:** So I still play the cello. Um, somebody at church asked me a couple weeks ago, “Oh so did you start playing cello ‘cause you really admire Yo Yo Ma?” And I was like, “No, I had no idea [all laugh] who he was when I started!” Um, and I told her, “You know, only reason I chose cello was because, um, uh, we went to this instrument fair in the beginning of sixth grade, and there was a bunch of [quietly] other Asian families there of course, and somebody told me, ‘Oh, don't play the violin ‘cause it will make your fingers all scrunch up.’ [GH laughs] I was like, ‘I don't want my fingers all scrunchy. I'm gonna—I'm gonna play something where your fingers can be spaced out.’” And so [laughing] that's why I chose the cello, kind of a stupid reason. [GH laughs]

Um, um ... I really want to get back into rowing. I was on the—I was in crew here. I loved crew.

**GH:** Really?

**SC:** I loved it. Um, I was probably the—the shortest, skinniest person on the team. [All laugh] Um, but I loved it. The whole idea of being in a team, all on a boat, all, you know, working to a common goal, rowing the same direction, I mean, uh, uh, I loved it. Um, now the—the 5 AM workouts and the running and all that stuff hmm. And—and it's ironic also ‘cause I can't swim. [All laugh] So—so—

**GH:** That's a bit nerve racking.

**SC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I actually remember—I remember there was a guy at Brown. He, uh, got thrown out of the boat during a race, uh, ‘cause the oar hit him, and he got ejected out of the boat. I was like hmm. [All laugh] I don't want that to happen to me.

Um, so I guess, um ... I guess my main hobby is community work now. So—so, uh, right now, uh, on the board of OCA. Um, I've been on the boards of, uh—there's a group called Healthcare for All Texas, that advocates for universal health care, uh, here in Texas. Um, so I was part of panel earlier this week here at Rice. I spoke about that.

**[1:05:04]**

Uh, let me see. I'm on the board of a group in San Antonio that, uh, is about, uh, community health workers, *Promotores*. So *promotores* are, uh, lay health workers from different communities, largely Latino. Uh, and I met these people, amazing people in San Antonio who, um, really saw a grassroots approach to community health, um, as the way to really help people, um, in kind of, uh, vulnerable communities. So I'm on the board of that. Um, something I've recently become more involved in is, uh, refugees. So, for example, yesterday I



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gave a talk about health care access to, um, a Bhutanese, uh, group. So that stuff keeps me really busy. Um, I—I guess I would say I'm active in my church fellowship. Um, and ....

Oh, I'm still doing something that [laughing] I did in college was help plan an Asian American film festival. Yeah. So I really—I really like stories of people, and, uh—and, uh, this is just sort of like a continuation of that, you know. Being a family physician, you hear many, many different stories, and that's one of the most enjoyable parts of my job is to hear people's different stories, um, and telling those stories. You know, I've always maybe thought about becoming a journalist, you know, kind of on the side. Um, that would be an interesting side career. Um, I just wish I had more time. [All laugh]

**GH:** It's hard.

**DL:** Yeah.

**SC:** Yeah. So ...

**GH:** Um, [to DL] were you gonna say something?

**DL:** Sure, uh, so you mentioned that, um, you're involved with your fellowship, and also you mentioned earlier in the conversation that, um—well like a lot of like—when you grew up a lot of the socializa—or, uh, a lot of the socializing between different Chinese, um, families was through the church. Um how does—how do you think that like your religious affiliation has affected your experience?

**SC:** Um ... as far as?

**DL:** Um, anything.

**SC:** Anything?

**DL:** Yeah.

**SC:** Um ... I think I would say this: um, in the times when I've been doing community work or I would—I'm not a organizer, but I would say I'm a community advocate. In the times when I've been frustrated or I felt burned out, um, um, and there was definitely times, um, uh, particularly near the end of college or during med school. I had a—I had a really tough time during med school. I actually, uh, chose on my own to go to med school. My parents never said, "Oh, you should be a doctor. You have to be a doctor." My mom said, "No, you should be an accountant or a petroleum engineer," [all laugh] 'cause that's what she was most familiar with. My dad never said anything. Uh, but when I got there, I—I really struggled. I really hated med school. Um, and I would say my—my religion—my walk has greatly influenced me, that—that—that I would say God brought me through that whole experience. And I really feel that, uh, what I'm doing today is a sort of affirmation of his calling, uh, to, uh—to place me in a place where I can, uh, uh, do His work, um, to be His hands and feet, um, to, uh, really, um, I guess, um, do His kingdom work. Um, and also in a sense of social justice, you have to put hope in a higher

being—being, where you may feel dejected or without hope, or, um, to give hope to others, um, that—that, um, hmm ....

**[1:09: 52]**

I think for many of the communities that I work in, that are here, uh, uh, they have huge struggles, uh, that they ... might be undocumented. Um, they don't speak English. [laughing] They have rebellious children that are now part of this culture that want to rebel against the old culture. And, um, I guess having this, uh—the Christian belief that there is, uh, a greater purpose, um, and, uh—and uh, uh—and a eternal future and hope, um, it gives me a lot of strength, uh, to be able to do those things, even in the face of, you know, tremendous poverty and, uh, uh, adversity.

Um, so—so that's—that's how it influences me, you know? It gives me a sense of hope, and it gives me a sense of, um, um, I guess, uh, justice, um, to see, um, all these many things that you might call unjust, uh, but to recognize that, you know—that it's, uh—all these things are—uh, uh, happen for a reason, uh, but that—that has justice, God's justice. Um, uh, well it's—it's like that—that old, uh, I guess, African American spiritual, like, "We will overcome" or "We shall overcome." Right that—it's their hope that—that, uh—that, uh—that they will be delivered, you know, from, um, uh, uh, from—from the struggles that they faced. So—so yeah, that gives me a lot of, uh, uh, inspiration and hope. Yeah.

**DL:** Awesome. That's awesome.

**GH:** Um, I guess, so one of the basic themes of our—the oral history project is finding, uh, your place in the modern, um, workforce and your profession.

**SC:** Mm-hmm.

**GH:** So I guess a final question would be, um, what—you said your parents were not a major influence in your path to becoming a doctor.

**SC:** Mm-hmm.

**GH:** Um, is there something that you believe was an influence?

**SC:** From them? Oh.

**GH:** Or just in general. What—what led you to become a physician?

**SC:** Um ... first being, uh, interested in biology and the biomedical sciences. Um, but also going back to my story, which is, you know, being flown in Life Flight and being at Memorial Hermann and I guess I have the—the privilege of being able to go back there. When I was doing campus EMS, uh, I rotated through the, uh—the em—the ER at—at Memorial Hermann. And it was feeling like coming full circle. Um, and then—and that's when I decided I wanted to be a doctor.

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Um, after that I watched a lot of cable, um, *Trauma: Life in the ER*. [All laugh] I was like, "This is awesome!" You know, "Ooh, blood, gore, car accidents, shootings." And, uh—and, uh, uh, uh, by that time, uh, I think we had cable for a couple of years. [laughs] So okay, actually, I remember—I distinctly remember this. We got cable in middle school, and then me and my brother started watching MTV. And it was so corrupting. [All laugh] 'Cause we started watching *Beavis and Butt-head*. [GH laughs]

**GH:** Oh, no!

**SC:** And, yeah, my mom hated that. Um, but, I remember watching a lot of like, uh, learning channel and watching that. I was like, "This is awesome! I really—I want to be a trauma surgeon." And my mom was like, "Ooh, that's too scary. Blood, no!" Um, but, I guess that and, um, um, I don't know, there's a lot of premeds [laughing] at Rice, so. Um, but, I think it was the—that ex—uh, you know doing EMS, going and doing School of Public Health classes, seeing how, um, pol—government and policy, and seeing how different communities are affected. Um, and, uh, um, let's see. I had—I guess I had some—I remember some really nice doctors growing up. I went to see the dermatologist a lot [laughing] when I was young, and there was one that I remember. She was a really, you know, positive influence. Um, but there's no doctors in my family, um, so we don't come from a medical tradition. Um, you know, just—I think it's a natural extension of feeling like you want to help people, and this is one of the ways you can do it.

**DL:** Awesome, I think that's a great way to end—end the interview.

**GH:** Yeah, so I guess we'll just end. Um, this is the conclusion of our interview with Dr. Stephen Chao. Um, it is 3:04 PM, uh, March 30th 2014. Thanks.

**DL:** Yeah sounds good.

**SC:** Great.

**GH:** Yeah, just pause button.

**[1:16:06]**

**End interview**