Background:

Jack Joe was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1942. His father had immigrated as a paper son and his mother, as a mail order bride. He grew up in a nearby town, Rolling Fork, Mississippi. Along with his parents, his three brothers, and two other Chinese families, he lived in a large “supermarket” that sold groceries among other goods and services. He attended the University of Houston. While completing his degree, he was drafted and served at bases in the US during the Vietnam War. After his service, he began work at Texas Commerce Bank (now JP Morgan Chase Bank) to support his wife and newborn daughter. He was employed there until he retired at the age of 57. Currently, he is involved in a number of community organizations such as the Chinese Professional Club, Chinese American Citizens Alliance - Houston Lodge, Houston Taipei Society, and Texas Asian Republican Club.

Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of labor and capital to develop a working history around the context of childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities. Much of the interview centers around his upbringing and his current involvement within the Asian American community in Houston.

The interview was conducted in Fondren Library at Rice University. The interview required one hour. Mr. Joe brought multiple childhood photos, books, as well as photocopies to supplement his interview in sharing about his past experiences and upbringing. As he shared these various photos, he provided details about his childhood in Mississippi before his move to Houston and his life thereafter. His life served as one personal story about the Chinese generations living in Mississippi in the 1900s.

Interviewers:

Rei Morikawa is a sophomore at Rice University. She is originally from Tokyo, Japan and is interested in pre-law studies.

Michelle Lo is a sophomore at Rice University studying sociology with a minor in poverty, justice, and human capabilities. She was born and raised in California, but her parents are originally from Hong Kong.
Interview transcript:

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[Audio begins mid-conversation. RM and ML are looking at photographs provided by JJ]

**ML:** [whispering] Oh, wow! That’s his store! That’s your store, right? [overlapping] That your family—the family store?

**JJ:** [overlapping] That—that—actually, that’s a store where my daddy worked when he first came over from—

**ML:** [overlapping] Oh, wow! He had his own store!

**JJ:** [overlapping] It’s, uh …. No, no. He worked for them.

**ML:** Okay.

**JJ:** And, uh, he—[talking in background] I think he was probably in his teens. This … [flips page]

**ML:** Hmm … Oh, wow! That’s the photo right there! That’s awesome!

**RM:** Oh, okay!

**ML:** What is that book? Is that—

**JJ:** [overlapping] This book is, uh, written by John Jung.

**ML:** Mm-hmm.

**JL:** He, uh, is originally from Georgia.

**ML:** Mm-hmm.

**JL:** And his first book had to do with, uh, Chinese laundries. Then his second book, he got interested in
the Mississippi Chinese. So basically—

ML and RM: [overlapping] Oh.

JJ: —this book is ‘bout Mississippi Chinese.

ML: And you’re all f—your family’s [overlapping] in there.

JJ: [overlapping] And that—that was the original Joe Gao Nu (?), uh, store.

ML: [overlapping] Ahh.

JJ: And that was—

ML: [overlapping] That is—

JJ: —number 2.

RM: Oh my gosh.

JJ: [overlapping] Um, there—and—

ML: That is so cool.

RM: That’s awesome.

JJ: —and at the time I didn’t realize it until he came to talk about his book that, uh, skimming through here I saw a picture [ML laughs] of the store where I grew up [laughs].

ML: That is so cool.

JJ: [overlapping] And that’s first time I met him—

ML: [overlapping] Oh, that’s amazing.

JJ: [overlapping] —and after, uh, [papers shuffling] we met and—and became friends, he said, “Wish I had known you back then. I would’ve had you in here.” So …

ML: That’s so cool.

JJ: But, uh …

RM: Wow.
ML: Okay. Um, well I guess we can officially start.

RM: [overlapping] Yes. Yeah. This thing.

JJ: All right.

ML: Yeah, we can do that ‘cause he’s giving it to us already. So we can do it later.

RM: Yeah. [indistinguishable]

ML: Um, but I guess we should just ask for your formal consent to interview you and record you. Just so that we [laughing] have it on tape.

JJ: Okay.

ML: IS that okay if we—

JJ: That’s fine.

ML: Okay, perfect.

ML: Uh, [to RM] do you want to start it?

RM: Okay, so thank you again very much for coming to this interview with us. And just for, um, the tape could you tell use your name and when and where you were born?

JJ: Okay. Uh, my full name is Han, H-A-N, Jack Joe Junior. I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1942. I grew up in a town called Rolling Fork, Mississippi, which is, uh, 45 miles north of Vicksburg.

ML: Okay.

JJ: So—and I lived in Rolling Fork until I graduated from, uh, high school in 1960 and then I came to Houston in 1960, been here ever since.

RM: ‘Kay. And, um, you have, um … how many siblings do you have?

JJ: I have 3 brothers.

RM: Okay. Could you tell me a bit about how it was like growing up with your brothers and like how—your family dynamic was like?

JJ: Well, it—we, uh, grew up in this, uh, store that—what we call a supermarket ‘cause it was huge. It carried everything from groceries to, uh, hardware to, uh, houseware, guns, ammunition. We made
keys. We sold farm equipment and, uh, supplies. Uh, we were the—the largest store in this—in the town. And we, um, also delivered people's groceries when they called in to place their orders. Back then, uh, there was no concern about crime. Everyone left their doors open. And so when I went to deliver the groceries I just walk into the house, place the, uh, stuff in the refrigerator if need be and—and left the other groceries.

ML: [quietly] Crazy. [gasps]

JJ: My, uh, three brothers that threw—grew up with were, uh, probably the—well not probably—they alone with my cousins who lived in the store were our own playmates because back then we were not really accepted by the, uh, Caucasians. I probably had more Black friends than I had white friends for a long time. Uh, so there was, uh, always at least three families that lived in the store, and their—the parents were—the fathers were usually the partners of the store.

RM: Um, who else other than your family did you spend a lot of time with growing up?

JJ: Well, throughout Mississippi there's a bunch of cousins. They were cous—they were mostly Joes who came from the same region in China. And, uh, when I was growing up it was hard to find a girl to date 'cause they—they were all my cousins. [ML laughs] So—and the—the families who were not related had boys. [ML laughs] So if there was a dance and I needed a date, I'd have to drive 200 miles to Memphis, Tennessee—

RM: Oh, wow.

JJ: —pick up a date, [ML laughs] drive back to Mississippi to the dance, and drive her home afterwards before driving 200 miles back home. So it—it was a lot of fun. I was young so [RM and ML laugh] it—it didn't bother me.

ML: Yeah.

JJ: After I dropped off my date, I would, uh—a bunch of us would, uh, get together at one of my other cousin’s house, uh, to spend the rest of the night dancing, eating, and talking, creating new dances, and things like that. This—that was just a common thing to do.

ML: Mm-hmm.

RM: Sounds like a lot of fun.

JJ: Yeah. And, uh, back then, too (?), when you go to these dances, all the girls would be sitting on one side, the guys on the other side. When the music started, the guys would get up, go there, you know, ask a girl to dance—

ML: Yeah.
JJ: —then escort ‘em back. [RM laughs] I know you [laughing] find that funny—

RM: [overlapping] That’s sweet.

ML: [overlapping] That's very cute. That's very sweet. [laughs]

JJ: —‘cause that doesn’t happen today. ‘Cause when they take you to a dance today, they're with you all day.

ML: Mm-hmm.

RM: Okay. Tell us, um, some other childhood memories that might be special to you?

JJ: Oh, special …. Well, there was this one time, I was in a neighbor's yard in a tree and, uh, I saw my dad's car go really fast on the highway. And I got home and I found out that my, uh, youngest brother had fallen out the window out of the second story. And we—since we didn't have a hospital in my town, he had to drive him 45 miles to Vicksburg to go to the hospital. And he ended up with a broken hip—

[0:05:14]

ML: [overlapping] Oh my goodness.

JJ: —and that was it. You know? So he was in a cast for a long time. But, uh, growing up I … I really don't have too many bad memories. Uh, never had any, uh, problems with people picking on me except for when I, uh, went to school in the, uh—I think I was in the 7th grade—there was this boy who kept picking on me and calling me names and stuff like that. So, I got tired of it. At recess one day—one day we got into a fight. I beat him up, and then we became best friends. [All laugh]

RM: That's great.

ML: Wow.

JJ: And, other than that—that was the only time that, uh, I encountered, uh, discrimination of that nature. But you have to also understand, back—back then when I was growing up, we were not considered whites. So, if we went to a department store, uh, you would see these water fountains that would be labeled white and colored, restrooms that were labeled white and colored. We would have to go to the colored section. And when I rode the bus, I have to sit in the back with the Blacks. When I went to, uh, the theater, we had to go around in the back and go up into the balcony and sit with the Blacks. And, for the longest time, the white barbershop would not cut our hair. So my mom would cut everybody's hair. So … until—I think, uh—about a year or so after my cousin—a cousin of mine who's a female was, uh, of school age and she couldn't get into the white schools. So her parents move her to
Greenville where she could be going to a white school. Then, when I became school age they allowed me to integrate school. And they—and I was allowed to join churches and things like that and go get my hair cut in the barbershops.

**RM:** And how did this discrimination between white and colored make you feel?

**ML:** Did you see it as discrimination, I guess?

**JJ:** Well, I—you know, back then being young and naive I thought that was commonplace. So I didn't question it.

**RM:** [overlapping] I see.

**ML:** What happened then as you grew up knew—noticed that this wasn't the norm?

**JJ:** [overlapping] Well, as I grew up I really start taking offense to people making fun of me and my race ‘cause, uh, growing up, initially I was embarrassed be Chinese. And—and my parents speaking Chinese in public, and, uh …. But after I grew up, I became to accept that because, uh, people should be accepted for who they are, not what they are. Um …

**ML:** Would you—what age would you say that you started to really notice this? Things are …

**JJ:** Probably, uh, in high school because I was—my brothers and I were very well accepted by that time by the community, and, uh, I, uh, participated in different, uh, areas of the school. Like I was a member of the Spanish and Latin club. I was—I played 2 instruments in the band. Had 2 brothers who also played brass instruments. I was in a, uh, Dixieland, uh, band. Uh, I played football. I played baseball. Played tennis.

**RM:** [overlapping] Wow, you were really involved. [RM and ML laugh]

**JJ:** All the—all the sports. Yeah.

**ML:** Yeah.

**JJ:** Uh, one of my brothers, uh, William who's the second oldest, was a, uh—was into baseball. And he was a catcher and he was an all-state catcher.

**RM:** Wow, that's awesome.

**JJ:** Which is, uh, really, uh, something for back then.

**RM:** And, when you were growing up, like as you got older were there more Asians or Chinese that moved into your area or did it stay the same?
JJ: Uh, say that again. I'm sorry.

RM: Did more, um, Chinese or Asian immigrants move into your area as you were growing old—growing older?

[0:09:54]

JJ: Well not—at the time we had—in addition to the three families that lived in the store there were one, two … at least three other Asian families—or Chinese families there. One was a—a Chinese man who was married to a Black woman because back then, uh, there were very few Chinese women available. And sometimes the Chinese men would—were—would marry Black women. And because of that the other Chinese would not associate with them, and he had a store across the bridge and none of us ever really associated with him.

RM: I see. Um, also, we noticed you put Toisan as your first language, but then how did you learn to speak English fluently?

JJ: When I first started school. [ML laughs] When I started first grade, I didn't speak a word of English. So after I started speaking English, I quit speaking Chinese. Uh, my parents and the other adults in the store were, uh, tutored by two—two Caucasian ladies through the, uh, fifth grade level. One lady was named, uh, Mrs. Kirkman and the other one was, uh, named Mrs. Cogdell. And my third brother … here with the glasses on was named after combination of their names. His name is Kirkdell, [ML laughs] from Kirkman and Cogdell.

ML: [overlapping] That’s [indistinguishable]

JJ: So he's probably go the only name like that in the world.

ML: Mm-hmm.

RM: That's interesting. What language did you speak at home?

JJ: Pardon?

RM: What language did you speak at home?

JJ: At home? That’s—uh, now or then?

ML: Then.

JJ: [overlapping] Then—
RM: When you were growing up.

JJ: Then, uh, I spoke, uh, mainly English. And, uh, until I quit speaking Chinese because I would get embarrassed because you know how the Chinese language is a sing-song, you know? Especially with our dialect.

ML: Mm-hmm

JJ: If you made a pitch wrong way it means something else, and I got tired of getting laughed at. [ML and JJ laugh]

RM: I see.

JJ: So I quit speaking Chinese until I came to Houston and start playing [laughing] mahjong with some older people. [RM laughs] Then I had to start speaking again.

ML: So what language were you speaking when you came to Houston. Was it Toisan or was it Cantonese, or …?

JJ: It—it was—well it—it was from the southern Chinese—China—part, uh, of China. Guangdong. Um, I didn't know at the time, but when I went back to, um, China in 2008, I was in, uh—we visited this, uh, place called Kaiping, which back then when my—my parents were there before the communists took over, it was called Hoiping. And after I had gotten home and got my dad's immigration records, I found out he was born there. Even though my mother and—and father never spoke about China. Ever. So that's how I found out a little bit about them. I know there was—this area in southern China around the Guangdong, uh, province where most of the Chinese who c—were in America, they were emigrated from that part of China. That's why there are so many cousins.

RM: I see. Um, so would you consider yourself still fluent in Toisan now?

JJ: No. I don't speak it or—or try not to speak it if I don't have to. [RM laughs] Uh, I've been, uh, co-president of ACOH. It's the American Chinese American Organizations of Houston, which is comprised—or at that time of like almost 30 Chinese organizations and most of ‘em, well uh, spoke Mandarin. And before I took office, I told them, “You all know I don't speak Chinese. So my meetings will be held in English.” I knew very well they can understand and speak it, you know? So there was never a problem. And I find it little ironic that I would lead such an organization. [JJ and ML laugh]

RM: I see.

JJ: And I'm still involved with them today.

RM: Um, so when did your family originally immigrate to the United States?
JJ: Uh, my dad came here in … [papers rustling] Did I …?

ML: Did they give you the form?

[0:15:00]

JJ: Don't tell me I forgot ….

ML: I don’t think we have any …

JJ: No. I had, uh, [papers rustling] … think I forgot to bring it.

ML: No worries.

JJ: I, uh, when I checked his passport, he came here in 19 … 29 I believe, at the age of 16 on the U.S.S. Taft. He came through, uh, Seattle. My mom was, uh, I believe a mail order bride from the same province area because, uh, she was a Wong originally, and they’re—the Wong family was from that area, too. It's like my mother-in-law.

RM: So your parents were in Seattle for a while?

JJ: Nope. My dad when he cleared the immigration there he went straight to Mississippi. Uh, he was what they call a paper son. I don't know if you're familiar with that or not. But back then Chinese were not allowed to emigrate [shuffling sounds] to the United—United States unless they were—had relatives there. So people who are already in the United States would kind of sponsors, uh, individuals saying that, “they're my—my—my relative, my son, my daughter, my nephew, whatever. And, uh, so they could get passport and come over. But before they did that any, uh, paper son or pa—paper daughter, uh, who was not really a relative had to know everything about that sponsor: his life, uh, everything about the village where he grew up. ‘Cause when I finally got my dad's immigration records and looked at all the immigration questions, I couldn't believe the questions they—they—that they would ask him. And he—he had to answer correctly. They would ask him if he had wood floor, dirt floors. They had, uh—how many bathrooms? Things like that.

RM: [overlapping] That's crazy.

JJ: They would say, uh, uh, there were four villages around your hometown. And you had to know—

ML: Wow.

JJ:—if that was true or not—

ML: [overlapping] Oh my goodness.
JJ: —and you had to know the name [hitting table] and location of each village. [ML laughs] Uh, questions like that.

RM: That's so difficult.

JJ: Yeah, but basically, the—the people who came here originally [thumping sound in background] knew the type of questions that would be asked. So there were a lot of people who, uh, uh, became, uh, paper fathers or parents, you know? So they knew what questions and answers to give the people they were sponsoring. And sometimes when you come through … immigration they might not ask you any questions if you gave them a lot of money.

RM: Ohh.

JJ: Otherwise, you could be there for a long time. Even though you answer the questions correctly.

ML: Mm-hmm.

RM: I see. Did your father and your mom, um, come alone when they were immigrating over?

JJ: Uh, like, my mom came alone. Like I said, she was a mail order bride. I—I was told she was from a well-to-do family in China.

RM: Okay. Then when did your family move, uh—or why did your family move from Vicksburg to Houston?

JJ: Well they didn't live in Vicksburg. They—they lived in Rolling Fork.

ML: Right.

RM: Oh.

JJ: Um, I moved. I came to Houston to go to University of Houston and I had, uh, relatives over here and a lot of friends. And I didn't want to stay in Mississippi because I was afraid if I went to school there I would never leave Mississippi. And most of my high school, uh, classmates stayed in Mississippi or they stayed in the town where they grew up. And I didn't want to do that.

RM: I see.

JJ: But my parents in 1967 sold their interest in the store and moved to Greenville, Mississippi, which was 45 miles north of there. And right after they bought the store, uh, I got drafted in the army. So that's—that’s one of my army, uh, pictures …

ML: So what age were you when you went to the army?
JJ: Pardon?

ML: What age were you when you went to the army?

JJ: I was … I—I thought I was going—be able to get out of the draft, but, uh, the head of the draft board in Rolling Fork was the wife of my dentist. And she was—they were good friends of the family, and she was drafting all the eligible boys in town until she ran out. Then she called me, here in Houston, and said, “Jack I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to draft you because I don't have any more boys to draft.”

[0:20:17]

ML: Oh.

JJ: So this was in 1967.

ML: Hmm, wow.

JJ: And I was in, uh, hot missile battery. Uh, fortunately I didn't, uh, get sent to Vietnam, but that wouldn't have bothered me either. But, uh, I was stationed in Fort Bliss, Texas and McGregor Range, Na—New Mexico. Fort Bliss is the NATO training grounds and they also had a—the German air force there. At McGregor Range, which was, uh, as big as the state of Delaware, was where the NATO countries came in to do their test fire and I would grade their performance when they came in. My youngest brother Howard was, uh, drafted a year after me, and he, uh, was in Vietnam. When he came back to Houston, he found out that he could no longer perspire because of Agent Orange. And to this day, he still can't perspire. Uh, because it's so hot and humid here, he thought he'd move to Arizona, which, uh, he found that didn't help. So eventually went to, uh, California, to the northern part of California where he lives today. And he still can't perspire and it caused him to lose, uh, one of his eyes.

ML: How long were you in the army for?

JJ: Just two years.

ML: Oh, okay. And—but you’re with all of your brothers, at some point overlapping or—[overlapping] just [indistinguishable]?

JJ: Ah yeah. We overlapped service.

ML: [overlapping] Oh, okay.

JJ: Actually, at that time, uh, my brother-in-law was over there, too.
ML: Really?

JJ: He was—he was about the same age as me. He was about 2 weeks younger than me. He was over there. And not only that, when I was in basic training, I ran into one of my sister-in-law's brother from Seattle, [laughs] who was—in basic training. He was, uh, in a—advanced infantry training. And he got sent to Vietnam, where he was eventually shot in the knee by his own men because they thought he was the, uh, enemy.

ML: [quietly] Oh my gosh!

JJ: He was—he was—he was on point which means you're way out in front scouting for the enemy and warning the rest of 'em, and they thought he was one of the enemy; so they opened up on him.

RM: Oh … How did you feel when you first found out that you were drafted?

JJ: Actually, it really didn't bother me because I felt, at that time and now, that I owe this country a lot because of what they gave my parents. And if, uh, my parents weren't here, I wouldn't be here today. And I feel the same way now, and—and all the members of my American Legion Post 596 feel the same way. We would serve again in a heartbeat. Uh, growing up I knew one of my uncles—actually two of my uncles—who lived in the store were in the army, but they never talked about their experiences. And then, uh, one of my wife's cousins Lewis Yi was always talking about his experiences in the Flying Tigers. And he—when he found out where I was from [laughs] I found out he knew my uncle because they—they would go to these yearly Flying Tiger reunions. [ML laughs] And to my surprise he gave me my home address. He told me what my home address was.

ML: Wow.

JJ: He was my uncle's sergeant in the Flying Tiger.

ML: Small world. [laughs]

JJ: And I still have, uh, probably four or five, uh, ex-Flying Tigers who are still alive in my American Legion unit—unit.

RM: Oh. Um, are you still in contact with a lot of your, um, relatives either in Mississippi or back in China?

[0:25:00]

JJ: Uh, most of my relatives, uh, around my age have left Mississippi. So they're all over. A lot of 'em are here in Houston. A lot of 'em are on the west coast. We either left Mississippi to come to Texas, uh, Houston mainly, or somewhere on the west coast. So I have relatives all up and down California, and I have tons of relatives here in the city. And, uh, we keep up, uh, using Facebook.
ML: [laughs] Nice.

RM: And, um, why did you guys want to leave, um, Mississippi?

JJ: I wanted to leave Mississippi because I didn't want to get stuck there. I—I thought there would be better opportunities for me if I were to go to school somewhere else, and, uh, especially big city like, uh, Houston. I—I never saw tall buildings before in my life until I came to Houston. [ML laughs] I never knew what a one-way street was. [All laugh] When I first came here, I started driving down the wrong way.

ML: Oh no! [laughs]

JJ: I had never saw a freeway before. Actually, I take that back ‘cause in—in the 50s we would come visit relatives here and the Gulf Freeway was under construction then. It's still under construction today. [laughs]

ML: Yeah.

JJ: So that's the first time I ever saw a freeway.

RM: And do you think your, um, friends and relatives felt the same way that you did about leaving Mississippi?

JJ: I think so, yeah. There were better and more opportunities for Chinese, you know, away from Mississippi because back then you're going to be relegated mainly to grocery stores. Since I grew up in a grocery store, I didn't want to, uh, stay in a grocery store. Matter of fact, when I was majoring in pharmacy for a long time, I had worked off all my hours toward a Texas pharmacy license. And I told myself, you know, “This is like growing up in a grocery store.” So I [laughs]—I didn't pursue that any further. And I couldn't make up my mind what I wanted to do. So I started majoring in different things, and then I got drafted. And after I got out of service I had to support a wife and a 1 year old daughter. So I had to get a job ....

RM: I see.

JJ: So I found a job at, uh, back then it was called Texas Commerce Bank. Now it's Chase. Uh, in the, uh, computer department. Uh, I started lowest level you can go. After 3 months the computer operations supervisor on third shift wanted me to move out there. And I was refused because I hadn't been there long enough, but after about 9 months or so, I was moved out there as a computer op—operator trainee. Then I became the lead operator. And then I became supervisor over computer operators who’d been there many more years than me, and from there I moved on up through the ranks to, uh, assistance to the—the main man, uh, of department managers of several departments and stuff like that. I had a 20-something million dollar budget with 200-something employees and seven or so supervisors and managers. So …
RM: I see. Um, so was the Texas Commerce Bank?


RM: Was it your first, um—was it your first job?

JJ: It was—

RM: Your first job?

JJ: My first job was, uh, in—what did they call it then? Distribution. My job was to sweep the floor, uh, get computer supplies for the computer operators and things like that, all the low level, uh, duties. And then I, uh, got promoted to what they called the 1419 room, which is a reader sorter for checks. When checks came in, you would feed ‘em to this, uh, long machine and it would, uh, take all the information from the checks and spit ‘em out into the right pockets, and all that would go along to a tape, which they would run, oh, a program against. And then from there I became a computer operator.

RM: I see So, um, did you ever change jobs?

[0:29:54]

JJ: Nope. I was lucky. I was, uh—I wanted to change, but I kept saying, “You know, I could change jobs and make a little more money, but then my tenure would have to start over again.” And I only wanted to work a certain amount of time to be qualified for—for retirement. So I decided to stay there and I—I have no regrets because, uh, as it was, I got to retire at age 57. That was almost 15 years ago. And, uh—

RM: [overlapping] Why did you—?

JJ: [overlapping]—if I had changed jobs, I would still be working today.

ML: Mm-hmm.

RM: Why did you choose to retire at 57?

JJ: Because at that time, I had worked on at least six bank mergers and, with each merger, I noticed that the employee benefits were getting worse and worse, and retirement benefits were going down. And my main concern was to make sure I had full medical insurance before they took that away. So that was—and then I—I spoke to my financial advisor. He looked at my account and he said, “Well, Jack, if you want to quit, you can. And if you want to do contract work, you can.” Because I talked to him about doing that. He said, “But you don't need to.” He said—and I said, “That's all I want to hear.” [All laugh] So I didn’t want—I really didn't want to be a contractor because I know how hard I work my contractors.
RM: I see. Um, did you ever experience any discrimination in your workplace?

JJ: Ah, yes. Matter of fact, it was very subtle and it was by my manager that I had for most of my career there. He was—he would, uh, discriminate against me and women. He would womanize women. He finally got caught doing that. He was, uh, talked to. Then one day, I was having one of my big meetings and he jumped all over me for nothing, for no reason. You know, I just had had it and, uh, I told him, “I'm outta here. I don't—don't need to take this.” And after that, all the other people in the meeting—there were about 20 or so, and they were other people on the phone. They'd known this about him. So they went to the big boss and told him, and he got—and they finally forced him to leave. I'd vowed to stay there and not leave until he left first.

So, other than that, uh … I can't think of any other. Well, yeah, I can. I used to train people and they would get promoted to a supervisory position before me. And they would move up. And I know it's because I was Chinese. Chin—they liked to hire Chinese because we—we're good; we're good workers, and we don't complain. But, they didn't know I'm not like that. [RM laughs] I speak my mind.

RM: Hmm. I see.

JJ: And, uh, the last discrimination I faced I think was, uh, when I was at a—in a, uh, University of Houston chemistry lab. And I went to the chemical table to get some chemicals, and this guy came up and pushed me and said, “Get out of the way chink.” And I got mad and I said, “Let's go outside.” And this friend of mine who was a, uh, she was a cheerleader, cooled me down and chewed him out. And that's the last time I faced any kind of discrimination.

ML: So would you say that most of the discrimination you faced was when you were a little bit younger? Like when do you think—around what age would you say that—

JJ: [overlapping] Well, I—I—

ML: [overlapping]—you didn't really experience it as much?

JJ: [overlapping] The seventh grade was when I really—

ML: [overlapping] Right.

JJ:—first noticed it, and—and, uh, then the last time was when I was at U of H in a chemistry class.

ML: Okay. So all that time—[overlapping] Oh there was—at work.

JJ: Then—oh, no—not the last time, but, uh, throughout my career at—at the bank—

ML: [overlapping] Right.

JJ: I faced it with my manager—my big—my immediate supervisor.
ML: Right. Until what age would you say, at work?

JJ: Oh, see. What—when did he, uh, leave. I must have been …. I retired at 57, and he left probably five, seven years prior to that.

ML: Wow, [overlapping] so it was the extent of your career, essentially.

JJ: [overlapping] So I was in my 50s. Yeah.

ML: Wow.

[0:35:10]

JJ: But he was the only one. And he was so subtle about it. He tried not make it too obvious, but other people knew, and they would hear him.

ML: Mm-hmm.

RM: Okay. Um, how did you meet your wife?

JJ: Pardon?

RM: How did you meet your wife?

JJ: Oh [laugh] that's another funny story. Uh, I used to bowl and I was president of a Chinese bowling league, uh, and, uh, her brother-in-law and sister used to bowl in the same league. And, uh, her brother-in-law was, uh, a part-time butcher. He was the butcher at the—at the store, and he asked me if I wanted a part-time job being a butcher. I said sure. So I went to work for them as a part-time butcher, and, uh, then I would see my future wife come in every so often and late in the afternoon. She'd walk by the, uh, meat market there to go in the back and I would say hello to her. Never answered. Not once. [RM laughs] And her mother always invited me to stay after the store closed to eat before I left. So one day, I just happened to be sitting next to, and I was talking to her and she didn't respond. And, uh, then finally one of them—someone spoke up and said, “Jack, you're talking into the wrong ear. [laughing] she can't hear in that ear.” What happened was when she was about 15 years old, she woke up and she fell on the floor. She had an inner ear infection and it—it threw off her balance and she—most of her hearing was—was gone. So we all laughed about it.

RM: Oh.

JJ: [laughs] I said—I can—I quit saying hello to her there for a while ‘cause I said, “Man, she is one big snob.” [ML laughs]

RM: How old were you?
JJ: How old—is—uh, 24, 25, or something like that.

RM: I see. And, um, what kind of wedding did you guys have?

JJ: What—what kind of—?

RM: Wedding.

JJ: Wedding? Uh, it was—

ML: [overlapping] Like a traditional one?

JJ: It was—we eloped.

ML and RM: Oh.

ML: How fast was your courtship I guess—[overlapping] from when you met?

JJ: [overlapping] Probably about a year or so.

RM: Oh okay.

ML: Was that the norm at the time, would you say?

JJ: Hmm. No—uh, probably, yeah. Back then … young people got married at an earlier age than they do today. And you're probably aware of that, which is, uh, I think young people today are smarter for doing it because they're more interested in getting their career started. Back then, you know, our career was in a store basically, you know, very few opportunities to get a, um—any other type of job, just like my wife who went to UT and the only thing she could major in was education. So that's why she became a teacher.

RM: Could you tell us about your first child and when he or she was born?

JJ: Our first house?

RM: Child.

ML: [overlapping] Child.

JJ: Oh, my first child. I was in the army and, uh, came on—on leave and we went back to Mississippi to visit my parents. And the night before we left, I noticed that, uh, her legs were all swollen up. And we thought because she was pregnant and she'd been walking and—and riding in a car too much. So we didn't think anything of it. And so we drove back to Houston the next day, and the day after that, I had
to go back because my leave was up. And, uh, 3 days later I get a call from one of my sisters-in-law and said my wife was in the hospital. I said, “Why?” She said, “Well, she went to see her doctor because of the swelling, and the doctor took one look at her and put her in the hospital.” She had come down with toxemia, with blood poisoning. And, um, so she was in the hospital until after she gave birth. Uh, my daughter was premature. She was, uh, 2 pounds 12 ounces and we had already made arrangements through the doctor to have the Red Cross call my commander if something happened.

[0:40:08]

So when she went in for delivery, uh, they had to—I was out in the fields somewhere and they had to come find me. And my first sergeant had already made plane reservations, had my orders cut and all that, and he told me take as much time as I want. And so, uh, after I’d landed in Houston went directly to the hospital and, maybe 30 minutes later, brought out my daughter. And the first thing I did was check all her fingers and toes to see if they were all there ‘cause she was so tiny. You know? She's perfectly healthy, uh. She never had a cholic, jaundice or anything. She was just underweight. Normally, they don't let babies out of the hospital until they reach 5 ½ pounds, but they let her go before she got to that weight and they flew back out to El Paso to join me. And, uh, at that time we didn't have a baby crib or anything. So we took, uh, one of our suitcases, made sure it wouldn't close on her, put pillows in there, and rolled up my t-shirts around the inside of the, uh, uh, suitcase to cushion her, and that's where she slept. When she started walking we had this, uh, Baskin Robins ice cream container that we made a wastebasket out—with papier-mâché and stuff like that. My daughter would get a habit of climbing inside, and ducking so low, and you couldn't see the top of her head. [All laugh] And while we were there we had bought a—a, uh, antique baby crib that was probably 8 inches wide and maybe 14 inches long, and she would sleep in that. She would climb inside and sleep. [laughs]

ML: Oh my goodness! That's so small. [laughs]

JJ: So—so she was small!

ML: Oh my gosh!

JJ: We never—never had to buy a, uh, stroller because she was always so small and light. [All laugh]

ML: And later when you were raising your daughter, what kind of values did you try to teach her?

JJ: I tried to teach her the values of the Asians, you know, and, uh, to respect your elders and things like that. Um, she would never learn to speak Chinese, but she could speak Spanish and French. And when my wife would get mad at her, we’d speak to each other in Chinese, and she wanted to know what [ML laughs] we were talking about, and I said, “Well, learn Chinese! You’ll know!” [All laugh] She never did.

RM: Was there anything other than Asian values, like any sort of Chinese heritage that you tried to teach her?
JJ: Well, I wanted her to be self-sufficient. When she was growing up, I wanted her to know the value of money [papers rustling] and how to respect it because when she was growing up, she would want nothing but the designer clothes ‘cause that’s all her Caucasian friends wore.

ML: Mm-hmm.

JJ: Even if we went to like TJ Maxx and got the same article, she saw the TJ Maxx tag on it. She wouldn’t want it. Until she started working. One time she had four jobs, four part-time jobs. So from—since then, she valued money. She knew how hard it was to get for what little she got, and today she is still frugal.

ML: Mm-hmm.

RM: That’s good. Um, how ‘bout education, did it play a big role, um, [overlapping] in your household?

JJ: [overlapping] Education, uh, to most parents is—is paramount ‘cause you always want your kids to do better than you. And she was smarter than me and my wife. [laughs] She was a, you know—she was an honors student throughout. So, it’s—it’s just that, she didn’t have the—unfortunately, she didn’t have the work ethic or drive that her parents had. But that’s, uh—it’s hard to teach that.

ML: Mm-hmm. So what does she do now? Like how did she—

JJ: [overlapping] She is—

ML: [overlapping] She went to college? High school and—?

JJ: Well she used to work at Child (?) 26 until she, uh, got health problems, and she still has health problems today. Uh, she was always in a lot of pain, constantly. She thought it’s fibromyalgia, but, uh, she finally found a doctor who said it wasn’t; it was something else. So she’s—lot of times, uh, even today, she can’t get out of bed. So …

[0:45:12]

ML: Is she in Houston or in Texas?

JJ: [overlapping] She’s—

ML: [overlapping] Or with you?

JJ: Yeah. She’s in Houston. It’s—is not that far from me in an apartment.

ML: Okay.
JJ: So, when she needs money, she’ll call.

ML: Mm-hmm. So how else, aside from values I guess, would you also say that Chinese heritage or traditions were celebrated in your family? Holidays or events?

JJ: Well, we, uh—growing up, the holidays was—were always a big thing for Asian families and, uh, she could see that from early on when, uh, we went home to visit my parents. Because when I was growing up, during the holidays, like, uh, the big holidays like, uh, Christmas and New Year’s, my mother and the other aunts would start preparing for Christmas feasts probably about 2 weeks ahead of time because they would make all the dim sum [ML laughs] and stuff like that. So on Christmas, we would have maybe up to around 300 people from all of Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee come. And we had so many mahjong tables set up. And those people would play mahjong for 3 days and night. [ML laughs] That’s all they did because there’s nothing Mississippi do other than play mahjong. [ML laughs] And that’s where I played at a young—young age [thumping sound] just watching them.

ML: Mm-hmm. Would you say you transferred any of those memories that you had growing up into your own family when you were here in Texas?

JJ: Yeah, after we got married and had our daughter, we still had big, uh, events on those days. We celebrated everything—Thanksgiving, Christmas, you know, all the birthdays, you know? So it’s—it’s, uh, important to us. Because, you know, you’re only young for such a short time. And, uh—oh, and when she graduated, I told her I would buy her a car, either, uh, before she graduated or after she graduated. But she knew in her mind that I would buy her a car anyway. So she was hav—she went to a friend’s house after high school graduation and, uh, I drove up in the driveway with a Toyota Supra with a big bow around it. [laughs] And her friends had her come out and showed her her car. [ML laughs]

ML: That’s so adorable.

JJ: I’ve bought maybe three other cars for her since.

ML: Wow. That’s sweet. Um, would you say that even with American traditions, like Ch—Thanksgiving or Christmas, were there any kind of Chinese traditions or things that leaked into it?

JJ: Uh, no because our traditions were very similar to your—your Caucasian traditions. You know, other than, uh, going to the cemetery and paying respects there, you know, with the meal and the—the scented, uh, candles and stuff like that, and burning the newspaper and paper money, and bowing, and pouring the whiskey out—

ML: Yeah. Right.

JJ: —and stuff like that, the hansan (?). You know? But, uh, we quit doing that after my mother-in-law
passed away.

ML: So then how would you say that you reconciled having the Asian—your Asian identity and also your American identity with all of these different things that you had going?

JJ: To me, I—I—I thought it was just natural because I was more American than Chinese after I grew up. ’Cause all my friends were Americans. I didn’t have any Chinese friends per say, unless I went to visit my cousins, and you have to drive a long ways to visit them. Um, so, I think most of my memories were of that nature, you know, as—as a, um—an American not Chinese.

ML: So then now you’re very involved with a lot of different Asian organizations and things like that. What motivated you to really embrace your Asian—or Asian identity I guess more growing up?

[0:49:56]

JJ: Well, before I retired, I was on call 24/7, 365 days a year for almost 30 years. So I didn’t have time to get involved then. I’d—I would for a little while, then my work schedule wouldn’t allow me to continue. And after I retired, one thing I wanted to do was stay active. So, uh, became, uh, active in—in the Chinese American Citizens Alliance to start with, which I was also a member of long time ago before I started working all those crazy hours. And, uh, became its president twice and now I’m the—on the national board as a national executive. I’ve served 2 terms as President of the Chinese Professional Club. I’ve served as a past commander—commander of my American Legion Post 596. I was co-president of the American Chinese American Organizations of Houston. Uh, what else? I’m on different boards right now. Uh, I wanted to give back to the community because I felt like I owed a lot, and I’ve got time; I’ve got the talent. Uh, I find it hard to say no [ML laughs] if someone asks me to do something.

ML: Mm-hmm. How did you first get involved in all of these organizations then, um, when you came to Houston?

JJ: Well, initially with the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, when I first came to Houston, they had a—a youth club. And I joined that to start with, and, uh, that’s how I became knowledgeable about that. The Chinese American Citizens Alliance was, uh, started in 1874 I believe as a—it’s a civil rights organization. That’s when all the Chinese in California were discriminated against, and that’s how that organization got started. Actually, it’s older than the NAACP. And, um, the Chinese Professional Club was started, uh, 60 years ago. We just finished our 60th, uh, gala. And our mission is to give scholarships to deserving high school students. Many of our recipients go to Rice.

ML: Oh, wow.

JJ: Uh, I don’t know if you know Steffi Hu …

ML: Oh I do! Yeah! She was Miss Chinatown.
JJ: Yeah! [ML laughs] And uh, I have some other from this year who will be coming here, too. And also, during June, we had the Youth Leadership Conference here at Rice, which we also sponsor. We bring in kids from across the nation who want to participate. Uh, you girls should probably get involved in that.

ML: [laughs] Okay. We’ll look into it.

JJ: Look into it! It—it’s a good thing. Uh, they have a lot of fun, but they work hard too. But at the end of the day, everyone has a great time. So you can be, uh, a mentor to some of the younger, uh, kids that come here.

ML: Yeah. How do you feel that, um, all these organizations that you’ve been a part of have really influenced or changed younger generations like us and Asian Americans growing up now?

JJ: Being involved with so many organizations and knowing so many people, uh, hate to say this, but most people know me, uh, because I’m in the Chinese newspapers a lot. Uh, even if I don’t know that person, I—you know—they know me when they see me. And when I talk to young people, I try to stress to them the importance of an education. Uh, most of the—actually all of the—the applicants for the Chinese Professional Club scholarships are so smart. We have so many scored perfect 2400s. They all have—like this year’s top winner took, uh, 10 AP exams and scored 5 in all 10 of them. [ML laughs] Uh, Karen Lee, who is this year’s, uh, Miss Chinatown Houston and current Miss Chinatown USA and Miss Talent was a runner-up in a scholarship. She scored 2400 on the SAT; scored 5 on 7 APs that she took.

ML: Incredible.

[0:54:47]

JJ: It—it's—you know, through the years, when you—you read these—these applications from these students, each year my mind gets blown away by how smart they are. But I don’t care. We don’t care if they’re the smartest students around. If they have no involvement in the community, we throw their applications aside because we want our students to be well-rounded, and all of ‘em that receive, uh, scholarships are well-rounded students. So I—I love being involved with the young people. I love, uh, taking care of the kids when they come for the Youth Leader—Leadership Conference. Uh, I enjoy being involved with the Miss Chinatown pageant. And, uh, it—it’s a—it’s a good feeling to me to know—to watch them grow and be successful.

ML: Mm-hmm. Do you feel that Asian Americans growing up now, um, struggle a lot? Or like what do you feel like the Asian American struggle is right now that we face?

JJ: Today, I—because of the, um … professions that their parents are in, they don’t really struggle. [ML laughs] And I find that they are extremely smart with a lot of common sense and—and—and they have a I—tremendous manners, you know? So I—I think they’re—they’re really brought up correctly.
Uh, I really don’t see any downfall or shortcomings of our kids today, except—I mean—you’re gonna get some because there are some who won’t put out an effort, you know, to—to be better in what they are. And lot of times, that’s because—that’s because of the parents. The parents have to kind of nudge them in—in the right direction. If they—the parents give the kids the opportunities, and the kids want to take advantage of the opportunities, they should. And it’s—if they don’t, it’s their fault, and they’ll regret it in the future.

ML: Would you say that, um, in our community right now or within Houston that Asian Americans still face discrimination at all? Or disadvantage in any way?

JJ: You know, I really don’t see it anymore. I really don’t. Because now … I see—even back in Mississippi, people are more, uh, friendly with each other now, even, you know, with the Blacks or Hispanics, you know? You can see that they mesh together a lot better. You know? Even here at Rice, you see there’s a lot of different, uh, international students and you probably all get along very well. I would hope so anyway.

RM: I’d say so. [All laugh]

ML: She’s international.

JJ: Are you?

RM: Yeah. I’m from Japan.

JJ: Oh! Okay. [ML and RM laugh] I have, uh—one of my sister-in-laws is—is Japanese. In fact, uh, during World War II—now, they’re from the Seattle area. They were interred during World War II. And there’s a picture of her mother holding her in her arms when she was a baby at the—at a, uh, train depot, as they were getting ready to be shipped to, uh, the internment camp. That picture is a famous picture. It’s been in the Smithsonian, in a Japanese exhibition there. It’s been in LIFE magazine many times. It’s been in, uh, movies—the picture has—has been in a lot of movies. Her mother is still living. She’s 105 now.

ML: Oh my goodness! [laughs]

JJ: And uh, she has testified before Congress. She being, uh, my sister-in-law’s mother—has testified before Congress. And every year, almost without fail, the Seattle paper does a front page article on her ‘cause I think she’s—might be the last survivor of the internment camp.

ML: Wow. You seem to have a very powerful family in terms of networks [laughing] and connections.

JJ: [laughs] Well, we—we—one of my brother-in-laws was Japanese Hawaiian. And he hated bananas [all laugh] because—‘cause when—when he was growing up, he ate green bananas, got so sick. After we find out, we try to sneak bananas into, like a banana cake, and stuff like that. But no, we are a pretty
international family and have Hispanic brother-in-laws, or had, he had passed away. Uh, uh, so, uh, Japanese, uh. So, you know, we’re pretty well diverse.

[01:00:11]

ML: Mm-hmm. Would you say your parents and I guess your other siblings and family growing up then were very open to diversifying, and—?

JJ: No way.

ML: Oh, okay.

JJ: No. When I [laughs]—like I said when—there were no Chinese girls for me to date.

ML: Right.

JJ: And she didn’t say it—they didn’t say anything at the time, uh, but, you know, when I dated some of my—my high school friends …. Uh, there was this new girl who came to town and she was so good looking. She had long blonde hair down to her waist. And we had our football banquet, and I asked her, and she surprised me and accepted. And all the other guys were so jealous. She said, “How do you do that?” I said, “I just asked her!” [All laugh]

So … and—but, later on, I—I met a girl from Dallas. She, uh—her father’s Chinese. Her mother was Irish. And, uh, we got engaged and I called my parents and I told ‘em. And, uh, then I told them her father’s name. And my dad got on the phone and chewed me out. Said, “You are not going to marry her. I’ll disown you.” I said, “Why?” I came to find out that her father and my father worked together at Joe Gao (?) Nu (?) in Greenville—

ML: [quietly] Oh, wow.

JJ: —long time ago and had somehow—a falling out. And so he drove all the way to Houston to get me to, uh, break off the engagement. I said, “I’m sorry. I’m not gonna break it off ‘cause you want me to. ‘Cause I’m going to be spending my life with her.” You know? But as it turned out, that, uh, she was Catholic. I was gonna become Catholic. Uh, the monsignor, the church was going to send us around the world on a honeymoon. And we eventually decided that maybe this wouldn’t work out. So we broke it off. She wanted lot of kids. Last time I saw her, she had at least 9 kids.

ML: Oh my goodness! [laughs] So then your parents were I guess a little bit more discriminatory growing up to—[overlapping] a lot of your friends?

JJ: [overlapping] Well it’s not like it is today. All the parents were, you know? You had to marry within your race. If you weren’t, you were going to be disowned. And some of the—my cousins—I—they did marry outside, and were disowned for a while—
ML: Wow.

JJ: —until the first baby come along. [ML laughs]

ML: And then everything’s okay!

JJ: Then everything changes! [All laugh]

ML: Especially if it’s a son or something like that. [laughs]

JJ: Yeah! [laughs]

ML: Okay, um, I did want to ask one thing about your last name because it’s not I guess a typical Chinese last name when you initially think of it. How did that come to be? Was it …?

JJ: Well it’s an Americanization of, uh, the family name—the Chinese family name. There’s different, uh, variations of it. Joe, it can be spelled J-O-E, J-U-E, J-O-W, C-H-O-W, C-H-A-O—

ML: Oh!

JJ: —C-H-O-U. My father’s name on the, uh, passport—his first name is spelled, um, C-H-A-O, middle name, S-I-U, last—last name, uh, C-H-I-U. But it’s all, uh, from the Joe family.

ML: Right.

JJ: I … I—I don’t know if you read Chinese.

ML: [laughs] I can a little bit.

JJ: You can? Okay. Usually when people ask me where, uh [gives business card]—

ML: [overlapping] Oh! Okay.

JJ: [overlapping]—my family came from …. You can have that.

ML: Oh okay! Cool, thanks! [laughs] Okay. So when he came then and was filling out his immigration papers, did he write Joe, J-O-E?

JJ: No he—no, that was later.

ML: Okay.

JJ: On the immigration, he had to be what he—[overlapping] what was on there.
ML: [overlapping] What he was ….

JJ: Yeah.

ML: Okay. So then why did he decide to change it?

JJ: To Americanize it.

ML: Hmm. Did he feel that he needed to I guess at that time period?

JJ: I never asked him about it. I never knew—I always thought that was his real name [JJ and ML laugh] to be honest with you. You know?

ML: [overlapping] Right, right, right.

JJ: That’s how, uh—how naïve I was about the Chinese culture. You know, until I saw his passport—

ML: Right.

JJ: —and the name on it.

ML: Right. You kept talking about like the immigration papers and the passport you started to find, when did you start investigating and wanting to learn more about your dad’s past and—?

[1:05:02]

JJ: After, uh—probably after I found out the—the—the thing about my name being—my last name being first. [All laugh] I start—I started—

ML: We were a bit confused about that as well.

JJ: [overlapping] I—I was very confused for 20-something odd years. ‘Cause, you know, they would never talk about it and—and I—the people I grew up with were like me. They were ABCs. You know? They didn’t know anything about it either. Sometimes they—some of my—some of my cousins ask me, “Why’d your dad sign J. H. Jack Senior?” I said, “I dunno, but that’s what he has on his license plate, and on his car door, and everything else.” [laughs] So when I found out, that’s when I changed it. So it’s officially changed on all of my—our, uh, birth certificates now.

ML: Okay. So then when—at what age I guess like—or what motivated you to start looking for these immigration papers and things?

JJ: Well, like I said, when I was in my 20s—
ML: [overlapping]—20s.

JJ: —when I found out about the truth about my—

ML: Got it.

JJ: —how—how my last—how my name—

ML: [overlapping] Right—was switched.

JJ: —appeared on the gift—on my birth certificate.

ML: Was is difficult to like acquire all of these papers and passport and everything?

JJ: No. Uh, actually, um, to get the birth certificate changed, I just had to pay the lawyer a little money to get it changed officially on all the birth certificates. And, uh, since then, I’ve gotten copies of my birth certificate, and it shows it’s been changed. Uh, but … I’m—I’m sorry, what—the other part of your question?

ML: Um, just asking about how you acquired your dad’s immigration papers, about the—

JJ: [overlapping] Oh! Oh! Okay!

ML: [overlapping]—questions he got asked, and all that stuff.

JJ: Uh, after Daniel Bronstein, uh—who was doing research on the southern Chinese also—uh, start talking to him about how we can, uh, get the records of our ancestors. That’s how I knew where to go ‘cause I, uh—after I found out my dad come through Seattle. On the handout, he gave—he gave a contact where you could call and—

RM: [quietly] I see.

JJ: —and find out. So I—I got—went home that night, shot off an email, and 12 hours later, I get a response. And, “We found your dad’s records.” Because I included his—the front and back of his, um, passport picture and that helped, uh, go right to it. And so 40 dollars I got the—the transcript.


JJ: Which is, uh—[taking out a folder]

ML: Oh wow. [indistinguishable] I wish I had these documents of my grandparents.

RM: Thank you so much for bringing all these.
ML: I know. Wow! This is …. Oh wow. So once you—how did you feel once you actually had all of these documents?

JJ: I—I felt great 'cause finally I can find out something about my dad. You know my—there’s—I had no information on my mother. So I couldn’t get hers, and she passed away. Uh, in fact, when she passed away, she knew she was gonna die that day. Uh, because they were going to a wedding in Memphis, and they always stop off, uh, on the way back to play mahjong. And, uh, on the way home, they were about three miles from home in the city and it was raining hard and her—the car got broadsided on her side and she died. Uh, but when I went to see the car. I said, “No way this killed her.” But she know she was gonna die. She had talked to a friend in Greenville about that. And when dad got home, he found that the safe was locked in the bedroom, which she—they never lock. And when he opened it, he, uh, found that mom had already labeled all the jewelry—jewelry and things that she—and who she wanted to give it to. And she wore no jewelry that day, and, uh, all she had in her purse was some money play mahjong. And that wasn’t like her. So she—she knew she was gonna die that day. And then, after that, uh, my dad’s health start failing too because they had been together so long and she used to do so much for him. You know, when you’re together for, what, 60, 70 years, you know, you get pretty close. So, my dad suffered some strokes and minor heart attacks, and the last one I got called, and all my brothers got called, and he lasted long enough to see his four sons. And then we went to, uh, have lunch and before our meal came out, we got a call that he had passed away.

[1:10:45]

ML: Was he still in Mississippi at the time?

JJ: Pardon?

ML: Was he still at Mississippi—in Mississippi at the time?

JJ: Yeah. Yeah. He was in Greenville—

ML: [overlapping, quietly] I see.

JJ: —where he moved to in 1967.

ML: [quietly] Okay. Wow … ok. [to RM] Do you have any more questions?

RM: Um, no, I think that’s all we prepared but …

ML: Yeah. Uh …

JJ: Well, I can—I can tell you, you know, when I was growing up, I got a, uh—a taste for peanuts, roasted peanuts. [ML laughs] Because among the things that we did in the store—and one of my duties, other than sweeping the store, sweeping the sidewalk outside, stocking, being a butcher, and all that,
uh—I had to roast peanuts. We had this big drum where I’d load raw peanuts and it’s, uh, roasted by gas, uh, heat. And we would, uh, roast peanuts for all the football games and things like that. And they—these supporters would come and buy the peanuts from us. And they would sell them. And I would just sit there eating peanuts, you know. We ordered them by 100 pound bagfuls. And, uh, so I love roasted peanuts even today. [RM laughs] Little did I know that it was good for you because it has fiber. [JJ and ML laugh]

ML: That’s so great. Um, I guess I actually had one more question just about your involvement in this community now and what you feel is maybe the most—the greatest impact that you’ve made, um, having been in all these different positions and been part of all these alliances.

JJ: Hmm. I guess the greatest impact is, uh, my involvement and the visibility that I’ve, uh, been able to give these different organizations ‘cause, you know, like I said, I’m known by a lot of people. Uh, not only within the Chinese community, but the—the politicians. Uh, I know a lot of politicians here in the state, in the city, and in D.C. And because of my involvement with the, uh, CACA national organization, you know, that gives us more visibility. ‘Cause every year in May, we go to D.C. to, uh, visit all these politicians in a four-day span to have them—to get us support certain things. So … uh, even though I’m a Republican, I have a lot of Democrat friends. You know, Al Green and I have known each other a long time. Uh, Sheila Jackson Lee, you know, Gene Wu, who’s a Democrat, we’ve been friends a long time. But, you know, I don’t care what party they are, you know, if we’re friends, we’re friends. Until—but, you know, when it comes election time, if they’re Asian, I’m gonna vote for ‘em [ML laughs] regardless of the pa—of the—the—the party that they belong to ‘cause I feel like we need more Asians, not just Chinese, but Asians in general in—in public office.

ML: Why do you say that?

JJ: Because we’re not well represented enough. And, uh, I think we can be if—if we get more Asians in, you know—in power.

ML: Right. What do you feel that, um, Asian Americans being in higher positions and office can really change this, um—the perceptions maybe within America, or even maybe within Texas, or even just Houston alone?

JJ: Well I—I think they can start with their local area, you know? Like, uh, Judy Chu, who’s a member of our CACA, uh, Los Angeles Lodge is, uh, in D.C. and we have been, uh, trying to get a bill passed to—for Congress to apologize for the way they, uh, treated, uh, the Chinese with the Chinese Exclusion Act. You know, all the other races, like the Japanese, they’ve been apologized to. They’ve been given money. We weren’t asking for money. The Blacks have been apologized to. Every other race has been apologized to. But when we started this project, what, five or six years ago, every time they saw the word apology, they would shoot it down. And Judy Chu, uh, with the help of, uh, some other Democrats and some—and Republicans also, rewrote it to take out the world “apology” and put “regret” in there. And so, with that, it just flew by both houses. But now, we’re going back to trying to get the “apology” in there, which is only right.
ML: Right.

JJ: I mean it—it—we’re not asking for monetary damages or anything. We just want them to show that they were wrong to exclude the one race, the Chinese race from immigrating. That’s why there’s not that many Chinese in America today as opposed to—even Chi—uh, Japanese, or especially Vietnamese. There’s much more—many more Vietnamese than there are others. So … we’re gonna try again. They may kill us. [ML laughs] I might not be alive when it happens, but we’re gonna keep trying.

ML: Yeah, definitely.

JJ: But, you know, we didn’t want to slap people in [papers rustling]—in the face, uh, of—uh, who voted the first time for us. And say, “You guys got it wrong. You know, you need to correct this.” So I—I was one who voted against going forward with the apology thing again ’cause it was so hard to get “regret” and I don’t want to upset all the politicians that voted for us.

ML: Mm-hmm. You were saying that, earlier that, um, you definitely considered yourself an exception to a lot of Chinese, um, within the community, especially like your parents, you were saying, who really came in together. Do you feel right now at this time, which is the stronger attitude I guess of Chinese being do you—do you think they tie together more and, um, naturally like run to each other and cling to each other, or do you feel like we’re slowly starting to expand and, um, be more vocal about, um, what our past is and everything?

JJ: Well I—I think people—the younger generation—my generation and younger—are—well my generation, especially are more vocal. Younger gen—generations like yours, it has no meaning to you because it has never impacted you. So, uh, from that perspective—I—I think you’re—in your mindset, you’re Americans. You know? Whereas, uh, we weren’t considered to be Americans or even welcome for that matter.

ML: Yeah. How do you believe then that, um, Americans—or Asian Americans in our generation then, um, should more actively be able to—do you think it’s important I guess for us to learn more about your past, and our past, and our history and be able to address it?

JJ: Well, I—I think your generation need to learn where you come from, the predecessors that came here and what they went through. If they understand that, then, uh, I would hope that they would make that information more available to other people and other races. On April 5th, we are going to have a Texas historical, uh, markup at Baylen Park to—for the Chinese Americans who came here, uh, especially in Texas, and, uh, to honor, uh, some of the earlier, uh, Chinese who came here to get it started, like Albert Gee, who’s daughter, uh, Linda Wu is head of the, uh, uh, Miss Chinatown pageant. And uh, she is—was one of the first people I met ’cause she—uh, her mother was like head of the youth club and we would meet at her house. [ML laughs] You know? But, uh, no, I think your
generation really don’t have a—any appreciation of what got them what they have today and, you know, what was given up—

[1:20:11]

ML: —right.

JJ: —so you can have what you have today.

ML: Yeah. I agree. I think my parents definitely remind me a lot.

JJ: Do they?

ML: Oh, all the time. Every single time I’ll complain about going to piano, my mom will be like, “I took two buses just to get—like just [JJ laughs] to learn this one thing. I would have to walk by foot. Here you are so lucky. For my birthday, I didn’t have a party. I got an egg” or something. Like [ML and RM laugh] I would get things like this all the time. So I definitely understand. I know.

JJ: I—well, actually I—I don’t believe in—in your mother’s philosophy. I—I—I think the offer should be there if you want to take advantage of it.

ML: Oh, definitely.

JJ: Because if you’re forced to do something, chances are you’re gonna hate it. Just like now, when you’re at Rice, if you’re pursuing a career that your parents are pushing—

ML: [overlapping] Oh, no. Yeah.

JJ: —you towards. I—I tell you right now, get out, find something that you’ll be happy at. If you don’t, you’re gonna be miserable. Your parents will be happy, but you’ll be miserable.

ML: Yeah.

JJ: And that’s not what it should be. They should just give you the opportunity to pursue what you want to do and what you feel that you’ll be happy at doing.

ML: Oh no, definitely.

JJ: Well, you know, I’m not knocking Rice ‘cause Rice is a tremendous school. It’s small. They—they—they give each student a lot of attention. I have a friend in, uh—in—in San Antonio. She, uh—granddaughters who live in Jackson, Mississippi. And I got to—got her to sponsor one of her granddaughters to the Youth Leadership conference here, uh, two or three years ago. She came, fell in love with Rice, and she’s here now. And her younger sister’s getting ready to follow her. Uh, like I
said, we have a lot of scholarship recipients who go to school here. So it—it’s a good school. I just left, uh, Harry Gee. He’s an immigration lawyer, and, um, very well known. He’s a Rice grad, too. We’ve known each other forever. So …

ML: Yeah. That’s good. [JJ coughs] Um, I think that about wraps up the time that we have, we don’t want to keep you here for too long. [laughs]

JJ: No, it’s okay. I mean, it’s only 5:30.

ML: Dinner’s coming you know! [All laugh]

JJ: I—I thought I was going to be late and, uh—and, uh, you know, impact your schedule.

ML: No, it was perfect. Um, but yeah, thank you so much for your time and everything that you’ve brought for us. Um, I think it definitely made—

RM: [overlapping] Yeah. Thank you so much.

ML: —I think it de—um, definitely gave us a lot more visual images, too while you were talking just about your life and, um, what you’ve gone through and what you’re doing, [laughs] which is really great.

JJ: Well, you know, if—if you need anything else, you—you have my contact information.


JJ: So feel free.

[1:23:22]
End interview