

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

Interviewee: Tairong Zheng
Interviewer: Tian-Tian He
Date/ Time of Interview: June 8 2017, 12:00 PM
Transcribed by: Tian-Tian He, Amber Lu
Edited by: Daniel Ngo
Audio Track Time: 1:22:05

Background: Tairong Zheng (郑泰榕) was born in Nanjing in 1974 to schoolteacher parents, and grew up in China under the effects of the end of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. She met her Chinese-American husband at 25 and followed him back to Houston, where she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in education from the University of Houston. In 2009, she began teaching middle school and high school Chinese at the Awty International School. She now has two children, Kristen and Jonathan, and continues to teach at Awty.

Setting: This interview was conducted in Tairong Zheng’s classroom at the Awty International School. Ms. Zheng speaks about her childhood experience in China, the effect of the Cultural Revolution on her father’s family, her philosophy on education, immigrating to the US, and raising her children as Chinese-American.

Interview Transcript

Key:

TH	Tian-Tian He
TZ	Tairong Zheng
-	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

TH: Okay, so, uh, this is Tian-Tian He, I am at Awty International School on June the 8th, 2017, and I’m interviewing for the Houston Asian American Archive. Um, so, to start with, can you say your name and, uh, where and when you were born?

TZ: Okay. My name is Zheng Tairong. My last name is Zheng and my first name is Tairong, so, in America, people call me Tairong Zheng. Um, I was born in the city of Nanjing in People’s Republic of China, in 1974. Here’s my age! [laughs]

TH: Um, so – oh, could you also write out the characters?

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TZ: Yes, I – I can. I can write in... a piece of paper and show it to the camera. [Ms. Zheng tears off a piece of paper and writes her name] Okay, as you can see, my first name is the second and the third character together. My last name is *Zhèng* (郑), it's right here. Uh, this is my family name and these two together are my, uh, first name. Well, my parents named me, um, with the meaning of *tài* (泰), means peaceful, and *róng* (榕) is the type of tree, it's called – it's a banyan tree, has the lots of branches and it has the meaning of peaceful and pros – prosperal. And uh, *tài* is also the short name of my mom's hometown, versus *róng* is the short name of the city of my dad's hometown. So, there is some meaning towards the name I have, it's quite complicated. When I was in, um, elementary school learning how to write my name, so I apparently changed my name to another two chara – different characters, for – I used it for years!

TH: What – what characters?

TZ: I changed *tài* (泰)... [writes the simplified characters on the paper]

TH: Oh my gosh.

TZ: ...to, uh, to a very simple one, and I took another *róng* [laughs] of the, of the half, to another, uh, character, so makes it a lot simple. This is my, uh, childhood name, it's this, this, this. [points to 郑,太,容] [laughs]

TH: Does it mean “too... *róng*?”

TZ: Yeah, “too”, *róng* (容) is kind of uh, “easy”, or something. Yeah.

TH: “Too easy.” [laughs]

TZ: “Too easy!” [laughs] Yeah, so that's my, that's my name.

TH: Um, so what was it like growing up in Nanjing?

TZ: Uh, in Nanjing, um, my memory towards... my entire childhood was very happy. Um, although, at that time era, 1970 – uh, towards my , uh, late 1970's to the early 1980's in China, the entire society was not very developed, because of the, um...the influence of the Cultural Revolution. So, every family had lots of, um, lacking material, lacking food and supplies. However, it didn't influence my happiness during the childhood. And at – at that time, means parents all busy in looking for ways to support the family, instead of have eyes on you to be performing A's, A's, A's for all your schoolwork! [laughs] So, uh, I had, I got to spend a lot of time with my friends, with my, uh, self 'cause I'm an only child from home, and, uh, we spent a lot of time together, and not too much as the kids nowadays have. So, we had, uh, very, uh, hap – happy childhood.

TH: So, was it like a... countryside?

TZ: No, it's, it's – it was in the city. It was in the city, so the – the city I was born is the capital city of, uh, one of the biggest, uh, provinces in China, which is Jiangsu province. And that's the capital city so, um, at that time, because everybody, almost every family, both parents worked. So, we had a, um... we had to walk to school. Because all – the school only collects the people who lived close by. And then how, because at that time, all the parents worked. So, there's nobody to drop off or, or, uh, take the kids back to

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– back home. So, um, we had a theme – um, a name, called “key kid”. Means we opened – my parents would give me a key hanging on my neck. And every day I go home, uh, and I leave home by myself, I go home by myself, do homework. And – but, to ensure the security, uh, is that we assign – uh, we, we separate the line. Let’s say if you take the center of the, uh, of the school, and you make a left, and you make a right. So, the left side, all the kids go to this route, will have – will form a, um, a line. So, there’s a line leader. And the –

TH: Like a single file line, going home from school?

TZ: Yeah, yes, the – yeah. Yes. So, uh, if you live close by the school and then we walk, walk, walk, so the further you walk, the less kids you have. Yeah. So most likely the line leader is the one that close to the end. Uh, same for the right, right route. The kids will go to the right route and, um, go – going to, uh, that direction. But there’s basically two routes, and people are living so close by. So, on the road – on the road – not much to going, uh, come to school, but, uh, we spent some time when we go home, on the road, we pick up some sand, or pick up some – go to, uh, a small riverside, play around, and then go home. So, it’s a lot of fun. Yes. But – and then, um, in the morning, you know, when you gonna go to school. You would know when the kids will haul (holler at) you, “Hi!” uh, “Time to go!” and then you, you kind of wait for them and then you go. [laughs] Was very funny. It’s something that, um, the kids nowadays would – would not imagine. They cannot imagine, yes. So, it was a very, um, very, uh, lacking of, uh, supplies, but very happy, very pure, um, world at that time.

TH: So, like was it your – were you living in an apartment? ‘Cause my parents say –

TZ: I was living in an apartment, yes. Most people in –

TH: Yeah, my parents are always like, um... like all the kids in the apartment would come together and play, and they would yell at each other through the apartment.

TZ: Yes, yes. We, we, we do the same. We, uh, we prob – I have – we have apartment, in Chin – in China at that time, most people live in an apartment, in the city. So, you have a building here, and right next to it is another building, so we cross, like I would yell open my balcony door – balcony, and yell to the per – the kids at the others, in another building. So, we are this close. Yeah. [laughs]

TH: Um, so what were your parents’ prof – professions?

TZ: My – both my – my parents are, uh, long-term – long-term, uh... teachers. My dad was a, um – both of them are retired, of course. My dad had worked for school for more than forty years. Uh, first ten or fifteen years he worked as a, uh, as a teacher, as a secondary teacher. And then, later on, he moved to, um, administration. So, he had stay – he had stayed in the position until he retired. My mom had always been, uh, in a – in a – teacher for elementary school. She had taught music, she had taught math – I don’t know what’s the relation with these two. [laughs] Yeah. But, as long as I can draw my memory, most – most, uh, the most busy time she was teaching was through the, um, the music class. Uh – the math class. She was one of the, uh – yeah. But she also had, uh, taught the school before she retired for thirty-five-plus years. So, both of them are retired teachers in China.

TH: Did you ever go to their classes?

TZ: I had been several time in their classes, but not in a – staying the full – full time. I probably just go there because I don’t have school or I *needed* to see my parents. Yeah. That’s pretty much – I was in, uh, my dad’s, uh, secondary school during, like, uh, middle school years. I was there. So, I went to school

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during my middle school three years together with my dad every day. Took – we took the bus. Yeah. Going there and come back.

TH: So, they weren't like, were they affected by the Cultural Revolution?

TZ: My dad was. My dad was, because, all because of my, um... My dad unfortunately had a – had a sister and both of his parents went to Taiwan. And then, bef – that got him in a big trouble. My dad was –

TH: Do you know what year?

TZ: 1940 – 49. Yeah. That's the year when the – when Chiang Kai-Shek flew and took a lot of people there. Um, my pa – my dad's family was lucky enough to... to... was affordable, to go to have another choice. Uh, but somehow my dad, in his mind, he thinks that, he believed in – he does not believe in, he did not believe in running away. He believed in, uh, the Communist concept. That's how he told his parents, "Let me stay," because at that time he was the early twenties. He said that "I'm going to join this, uh, fighting, and – uh, the battle. And when China wins, I'm going to go to Taiwan to unite with the family." And the parents, of course, as the only son, one of two kids in the family, my dad was not, uh... was too naïve to believe that that was the case. But they had never – he had never been back since, uh, since then. Until both parents passed away. Until the sister passed away. It was a family – it was a very – so his parents both died of cancer, uh, some – my dad says some of them may – may be contributed to missing him too much. [laughs] And then, um, my, uh, his sister, uh, died of some kind – another kind of digestive cancer as well, not long ago, when – when she was ninety-something years old. But, at that time, uh, my dad received a letter – with all those years, uh... I think from 1940-something to 1990's, early 1990's, they couldn't, uh, contact each other because of the political reasons. But then after 1990's, they were – there were possibilities for, for the mail to go through between Taiwan and mainland. So, my dad started to write. By that time her – his parents already passed away. So, he kept in contact with his, uh, sister's family for quite a – for, uh – I think more than two decades. But the direct flight was not, um, was not allowed at that time until, uh, nine – 2000... after I came to the United States, so it's nine – two thousand, probably seven, eight, or even further. Um, so at the time he was able to, um, schedule a trip to go from Nanjing directly to, to the city, um, where, uh, his older sister lived, um, it was very, uh, late. We thought, because the whole process – there was a lot – was a lot of whole process. But then, um, uh, it took him a while to get the permit to – to go with my mom, and then at that time they got there, she already passed away. So apparently, since 1949, she – he was departed from his par – his family forever. And, uh, didn't even have a chance to see his older sister before she passed away. But they, they did write each other for a while. But because the sister had never worked in her life, so, um, all she could do is to mail some – some letters. And not really – nothing special to talk about with him. So, he always wanted to meet her in person, but sadly, him and my mom – at that time I already came here – him and my mom went, took the trip, after she passed away and then all they saw is, um, is the graveyard of the parents and, and her. Yes. That was ah, that was a tough one. I was not in the trip because I already here. And he, him and my mom, the trip they took to Taiwan is after I came here. So, I – I'm sure that was a very, um, very sad and very, uh... its... you cannot describe it, the trip. Yeah. So.

TH: Um, so, you said he fought in the war?

TZ: He – yeah. He fought in the war – no, uh, he was not a fighter, he was not in the fighter, like go to the battlefield. But he was the one that serve in more towards writing, more to – more towards a supportive team, that kind of thing. Yeah. But he was not in the battlefield to fight with enemies.

TH: Writing –?

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TZ: Yeah, like writing something, or some kind of, uh, like officer type of, type of thing.

TH: Oh, like a secretary...ish?

TZ: Yeah, yeah. Some – something like that.

TH: Um, so like... your sister and your... dad only went to Taiwan because it was convenient for them, or they believed in the cause or?

TZ: Oh, my – you mean my uh, my grandparents?

TH: Oh, yeah. Your dad's sister.

TZ: My dad's sister – yeah. My dad's sister went to Taiwan only because the family wanted to move. Because at that time, they live in a – they originally come from a, um, I would say a... east side, east – uh, no. Uh, southeast side of China. It's called Fujian province. And most of the Taiwanese who immigrated there since 1940 – uh, 49 – was from that province. So, if your family could afford a trip, um, and you were wondering whether you are able to, you know, adapt to the new, um, foundation of the new power, like Mao Zedong – lots of wonderings. So, a lot of people say, "Okay, we're going to follow Chiang Kai-Shek, uh, to Taiwan." That's his parents' choice. So the parents decided to take the whole family there, but at that time my dad already served as officer in the, um, in the army, and he's, he was telling hi – not saying he didn't want to go them – go with them – but he said that, "Let me finish the stuff I have, then I will join you after this." But who knows, it's all – yeah. It had never been united again.

TH: Yeah.

TZ: But that, that brought him a lot of, um, problem in Cul – in Cultural Revolution. Because somehow –

TH: Because of the link –

TZ: Because of the relative, the link to overseas. So, they doubted whether he was, uh, the one that kind of acted as a spy, and my mom and my dad said, "If I were a spy, then I wouldn't even go – you know, stay here. They asked me to go but I chose to believe what, you know, what we believe, but..." Uh, so, he went through a hard – a hard time. But, uh, eventually, they didn't find any, uh, major fault. They – they didn't have the evidence to say he did this, he did that. So, he did not, uh, he – he was okay afterwards. Then he – he went back to work, saved (?) for my mom.

TH: So, they didn't have any trouble because they were like, teachers or intellectuals?

TZ: Uh, they did have – they did have this too. My – intellectual, they – both of my parents... Because my mom was born in a very poor family, at that time it was something to be proud of. Uh, you got nothing, you – you really revolutionary. [both laugh] So, so, um, uh, but my dad was mainly because of that. Um, of course, at that time, because the group – they were defined as a teaching group, which is not a capitalist, uh, group, so the-they were not paid very fairly, they, uh, they were not taking as respective (respected?) as they're supposed to be. Um, but because they were teaching not towards the high, like college level, they were teaching at the elementary school and middle school, so it was fairly okay. My dad's, uh, trouble, mainly from his family link to Taiwan.

TH: Okay.

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TZ: Yeah. It went, it's – it's until 1970-something. Late 1970's. It was a hard, hard couple of years for them. Um, but my mom always believed in him, and was shoulder to shoulder with him. So, they went through, at that time a lot of people divorced, because, uh, "I don't want to deal with this person, I know he's going to bring me trouble, so the only thing I can do is to divorce." Yeah, a lot of broken families because of the political reasons. Very cruel and crazy time era. Yes.

TH: Um, so, what was your school like?

TZ: My – my own schooling?

TH: Yeah, your own schooling.

TZ: My own school, I had spent six years in elementary starting age six, uh, grade 1 till grade six, then three years in middle school, then three years in, uh, in high school. Then graduated in age – age of eighteen, then I went to, uh, Nanjing Normal University, not a bachelor's degree – I was, my grades was not enough, good enough for – to get into a bachelor's degree, but I got an associate's degree. It's a three-year college. Then I graduate, uh, age not yet twenty-one. Like between twenty and twenty-one. And then I started working from age twenty-one till age twenty-nine, before I came here. Yes. So that, my school was continuous, uh, not – not a fancy school, um, but overall, uh, I did well for all divisions and, uh... One thing I would say in China, if you – at that time era – if you would have to, um, be the top student, you would have to give up something. Me, I was not, I was not willing to give up something that like – I think the course of politics is totally waste of time. Uh, we have a course.

TH: Wait, you mean like give up time or?

TZ: Give up your – give up your hobby, give up your time, give up something, for – for you to become um – I was, I was always a mediocre student. Not ever want to be, or can be, because they only use the uh, one *gaokao*, one – yeah. They – the uh, entrance examination to judge. That's the only standard. So, my, uh, overall grades are not strong enough to get into a bachelor's degree at that time. So that was the reason. That's why when I came to the US, my first goal was to get a bachelor's degree from here. That's why I, I – in 2003, once I came here, I went to, um, Houston Community College to study, to get to, um, some prerequisite classes, and then also get my English improved a bit, and then I went to UH to get a bachelor's. I *gai* – I gained my bachelor's degree in, at the end of... in December of 2008, and, uh, that was education curriculum, education, from UH. Yes. And then I got another, uh, a master's degree and – when I was working here. So that's my education path.

TH: Whoa!

TZ: [laughs] So education has ever been a key to me, it's just uh, I in – instead of getting it periodically, continuously, I decided to let it happen when I know exactly what I want to do. And, uh, I do it – one thing I – I still think and I appreciate is that I think at that time, kids were freer than the kids now, and, um, people had less – lower, a little bit lower expectation on the academic performance compared to what parents expect from kids now. So, at that time, we had a lot of time to discover the world, although our world apparently was small. Uh, we spend a lot of time in dealing with different, um, peer – uh, the friendship, lots of, uh, things, although at that time we didn't have much, you know, internet, those – this and that. But we get to see the world in person. And read a lot of books. I have been always a – a great, um, book reader. And I – I maintained this – this is my, probably my lifelong, uh, hobby. And, uh, I just newly discovered a book! Um, in my, uh, online, through one person's pers – uh, recommendation. Uh, it's, it's uh, it's called *Wolf Totem*. It's talking about the time towards the end of, uh, Cultural Revolution, in 1976 through to 1979. And, uh, it was talking about, it's inner Mongolian area. It's the –

TH: Is it in Chinese?

TZ: It's in Chinese. So, after reading – reading the Chinese, it took me four to five days to finish it. But, reading – and I felt so good, I even come to the class, tell my – like, my kids, I said, “This is really good book.” Then I went online, found that they al – they have English version. [holds up a copy of *Wolf Totem*, laughs] They have English version. And because I read the Chinese version – was in, was in Chinese, so it was on – online, I didn't know it's this thick! [laughs] I just read after page, after page, it took me four, five days to finish. So, um, this book was originally written in 2004 by a Chinese author. Then because it's so good, they, um, they trans – it's translated into English, to Japanese, to German, different languages. And then, um, in 2015, uh, a French director, famous director, took this as a picture. They – they shoot a movie for it. It was very good, and I, and I ordered it. It's not arrived yet. Yeah. It's the same, same name, *Wolf Totem*. It's like, excellent book, I think it's very, very enjoy – now I'm reading the English version now.

TH: Oh okay, you're rereading it.

TZ: But it took me – it's taking me much longer! [both laugh] It takes me much longer. Yes. So, it's, uh, so reading is one of the things that I, that I have always been enjoying and... luckily through this day I still find myself in a lot of different contexts. So, one thing, I think, because we – during childhood, we were not so depressed by the academic part, we were able to, uh, spend some time in reading some books that's not related to the, the courses. That was a saver for me. So, a lot of joy – uh, it was from, uh, from the books. And dealing with different friends and, and have a friendship, that was, uh, very, very, uh – so, social-wise and read – life-long reader, was the main two things. So, I was very satisfied.

TH: Yeah, so I feel like, um, people expect China to be like so hardcore, you have to get good grades, straight A's, but... So, when do you think that changed?

TZ: My parents had never... My – uh, my parents had never, uh, pushed me that hard because they knew that, uh, I was not that type of kid that can be the same as others, so they always respected that. Uh, and also, they are teachers, so they had better understanding of how much you can push a kid. You know, they don't want to have a very tight, and tension relationship with me, uh, just to – for me to get certain grades. So, they'd be very, uh, democratic. Uh – this – no... uh... yeah, democratic family environment. So, I grew up, uh, in a very democratic environment. I, um, I was allowed to make B's sometimes, depends on sub – just certain subjects, like physics. Never be able to pass –

TH: Oh my gosh, I'm not even allowed to make B's.

TZ: Oh really? [both laugh]

TZ: Yeah, I think since 19, even 2000. Probably late – late 1990's, gradually, especially the pe – the kids who were born in 1990's, who were born in 2000, they are *very*, they're pushed so hard, um, by the parents. I think they are very, um, all they want is how to get into a... a good university or a good, uh, higher education institution. That's all their goal. I think they miss a lot of things. Not saying everybody in China does this but, um, they are in, under a great pressure of everybody else around you doing – doing this. If, if you as a parent, let's say take your kids to a weekend school, for different subjects, I choose not to take that. Then, you would feel – maybe at beginning I say, “Oh, just leave them some free play time,” but gradually, you will feel like you are missing the steps. So eventually in this environment you – parents, parents, you do, eventually you do what everybody else is doing. So that was, um – it's a very sad, uh, situation. It's even – even as parents it's very difficult to, to see that. Because they have to give

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up their, uh, their time, to do that, to take the kids there, to take the kids here. Um, if, if a teacher says, uh, “Okay, this is not covered in class, but we will have a afterschool class, we will teach them supplemental things,” do you think you can, you can, omit that?

TH: Like, that’s not optional. [laughs]

TZ: No, it’s, it’s not optional! It says it’s optional, it’s not. So, these kind of things had never happened during my time era. But nowadays, it’s – it happens all the time. Yeah. I feel sorry for the kids. That’s why I chose not to be the parent like that. [both laugh] I think it’s a to – it, it makes learning a torture. I’m saying it, it’s good in a way that they have high expectations, but they got to have a boundary. You cannot, you have to know your kid, if they are towards academic, uh, part, then it’s fine. You can push them. Even you don’t push them, they push themselves, like you. [laughs] Right? But if I have a kid who is not towards this one, one path, and I try to push him or her to this one direction – I would not be successful. And, and the tension, the relationship between me and, the parental with the kids would be really, uh, bad. It’s not worth it. Yeah. I, I remember in, um, in a movie of uh Kung Fu Panda 1, you know – [both laugh] You know that, that, that, um, that Oogway, right, the Master Oogway right? And he was, he was telling the, what’s – uh, the Master Shifu. And Master Shifu was so mad that, that, why this stupid panda got elected, right. And Master Oogway said, do not – right before he, he flew away as flowers – [laughs] he said, uh, you cannot expect – I’m not quoting, but this is the meaning – you cannot expect a, a peach tree to be a plum tree. You ca – you, you need to respect that the peach tree can ever be only peach tree. You can be trim, and watering to make it better, but you can – this child will not grow up to the neighborhood, another one who is ideal. So, I think with the respect of who they are, and, uh, find out what they’re good at, what they’re bad at, uh, what they need to improve, I think that’s the right path. Not compared to... you know, somebody is doing so well, why can’t you?! Why you’re missing two points, you’re making 98, excuse me, where are the two points come from? You know, why you missing two points? So, I think, uh, there are a lot of good values for the Chinese education, but the parents nowadays also need to be more, uh... accept who their kids are. And also make themselves – life, a little easier. Not make it torture to their kids, and to themselves. Yeah, I think it’s – there’s a balance there.

TH: It’s a good life lesson from Kung Fu Panda. [both laugh]

TZ: Yes! [laughs]

TH: Uh, so going back to like books and things like that, what were your favorite books as a kid?

TZ: As a kid, um...

TH: Or even like music and TV, what did you ...[unintelligible]

TZ: My – yeah, uh, well it, it depends on different time – time era. When I was very little, even the books was uh, very, uh, very difficult supplies. So, at that time we didn’t have, uh, even you had money, you couldn’t find it. So, all the books that, through my, uh, elementary school, childhood, it’s about half of the size of this book. [gestures to half of *Wolf Totem*] And very thin. It’s called “mini book”. I had lots of mini books. So those mini books, um, that was the only available ones for the younger kids at my age. So, my parents bought me a lot. So, I, I ended up with reading every book, again, again, again, so I read all those books, all those books become very, um... like, uh, torn. Um, but very sad, later on we – we moved, but they – we somehow sold it. I – I wish I did, had never sold it. Um, and then later on when I went to middle school, I started to go to library – we had more books in the school – library, and, uh, also in, um, we had a, um – my mo – my mom always order some magazines, like monthly magazine for me to read. And my two types of – during my middle school and high school, my two types of, um, favorite genre of

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the books were – not genre, but the topics and themes – at that time there’s no universe, there’s no, uh, uh, scary books – one is, I always love detective books. Detective books, and the other one is, uh, romance book. [both laugh] These are the two type of books I – I read so many. So, the romance book mainly from a, uh, a Taiwanese, uh, writer, [name]. I have read almost all her books. Yeah. I read every book I could borrow. And the detective books, there – depends, detective books, there are Chinese styles, there are like uh, Shar – Sharl... eh... the British one, um – [clicks tongue]

TH: I know what you’re talking about, but I can’t think of it. Oh, Sherlock Holmes.

TZ: Yeah, yeah. Sherlock Holmes. Yes. I like that one too, uh, there are a lot of different – anything that gives me mystery, gives – I like to read. Um, and then there are a lot of, uh, books from the, uh, from the ancient China about how people used to, you know, this and that. So, I did, I – those are the two main styles of books that I, that I ever liked. But then, uh, once – once I went to high school, middle school, I get – I get to, you know, be more focused on the studies, so less books but even though – even so, I had read a lot, a lot of books. I like, um, what’s that called, it’s a type of, um, writing skill, it’s called san wen [characters]. It’s not a, uh, persuasive, it’s not a poem, but something you can write. That just – free, freestyle. That kind of thing. I can – I read a lot of freestyle, of – I guess one of the reasons is that, um, *I’m* free. Second reason is that at that time you have a lot of, um, teenage puzzles, of, towards different things, so you, of course you share with your friends, but also you want to find some answer from the books, to see what the book said. So that was some – I still use this kind of strategy to apply to my life right now, if I have some, um, life, uh, like self-growth or self-education, I usually get inspiration from different books. Like this book [flips through *Wolf Totem*], I have a lot of ins – inspiration from how wolf gets, survived, in a very cruel environment. Yeah. So, I have to say – so... so it – because I realized, and I benefit from reading, so that’s one thing that I really emphasize for my own kids, are reading. So, my, my daughter and my son, they are both, um, especially my daughter, they are, they are readers. But with the distraction of modern technology, um, they sometimes choose to read from online, which I don’t mind, yeah. But sometimes I think, “Are you reading? Or why you are laughing?” [laughs] “You’re playing games!”

TH: [laughs] They can switch tabs.

TZ: Yeah, yes! So, yeah.

TH: Um, so what did you want to – want to be when you were a kid?

TZ: When I was a kid, I didn’t really think much about what I wanted to be. Uh, but one thing I knew, it was, uh, not to be a teacher!

TH: [laughs]

TZ: Yeah. It was very ironic because, uh, I graduated from a normal university, which trains people as a teacher. Um, but my major was journalism at that time. Um, but, because both of my parents were teachers. They were with me *every* single summer, since I was childhood. It was a pain to me. Everybody else, you can go their – go to their house to play, you know, ‘cause nobody there. But *me*, my parents always check when you going, when you come back, ‘cause they’re at home! So, what I wanted to do is, I can go anywhere but teaching. So, I did not – the reason why I went to a normal university educational institution is because I, I was good enough to – I was not good enough to go anywhere else. [laughs] So I seek every, I seek every single way, not to, um, be in the, in the teaching field. That can explain why, after I graduated, I, I had approximately four to five jobs, in nine years from age twenty to age twenty-nine, in China. I switched so many jobs, like every two or three years has one job. That was a very, very,

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um, inspirational experience for me. So, if anyone would ask me, what do you think they should do when they are younger, I think go explore the world. Explore different fields to find out what you like to do. But standing at this point, I think it may be destiny that I ended up with teaching, but who knows? I'm teaching now, doesn't mean – I, I know I'm not *that* young, but – who knows, that years from now, I wouldn't, I wouldn't convince myself to try something different. Yeah. If there – there is something different that will probably be related more or less to medical field. Yeah. I think it's, uh, that is a good, good field and I always curious about how human body works, and, uh, I think I can find a good mix, not, not towards too much schooling, but some – somehow you can be in the field, help some people, and see a different, see into different window. Yeah. But before that happens, I probably need some training, I need some preparation. But for now, I'm satisfied about the job that I have. Yeah.

TH: I think it's cool that you, like, got education as you needed it.

TZ: Yes.

TH: Like when you really knew, oh this is what I want to do, this is the education I need.

TZ: Yeah, yeah. So, it's always good to have something, um, at least will ha – will give you, will give you some big foundation. That's why I always think, um, education... is not equivalent, completely equivalent to the degree of this person gets. Some people can, um, can get a high degree, like doctoral degree, but know very little about life experience. Versus some others may have minimum education, educational level, but are very wise in term of dealing with different real-life experience. So, I think um, it's how you want to, uh, educate yourself. Self-education is life-long. It's the life-long, uh, skill that everyone ought to have... is to, uh, find where you are, find what you like, find what you don't like or what you, um, are not so good at, and, uh, if you can prove it – improve it – then go, if not, then maybe find something around it. So not in – and then be a positive person, and self-teaching, and be, uh, self-reflective. That's very important. [both laugh]

TH: Um, then, how did you decide to come to the US?

TZ: Um, well that's because in 2000... early 2000's, when I was passing, probably passing twenty-five years old, then I feel the urge of, uh, maybe find somebody to get married. But at that time it was no suitable person, and then in – during one trip, my, um, my colleague, one of my colleagues at that time, she, she, she knew somebody, uh... from her family that was trying to match her boyfriend, which at that time was in the US with her. So –

TH: They were trying to match her boyfriend?

TZ: Yeah, with, uh – match the boyfriend to her. Uh, at that time she was in the same, same company with me. And then, um, at that time, she, uh, so my current husband, my husband, went to the trip with that guy, to meet the lady. So, I happened to be the tour... with them. So, they went on their, their date. And I took the guy somewhere else to – that's how I knew my husband. And then he is five ol – years older than me, so at that time I was twenty-five, twenty-six, he was probably thirty, thirty-one. So he felt the same thing. So, we, after he returned back to the – he was a, he is a American-born Chinese, but did not speak Chinese at all. So, he, um, he came back, and we communicated each other – uh, afterwards, um, through e-mails, and then he went to, uh, China several more times after then, then we decided okay, we maybe, we can consider to get married. That's how I came here. Um, yeah. So, we – we got married, uh, in 2003, then I came here. That's why.

TH: Um, can you describe your first day here?

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TZ: My first day – here?

TH: In the US.

TZ: Uh... I cannot really, because we, all our date, limited amount of dates were in, in China. But every visit – he visited three times before we started our procedure to apply me go – come to the US. Um, but before, before then, every time he only stayed there for a ma – maximum two weeks. So, when we – when I came here, um, I... we immediate – because the visa type I had was fiancée visa. You have to get married within ninety days. Then, within the ninety days, you, you get married first and then you need to um – him, he was a citizen – he has to, um, petition me to, uh, apply for me as a, as, uh, the temporary resident. So, we, we really – if there was a date, if you can, if you can call as the date, that's after marriage. [both laugh]

TZ: After we went, after we decided to get married here, yes.

TH: Oh – oh wait, not like a date, like your – when you first came to the US.

TZ: A day?

TH: A day.

TZ: Oh, we went to, we went to, uh, well at that time I landed in – uh, San – Los Angeles. Los Angeles. So, we took two weeks in Los Angeles. And, uh, and San Francisco, in California. So, we, we traveled, he has couple of relatives there, we went there and on – on the day, that was sunny day, everyone went out, supposed to go out, it was in, uh, city of – called Reno, we went there to look for, look at the casinos, and it was new to me. And then, uh, and one of the relatives said – she already passed away – she said, “Oh, it's a good day! Why don't you get married?” [both laugh] I'm like – “Okay...”

TH: In a casino?!

TZ: Uh – yes! So, we registered in the casino.

TH: Oh, oh wow!

TZ: Yes, in a casino.

TH: That's so cool!

TZ: [laughs] So crazy. I had a prepared, my parents had prepared me a red Chinese *qipao*, I didn't even bring it! Who the heck would know, that's the day I'm going to – so I ended up renting a, a, a wedding gown. [laughs]

TH: Oh my gosh.

TZ: Yes.

TH: I think that's exactly what my parents did too.

TZ: See?!

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TH: That impulse, “Let’s rent a wedding gown!” [laughs]

TZ: Yes. Yeah, yeah. So that’s very – I still remember the, in that same day, or before, that was my very first time with, uh, that, that was sitting in the casino. So, at that time it was not the tickets. At that time, it was the real coin, twenty-five cents coin. So, I think in one hit, I got so much! [imitates the sound of a slot machine] I got so much coins! It – I had a, everyone had a box. So, my box is al – almost filled. I don’t even know how many! Okay, but I – ‘cause I had no experience and everybody was else – somewhere else, ‘cause they want a different machine. I was in the slot machine. My husband at that time, he went to either the restroom or somewhere with other, older relatives. So, I was by myself, right? Nobody would know, this person will make so much money. And I was so naïve, and foolish, stay in the same machine, and lose everything back to the machine! [both laugh]

TH: Oh – Ms. Z!

TZ: Exactly, I lose, I lost every single coin in the same machine! [both laugh]

TZ: Yes. [laughs] I, I still can, I still remember that. Yeah. Then – almost, when I almost finished, my husband came back with other relatives. He said, “How did it go?” Of course, look at, look at my coins. “It didn’t go so well.” I said, “It was very well earlier!! Now, you see everything is about –” He said, “What happened?” I told them. He said, “Oh, you should move right away! You should move to the –” I said, “You guys were disappeared, nobody was here!” So – nobody told me. If I knew, if I had knew, then I would go, you know, go to some other machines. Yeah. Yeah, that was a real coin. twenty-five cents. Yes.

TH: Ohh. ...Forgot my next question. [both laugh]

TH: Okay, uh, what were, what were the biggest differences between China and the US that you first noticed?

TZ: First noticed, was... uh, US was not as good as what I – as I thought at that time. I – I remember, when I went to, uh, ‘cause I left the Shanghai international airport, the airport that at that time was new, was fancy, when I landed in Los Angeles airport, I was like, “Okay, this airport needs some work!” [both laugh]

TZ: Then, then, uh, at the time, California was fine because the weather is nice, lots of street flowers, it was good. You have this uh –

TH: What season was it?

TZ: That was June. June, yeah. It was not hot yet. But we went, we drove through that, uh, Highway 1, that by the ocean, that was so, it was very scenery-wise, was excellent. But then when I came to Houston, I was like, “*Okay*, this looks like a countryside!” [laughs] And look at all this, uh, dangling, all this almost hanging down traffic light!

TH: Oh, yeah.

TZ: Right? With, with wires! I’m like, what is this? [both laugh]

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TZ: Yeah. So, my fir – very first thing coming to the US was to learn how to drive. That was my, um, I, that was my, um, priority because my husband went to work every day so I, I had to stay home if I didn't know how to, how to, how to drive. So, uh, we came here – I came here in June and then we spent like a half a month or three weeks in California, and sometime in July, early July or mid-July, I went to, uh, test, you know, pass and then start driving. And then, uh, end, at the end of August, when HCC started, uh, that's how I drove to school every single day to have my classes. So, driving, it was a, a need, if I didn't know how to drive then I couldn't go to HCC every day.

TH: Yeah.

TZ: Yeah, so yeah. But so far, I think I have adapted to the US quite a lot than I, uh, I really like the country, I think, um, I am really... this – you have heard this saying is that, “China is, is my homeland, but US is like my second home – homeland.” Yeah. I, I really feel that way. And I don't see myself going back to China for retirement. I think sin – since I, um... I fulfill my important life steps here. Get married, have kids, have families. Even both of my parents are here now. So, I think this is the place that I want to, uh, end with, towards my, uh, my, uh, the end of my life. So, Chi – China, 'cause it's, I'm the only child – only child, no relatives, only some good friends, childhood friends, and some, uh, later on, coworkers who are really, we still keep in touch. But I don't see myself going back to live. Visit, yes. But, uh, to live, is less likely. Yeah.

TH: Uh, how has – how good was your English when you first came?

TZ: My English... at that time when I came here, it was good enough to communicate with my husband. It was good enough to get around, myself. At least, to pass the, um, the test of, uh, of the, the driving. Because at that time they didn't have the Chinese version yet. Now, you can do the Chinese version. Um, and good enough to, to understand what, what the instructor, the tester, tell me to do, you know, to pass the exam. Um, the – all that because, uh, I – it's because of the job that I worked. I worked in several joint adventures. Uh, like, uh, it's a company that's, that uses English at that time, during my twenty to twenty – twenty-nine-year-old time era. So, I had, um, I had practiced my English a bit. But still kind of Chinglish, but good enough to go to the community college and sit in the classroom to listen to – yeah, that's why, and because my husband doesn't speak English – uh, Chinese, at all, so at home –

TH: Is he from Houston?

TZ: He, yeah, he was born in Houston, and he – yeah. So, the only communication language between me and him is English. [rolls eyes] Ironically!

TH: [laughs]

TZ: Yeah. But, um, but I think that improves my English a bit. And also, when I was at school, my instructional, um, language was English. So that I got to improve quite a bit and quite fast. Yes.

TH: What was your biggest challenge?

TZ: Challenge at that time was how to be independent, true independent. Meaning you have to take care of things yourself, learning how to survive in the school by all these language barriers and the culture shock, and living in the place where you, um, have no idea about, uh, and form a family, uh, and dealing with his guy who you met numerous times – not many times, but start a new relationship and a marriage, so that was the combination was – was a challenge. But it was not – it was, it was pretty smooth. It was,

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of course, there was a lot of, uh, differences, uh, some – some are the character differences, some are just the culture differences, but not, not horribly managed, it was quite managed well.

TH: Like, between you and your husband?

TZ: Yeah, and even, uh, I did very well for school. I graduated from UH with a GPA with 2 – 3.9. Yeah. Well, U of H. [both laugh]

TZ: So, uh, so, I was, I was, uh, okay. And then, um, I think, and then, December 2008 I found the, um, I graduated from UH and then... March or April, I found a job here of 2009, until today. So, I – I really don't have much, um, complaints, uh, I think it's, it's – that's why I said the true independent is that you know who you are, you walk every step by step, you – you build your confidence step by step, you don't born with confident. Of course, there's different people, some people are born and they're shy, versus others are more outgoing. But doesn't mean these two people will ended up the same. No. Uh, they can al – always move a little bit towards another direction. Like, I cons – define myself a very extrovertial person. Extremely outgoing. But as time goes by, and as, as I get older, I think I really... one thing, for a very outgoing person, the big advan – disadvantage is then they, they tend not to be calm as they should, and they have less time to themselves. But as time goes, goes by, I learn how to deal with myself. I gradually learned how to calm myself and find internal energy and build upon that. So, I think people always should be aware who they are, what their advantage and disadvantage, and work a little bit towards the disadvantage part to open up. Let's say if you are a little shy and then you can, uh, find some strategies to, to quickly adapt to the situation or make people get to know you quicker than they used to be. Yeah. You don't have to be another person, but you can walk towards that opposite direction a bit. That will overall build yourself in a much mature and a much more balanced form in later on life.

TH: Did you, like, feel that Americans are more extroverted in...?

TZ: In general, yes. In general, yes. They are –

TH: Or, like, what other kind of culture shock was there?

TZ: Um... America, American people, I'm talking about typical American people, they, um, they're more, they're more, um, friendly, like when they see you on the street when they don't know you, they probably think, oh, you, you are, you look friendly, so let me say hi to you. This, this is not something you see in China at all. Um, and, uh, and they like to, um... express their opinions in a more, in a much more indirect way.

TH: Yeah.

TZ: They don't tell you, if I, if you, wear, if you wear a different hairstyle and if a Chinese say, "Hey! Why you look at that? Oh, that doesn't look good, okay? Eh, go change it, okay!" Yeah, you know that right. But American people say, "Oh, you look very, uh, something is new today. Yeah! It's interesting!" You know? And I think, in a way, it's good, so you – so people feeling don't get hurt, but sometimes you really have to think, "Uh, how true is that?" Yeah, you have to, you have to make the judgment on their tone, and – and really knowing whether I really look good. You know? Yeah, even as teachers, if you, um, if you have to write the comments to the students, you supposed to tell them the good, positive things first, and then something they need to improve later on. So, I think, this is a good strategy to help, to help esteem and the esteem of the kids, but in another way, I always think that people who grow up in China are more, I don't know, thick-skinned. They can take a lot of different criticize, you tell them directly they may be upset a little bit at the beginning, but later they are fine with it. But in America, if you tell a

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typical American the way as it is, some of them may – may – may have feeling hurt. Or they, um, that's why we have to change, we have to change some way. But in a Chinese class, I think the kids know certain ways of who, who I am, and then stating in the Chinese class, so have, so they have a lot of, uh, understanding of the culture where I come from. So, I can say something that's kind of free, not free, not completely free, but it's kinda say something, yeah.

TH: Yeah. So, what has been your favorite part of living in America?

TZ: Uh, my favorite part living in America is to deeply discover who I am. I think in America – in China, I was, I was going through lot of different time era of in term of job, building, um, however to explore who, what's inside of me and gradually develop a more personality and characters, I think America gave me the, um, the sun, the sunshine, and the soil for me to and freely express my – well, I have always been free in a certain style, but here people give you more encouragement and people, uh, give you more, you gain more opportunities while you are doing it. In China, maybe, you cannot go to certain positions if you're not related to people in power. Here, it works this way in general as well, but if you prove that you are capable, you are, um, um, uh, you can, you can do, and people would trust you and give you opportunities. So, I think at this point, is – so people talk about racists, talk about, um, bias and discrimination. I think, in a society of people come from all over the world, it's really impossible, it's impossible to do, to be a hundred percent fair, but we can only find the fairness from what we can see, what we show people. I think that's how we, um, discover, um, who we really are. Who we can be. Yeah, I'm still on the road [laughs] I'm just saying, I'm still on the road.

TH: Um, well, did you ever experience any discrimination?

TZ: I think, in the school, um, uh, yes. I think I have, uh, maybe it's just part of the reason is because I was not obedient as other student, I had too many questions, and then one time...

TH: Oh, like in, uh, college...

TZ: In, in here.

TH: HCC?

TZ: Yeah, HCC. There was one time, uh, there's a guy. I remember he was our, uh... What's that course called? But like, uh, you – you learn American history, it's not a history class, it's political science. Oh no, it's something, uh, I forgot the course name, but it's political-related but also, uh, not history, but um... So, he, I was taking both, like one and two from him. And then, one time, he had, he had a quiz or test, and there's one question, I did not, uh – well, nobody in this class got it right. So, he said that, uh, well, "I wonder why," and then some people said, "Because they never taught us", right? And he said, "Really?" And then we kinda saying, "Yeah". He said, "Okay. Then, we may, uh, I may give you this point back." So, at the time he finish his, uh, his analysis of the test, then he, um, he took off, he said, "Okay, now, from back to the front, bring your paper up." Right? So, note he did not mention about give that points back. So, I raise my hand, I said, "You just said you're going to give us that point, the – the points for which question." He thought he – he thought I was challenging his, maybe, yeah, he took that way. So, he said he was very upset right away. It's a – It's a male teacher. He was very, very upset. And then, immediately, he – he said, "Everybody else in this class got the points but you." Man, that was harsh! So, I stood up, left. [laughs] Well I – cause I was sitting close to the, close to the, to the door. At the time I open the door, my, my, uh, my paper flew to the front to the ground, so a girl who sit next to me pick it up and then, she come from Taiwan, so she and I became good friends. [both laugh] And, then, I – I was talking to some other teacher in HCC, and another teacher said, "Oh, he is not supposed to rule

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you out, you know, in front of, uh, you know.” And then, I emailed him, I said, “Well, I really wasn’t, uh, trying to challenge your, you know, I was – I had a question. ‘Cause you mentioned it earlier, but you didn’t mention, um. And then, um, I went to, also, I went to talk to him, and, uh, he said, “Oh, that was okay. That was a miscommunication.” I said, “I, you know.” And then I said, “I apologize for any misunderstanding.” And then he went, “Oh, don’t worry about it.” And then, um, and at the end, I said, “Are we clear?” And he said, he was look at me, “I think so.” But what I mean is “don’t think about this, don’t think about what happen today will cause me trouble. Okay, don’t give me any trouble later on.” I said, “Are you sure?” I – I – I really said it really plain, “Will I be in trouble because of this?” He said, “No, no, no, no, no, no, no, you are a good student, you also in my another class, don’t worry about it.” I said, “Okay, let’s put it as the end.” He look at me was like [laughs]. So, I, I got two A’s from that class. So, I wouldn’t call it discrimination, but I think there are certain things that maybe he was, he felt like he was challenged, and he felt like it was a very, um, it’s an unexpected thing from a girl who is – who has – who happened to have Asian face. [laughs] Yeah, yeah. But that was, that was pretty much it. If there is something discrimination this and that, you can, sometimes you can feel it, but you really have no evidence to – to say, but I would say, you, we can... at our part, we can always do our part to, uh, to better ourselves, to, um, uh, understand people. Don’t take things very personally. Don’t take things too defensive. I think that will make life easier for everybody. Yeah. To people who like to, especially people who are new to the country, will say, “He gave me that look. Does that mean he’s discriminating?” I said, “First of all, he’s not going to tell you, ‘I don’t like you. I discriminate.’ So even if you feel like it, then, then, uh, there’s no evidence, so what you can only do is to try to be more, um, the way, that this person, or that person, can accept.” ‘Cause a lot of times because the culture thing, we don’t, we do things that other people don’t fully understand or fully agree. They take it as a disruptive behavior. Like, we talk, we usually talk loud in public, in public. So, I said –

TH: People don’t expect?

TZ: People don’t expect, yeah.

TH: Like they – the stereotype is that Asians are quiet, and...

TZ: Yeah, they don’t understand. They think we all quiet and obedient. Hell no. We’re not. We’re not.

TH: No.

TZ: [laughs] Yeah.

TH: Um, did you ever experience discrimination at Awty?

TZ: Mm-mm. No. I would say, no. I don’t think this is the, um, the, uh, the institution. ‘Cause we say we are an international school. I think, I think it’s more, it’s more, it’s not towards discrimination, it’s more how you, how... how good your performance. If you prove that you are capable and then you get opportunities. If you cannot prove, then no matter what race or where you come from, you don’t have opportunity. I think that’s fair. I think they, they all, people all are trying to be fair. That’s good. Yeah.

TH: So... How do you feel like Awty has changed since you first got here? Or, wait... wait, did you already, did I already ask you how you came to Awty?

TZ: Uh, yeah. Kind of. Well, uh, you didn’t ask me, but I told you is that, they, at that time, in 2000 – in Spring 2009, they wanted to find a teacher, and then somehow, um, they, at that time I was looking for a job as well, and I was planning to teach in a, in a summer school, in a Chinese weekend school. A

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Chinese school. Then, um, the, the principal at that time of that school, uh, knew that was, I was certified, and that I had an education in, in America, and then I think Pang 老师(teacher) had find, had found him, knew him, and asked him for a recommendation of several teachers. So, he recommend me along with another girl together. So, we came here for interview. Yeah. So –

TH: You, like, you had gotten a teaching certification? Through...

TZ: Yeah, through – yeah, through my, uh, my... U of H. Once you finish you, you have this, uh, this is a requirement. Yeah. So, I think Awty has changed because science-wise, we are much bigger, um, we are also on the way going to bilingualism, immersion program. Uh, yeah. That's... yeah. But we don't – it – the lower school and pre-school are already doing it. We don't know when and how it will come to secondary. Um... and... Yeah, and Chinese program has been, uh, developed, have been, has been developed a lot through the years. So, uh, jobs, job-wise, it's a lot busier and I also take, uh, several more other positions. One – one thing is that I'm doing CAS, and this year, um, I also did this, uh, ninth grade internship. Uh, I help with all the internship, this and that. So, uh, I think there are opportunities and everybody seem to be much busier than before. Um, and, um, and we also have the concept of int – integration of, uh, bilingualism and the one school between the two sections. We try to – yeah. So, it's a lot of, um, homogenization, lots of integration, lots of degrees of different, um, and, and I think Awty is – will have the five-year, is it ten-year, review from the private school, uh, independent school district. Independent school association. So, we, we'll be busy doing that next year. Yeah. But everybody is getting a lot busier than before, that's for sure.

TH: Have your students changed?

TZ: Yeah. My students have been, um, some are good, some are not as diligent as before. Yeah. But also has something to do with the requirement from the teachers. You have to give them clear line for them to follow. Yeah. But I have always been, uh, relatively linear teacher, I think in order to pro – duce certain product later on, like we are required to at that time, we only have offered Chinese at the municipal level, for IB. This coming year, I will have students who will take Chinese A-level who are from China, and I also have one or two kids take B-level. So, that, that will be something I have never experienced before. I have to learn myself to structure a different path for each student. I think that's very important.

TH: I feel like there are a lot more Chinese students.

TZ: Yes. We have more Asians.

TH: I think because of Jessica.

TZ: Uh... she was definitely, looks like she was a start, but indeed...

TH: I think she brought people, like, she convinced people...

TZ: She convinced people for several only. For like, uh, for another Jessica, graduate this year. And then, um, but, in general, the Asian population, I think a lot people, a lot, if we're talking about people like you, your case, ABC, it's because people knew a lot more the school than how much the outsider know about Awty. I think Awty got more famous, well-known than it used to be in the Chinese, uh, population, or Asian population. And some Chinese are more willing to, um, get their kids here for a private education instead of a, um, public education. Yeah, that's their choice. But definitely we do have more faces of Asian, yes.

TH: Um, so, how do you keep up Chinese tradition in your family? Or do you?

TZ: Uh, I do, uh, I try to. Um... well, this simple way is I try to speak Chinese with my kids sometimes, not all the time, which I should do all the time. And then, I also – we have, you know, different. My parents living with us during summer, we, um, we are living with them. So, it's easier for my kids to deal with their, their grandparents and then, the food of course, we cook. Um, the movies, um... I think there are lot of, a lot of things we can do as a parent and as a teacher. Yeah, I brought a book back home just to teach some Chinese during summer. I don't know. My daughter, yes, is doable, my son, he is only five, so he barely writes English well. So [laughs] so maybe I'll give some introduction to him. My daughter, she is nine, so she needs to learn. Yeah.

TH: Are they ever going to go to a Chinese school? Like the weekends?

TZ: No, no, no. Because I'm a Chinese teacher, I can teach them. If I cannot teach them, why do I expect to send them somewhere else. Yeah, I... I can teach them at home.

TH: Um, did you teach your husband Chinese?

TZ: No.

TH: Or, how much, how much like...

TZ: Nothing.

TH: ... Chinese traditions does he...?

TZ: Uh, he has good Chinese traditions. A lot of values he has, like respect the old, like, uh, a lot of them, a lot of things he is pretty much Chinese. Just the language doesn't speak. He does not speak Chinese, he does not, uh, the language. And then, um, um, he has no willing to learn Chinese. He said it's too difficult. [laughs] So, I'm, there's no pushing. It's – it's fine. If he – you can only learn when you are willing to. Yeah. And this summer, I'm going to, to learn some Spanish. Hey, you have learned some Spanish before, right?

TH: Only in elementary school. But here, I learned French.

TZ: Oh, French. Okay, okay. How well is your French though? A – and when you graduated did you, did you test French at a higher level?

TH: Uh, no. Just standard.

TZ: Standard level? Okay. How good is your French? If I gave you a book, can you read it?

TH: If you gave me a children's book.

TZ: Article? Oh. Article?

TH: Yeah.

TZ: Okay. Do you forget? Would you say – maybe you would...

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TH: Uh, I haven't tested my French for a long time.

TZ: Probably give you some time for you to renew all your memories or put you in that environment who need to speak French, you will go back to that, that status. Yeah.

TH: Um, and also, are you ever going to take your kids to China?

TZ: Yes, I did. I did – I did take – I took one last year. I took my daughter before I had my son twice. I took my son only because at that time my daughter had to go to school and her school does not allow to miss one week, one and a half weeks of school. During Awty Fall Break October last year I took my son to China to bring my parents...

TH: They both go to Awty?

TZ: No, no. Both of them are not at Awty. I'm thinking about to bring them, um, during middle school, because now they're in a very good, uh, neighborhood school for elementary. They also offer Chin – Chinese, Spanish, and...

TH: Which one?

TZ: Huh?

TH: Which one?

TZ: It's, uh, uh, called Culture Elementary. It's by, um, uh, Meyerland area, which close to, really close to where we live. Yeah. So maybe, maybe join middle school, yes.

TH: And how do they – what do they think of China?

TZ: Um, my daughter, at that time she went, one when she was two the other when she was three, uh, they thought food was good, but boring because they don't have anyone to play with. Yeah, it's not the environment they, um, they, they – they're used to. Yeah. For that, I don't – I don't blame them. I can go into some – if you go in summer, then it's hot everywhere, that's when I took my daughter, and it was so hot. I stayed, like, one month and a half, or two months, it was so boring for her. Nobody to play with. Yeah. At that time, she was small, so she was okay, but if now, it will be much more difficult. She will complain every day. [laughs] Yeah. My son, we only spend nine or eight days during last fall, so he was okay. Yeah, he liked it, but had to be with me everywhere I, I went. Yeah.

TH: Okay, so those are all of my prepared questions –

TZ: Okay.

TH: – but, can you show your pictures?

TZ: Oh, my pictures. Yes. Okay, so this is the one of the wedding pictures when I got married to my husband. [both laugh] This is a Chinese, Chinese-style, um, I took in 2003 at that time. So, it's been – look how much hair I had at that time. [laughs] And then, this is the, the family picture that I brought. So, we took it in 2012 or '13. So that's my dad, my mom, he is at his eighties, my mom is at her seventies,

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my husband, and my daughter and my son, so he was about one year old or a little lower – less than one year old. Yeah. So, she's older, she's younger, her name is Kristen, his name is Jonathan.

TH: Do they have Chinese names?

TZ: They do. Their Chinese names – her Chinese name is C-H-E is her middle name, so her name – full name Kristen C-H-E Lum – Lum is my husband's last name. And his last name – his full name is Jonathan Z-E – that's another Chinese character, zé, and then, uh, Lum. So, they do have Chinese names for both.

TH: They're so cute. [both laugh]

TZ: Yeah. [points at her children] So these are the hats I took – somebody gave me – from the Peru.

TH: Oh, yeah! [both laugh]

TZ: Yeah, from Peru. Now, at that time, she was probably, I don't know, five, six. Yeah, they are four and a half years apart. Yeah. So, family values.

TH: Okay, and like, this is a wrap-up question that we always do.

TZ: Yeah.

TH: What are your hopes for future generations?

TZ: What is my...?

TH: Your hopes for future generations? Like your chil – your children or Asian-Americans?

TZ: I hope, I hope one thing is that I hope they can develop deep critical thinking skills. They don't, they don't... act as what they are told. I think, I hope they can generate their own idea and analyze the situation and then act. I don't want them to be, um, either naïve, too naïve, or either too liberal or too, um... like, being controlled by the environment they're living. They, they ought to have their own ideas and mind to decide what they, what they want to do. But this is a skill, it's the hardest to develop. You cannot teach a person's critical thinking skills. If you teach them, maybe they will get worse. Yes. If you... this critical thinking skills can only developed gradually by the form of their mind, how their mind is formed. You cannot suddenly change. Even the, even you teach them, you tell them, but if they cannot realize by themselves, they do not go through the process of analyzing things by themselves, it's not there, they didn't get it. Yeah. This is very important. People, I think, will the, the general – the generations to come, they're living in a much more changeable, much more lively world, and they ought to find the useful tools and apply self-disciplinary rules to themselves to, um, to find what they can do to help the world, not just, to find out there are difference you can never, between countries to countries, to cultures to cultures, you can – you can, uh, shorten the distance, but you can never, uh, say, I'm you, you are me. And we don't want that. We want the – the blend of different things, but we don't want to convert other people to believe what I say. Yeah, I think that's important. People in this culture, I think, a lot of times, they, they cannot take criticism. They think things if that's what they believe, they want you to believe too. I think that's, that's forceful, it's not gonna work. Yeah.

TH: Okay, also, I know that was the wrap-up question, but I have one more.

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TZ: Okay.

TH: Um, how has Houston changed over the time you've lived here? Especially, I'm really curious about Chinatown.

TZ: Yes, uh, Houston has been changed in a much more diverse city since 2003 when I just first came here. It's – for example, of Chinatown, yes, at the time I came here I think, uh, Chinatown was much smaller and, uh, there – there were less plazas at that time, and they were, there were less restaurants and less businesses, and o – over there, and now it's right before, uh, Beltway 8, well of course, there's extension outside of Beltway 8, like Korean restaurant, Vietnamese, but main – a lot of Chinese are inside of the Beltway 8 on Bellaire. So, I think, there are a lot of different choices of different cuisines. Not only Cantonese. It's all, from all nation, all, um, nationwide in China, there's different cuisines and lots of population, the Chinese or the Asian population had grew a lot. You can see on the weekend, on, uh, on holiday, there's so many cars you can even – you can hardly find parking over there. Yes. Um, and I think Houston has become a much more diverse city and you can see people who use Spanish, who speak Chinese, who speak Vietnamese freely. You can hear them and then, um, at that time, uh, when I came here, you go, you walk on the street, uh, if you speak, let's say you and I walk, you go to a crowd of people, you probably will do, uh, like, very small sound. But now, people can talk in any language, don't have to – to do that. And other people understand that. And then, lots of, uh, supermarkets, even local supermarkets has food or sections of international food. So, I think, it's, it's – it has become a talking about the housing crisis has increased a lot. Yes. So, um, I think the city has definitely become much bigger in size-wise, population-wise it's much bigger, and diverse-wise, um, we have a lot of people, we still, I think I read a research paper said every day, people move to Houston is 600 people a day. That's a lot. Although we have very flat and broad area to, to include these people, but think about where they gonna live. It's how you feel traffic. The traffic, the, the road I travel every day from Monday to Friday used to take me twenty-five minutes. Now, minimum forty-five minutes. If I get to school – want to get to school for first period class by 7:55, I used to be leaving, latest I can leave is 7:25. Now, I better get – hit on the road by 7:05. Yes. Same way when I go back to, go back from work, from 610 from here to, um, Meyerland, like 610 South. Uh, if I want to get to my daughter's school by 5:30 by pickup, I used to be, I can leave here by 5:00. thirty minutes will get, can get me there. It's only, without traffic, only takes me sixteen minutes, I calculated. But, now, if I need to get there, I need to leave by 4:30. An hour to, to – yeah. An hour ahead of time, make sure I can get there by 5:30. It's lots of traffic. It tells you more people, more car, much crowded, uh, highways. Yeah, at that time, I-10 was under, was under construction. We thought, oh great, 12 lanes. Now, 12 lanes is nothing. Yes. It's, it's, it's pa – it's packed so bad. Yeah, so I think it's – the city definitely grows size-wise, and, um, uh, I think it would be more people to immigrate to – with a lot of economic status has been changed in China, it will be more Chinese, more Asian immigrant to western countries. United States is one popular destination. I think we will have, we will see more, more people, um, join us in – in – in the town. I think it's good in a way, um, that you probably have more choices, and vote-wise, okay, let's say you vote, you have more population to represent your ra – your ethnicity. But you will also be careful about, uh, these – when, when they join us, you know, the housing price, the, the job, and you have more competition. Yeah. So, it's, it's both. But there's something we cannot do. All we can do is to improve ourselves, and get better, and um, looking for opportunities. And there's something we have to – we have to accept and accept it. Yeah. [both laugh]

TH: Okay. Thank you, Mrs. Z.

TZ: Okay, you're welcome. It's my pleasure.