

**Elisa Pang  
FPP Interview Summary  
May 2018**

**Intro** – Jo Blatti interviewing Elisa Pang at her home in Memphis, Tennessee, May 5, 2018 for the First Person Plural project

File # 1

EP Born Dermott, Arkansas, moved to Dumas [Arkansas] at 6 months

JB Ask about parents, born in China?

EP Father [Eugene H. Lee] came first, 12 years old  
His father [\_\_\_\_ Lee] already in Chicago [Illinois], business next to fire station  
My father, son of second wife

Grandfather [paternal] was sort of import-export business  
Father born in 1911 - Chicago in the early 1920s, time of Al Capone

JB South Side?

EP In Chinatown, heard a lot about gangsters  
When about 17/18 years old his father sent my father back to China  
Already betrothed, my father arranged to see wife-to-be, was disappointed  
Picked my mother  
The other family was furious, all the gifts already given  
My oldest brother [Joe], now 87 in New York City, was born in China  
My mother's parents already in Dermott, the Iron Mountain Café [Elisa's maternal grandmother  
Jin Shee, her grandfather, Lee Jaim]

They [parents] came back in 1935, father trying to find a business  
My [paternal] grandfather Lee in Chicago, a godfather, helped other people, loaning money  
They [recipients of loans] said, 'wish we could pay you back'  
My brother King was born in 1936  
Father didn't want Louisiana opportunity – paper mill smelled  
Mississippi very prejudiced - didn't want them [children] to go to school  
My husband went to a one-room school in Mississippi  
My brother boarded at [Chinese school in] Cleveland, Mississippi when we lived in  
Dermott  
We were very well accepted

10 min in

JB Bi-racial

EP Caucasian -Chinese

JB Not black Chinese?

- EP No – some in Mississippi, maybe the cause of some discrimination
- Tells story of friend with graduate degree who couldn't get teaching job in Mississippi, late 1950s  
Very bad in Mississippi  
Didn't find it so in Arkansas  
Sometimes when junior year when wanted prom dress
- JB Anglo stores?
- EP We shopped on Main Street, always felt ill at ease
- JB Public schools eight of you, university –
- EP I didn't finish, got married
- JB How meet husband?
- EP Dances in Mississippi
- JB Permissible to date white guys?
- EP Special occasions – banquets, homecoming  
Girls' State, two other Chinese became sisters- in-law

15 min in

- JB Another salutatorian didn't speak at graduation.
- Did you or your siblings ever -?
- EP Brother King was president of his senior class,  
Adds speculation that he might have run for additional office, but stayed out of school for a week  
due to their father's illness that year.
- Parents didn't mind up coming in at 5 & 6 a.m. from these dances.  
Took our Caucasian friends sometimes
- JB Most contemporary parents would be chewing –  
Were you that good?
- EP Well, we weren't that good, about normal
- JB Work in store?
- EP We all worked in the store

20 min in

Father built supermarket 1960  
We did everything – swept, checked out, stocked

JB Boys'/girls' roster at the house?

EP No, house pretty messy  
She [mother] worked all the time, made all our clothes  
Loved to cook and loved to sew, good at it  
Story of recital, mother finishing dress just in time to preform

JB Father pretty good education according to the census – high school

EP At home working for my dad  
Citizenship right after World War II  
She [mother – Gam Len Lee] in the 1960s  
Mable [Owyoung] and my mother & others, we drove them

JB Books of your mother's primary/secondary – literate Chinese.  
What about English?

EP Really surprised me how much  
We went shopping in Little Rock. She said 'Sho nuf.' Otherwise quite good.  
'Well, you got to use a little psychology.'

JB Talking to her college educated kids –

[Both laugh]

Did she drive?

EP No, she wanted to. Always asking us to drive her to Pine Bluff [Arkansas], Greenville [Mississippi]

JB Busses, trains when you were growing up

EP Yes. Relates memories of visiting namesake Elisa B. Simpson, a grown lady who moved to Little Rock from Dermott on the train, her day in the city, all the things they did – department store, tearoom, movie.  
Lived on Lincoln Avenue  
Had been a customer of the family store  
Correspondence via letters  
Gave the name to her daughter as well

30 min in

JB Other folks you remember?

EP Miss Dancer, her daughter Susie. We had braces. She'd take us to Drs. Allstadt & Smith for our appointments

Tells story of her youngest brother, born 1946, who got polio. Still walks with a limp.

JB Some people told of growing up surrounded by eight or nine grocery families

35 min in

EP Joe Dan Yee [Lake Village family] my grandmother or somebody would have a party on weekends

I need to see with my uncle

My mother the oldest of seven

See this picture [group in Chinese dress, pre-WWII], includes Elisa's parents

Picture taken in China, children born in Dermott, my parents newlyweds

All gone except for Uncle Young

Their children have all married Caucasians

My mother & her father, my grandfather, were really close [Lee Jaim]

Surprised us because he had so many sons

40 min in

Refers to senior moment

JB Your parents married with respect to Chinese tradition

Wife did not know him at all

EP Mable's [Owyong's] parents, lots of others, arranged

Maybe something to it

JB You & David –

EP Husband born in Indiana, family moved

Been in touch with Emily Jones [Cleveland Museum of Delta Chinese at Delta State University in Mississippi]?

I'm in some of the pictures

JB Yes, wonderful website

EP Not enough to build a museum, Emily worked it out

JB So many changes -

45 min in

EP They volunteered me at the Chinese Heritage Association

JB Tell me

EP When we would have meetings – dinners: fashion shows, LULAC [League of United Latin Americans], dances, a girl here who sang opera

Both Arkansas and Tennessee

Worked for my dad a long, long time

1960s, my daughter started school in in Dumas, finished in Memphis

Husband commuted weekends

JB When close store?

EP Dad retired ...?  
Late 90s, early 2000s

50 min in

Then someone got money from federal government to turn the building into senior citizens center

JB Still working in Dumas when Mable [Owyoung] running the restaurant?

EP Yes – my daughter/granddaughter have to earn spending money  
Didn't have to work the way we did  
Till the last customer left on weekends

JB Who were the customers?

EP White, black – describes 'grocery row'  
Rented on contract for years

JB Dumas store on the dividing line – white/black?

EP Railroad comes right through  
Railroad came right past our house, too

55 min in

JB Not a good picture of the town layout –

EP High school way off from town  
I had a bicycle, rode all over

JB Delivery service?

EP Spent more on gas –  
I remember one lady 'I want one small box of crackers & a can of soup'

When I was learning how to drive, I tried backing up, Mrs. Meador, she called my daddy right away

In politics, have to stay neutral  
Classmates of mine & my siblings were running

1 hr. in

I put a card on the counter for my friend, along came a customer related to another of the candidates. I was a grown woman. Daddy was very diplomatic: compared the situation to my brother and sister, who would have been rooting for the other candidates.

Years later, invited to a shower for that customer's - Miz Mathews - granddaughter! Afraid she would raise the incident.

I learned a lesson.

JB Speaking of your sister Louise & the way you all were accepted, she's in her cheerleading outfit on the cover of a book titled *Partly Colored* [ Leslie Bow, New York University: New York, 2010]  
About the ways Chinese families caught between white & black society on the Delta

EP We never discussed it – senior moment  
Allowed, sneaked around, group dates with white guys

1 hr. 5 min

Back to cheerleading – had to buy the sweater  
Aunt May was not a cheerleader, my mother was not for it  
Back then, up to football players  
Daddy encouraged – I think he thought it was good for business

JB Your mom was thinking what?

EP Protective maybe  
Mom, you – girl, something happens, never spelled out, raped, killed -  
Here is funny thing - Chinese men are not geared toward this -  
When I was dating David [who became husband]  
'Why not go up to Washington & visit Aunt Linda [Lee]?'  
Father's example: dress shopping - 'like new dress, might find another you like better'  
I was 18, 19

1 hr. 10 min

He was at Tulane; I was in Fayetteville [at University of Arkansas]

[As young marrieds] there were times David & I were down to selling returnable bottles  
He had a part-time job and was going to school  
\$35 at week and an apartment with roaches  
He got a raise and we got another place

JB Let me pull out some of these photographs [xeroxes from family albums shared in advance]  
Portrait of Elisa's mother [Gam Len Lee] and oldest brother [Joe Lee] in China

EP She was very close to in-laws. She said 'You know I'll come back.' Left everything behind.

Picture of Elisa's father in a western-style suit at a riverbank

JB Is that the Mississippi or in China?

1 hr. 15 min in

- EP Don't know
- JB Your mother's Seattle port of entry paper and later citizenship, your father's citizenship & list of important dates in his hand.
- EP Father always remembered my birthday, also his wedding anniversary.  
Lang Sam probably where Mable's [Owyong] family also from. She and my mother were Yees.

Louise Weeks – my sister named after another customer

Continuing images survey -  
Store picture with all children  
I'm the oldest of the four girls

Christmas holiday picture with neighbor children in living room at Dumas – there were five kids in their family (bi-racial)

1 hr. 20 min in

1946 picture of the Suen family

Story of Elisa modeling University of Arkansas dress picture – Chinese lady taught course, another girls & I used same pattern

Elisa's wedding in New Orleans

JB Family celebrate Christmas?

EP We grew up Baptist. My daddy went to the Methodist Church - no idea why I went to camp, etc.

JB Chinese customs, religion?

EP My mother believed in Jesus – but would not have understood [a sermon]

My daughter [Valarie Elisa Pang Wing] after 9/11 felt maybe hadn't made a contribution  
Got a teaching certificate/MA degree  
ESL Africa and elsewhere

1 hr. 25 min

JB Grandmother [Jin Shee]

EP Not completely bound [feet], to show had servants, money  
[Expresses discomfort regarding custom]

JB Your daughter, your wedding dress –

EP Chinese custom  
On her birthday, my mother would give jewelry and money, very generous  
My father, also

Would loan without interest

If the man of the house died, would write off account – mainly white people  
Young black woman: your daddy gave my son a job toward college and loaned me money – good man

Back in the 1950s, Polish women told story, poor man needed money, received a no interest loan

JB This book – look like single entry accounts, vendors?

1 hr. 30 min in

EP Yes, vendors. Chore to write down every day. Overcharge: \$1.17, .20!

Mr. Hancock [vendor] had a son – about my age – always shopped at Lees

JB Relation to China

EP Used to leave wives behind

JB Conventional literature – not much about U. S.  
Knew a lot about both countries –

Looking around house – many items in the style of –

EP Artist in family – family pieces

JB Lee family album – many to China

1 hr. 35 min in

EP Nieces and nephews, I sent a granddaughter

Members of the younger generation.  
Tried to interest in heritage  
Not around as much – married out

JB More common among all  
OK with you?

EP Yes, fine with me  
If I'd done that – disowned  
People were talked about a lot  
Now world is so small  
Brother had DNA tested - Scandinavian blood. How come to be?  
Daughter Polynesian blood  
Guess that means I have it  
Exactly who related? How know that?

My daughter wants me to have it done

1 hr. 40 min in

My daughter & son-in-law distant cousins

So, I don't know

Really like to know about my history

My daddy Chicago – running numbers – he was the boy who paid/they would give the deliveries to him

My daddy always kept money in his pocket, would deliver ...

[To husband David Pang off microphone: can you make it?]

Godfather of Chinatown

Wedding in Chinatown [Chicago] family sent us

OFF

END FILE #1

BEGINNING FILE #2

EP Resumes story of attending Chicago story

Did we want Chinese menu? – yes - barely speak it, can't read or write Chinese, had to ask for translation

Mentioned father grew up here

A woman led me to site of store right next to the fire station

Laughs – small world

Also, father knew parents of sister-in-law; they all went to school in Chicago

Only one [marriage] daddy really approved of – knew parents

I showed Daddy ring 'Is it a diamond?' - so funny

When sister Louise got serious – same story

Just because fancy car...shop around

JB Nobody good enough for his girls?

[Husband says something indistinguishable off mike]

EP Is it a diamond – kind of small

I was first in family to get married

Mother – none of your brothers is married

JB Birth order important?

EP Mother happy for us

5 min in

Father died in '83, didn't see any grandchildren married

Daddy kind of a gambler

One night my mother said 'I used to worry about your daddy gambling, now I worry about me.'

One time he lost the store

JB Lost the business?

EP Could have been serious, don't know how he got it back

Mr. Evans, insurance man, lost to dad, offered stock

Daddy a cash man

Joke on daddy – Mr. Evans not Sunlife, something else, made it big, endowed a building at Hendrix [College]

Some of the insurance men used to call on Daddy and laugh with him

EP Story of her investment research and advice to husband

10 min in

Growing up working in store

Did take a course in stock, imaginary \$100,000 – I made money

You don't know how upset I get

My brother told me about Berkshire Hathaway – could have afforded a couple shares

Another time, AutoZone

Men don't listen to their wives

JB How opportunities for women changed in your lifetime?

EP Granddaughter much more savvy, computers all this

More politically, keep up

Daddy: don't believe everything you hear

Daughter and her husband, big Republicans, then saw the light, became more savvy, thank goodness

JB I've asked tons of questions

EP Happy I grew up in Arkansas, not Mississippi, because of not allowing to teach

Gotten better now, improved

Friends never mentioned anything about being Chinese

JB Discrimination African-Americans – related to Chinese?

EP Schooling story Dermott

Chinese boy smarter than son, have to ask Uncle Young about that

15 min in

Uncle Belzer named after teacher in Dermott

At one point, two of my uncles and an aunt lived with us to go to school  
All of my teachers spoke highly of uncles, aunt

I miss my mother and daddy,  
Daddy was 72  
Mother almost 94  
I'll be 80 at the end of the year  
I can remember Miss June, Miss Evelyn, Miss Louise, Miss Donnie, Miss Lemoyne

They taught everyone. Miss Lemoyne never married at all. Good teachers ...

20 min in

I'm thankful those dances we had

JB How big?

EP Several hundred, really liked formal at Christmas – band, the works  
Other questions?

JB Carloads?

EP So much fun – not much individual dating, good old days

JB Anything you want to add?

EP Decides against following a train of thought –

JB Thank you so much

EP Some photographers from New York visited about 2 years ago – don't know what they did with it.

23 min in

END FILE #2

OFF – 2 hours total