

Many Voices, One Nation Interview Answers (Final)

Family background, childhood, education

I was born in Shanghai, China on April 9, 1934, the second child of the family with two sisters. My father was Chinese and my mother was Japanese and they were married in 1930, when the two countries were at war. They met when my father wanted to learn Japanese and was introduced to my mother as his teacher, not knowing that my mother was a member of the aristocratic Ashikaga family. My father was an entrepreneur who was fluent in several languages and was able to read and write in Chinese, Japanese, French and English. He was a graduate of the University of Lyon, France majoring in textile engineering. The Chu family had a well-established multi-generational history in the domestic and international silk business in Hangzhou, China. They were also known for their commitment to education for both male and female family members as well as village children. The family provided scholarships to the brightest children in the village and sent them abroad to study with no obligation in return.

In the late '20s my father returned to China from Europe where he had been learning about the textile industries, especially in France and Switzerland. . He settled in Shanghai, then already an international hub for commerce and industry, and launched a textile weaving and dyeing company that had a substantial export business. The company survived the 30's depression and WWII, but the family business in Hangzhou went bankrupt during the depression. It was later revived by my father who, as the oldest male member of the family, was expected to assume responsibility over the wellbeing of the extended family.

Our family was forced to leave Shanghai at the end of 1948, as did most well to do families, when the communist army was advancing toward the city. We left on the last Air France flight departing from Shanghai and settled in Bombay (now Mumbai), India as planned. My father and a Parsi industrialist, Mr. Karanjai, with whom he had previously developed strong business ties, decided to start a joint venture textile company. Unfortunately, it was only two years after the India/Pakistan partition and they were not able to secure government permit for foreign investment during this tumultuous time in India. My parents eventually gave up and moved to Bangkok, Thailand to launch an international trading business. However, they had earlier enrolled my two sisters and me in Woodstock School, an American boarding school in Mussoorie on the foothill of the Himalayas in India. We remained there until my older sister and I graduated and went on to study at University of California Berkeley. Our parents visited us in India periodically from Bangkok and my mother spent several summers in Mussoorie to be with us.

Woodstock School, a boarding school established 165 years ago, was originally intended for education of the children of American Protestant missionaries in Asia, but accepted some Indian and foreign students. During my high school years, there were no foreign embassy schools in the capital Delhi, which was an overnight train journey away from Mussoorie. Consequently, many foreign diplomats sent their children to attend Woodstock School. In my 1952 graduation class of 31, we had nine different nationals representing six different religions, not counting various Protestant denominations. In retrospect, my time at Woodstock School had a significant impact on my career and me. I was never conscious of being a minority member at the school and later in life. During my senior year, I served as the student body president and was granted the Best All-Around Student Award at my graduation.

With a strong recommendation from the Principal of Woodstock School, I was accepted by Berkeley as a chemical engineering student, but switched my major to physical chemistry upon arrival at Berkeley in spring of 1953. My parents had by then moved to Tangier (then an international city prior to becoming a part of Morocco) to launch a carbon dioxide factory primarily serving the soft drink industry in North

Africa. It was a difficult economic time for my parents and they were not able to financially support my education at Berkeley. However, I was able to pay my own way through school by working as a union-member laborer during summers at a Del Monte fruit cannery in nearby San Leandro and working for the math department in correcting homework, grading tests, and tutoring graduate psychology students in statistics. By staying at a student cooperative housing unit, I saved on living expenses and acquired self-confidence by assuming more leadership responsibilities over time at the cooperative. I was eventually elected as the president of the Berkeley Student Cooperative and had a fortuitous opportunity to share the podium with Eleanor Roosevelt during a special university meeting honoring the 25th anniversary of the student cooperative.

Working summers as a union laborer at the cannery was also a major contributing factor for my education. Not only was the wage high relative to other job opportunities for students, but I was paid time-and-half after eight hours and double time after twelve, and I was willing to work as long as the plant superintendent let me. I was the only Asian worker at the cannery but I was given increasing responsibilities and eventually put in charge of quality control – a job never given to a union laborer before. I also learned to understand and appreciate the sentiments of the blue-collar workers (mostly Portuguese immigrants) which also subsequently served me well in my career.

After graduation, my first job was with a start-up company manufacturing gas chromatographs, then a significant new and powerful analytical instrument. I was offered the job as the company's first applications chemist, literally working in the founder's garage. The founder was an agricultural chemist working at the USDA Research Laboratory in Albany CA. He persuaded his brother-in-law and fellow teachers at Napa CA high school to assemble the instruments in a garage at Napa, while he remained at his Walnut Creek CA home where I worked.

As the company's application chemist, my responsibilities were to communicate with existing and potential customers demonstrating how to use gas chromatograph to address their specific analytical needs. The company grew quickly and before I realized it, I was de facto put in charge of marketing and sales and later assumed responsibilities over R&D and manufacturing as well.

In 1962, the US administration lifted the restrictions that had previously prevented any Chinese who majored in sciences and engineering at US universities and colleges from leaving the US, for fear that they would return to China and help develop China's capacity in making atomic weapons. That gave me the first opportunity to meet my parents after many years. They were then living at Versailles, France having sold the carbon dioxide business in Tangier to the French monopoly, Air Liquide. During that trip to Europe, I visited a number of European chemical companies and government research laboratories, which were interested, in using gas chromatographs. When I returned home, I persuaded my boss to set up a European operation to market the instrument. He was not particularly convinced by my recommendation but eventually agreed on the condition that I would move there to implement and manage it.

I arrived in Basel, Switzerland, the center of Swiss chemical and pharmaceutical industries, in the spring of 1963, with two suitcases and went to work hiring employees and setting up subsidiaries in several major European countries. I was only one of two Asians working in Basel when I arrived. In two years, sales in Europe exceeded sales in US and the company became the world market leader for gas chromatographs. Contrary to established instrument companies in US and abroad at that time, I set out to hire only knowledgeable and energetic young chemists rather than seasoned professional salesmen. Consequently we were treated more as helpful colleagues by our customers than as salesmen.

The most important development in Europe, however, was I met my wife Irmgard Suetterlin at Basel. It was a rapidly developed romance and we were married in December of 1963. We have just celebrated our 52nd anniversary. We have one daughter; Andrea Adelman married to Andrew Adelman, and two grandchildren, Olivia and Kyle.

It was inevitable, that the rapid growth of the company attracted significant interest from large corporations. When I was in Europe, the company was acquired by Varian Associates, then a major technology company based in Palo Alto, CA. My boss became the largest individual shareholders of Varian but Varian insisted that I assume the post of general manager of the newly acquired division and made me the youngest vice president of the company. A year later, Varian asked me to also assume responsibilities over another instrument company it had acquired making atomic absorption spectrometers based in Melbourne, Australia. I commuted between Walnut Creek, CA and Melbourne, Australia every month for about two years, until I resigned to join a young company, Finnigan Corporation, making mass spectrometers and combined chromatographs and mass spectrometers (GC/MS and LC/MS). The company was in difficulty and I was asked to invest in the company and assume the role of CEO.

Journey

I was 18 when I arrived in New York City in January of 1953 on a small WWII freighter crossing the Atlantic Ocean during a major storm after spending one month in Tangier with my parents. I then took the train from NYC to Berkeley and was welcomed there by my older sister.

Berkeley was a grind for me, being a chemistry major student in a highly competitive academic environment - attending three-hour long laboratory classes most afternoons, and having to work most evenings and weekends to pay my way through college. But, it probably was the best experience I could have in preparing for my career, mostly as CEO of instrument companies that served global markets. Throughout my career, 12-hour days were the norm, since I lived and worked in California and had to be in touch with our European operations in early mornings and Asian operations in evenings.

When my first boss offered me \$400 per month to join the company, I jumped at the offer. I was given \$200 by my father to attend Berkeley and I graduated with \$200 in the bank but with no debt. \$400 per month seemed a small fortune to me then. The serendipitous offer of to begin my career in the then nascent analytical instruments industry was most fortunate, because the industry grew very rapidly during my career, as awareness about issues involving the environment, drug abuse, pharmacokinetic, atomic safety, and so on emerged and continued to rise. The working experience I gained and the broad responsibilities given to me while attending university and during the early stages of my career were incredible gifts. The lack of consciousness I gained during high school, university and in the industry to being “different” as a member of a minority race was also an incredible gift. Only because of those gifts was I able to become the first Asian CEO of a public technology company in America – a country that values meritocracy rather than family background.

Community

In 1950's, a large number of my fellow students at Berkeley were veterans of the Korean War. They were mature adults with modest background and most commonly the first ones in their families to attend college, enabled by the GI Bill. The fraternities had almost faded away because of lack of interest by the students at large. It was a highly competitive academic environment and the professors then were not very interested in giving support to freshman students, unlike it is today. The freshman dean told us during the first orientation meeting that one among three of us would not make it to the sophomore year.

I was fortunate to have lived in a student cooperative housing, where the atmosphere was very different. Mutual support was and is the modus operandi of cooperative houses. In addition to the around 40 of us who lived in the house, we had twice that number, mostly graduate students, who had their meals there. They were always helpful when we needed help academically. Indeed, I learned more about chemistry and physics during laboratory sessions led by graduate teaching assistants and after dinner than I did in the large classes taught by professors, especially for the lower division courses. I am forever grateful for the dedication of the graduate student teachers.

The cooperative housing units, as you can imagine, were very humble in every way. We were all poor and did not expect much, but in fact gained much from social and academic support. The one I lived in, Ridge House, was located at a quiet neighborhood on the north side of the campus. Today, it is surrounded by seminaries of different religions, whose students have access to university libraries and lectures.

There was a corner drug store owned by a very kind Japanese American couple. They took special interest in me because of my mother and occasionally I was offered a much-appreciated free ice cream cone. There was and remains a pizzeria and beer garden nearby where huge amount of beers were consumed during weekend evenings. I was not aware until after I graduated and started to work, that beer came in bottle sizes smaller than a quart, because I had never seen one.

I did not socialize much because I had to study and work. I was rather envious of liberal arts majors who seemed to have a lot more free time than I did. Because of the close proximity of the cooperative house to the School of Architecture there were quite a few architecture students at our housing unit. They were often given a project to design at 5pm on Friday evening which they had to submit by Saturday evening. They were the poor souls that enjoyed even less free time than I did during weekends.

Tradition and Culture

Over the years, more and more Asian students, especially Chinese and Indians, began attending Berkeley and Stanford and chose to live and work in the Bay Area afterwards. We can count about 40 members among our extended families that now live within an hour's drive from our home. We regularly celebrate holidays, weddings, birthdays, or welcome Chinese visitors from abroad and elsewhere in America, at different homes or Chinese restaurants. We speak a mixture of Mandarin, Shanghai dialect, English and less often Cantonese during these gatherings. I sometimes worry that the few Caucasian members of our extended families are being left out, but they always seem to enjoy themselves, especially with the younger members of the family who are thoroughly Americanized.

When we lived in Berkeley during the early years of our marriage and before we moved to Los Altos to launch the Finnigan Corporation in Palo Alto, our home was the social center of the Swiss community at Berkeley. Whenever a new graduate or post-doc student and his or her spouse arrived at Berkeley, the churches or academic departments would send them to us to help ease their transition to life in America. We always celebrated the Swiss Confederation Day on August 1st at our home. In those days, I was more fluent in German Swiss and French and the conversations often lapsed away from English. Because Europe was always an important market for the companies I led, we often traveled to Europe or received European visitors to our home, thus were able to maintain the friendships we gained at Berkeley over the years. However, these days we have fewer opportunities to make new Swiss friends.

Identity

I identified myself as an American well before I became a citizen of the United States, whereas my wife identifies herself as a Swiss and has never changed her citizenship. It has never been an issue for us, but we did make sure that our daughter was born in America.

I think I have identified myself as an American since my high school days at Woodstock School in India, where most fellow students were Americans and almost all went on to attend colleges in America. I have always been interested in reading about American culture, politics and economics. I remembered my citizenship examiner tried hard to stump me with questions about America after I told him that I did not attend a citizenship class but to his amusement he failed!

Culture identification has never been an issue for me. I feel quite at home wherever I was - whether in Asia, Europe or America. I have served on company and institution boards in all of these regions. On the other hand, I take my American citizenship very seriously and always voted in local and national elections. I consider myself a left-of-center Democrat, but I pay much more attention to issues than party or persons.

I have often found myself the only, or among the very few, Asians in events and gatherings, but it has never bothered my wife or me. The bottom line is nowhere other than America, would I have been given the opportunities I have had in my life and career.

Work

I started as an application chemist at a start-up analytical instrument company known more by its trade name, Aerograph, and progressed to become the executive vice-president of the company. After the acquisition of Aerograph by Varian Associates - a major technology corporation -- I served as general manager of two divisions simultaneously until I resigned to join Finnigan Corporation, an analytical instrument company focused on mass spectrometry. As CEO, I took Finnigan public and became the first Asian CEO of a public technology company in America and Finnigan became the dominant mass spectrometer company. After two decades, Thermo Electron, now ThermoFisher, acquired Finnigan and, according to the terms of the acquisition, I agreed to serve as the subsidiary president for two years. I was then recruited to serve as a limited partner of a venture fund but returned to serve as CEO of several instrument companies that needed turn-around leadership. I retired for good in 2012 at 78 after successfully completing my final assignment.

During and after my career, I served on several company, industry and education institution boards. I always took special interest in supporting educational institutions at all levels and have served for over a decade on the board of Woodstock School and as a trustee of University of California Berkeley Foundation, among other schools and supporting organizations. At the industry front, I served on the board, including chairmanship, of American Electronics Association, Analytical Instruments Association and International Isotope Ratios and Standards Committee, among others.

To me, success is measured by whether the contributions I made during my career had a lasting positive impact on the world. The instruments that my colleagues and I developed became the technical foundation to the regulations governing environmental, energy, and life sciences practices, among other issues, that affected life in America and the world.

Reflection

In looking back on my career, I am most proud of the fact that a number of individuals who worked for me became successful leaders themselves of companies and institutions. Identifying, encouraging and nourishing talents in others are the most satisfying reward of any job. In every company that I was asked

to turn around, I was able to identify and nourish able individuals from inside the company to succeed me, instead of recruiting from outside.

The most challenging task for a company CEO is to fairly balance the long and short term interests of shareholders, customers, employees, and the public, and to be able to effectively articulate and stand firmly behind them under pressure.

I would advise the future generations to always keep the best interests of their succeeding generations in mind. By that I mean don't focus on realizing immediate personal gain, but try to figure out how to leave behind a better social environment for succeeding generations. Only then, would the America that we all envision and want it to be progressively approach reality. I sincerely believe providing the opportunities for a good education is the key and we all can do something about that.