

Mary Kim Bilek
Narrator

Sarah Mason
Interviewer

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sarah Mason **-SM**
Mary Kim Bilek **-MB**

SM: I'm talking to Mary Kim Bilek on March 2, 1979 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This is an interview conducted under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. And the interviewer is Sarah Mason. Mary, could you begin by giving us your full name in Korean and talking some about your early life in Korea?

MB: Okay. My full Korean name is Kim Cho Chang [sp?]. Cho Chang [sp?] means beautiful dawn, and I think that's a rather lovely name [chuckles] to have. I was born June 13, 1938 in Seoul, Korea.

My mother and father were, I suppose, progressively educated people in Korean society. My father went to college in Japan. And my mother, who was betrothed to be married at age sixteen ran away from home and threatened never coming home unless they canceled that marriage. And since she was the oldest child then they had to give in. And then she went to . . . to a teachers college and got her teaching certificate and taught school. And according to my grandmother, she was never going to get married, which worried my grandparents a great deal. And then she met my father, who was a . . . sort of a poor person, financially. He had no money. The only thing he had was really a college degree. Whereas my mother is from a very aristocratic family with material wealth and family name and so forth. And I think she must be in her early twenties or mid-twenties when she and my father got married.

And I was the third child. We have six children, so five boys and I was the only girl in the family.

SM: Could you give your parents' names, too?

MB: My father's name is Sang Don Kim [sp?]. And my mother's name is Madam Ko [sp?], that's her maiden name. Nam He [sp?]. In Korea, you do not change your name when you get married.

SM: I see.

MB: Have you noticed when . . . ?

SM: I noticed somebody introduced me to a mother and it was a different name.

MB: Right. You remember when vice premiere Kang was here, how President Carter called his wife by Madam Chain Lai or something like that, you know.

SM: That's right. Yes [unclear].

MB: And so we do not change our name. In fact, I should be Madam Kim, instead of Mrs. Bilek.

SM: Yes. Yes.

MB: So my mother's name was always called . . . my mother was referred to as Madam Ko. And she taught school until I was born. So, you know, that was something that most ladies at that time didn't do. They'd hardly even leave outside of the house, but she taught even though she was pregnant and gave birth to kids and so on. She taught school. And some of the pictures I have of her as a teacher standing in front of . . . along side of I think about sixty kids, in a Kindergarten.

SM: Oh. [Chuckles] Oh! [Sighs]

MB: So when you talk about student/faculty ratio over here, it doesn't make much sense to me, you know. [Chuckles]

SM: [Chuckles] Sixty Kindergarteners.

MB: Right. And they're all so tiny; they are . . . in their own little Korean dresses and so on.

SM: Oh.

MB: And my father worked for a newspaper under the Japanese occupation; that was before 1945. And after the war was over, Japanese left Korea and Korea became an independent country. And I think my father was basically a Marxist type of person.

SM: Oh.

MB: Mainly because probably of his, you know, background in poverty.

SM: Yes.

MB: He thought that we should do everything we can to share with other people, and which meant very contrary to his wife's lifestyle.

SM: Yes.

MB: And his lifestyle, because we had maids and . . . and we had large houses. In fact, we had more maids than number of people in our house. We had dressmakers that were living with us and all these things.

SM: Yes.

MB: I don't think he ever felt comfortable in there. Even though I think he enjoyed it, you know. And then the war came. We had to go to a tiny island called Cheju. We stayed there until 1954—from 1950 to 1954. And my mother died on that island. And also my grandmother, who came with us, who was my mother's mother, also died on that island. So we had two deaths on that island.

SM: Oh.

MB: I don't know whether this is time to talk about my grandmother or not.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: But she was a . . . a lady who was not even five feet. She must have weighed about something like seventy, eighty pounds, I don't know. She was a very tiny woman. She was married off when she was about fifteen or so, from Southern tip of Southern peninsula to middle part of Korea. And she had to sit in the settee chair for a whole week to be carried to her husband's house.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And, as I understand, she had six children altogether. Three of them died as infants. And I heard her talking to us that really she doesn't remember too well about those three children who died. But when she was almost forty, apparently she had a baby boy, who my grandmother just cherished a great deal, having finally been able to bear a son. And unfortunately, I think in early 1942 or 1943, I'm not so sure exactly what year, my auntie, her other daughter, who was in her late teens, her early twenties, I don't know, and her boy, the youngest boy, only boy she had, was seventeen or so. Both died within a year with tuberculosis really.

SM: Oh.

MB: And that really took life out of her husband, literally, and *he* died within a month or two.

SM: Oh.

MB: So you can see that her life was a very, very difficult one. Not in a material sense, because she was wedded to a wealthy family, but her life, looking at it from my point of view, was a very difficult life. And she had to be put into a special place, guarded all the time by her maids and friends that she doesn't do any harm to herself after all these things are happening. And

apparently she just went literally out of her mind when it happened. And as she was getting better, my mother had another child, my next brother, who is three years younger than me. And apparently, she gave that child to my grandmother.

SM: Ah.

MB: And that saved her.

SM: I see.

MB: So there was my grandmother, living at her house with her dressmaker, who was her companion all her life, and a maid. And so these three ladies took care of this baby, and he became a spoiled rotten child. [Chuckles]

SM: This was your older brother?

MB: No. Next to me.

SM: Next to you.

MB: Yes, he's three years younger than me.

SM: Oh, younger.

MB: Right.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And I remember my first recollection of my grandmother is somehow going over to her house and I saw my little brother but I never connected him as my brother. He . . . I thought that was Grandma's child.

SM: Yes.

MB: Or something like that. And eventually I realized we are brothers and sisters. And Grandma will come over to visit us with my brother. And she's just protecting him like . . . a mother hen.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And when we go over to my grandmother's house, my brother, as he was getting older, will always say, "Don't come to my house. We don't want you."

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: You know, because he knew that, you know, the attention will be divided up and all these things. Anyhow, I think that that's what saved her, having this little boy to take care of. And I think he was about . . . eleven years old when my grandmother died.

SM: Oh. Still young.

MB: He was still young. And I remember when my grandmother was dying in bed, he would . . . he was sitting by the bed and rubbing her legs.

SM: Oh.

MB: And she just stopped breathing. And he was . . . even to this day, he's very, very close to her, I think. And so that . . . and then, you know, the funny thing is then, of course, she lived for us, you know. She was living at her house and we were living in another place, and she will . . . she never thought that my mother was a good homemaker.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: So once a week she will bring her own maid and come up to supervise the housecleaning in our house. And doing all these things for her daughter, only daughter she had. And then of course during the war we took her with us to the island. And my mother died in 1952. And she died a year later. So what happened was all her six children died before she did.

SM: Oh, how sad. Hmmm. Well, she didn't live in the same house with you then before you went to the island.

MB: No.

SM: You went to another house.

MB: Right. Yes.

SM: I see. But she had these maids and so on sent over.

MB: Right. Yes. Yes. Oh, when my father realized that this boy, my brother, whose name is Chou, is turning out to be rather a spoiled kid . . .

SM: Yes. [Chuckles]

MB: When he became six or seven years old, he thought that we have to take him away from Grandmother. So you could imagine the scene there. So what happened was they took my brother and they left me in my grandmother's house.

SM: Oh!

MB: Because and we knew that Grandmother could not be without some children around.

SM: I see.

MB: So I was put there as an exchange for my brother.

SM: Oh.

MB: Which both sides resented it very much.

SM: Yes.

MB: And my brother was like a stepchild all the time at home.

SM: Oh.

MB: He never felt that he was comfortable in that house. And my grandmother, every time on the weekend she would come and when she would leave there is a *wailing* from both sides.

SM: [Gasps] Oh.

MB: My grandmother would be crying and my brother would be crying and . . . and all these commotions. Looking back, I think those were fun times, you know. There was such feelings, and care, and . . . and a great deal of joy at the same time. Our family life.

SM: What city was this taking place in? Or was it a city?

MB: It was in Keson.

SM: Keson.

MB: Yes. That's about, you know, very close to Kunming Jong.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: It used to be South part of Korea but it became North Korea when the war was over. They just changed the [unclear] slightly and it just became a North Korea.

SM: I see.

MB: And let's see, what else? My grandmother was a devoted Buddhist.

SM: Oh.

MB: I think my father, I heard him saying at one point that he was baptized at a church.

SM: Oh.

MB: A Christian church. But I don't think he ever believed in it really. Because I have never seen him going to church.

SM: Yes.

MB: Whereas my mother went to a missionary high school. And I remember going to a Methodist church with her quite often. And then I remember . . . of going to visit missionaries, American missionaries once in a while after the Korean . . . or after the Second World War. And, in fact, through them, I got pen friends, pen pals.

SM: Oh.

MB: There was a little girl named Eva Dumas, who lived in North Carolina. She was a year older than me. And apparently this girl had asked somebody . . . I don't know how it got to me, but somebody that she wants to have a pen friend from Far East. And somehow my name was recommended to them. And I suddenly got a letter from this girl. And this missionary translated for me, then I will write letters in Korean and then she translates back. And that's how we sent letters back and forth as six, seven, eight years old children, I think.

And then the war came, and apparently this family in North Carolina tried to contact me several times, but couldn't, you know, because we'd left our house. And so they were quite concerned, trying to locate us every way they can. And finally when we came back to Seoul in 1954, you know, our house in Seoul was really ransacked and everything, but there are a few family pictures and some old letters were scattered around the floor and one of them happened to be the letter from this family in America. And so just to let them know that I'm alive, somehow I wrote, I managed to write a letter to them. And they were so overjoyed. I remember receiving a care package from them with just an elated letter. And that was 1954.

And at some point, I guess, you know, in the meantime . . . I never went to school regularly, I guess, until 1954. I went, altogether, either four or five years. it was so tumultuous, my former schooling, because of the war, and because of the family problems, and because of the deaths of my mother and my grandmother and all of this. And somehow when I became . . . had come back to Korea, I was . . . came back to Seoul from that island, I must have been fifteen or sixteen. And my father figured that I must . . . if I have followed my normal course, I must be a junior in high school. So he just put in as a junior in high school. So I went as a junior in a senior high.

SM: Oh.

MB: And so within two years somehow I graduated. Apparently, I wasn't a dummy. Somehow I caught up. But I never learned the basic English. Neither did I learn the basic mathematics. I just had to catch it wherever I went, and try to follow it through.

SM: Hmmm. Was English a regular part of the curriculum then?

MB: Yes. Yes. English was taught from seventh grade on. But not . . . not spoken English. It was strictly a reading and writing type of thing. And then . . .

SM: Could you explain a little bit about the island? Was that a sort of a refuge or a place that was safer or why your family went there?

MB: Well, it was our most Southern tip of Korea.

SM: Oh.

MB: And really that island is the biggest island in Korea.

SM: Oh, it's a big island.

MB: Yes.

SM: I see.

MB: The island . . . [unclear] part of that island was that . . . when we got to that island on a huge LST . . . I don't know what you call it. LST ship.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: It's a huge cargo ship. We got there. My grandmother was very distraught. She said, "This island is an island where in the olden days . . ." My grandmother used to hear that criminals were sent to.

SM: Oh.

MB: For the rest of their life. And she was sure that she would never get out of that island, and which came true for her.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: Yes.

SM: Did a large number of people go there [unclear]?

MB: A large number of people went. And I'm sure that tens of thousands of people were on that island.

SM: Was there food there that [unclear]?

MB: Well . . . no. I . . . I remember the first night. We were at some huge school or some sort of a huge building, and I think probably a few hundred slept there on the floor. And then we got a tiny little place, which wouldn't be bigger than really, at most, a small bedroom. And I guess there, six of us, and my mother and father, and my grandmother, and a maid . . . ten of us lived there for about a half year. And then somehow my mother managed to get part of a house in another part of the town.

SM: [Unclear].

MB: Where there are two rooms and a little hall in between. And so we moved in there and I remember the smaller room, my grandmother and myself and the maid and my youngest brother stayed there. And in the other room, my father and my mother and the other brothers stayed there. And usually we . . . I think survived with really the food aid that were provided by America. The grain of rice we used to get and I know many people complained because it's not the same type of rice that we usually like.

SM: Yes.

MB: I think it's . . . it must be like Uncle Ben's. It wouldn't stick to well, and we complained a lot about that rice.

SM: Oh, do Koreans eat rice that is sticky, too?

MB: Right. Yes.

SM: Oh, I see.

MB: That's Chinese, I think.

SM: I think the Chinese liked it separate. [Chuckles] But it may vary among the areas, too.

MB: I don't know. I..I . . . yes. So I think when I came back to Korea and I was just about to graduate from high school, I realized, you know, my father . . . we lost everything we had in Keson, that's the town we used to be in. We lost our mother and our grandmother. We had hardly any money. And he had six children. So I . . . he married another woman. Her name's Chun-Ja, who apparently was previously married at some time. I really never did get the whole background or her previous life. But she came to our house as our stepmother. And . . . and then my older brother, who was either sick or something when he was a little boy, who couldn't go to school, so he was two years behind, and my second brother, who is a year younger than the oldest one, to make other one feel better, because he thought that if he is ahead of his older brother that older one would feel terrible, so he decided to lower himself one grade.

SM: Oh.

MB: So what happened was three of us were all in the same grade.

SM: Oh.

MB: We are graduating all at the same time.

SM: I see.

MB: And then, knowing how my father valued education for his kids, because he, himself, ran away from home as a little boy and went to Tokyo and worked all the way as a newspaper delivery boy to get his college degree. I know that he valued education very much, but there was no way he could send all of us to school. And it was not ever mentioned that I would have had less chance than my brothers of going to college, but I just assumed that if there is a choice, my brothers would go.

SM: Yes.

MB: I don't think it [unclear] happened that way if he had to be, but I thought that, you know, there is no way I will ask him to send me to college if it's so hard for him.

SM: Yes.

MB: That's . . . at that point I decided to pursue oh, some sort of an education in America. So I wrote to this family and asking them whether there is any chance I would have of going to college in the United States. And they wrote that . . . wrote to me and they said that they have investigated in several ways and there is a college called Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. And they're willing to give a three hundred dollar scholarship, I think. And at that time the whole tuition and room and board must be about six hundred or seven hundred.

SM: That's still amazing isn't it? [Chuckles]

MB: I know. [Chuckles] And so . . . and then I would be a work study student there of some sort. Or there is a dormitory where you in the morning get up and clean and, you know, cook, and do the work together, and you get free room and board or something like that.

SM: Oh.

MB: And then these people at North Carolina will help me as much as they can. So that's how I arrived through . . .

SM: I see. Through your pen pal family.

MB: Through my pen pal.

SM: That's really something.

MB: Pen friend, really.

SM: Yes. Hmm. Was this college near where they lived?

MB: You know, I didn't know how to speak English at all.

SM: Oh.

MB: And I remember coming to this country. At that time there was no jet. It was a propeller thing, and it just goes on and on and on.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And apparently either I wasn't careful or something. I missed a plane in L.A.

SM: Oh.

MB: I was transferred to L.A. and then supposed to go to Washington, D.C., and then transfer again to go to Raleigh-Durham. So I missed the plane and somehow I conveyed it to the counter that I missed my plane. And they somehow wired to [unclear].

SM: Oh. Hmm.

MB: So finally, when I got to Raleigh-Durham, there they were, waiting for me. And I guess I must have been about a day late.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And I had *no* idea how far these people are living. I thought that, you know, I had no notion of how big the United States was either. But you know they . . . they accompanied me at the airport, I must live in the same town where the airport is. They drove and they drove, you know. [Chuckles]

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: For about two hours in their car. And I was . . . and then, of course, I was trying to explain to them that how I missed my plane. And they couldn't understand. Neither could I understand them. And though we are doing all this hand gesturing, everything.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And this . . . my foster father, Mr. Dumas, who is a marvelous man, I guess it's human tendency, his voice gets louder and louder and louder, trying to make me understand.

SM: [Unclear]

MB: And then he's just screaming at me.

SM: [Laughter]

MB: Once in a while, his wife will remind him that, "She's not a deaf. She just doesn't understand." And he will lower his voice. And then he'll start all over again, and it gets louder and louder and louder. And then their girl would say, "Dad! She is not a deaf." Of course, I didn't understand. And we sit down and talk about these things now, you know, how it was. I didn't know what was going on at the time. And I thought that, okay, they've picked me a college, so I will stay at their house. And I thought that's how I was going to college. You know, they apparently had explained it all to me, but I had no idea what to do.

SM: Yes.

MB: And the next thing I know, they've packed me in the car and then they drove forever again [unclear].

SM: [Chuckles] You stayed for a few days at their house?

MB: I stayed for about four days. I arrived there on Thursday and Sunday we left, I think. And it was a three or a four hour drive. And I thought it was just lovely, beautiful fall weather.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: And that I was very impressed with this lovely college.

SM: Oh.

MB: And then I didn't realize they are just going to dump me there and go back. [Chuckles]

SM: [Laughter]

MB: And I remember sitting . . . not sitting, standing at the back of the building, of the dormitory, and this my pen friend Eva Dumas and I are holding hands with each other. We can't speak to each other, we are just *sobbing*.

SM: Oh.

MB: She was crying and I was crying. And I thought that I was never going to see these people then.

SM: Was she staying at the college, too? Or just saying goodbye?

MB: No, she was going to a different college.

SM: I see. Yes.

MB: You know, that she just came to, you know, bring me over there. And we were just holding there and *sobbing* like crazy, you know. And finally I remember somebody, a girl who was in the dormitory, led me to my room and . . . and they somehow said goodbye and then left. And . . . and then, to my consternation, the school had begun two weeks ago.

SM: [Gasps] Oh.

MB: And . . . and somehow I ended up registering. I don't know how.

SM: I see.

MB: And I go into classes. I have *no* idea what they are talking about. I sit and I somehow got some books. And I start to . . . the way I did it, I think I memorized the whole book.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: Just sat from the page number one to just memorize the whole thing. And that's how I got through my school.

SM: Oh.

MB: And I think it took me about two years before I began to feel comfortable of saying what I want to say, and understanding most of what other people are saying, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: And apparently, I managed to get through. And by the time I finished my college, I was, you know, an honor student.

SM: Yes.

MB: I don't know how I did it, but I did it.

SM: Oh [unclear].

MB: And in my junior year I met Larry.

SM: Oh, he went to the same college.

MB: Right.

SM: I see.

MB: And I remember sending a picture of Larry and myself to my family without saying anything. And I think I got a very strong letter from my father. In no uncertain terms, I wasn't to be involved with this man or something like that.

SM: I see.

MB: And then from then on there was all kinds of pressures [unclear] and several young men, Korean young men, who were coming to see me.

SM: Oh! He went to a lot of effort then.

MB: From my parents . . . you know, they were my parents' friends' sons or my brother's friends. Or one was a West Point graduate who was staying near Washington.

SM: My goodness.

MB: And one was a pathologist who was doing his residency at Roanoke, Virginia. And these people would come and see me and I'd have to [unclear] I want to be married and all these things. Well, anyhow, it didn't work out that way. [Chuckles]

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And then in 1960, my senior year, my father died.

SM: Oh.

MB: In Korea.

SM: So you didn't see him again.

MB: No, so I didn't see him again. In the meantime, I knew that my family situation was getting desperate back in Korea, so I ought to try to earn as much money as I could and send some money back to Korea.

SM: Yes.

MB: And I remember I had to work at least [unclear] a day. And I was getting fifty cents for an hour. Well, I guess that must be like two or three dollars an hour now.

SM: Oh, it's still not much.

MB: I don't know how much . . . it was mainly I was waiting on the tables in the college dormitory cafeteria.

SM: And you were also sending back to your family? Oh . . .

MB: Yes, I was trying to send some money back to Korea. So and I brought one of my brothers over here.

SM: Oh. How did you ever save enough for that? It's really hard to imagine.

MB: I don't know if I saved or I borrowed. I . . . I don't remember all these things anymore. [Chuckles] And then I brought him over here and he was here with me one year.

SM: Oh. Yes. Was that the younger brother then?

MB: No, he was one year older than me.

SM: One year older.

MB: And then after I finished going to college, I . . . I was sort of in a limbo because I thought I was in love with my Larry, who I'm not supposed to marry.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And I didn't want to leave him, so I couldn't go back to Korea. And so the only course left to me was to go to graduate school. That's the only excuse I could stay here. So I decided to go to graduate school. And I applied here and there for my graduate education. And at the time my brother was interested in medical school. So he thought maybe [unclear]. That is one of the reasons. And then the other one is that Larry came from Minnesota, too. So somehow it all fitted it together, so I came to Minnesota. Of course, Larry had to stay in North Carolina because he didn't finish his school yet. So my brother and I came over here to go to graduate school. And then ever since then I stayed here.

SM: I see.

MB: And I finished my graduate work in 1963. We got married. And then Larry went to graduate school. And then we had two children and I'm a typical middle class American housewife [chuckles] with the two kids.

SM: [Laughing] Well, that's modest, I would say.

MB: I guess working wife. Working wife. [Chuckles]

SM: What did you study in your graduate studies?

MB: Well, you know, I really had this theory . . . grandiose plan of studying something like social work. I was interested in getting into human services area. But there's no way I can get a degree, I didn't know how . . . I just couldn't understand those lectures and so on.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: Whereas I could do very well in physics and chemistry and math.

SM: Oh, I see.

MB: And so I got my degree in physics.

SM: Oh. The whole thing. Was that because it wasn't based so much on lectures and so on?

MB: [Unclear] because it's . . . you know, all you have to do is solve the problem. And there's no problem in that. And chemistry is the same and so is math. If there is any other area you have to read and write an essay and things . . . that was very, very difficult for me.

SM: Yes. So language was a big problem.

MB: Yes. Even to this day I have a problem with that.

SM: Oh, well you seem very articulate.

MB: Oh, I don't know. Do you think so?

SM: Oh, yes. I mean, I wouldn't guess you had any problem with it. And I thought, well, it must be because you've been here so long.

MB: No. I have a lot of problems with language.

SM: Oh. Well, it couldn't be too severe. [Chuckles]

MB: I try to come up with exactly the way I want to be expressed; it's very difficult.

SM: Oh, yes. But we all struggle with that, you know, if we're writing or talking or . . .?

MB: Yes. Yes. And then I came here and I got my graduate degree in math.

SM: I see.

MB: I guess because even at that time, it was 1960, most people would say, "What is a girl doing in physics?" You know, I think that now it's probably different. I think girls would be proud to be in physics. But at that time I was just so full of embarrassment that I was in physics. It's like a less of a controversial subject was math. So I switched to math [unclear].

SM: And that was here at the university?

MB: Yes. Yes.

SM: I see.

MB: And after that I worked at the medical school as a supervisor of statistical services, which deals with all kinds of medical research and then when the lab work is done and the data had to be analyzed, they would bring it to our unit and we would analyze if it needed to be fed into a computer and then incorporate the data and have the research for people to write their papers.

SM: Oh, I see.

MB: And I did that until Anne was born, which was in 1968. Then I decided to work for part time and so I worked on a part time basis for Minnesota Health Department, State Health Department as sort of a . . . I don't know what I was. I guess my official title was senior research analyst but I was doing the demographic work, which is estimating the population by different age groups and sex for, you know, tax purposes and all these things. At the same time I was working as a researcher at the Neurology Department at the University of Minnesota. And I was doing that until my second child was born. And then I moved into pediatrics to do some other type of work. And I was there until 1975. Then I decided I have done enough of basic research, I wanted to learn something different. So I came to CLA to be a sort of an administrative . . .

SM: CLA?

MB: College of Liberal Arts here.

SM: In 1975?

MB: Yes. I wanted to do something other than what I have been doing. I always learn something new when I change my job.

SM: Yes.

MB: And so even though I hardly knew anything about administration and what type of skills that would be needed, I knew that I could learn, so I came here to be head of data services of the college.

SM: That's . . . is that your present title?

MB: Well, I guess right now I'm a college budget and planning officer.

SM: Oh, I see.

MB: Somehow it . . . I think I have accomplished it, in the last three years, what I have come here for; mainly to set up the database and lay out the ground work. And even if I leave, somebody else could carry on very well, because I have really set the basic machinery going.

And so when the new dean came, they needed a budget officer and planning officer. And I was beginning to work with them, and it turns out it was last Monday it was officially announced that I would be the budget and planning officer.

SM: Oh, I see.

MB: Of the college.

SM: I see, so at least officially a new position.

MB: Yes. I don't think it should be congratulated, because the budget situation is so bad that Larry said, "Why would anybody want to be a budget officer at this time?"

SM: [Chuckles] He has a point there. But in order to cope with it [Chuckles] you have to be pretty [unclear] I've heard.

MB: So that's where I am right now. Okay, I will tell you a little bit about some of my first impressions of American life.

SM: Oh, yes. That would be interesting.

MB: What was the thing that was funny and . . .

SM: Would you like more?

[Sound of pouring liquid]

MB: Thank you. That's fine. I remember struggling with my English to express puzzlement to my foster father and foster mother who . . . even though I speak to them now, I don't think they would understand what the problem was. Was the commercials on TV.

SM: Yes.

MB: How could a station, for instance, advertise two different products saying both of them are better than the other? To me, that was such a difficult one to understand. But most people think that was natural. They don't understand what the problem is. They don't understand why even it's a problem. And to me, how a station would say five minutes ago that Ford Pinto is the best car, for instance, and five minutes later, it says that Chevrolet is the best car.

SM: [Chuckles] That's an interesting observation.

MB: And I guess what I didn't understand at that time is it's not the station's point of view they are expressing, it's the sponsors. But somebody who has never watched that type of thing, it's a big puzzlement. And I noticed, talking to some other foreign students, they have the same problem.

SM: Oh, I see. Yes.

MB: But most Americans who grow up with it just do not understand what the problem is. They don't even know why I'm even asking such a question.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: That's one. The other one is of course the affluent of the society.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: Because coming from the war torn country, the material wealth was very [unclear – impressive? Impressed upon?], but then . . . I think at that time I was quite religious, when I first came here. I don't know if it's the adolescent period that pulled me through, or if it also had something to do with the hard life I went through, that I figure that there is something more than what we have here. It's that, you know, usually brings most of us to be very religious when the needs are great. I rejected every type of Christian religion after I'd been here only a half year or so. I thought going to a church was so superficial.

SM: Oh. This was at the college?

MB: And college and at . . . visiting family. Because I . . . I guess it could be that particular atmosphere of that town or whatever, but they would spend hours putting the best clothes on to go to church.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And I thought that was contrary to the motive of why we are going to church. And I didn't want anything to do with it.

SM: Yes.

MB: And then this family, who is just marvelous in their own way, they would be buying me all kinds of things. And they were buying me a hat, which I never learned how to wear it, and white kid gloves....

[Recording interruption]

SM: Okay, let's see. We were just talking about this family in the South.

MB: Yes. Anyhow, they were . . . they were providing me with these lovely Sunday outfits with a broad brimmed hat and gloves and purse and all these things. When I come to their place to visit, and next time, I come back . . . of course, I forget all these things and don't bring them with

me. So promptly they will take me out to the store again to buy a whole new set of white gloves and another hat and a matching bag and something like that.

SM: Oh.

MB: And so I'm sure in four years' time I have accumulated over ten hats and all these things, you know, different things of going to church. But when I am at really at the . . . coming back to the campus, I really didn't go to church. Well, mainly, I was too busy. I'm always behind with my homework. And then I really didn't have that urge to go.

SM: Yes. Well, could you talk a little bit about, you know, why this bothered you and whether it was your background in knowing this surplus of affluence, did that seem wrong to you?

MB: Well, I think it's several. It was that . . . that age when you look at things critically.

SM: Yes.

MB: And in a way cynically, too, you know. And your tolerance level is quite low at that age, usually. And I saw the girls in the dormitory . . . ninety-eight percent to be very shallow, in my own way of looking at them, very interested in dating [unclear] rather than really doing any serious study, or intellectual pursuit, or any even trying to establish serious relationships among people.

SM: Yes.

MB: I don't mean among opposite sex, you know, I think life is a process of learning of how to get along with people, and I just didn't see that. And I see a great deal of waste in material things, which bothered me, too. And at the same time, you know, who have not really gone through school in a proper sense, I was being awakened in my intellectual pursuit of what everybody's thoughts should be. And I thought that the Christian religion is one religion that has no tolerance of . . . of any freedom of thought.

SM: Yes.

MB: And that bothered me a lot. Nobody else is right but them. And I just . . . you know, I remember having a debate with some people that how do you know I am wrong if you don't know me? And how do you know that the Muslims or Buddhism or whatever is wrong and yours is right, when you haven't studied it? And they would always come back with the story that because the bible says so. And I just had a hard time accepting that, even though when I do go to church, and if things are right, I did feel good or I did feel the true motivation of going to church. But I have to set my frame of mind right and things had to be right. It usually just didn't work out that way.

SM: Yes.

MB: And I didn't care to go. I think most college kids went there to meet boys or to go with boys. Which I don't think anything is wrong with it, you know, looking back from my point of view at this age, forty, you know. I think that's a great place for social gathering. But at that time I don't . . . I didn't think of church as a social organization. I thought of church strictly as a religious organization and you go there for religious purpose, nothing else.

SM: Yes.

MB: And I just . . . my view was very narrow. My definition of church, it was totally than different from what it is. In fact, I feel like that I should send my kids to Sunday School, just so they can be aware of what other kids are doing. Now there are such things as Sunday School, there are such things as, you know, this Christian religion and so on. And I think they should be aware of it, not because they will, you know, really believe in it. If they do, that's fine, too, you know.

SM: Right.

MB: But I think as a part of a social fabric in this culture, I think they should know about it. But, you know, when you are eighteen and you have gone through a different type of life, it's hard to accept that.

SM: Yes. I can imagine having . . . you'd just been through the war and all that and then to come to this very superficial kind of setting, it would be very [unclear].

MB: Yes. Yes, those are some of the things that I . . . I thought was . . . you know, I was awed and then at the same time I was very cynical, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: And . . . [sighs] I think it's still true, oh, you know, I have these mixed feelings. You know.

SM: Sure. Was it intellectually stimulating? I mean, were there good teachers there?

MB: Oh, yes. There . . . why, I know . . . there are a couple teachers that were just excellent.

SM: That's good.

MB: And then the school was excellent, I think, because it was a small liberal arts college and that all your courses you have to take such as we had to take a year of history, a year of religion, a year of ethics, a year of art, and a year of Greek mythology, and a year of Shakespeare and all these things, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: I don't think I ever learned what the beauty of Shakespeare's words is, but I remember who killed whom, in Shakespeare's play. And that's how I got my grades up. I'd try to draw a diagram. And okay, King Lear is there, eleven people died, and who killed whom, and . . . and that's how I got through my Shakespeare courses.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And then mythology, I tried to remember whose god was mad at which god because of somebody, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: And then this philosophy course was excellent and . . . you know, that all added to my rejection of Christian religion at some point. But I had a wonderful time in that place.

SM: At this point you were still thinking of yourself as a temporary visitor here?

MB: I think so, yes. And I remember once asking questions to one of the professors. And I hoped that if some of my children or if somebody ever asks me as dumb a question as that, I would be as serious as he was. I was asking him that is there anything called true. And I remember he went into a long discussion with me about that. I don't think I understood even one tenth of what he was saying, but he took time and he was responding to me in a serious manner. I think that was a good point of going to a small college.

SM: Right. And that's the age that people are really thinking about this kind of thing, in college or somewhere.

MB: Yes. Yes. That's right, you know. And I don't know whether that type of thing is happening in a big university like here.

SM: I think it's pretty different [unclear].

MB: Because you can get your requirements met with easy courses and get your degree with . . . you know, by just . . . there are courses in which you learn how to raise green plants, you know.

SM: I guess you could take [unclear].

MB: Yes. And then you . . . you know, you . . . if I didn't take the philosophy course, I really wouldn't know . . . I never really got to be a great, you know, student of philosophy, but the little I know is from that course.

SM: I see.

MB: And in the Greek mythology, the little I know about Greek mythology is from that. And art courses and the principle of art and all these things, it really is irrelevant in practical living but it's also very important in . . .

SM: There's one point in your life you can study that.

MB: Yes. That's right, you know.

SM: Yes. So you had a really liberal education.

MB: Yes. Yes. But then my father started us very early, I think, when we were growing up of . . . of introducing these classical literatures. So I remember reading [unclear] and Hugo and Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

SM: Before you came here?

MB: As a little girl. Either . . . I don't remember whether reading it or my father was telling me, telling us.

SM: I see.

MB: I don't know what, but those remain very [unclear].

SM: That was a period, I suppose, when these Western classics were being translated.

MB: Oh, I'm sure. Yes.

SM: And were very popular, I think.

MB: And I remember reading The Good Earth [by Pearl S. Buck].

SM: Oh.

MB: What else? And of course we had to read a great deal of Chinese culture, you know, Chinese philosophies and all those things. But even now my favorite authors are really the Russian authors.

SM: Oh.

MB: I still read [unclear] and some of the Dostoyevsky I read . . . something like, you know, Brothers Karamazov, I read about four times. And last week I was reading second time again for The Possessed.

SM: It was your father that introduced you to these though?

MB: I think so. And I can read Tolstoy over and over again and I don't get tired of it. [Unclear] and Fournier and much of those, I read [unclear].

SM: Was your father pretty politically oriented or . . . ?

MB: I think he was a Marxist truly, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: But he traveled a lot as a newspaperman.

SM: Oh, yes. He'd have to be aware of politics.

MB: Right. And he, you know, as you would know, he would be just appalled at the situation in Shanghai's streets.

SM: Oh, he'd go to China to record and so on?

MB: Yes. Yes. And he was a great admirer of, in fact, Mao Tse Tung.

SM: Was he?

MB: Oh, even before he came to power, you know.

SM: Oh, yes. When he was out in the West there.

MB: Right. Yes. And I remember vaguely that I brought a newspaper to my father and in the front top there was [Mahatma] Gandhi's picture and Gandhi's death. And I remember he knelt down and wept. I remember that.

SM: Oh, so he was also an admirer of Gandhi.

MB: He was an admirer of Gandhi and he was an admirer of Mao. He didn't like [unclear]. He rejected . . . he thought that those are superficial people, [unclear] of Westerners. So you can see that where we're [unclear].

SM: Hmmm. Was Mao Tse Tung widely admired in Korea in those years or were there just some [unclear]?

MB: Well, I'm not so sure whether if he could have been widely admired or because, you know, he was a Communist and we are living in a, you know, anti-Communist section of Korea.

SM: Yes. This is in [unclear].

MB: So you could not really say that. But it was 1948, I think he came to power, and that's before the Korean election was held and officially there it was divided into South and North. I don't think my father would have turned to Communism because during the war, they came, the Communists came down and they were all . . . I think quite brutal about the whole thing. And my father did not appreciate that at all.

SM: I see.

MB: So I think my father was person . . .

SM: And those were the Chinese?

MB: Right.

SM: Communists or . . .?

MB: It was . . . it would be Chinese, also North Koreans, you know.

SM: Also Koreans.

MB: He . . . I don't think he . . . any sane people would have accepted Stalin's or any of that type of Communism. But I think he supported the principle of it.

SM: Yes.

MB: That we should share things together type of thing.

SM: And the town you lived in, or his town, I guess, was in North Korea, wasn't it?

MB: Yes, he came from a town in North Korea.

SM: Yes.

MB: Near . . . in fact, near the capitol of North Korea right now.

SM: I see.

MB: And he . . . he was brought up in a totally different atmosphere from my mother.

SM: Yes. Well, the ways of traditional . . . I mean, there was a Korean Communist movement, I suppose, in these same years such as there was in China.

MB: I'm not so sure that there was a Communist movement or a nationalistic movement.

SM: I see.

MB: You know, we were under Japanese occupation, so our . . .

SM: I see. Yes. That was the strongest.

MB: Yes. The prime . . . prime objective was to get out from Japanese occupation.

SM: Yes. I suppose . . .

MB: And probably, you know, there are two factions. One, people who went underground and went to China. And the other group, like Syngman Rhee, who came to the United States.

SM: Yes.

MB: And what happened was usually the people who went to China became a Communist of the North.

SM: Oh, I see.

MB: And people who came to the United States, the U.S. brought them back and put them in power. And so . . .

SM: I see. Yes. Hmmm. Yes, that's right, they actually were the . . . Syngman Rhee was brought back then.

MB: That's right. Yes. And so I think my father resented the Syngman Rhee because he thought that, you know, he really did not . . . he had a hard life like some of the people in China, and he was . . .

SM: Your father wasn't too favorable towards Rhee, you said.

MB: No, I don't think so.

SM: Yes.

MB: And of course he resented Syngman Rhee having a non-Korean wife.

SM: Oh. Yes. He had strong feelings.

MB: Little did he know that his daughter is marrying a non-Korean husband! [Chuckles]

SM: [Chuckles] Yes. Well, that sort of leads into that whole business of how you may have changed your own values or picked and chosen from Korean values, American values. I'm sure it was sort of an ongoing process. And where you have arrived might be interesting, too.

MB: Oh, yes. Yes, I wouldn't know how . . . you know, I would have some long discussions with some of my friends. Usually, I can converse better with older people. I have some friends who are older.

SM: Oh. Yes.

MB: I don't know whether you'd remember Mrs. Larsen or not. She was at that meeting at my house, Hmong meeting.

SM: Maybe if I saw her.

MB: Yes, probably. So she's in her sixties. I . . . I like older people. I think they are . . .

SM: Yes. That is a Korean value.

MB: You know . . . yes. I think partly it's a Korean value and I think partly that they are wise people. If they are not bitter of being old.

SM: Yes.

MB: And they are . . . by far, very candid. Whereas young people are still struggling to find out who they are. I don't think anybody ever finds out who they are, but, you know, you come to terms with yourself as you get older.

SM: Yes. Well, how do you feel about yourself? I mean, do you feel Korean or do you feel American or do you feel Korean-American? [Chuckles]

MB: None of the above. [Chuckles]

SM: It's a little hard to put your finger on it. [Laughter]

MB: Yes. Yes.

SM: But are there certain ways you feel more Korean and certain ways you feel more . . .

MB: Yes. Like . . . raising children. It brings out some of the Korean-ness in me, you know.

SM: Ah.

MB: I cannot . . . I have less patience than children . . . oh, what do you call it? Talk back to their parents.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: I . . . I can carry on a discussion with my children, which I want to and so on. But when children try to put down their parents, and being selfish about it, I have very little patience with them.

SM: Yes.

MB: I think that's one of the big problems. In fact, I think it was written in some newspaper yesterday, Saint Paul newspaper. I almost was going to cut it out. It was in this morning's . . . how you teach . . .

SM: Oh, here's Chinese food for you. [Chuckles]

MB: How do you teach children to be unselfish? a I think that's [unclear].

[Noises like crumpling bags]

SM: So when it . . . in terms of child-rearing, it goes back to your basic values learned in your own childhood, I suppose.

MB: I think children should be taught that we are living in a society where we all have to contribute. Oh, here is the Saint Paul paper. And the limit of parents teaching unselfishness.

SM: Oh. Hmmm.

MB: I try to . . . and I . . . I think children should be more responsible. Should be given more responsibility. I know many Americans would be horrified to think that, you know, children should be left alone at home sometimes. They say oh, all kinds of things might happen. Well, life is full of chance and full of, you know, risk. And I think ten years old is old enough to do almost anything.

SM: Sure.

MB: If they are old enough to say that I'm angry at you, then they should be old enough to do most of the things that told them to do or they should know what is expected of them.

SM: Yes.

MB: Another problem I have, which me and my husband . . . it . . . it's . . . I think it . . . I'm not so sure. My husband claims it's not the cultural problem. It's personality problems, and it could be it, even . . . even, you know, people from Saint Paul might have a totally different view . . . two people from Saint Paul than, you know, somebody like me.

SM: Yes. Right.

MB: Basically, he and I doing basic things, but I tend to be more harsh to . . . with my children. I think he's spoiling the children. He . . . at Christmas time he would like to buy all kinds of toys. And I say no. No. I say to the children that you can choose money and let's give this money to a care of some . . . And Larry said, "They won't even understand what it is." And I said, "That's why I think we should teach them."

SM: Yes.

MB: And in my view, due to the background of where I came from, I don't know.

SM: Yes, because your childhood was hard. And it must be hard to see children just have everything in this country.

MB: And the other one is the pursuit of happiness over here. I don't think anybody gets it, but they are always after it.

SM: Right.

MB: And I have a difficult time accepting parents that [say] I want my children to be happy. That's not what I wish my children to be. I want my children to be responsible, fearing, having empathy of other people, and make the best out of the situation. I don't know what they mean when they say I want my children to be happy. Oh, usually, I guess they meant with the material wealth and comfort and so on. I . . . I really don't know what they mean. I want my children to be able to cope with situations the best they know.

SM: Yes.

MB: And rise above the occasion. And I guess that's what I would wish, and have feelings for other people.

SM: Yes. Hmmm.

MB: I see . . . I see the difference they all . . . I don't like to give my children . . . I have no desire to save money and give them all the things I missed. Somehow I don't have that. [Chuckle] You know.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: I think . . .

SM: That never works out anyway. [Chuckles]

MB: I think I have . . . I think I have a relatively good life now.

SM: Yes.

MB: Not in comfort term, but I have several good friends that we share and we have good time, too, I think that's very important.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: And I am in a situation to be able to help other people with money. Not by any means in a great quantity, but in a small way I can . . . I don't have to go into debt to help other people.

SM: Yes. What about your involvement with the Hmongs? And that seems to grow out of this kind of a value.

MB: Yes, you know, the thing is . . . well, I do it for two reasons. First, the people I get involved are fun to be with.

SM: Yes.

MB: And it is fun doing it. Not everything is fun doing it, you know, but most of it is fun. Second, even if it's a work, it's very small part on me but it . . . it affects a whole life for them.

SM: Oh, yes. Do you feel a certain . . . ?

MB: My input is very tiny compared to what I have right now.

SM: Yes.

MB: Whereas it can have just a whole life and death effect on them.

SM: Yes.

MB: And the little inconvenience I go through is . . . is really . . . I mean, the joy I will get out of it. I don't mean, you know . . . in a Christian sense that you have to sacrifice to, you know. Nothing like that.

SM: Yes.

MB: And third reason is, you know, a selfish one. I want the . . . I want my children to have experience of this.

SM: Yes.

MB: My children do not know there are any poor people. And I think by having these Hmong people living at our house, arriving with nothing, will give them more education than anything I can ever try to do.

SM: That's true.

MB: So mainly for that, I do it, you know.

SM: Yes. Do you think it might be linked, too, to a feeling of community responsibility, here are some other Asians coming here or . . . that you . . . it goes back to your background or . . .?

MB: Oh, I don't know whether I wouldn't be as involved with if it's non-Asians.

SM: Yes, I can't imagine it's just because they're Asian.

MB: Yes.

SM: But you must feel some sort of a bond with other Asians, I would imagine.

MB: Yes. Yes, I think so. I think we are so much better off and it's so little we do. And it can help them so much.

SM: That's true.

MB: And I . . . I think if most people are aware of it, they would do the same thing.

SM: That's true, many people don't know anyone who . . .

MB: But many people don't know or are not aware of it.

SM: But even when you were in college, you mentioned you were thinking of something like social work or something. There must be something in your background of [unclear].

MB: Well, I guess I . . . I did that because my mother did something like that. At this island where we were we saw lots of people, lot of especially young soldiers who [unclear] they are dying in the streets.

SM: Oh.

MB: And my mother . . . I don't know, I don't remember too well how it was, but I remember very well that somehow she got involved and she dragged some of these dying soldiers toward some bar in someplace and go around and got some food from someplace and tried to feed these people.

SM: Hmmm.

MB: And my grandmother was very, very angry at her. Because my grandmother said that you have a two year child, a one year old baby you're neglecting all day long, and here you go

around and trying to help other people, you know, what kind of mother are you? And I remember that conversation between my mother and my grandmother.

SM: Oh, that made quite an impression on you.

MB: And . . .

SM: These were wounded soldiers? Or just . . .

MB: These were wounded soldiers or starving soldiers, I don't know what they were, I was too young to know.

SM: Yes. Yes, these were Korean soldiers?

MB: Korean soldiers, yes.

SM: That was during World War II?

MB: No, it was during the Korean War.

SM: Oh, yes. I see. In the Korean War.

MB: Yes.

SM: But it was World War II when you were on that island, was it?

MB: No, it was during the Korean War.

SM: Oh, I'm sorry, I was confused on that one.

MB: Yes, World War II was over by, you know, 1945.

SM: Right.

MB: Yes.

SM: Yes, this was after World War II.

MB: So yes, it was in the early 1950s, I think.

SM: I see. So it was shortly before you came.

MB: Yes. Somehow I thought, [unclear] myself that I would like to do something like that. And I was very . . . religious. I remember reading the bible every morning, going to a five o'clock prayer meeting every day.

SM: Oh.

MB: And being very involved. And, you know, being very particularly righteous about yourself.

SM: Was this a religious motivation on your mother's part? Or a cultural . . .?

MB: Oh, I don't think so. I don't think so. I think she was just a romantic person.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And she . . . I think she was just the type who gets in there, you know. You see something and you don't think one way or the other and you just act.

SM: Right.

MB: You know.

SM: Would this be customary in Korean culture?

MB: No, no.

SM: So it was opposite to the culture.

MB: I think so.

SM: Sure. Yes. I know in China it would be the tendency not to get involved – for a number of valid reasons that . . .

MB: I know that that's how probably Koreans would be, more or less.

SM: Yes. So she was going against the trend then really.

MB: Right.

SM: That's interesting, isn't it.

MB: Oh, my mother went in many things against the trend. [Laughter]

SM: I see. Well, were there modern currents going on in Korea in those years?

MB: Well, you know, my mother, I remember, emphasized a great deal of modern education.

SM: Yes.

MB: And the other thing that is funny, I think, is that . . . is my grandmother was a very traditional woman who would never venture out of the house. When American missionaries my mother would invite, my grandmother would stay in the background and do all the cooking and so on. She would never come out and meet them.

SM: Oh.

MB: She said that they *smell* and they are not . . . you know, she didn't like them. And she would have nothing to do with them, even though that, you know, my mother wanted to entertain them, that's fine. My grandmother, knowing that I'm the only granddaughter; she wanted to dress me in a very lovely way in a Korean dress. And my mother, at that time there was no readymade Western dresses for children's clothes.

SM: Yes.

MB: She'll make patterns and she'll sew all night and put me in these little Western clothes, which I just *hated* it because I was the only one there.

SM: Oh.

MB: I didn't want to wear it.

SM: Yes.

MB: And then I remember once that she made a matching coat and red riding hood hat, a cap, with a ball on it. And she said to go to school with it. And I wore that and walked that out of the block and I took it all off and hid it someplace and went to school.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: I remember doing that.

SM: Yes.

MB: I knew my mother was different, in several ways.

SM: Yes.

MB: And then I was supposed to practice piano all the time, and supposed to take the dancing lessons.

SM: Oh.

MB: And I'm sure my mother had a great hope of having a beautiful, successful, talented daughter, which none of them turned out to be, you know. [Chuckles]

SM: Well, I wouldn't say that. But she wanted you to wear the Western clothes [unclear]?

MB: Oh yes, she wanted me to wear Western clothes. My grandmother was just horrified. I was growing so tall and so . . . having big feet. And who is she going to get married to, and my mother really couldn't care less. She said, "That's fine if she grows tall. That's good for her," and all this.

SM: Oh, so there was a real horror of growing too tall?

MB: Oh, yes. Yes.

SM: I see. Hmmm.

MB: And I still carry that, you know. I have . . . I don't have good posture, and one of them is I was tall growing, and I was always trying to look small in the class.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: And I was trying desperately to be in the middle of the class rather than at the end, you know. And . . .

SM: So your mother was really a very progressive person.

MB: I think so. I'm not so sure that it wasn't just a Western influence that she got from going to these missionary schools.

SM: Oh, yes. It could be part from that.

MB: Could be partly that.

SM: How about your father? How did he feel about these things?

MB: Well, my father was, I think . . . he was indifferent to this. That's a woman's thing, you know. How she dresses me is none of his concern, you know.

SM: Right. What about his own dress? Did he dress in a traditional way?

MB: No. No, he was . . . he always wore very nice suits. In fact, he always had just wonderful clothes.

SM: I see.

MB: And then when he came home, he would wear Korean dress once . . . you know, Korean clothes once . . . you know, it's because he said he felt comfortable.

SM: Right.

MB: At holidays he liked to wear Korean costumes because somehow it gave him a sense of something.

SM: Oh, yes. So it relaxed him to wear Korean clothes.

MB: Yes, it's more comfortable to relax wearing Korean baggy pants and so on.

SM: Right.

MB: But other than that, I don't think he really bothered one way or the other. I think he had all these, you know, progressive notions, but he really didn't want to be bothered with its practical things. I don't think he ever ate with us.

SM: Oh.

MB: It's too much of a bother to eat with the six kids.

SM: Well, was that customary that the father would not eat with the kids?

MB: I don't know whether it was customary or not. He said it's just too much of a bother.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: He doesn't want to be bothered while he was eating with all these kids. So all the kids were fed separately. And my father and my mother would have their own table. And once in a while I would be invited, because I was the only girl.

SM: Oh.

MB: But he would come while we are eating and supervise us. And that's the time he would talk to us. And so we had a . . . you know, like there were things going for us because my mother and father were very interested in our schoolwork and our learning process. And my mother, I remember, tried to teach our maids and cooks how to read.

SM: Yes.

MB: And she said that you have to know how to read. So she would teach them at night, how to at least read the basics.

SM: Education was a very important value.

MB: Right.

SM: And that . . . that is traditionally in Confucianism.

MB: I think so. Yes.

SM: I'm sure [unclear].

MB: Yes. I think so.

SM: Yes. What about the role of your mother as opposed to your father? Is that more of an equal in Korean culture than in China? Or about the same?

MB: You know, I think really the role—as far as role goes—the Oriental woman has more things to do in the house than in the Western here, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: You are just the mistress of the whole thing, you know.

SM: [Chuckles] Right.

MB: You don't ask your husband, "Do you like this color of the wall?" You know.

SM: Right. It would be up to the woman to decide.

MB: It's up to them. Whereas Larry and I fought constantly saying that, "Do you like it?" You know.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: "No, I don't like it. But if that's what you want to do, you can go ahead and do it." And then I said, "Well, that's not . . . I don't want to do it if you don't like it." And that's how we got into these constant indecisions and, you know, and then get into arguments sometimes.

SM: Yes. [Chuckles] Right.

MB: Which really is not . . . he's [unclear] he's stating what he feels like, you know.

SM: Right.

MB: And I'm saying it . . . you know, in a very . . . most typical female role that, you know . . . I want you to say you like it.

SM: Yes.

MB: And then he said, “Why do you ask me to begin with if that’s what you want me to say?”
You know.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And so, you know, trying to combine both. And it just doesn’t work. So I think in a way that much . . . much of their life was simpler there than here.

SM: Well, there was a more definite idea of what the woman decided and not the husband decided.

MB: The roles, sure. Yes.

SM: Right.

MB: That’s right. I think . . .

SM: There wouldn’t be this discussion. [Chuckles]

MB: No. You just don’t discuss, you just do it, you know. [Chuckles]

SM: Right.

MB: I don’t think my father ever even set a limit of how much money she spent because it’s none of his business, really.

SM: Oh.

MB: Well, because my mother had her own income. In fact, you know, that’s where most of the funds came from for us to live, you know.

SM: Yes. Well, the Japanese woman handles the purse entirely, doesn’t she, in the home?

MB: Oh, yes. Yes.

SM: I’m not sure if it’s quite that much in China. But . . .

MB: I think so.

SM: Yes. Right. What about your children? Do you see any ways that they have either picked up on Korean culture or identify themselves with that or . . .?

MB: I think so. I think . . .

SM: [Unclear]. [Chuckles]

MB: I think they . . . they say they are half and half.

SM: Yes.

MB: And so . . . and I think they are aware of that very well. And they are aware of . . . I don't think they ever felt they are disadvantaged because of it.

SM: Yes.

MB: And I don't think so either. Because they have all these uncles and aunts and extended family. And certainly they have the security.

SM: They have Korean uncles and aunts here?

MB: Yes. Yes.

SM: I see. So it's not only the American relatives that [unclear].

MB: No. In fact, they hardly see their American uncle.

SM: Ah ha. So that would make a difference.

MB: It's the Korean uncles and aunts, and they can . . . When Anne was angry at me one day, she said that she's going to call up Uncle, and they will always come and get her if she is, you know . . .

SM: Oh, so she's very close to them then.

MB: Yes. Yes. And they pick up the phone and call all the time and . . .

SM: I see, since they do have Korean relatives, then that would make a big difference when you're living in this country.

MB: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And they are aware that one of the Korean uncles is a really fantastic scholar.

SM: Oh.

MB: In fact, Peter will call him up and ask him about what water is made out of, and he will just explain to him for a whole hour what the atom is and what the . . . you know, hydrogen is. And he will explain the whole term to him on a children's level, which I think is just wonderful for children to have.

SM: Yes. This is your brother?

MB: Right, that's one of my brothers.

SM: Is that the one that you brought over originally?

MB: Yes, that's the one. Yes.

SM: I see.

MB: And then I have all kinds of other brothers. And they know that they are all different.

SM: You have other brothers here in the [unclear]?

MB: Yes.

SM: Oh. Well, that must make quite a difference then.

MB: Yes. And I try and . . . I think it was about two or three . . . two years ago I changed the . . . in my own mind, and I think I talked to my husband about doing this to our children, we were reluctant to talk about something that we do not like among our neighbors. Not necessarily our neighbors, the whole . . . their friends and so on.

SM: Yes.

MB: And I decided to talk about it, you know. I said, "You know, I do not like so and so, because I do not think that's right."

SM: Yes.

MB: "You know, but I expect you to keep this in the house."

SM: Yes.

MB: I don't think they would understand what my value is, if I do not bring it in terms of who they know. If I talked in abstractive terms, I don't think they would understand.

SM: Right.

MB: So I think even Peter will say once in a while, "You know, Mama, so and so, the poor boy, he gets everything he wanted. What is he going to do when he grows up?"

SM: That's pretty good that he can . . .

MB: You know, he will say that.

SM: Yes.

MB: So and he . . . they do envy for their friends who can have everything. At the same time, when that moment passes, they realize it's not good.

SM: Yes. Well, is this anything to do with your Korean background or is this just something you decided intellectually?

MB: Oh, I think . . . I think it's probably both.

SM: Yes. Do you feel Korean parents customarily then criticize certain friends but expect it not to be passed on, or . . . ?

MB: I don't know. I really don't know how they do it.

SM: I know that there are a lot of Americans who won't do that in front of their children.

MB: Yes.

SM: And I personally never have . . . can agree with that. I never can agree with that we should always pretend we like everything about everyone. [Chuckles]

MB: Yes. I don't know. I . . .

SM: Does your husband agree with you on that? I mean, of course, he isn't necessarily the typical American father, but . . .

MB: No. But I think he agrees with me so we say it, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: I don't like . . .

SM: Certain characteristics of someone. Yes.

MB: Yes, I don't like . . . I don't like them. Always having to do something.

SM: Right.

MB: They are always going over here and then my children will say, "Well, why can't we do it?"

SM: Yes.

MB: And I said, “Because I disagree with them.” You know. “And I think that you should have as much fun reading books as going to a movie.” And I try to tell them that, “You think that it’s the most important thing right now. But two hours from now, you won’t feel that way.”

SM: Yes.

MB: “And if I give in to your will, then you will be what I call spoiled American children. And you don’t want to be like that.” So they . . .

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: They said, “Okay, I don’t want to be spoiled American children.” So I really snow on them. And I shouldn’t, really. I don’t know. I don’t know how they react to it. I’m afraid that someday they will really counter-react to it, you know. All they will remember is my mother always saying no to this and no to that. And they do. Already, Anne says, you know, “Boy, Mother. You are so tough, Mother. And then so and so did something bad. All their mother said is, ‘Don’t do it again.’ But you don’t stop there. You make me pay for it,” and so on. You know what she did? When they are having telethon over this multiple sclerosis or one of those things, she called up the place and pledged under somebody else’s name.

SM: Oh, no. [Chuckles]

MB: And she thought that was a big joke.

SM: Typical children’s trick.

MB: And so she had to pay for it.

SM: Yes.

MB: And she had to do it, and it was not her own idea, really. There are three of her friends sitting there and they all say why don’t you do it?

SM: Oh. They put her up to it.

MB: And she said, Well, how come that they get by or . . . And I end up paying for it. And I said, well, if they were my children, I would do something about it. But they are not my children, I cannot do anything about it.

SM: Yes.

MB: It’s up to their mother to do it. I always say that if you are not my child, I will just talk about you behind your back and say how bad she is. Since I’m your mother I’m responsible [unclear].

SM: Yes. That's right. It makes sense.

MB: And then she understands, you know. She resent it though, you know, there's no doubt about that.

SM: Yes. Well, they're going to resent things about their parents no matter what.

MB: Yes.

SM: Do they speak Korean at all?

MB: Some. But very little.

SM: Yes. Do they understand?

MB: No. No.

SM: They haven't been to Korea, have they?

MB: Anne has.

SM: Oh, has she?

MB: Yes. Anne has, yes.

SM: Did you take her?

MB: I took Anne to Korea for about three weeks when she was eight.

SM: Oh.

MB: Yes.

SM: So it's not so long ago then. Couple years?

MB: Yes. Two years ago, yes.

SM: And you still have relatives there?

MB: I have my stepmother there.

SM: Oh, yes.

MB: And I have stepbrother. One other comment is . . . it has nothing to do probably with being Korean, but I feel that we have to get into a situation of where we care for not only my children

and your children and so forth, but somehow communal care-ness and relationships we build on a more permanent basis. So much is happening, just though you meet somebody, and then you just turn around, and then . . . I don't like to say that is a most typical American thing, but I am afraid it's true, you know.

SM: It is. There are so many temporary relationships in America, I think.

MB: Right. Yes. There are many wonderful things of American things. It's openness and the spontaneity and the . . . the informality and all these are very, very appealing.

SM: Yes.

MB: At the same time....

[Recording interruption]

MB: Yes. I . . . you know, as an example, you know . . . Of course, there are *always* exceptions, but in many cases I see that grandparents and uncles and aunts and all, they profess to be . . . you know, they care for their children, they love their children and so on—but only when they are not inconvenienced by them. So when they have to make a commitment, it's not like the Oriental grandparents.

SM: Yes, these are the American . . .

MB: I think the Oriental grandparents, no matter if you like it or not, you are committed to your children, you know.

SM: Very strong, yes.

MB: There are both good and bad on both sides, you know. But if I have an ultimatum to choose, I will choose the Oriental side.

SM: Yes.

MB: The other one is accounting of give and take is . . . is too in detail here, I feel. You know.

SM: Oh.

MB: And one of them is my husband. If we go someplace and we take them out or if they take us out several times or something like that, [unclear] brothers or whatever. We really never keep track of it, who eats at whose house.

SM: [Chuckles]

MB: And I . . . many times I call one of my brothers and I say, “I’m coming for supper,” without an invitation.

SM: Yes.

MB: Or they do the same thing. In fact, they have . . . all of them have a key to our house.

SM: Yes.

MB: Anytime, they are welcome to come over. But we . . . we don’t drop in to Grandma Bilek’s house without calling them and having, you know, a proper invitation contrived out of her if nothing else.

SM: Oh.

MB: And once in a while if something comes up, if we need her, she . . . she might do so but with all these conditions that have to be met.

SM: Oh. [Chuckles]

MB: You know. And then, also, the notion that, you know, “I don’t want to take care of my grandkids,” you know, or, “I have done my share, I don’t want to do it,” you know.

SM: That’s [unclear] common. Yes.

MB: And so they make . . . they tell their children, “Now, don’t come and ask me for help,” type of thing.

SM: That’s really strange, isn’t it. But I hear that a lot.

MB: I don’t know where children would go if they don’t go for help to their parents and their brothers and sisters.

SM: Yes. It’s something to do with this idea of individualism. [Chuckles]

MB: Independent.

SM: You know, independence and . . .

MB: And then also not owing anybody anything.

SM: Yes.

MB: I have asked . . . my mother-in-law, when she was sick, she came and lived with us for a while. And when she got well she insisted on moving out. And I said, “Why?” She said, “I can’t

do this to you.” I said, “You are not doing to me, you are my husband’s mother and there is no question whether you wouldn’t stay with us or not.”

SM: Oh, this was very recent.

MB: Yes.

SM: And she said, “Well, I wouldn’t be a burden to you.” But in the Oriental community we would never think in that term. You just accept it, you know.

MB: Right, it’s just completely [unclear].

SM: And in no uncertain terms we are aware of the problems of living together. But that doesn’t mean that you have to live lonely because you are afraid of the inconveniences and the problems you will face. Of course there are problems. But then there are fun of living together, too, you know.

MB: Yes.

SM: But over here, people like privacy and independence too much. And they miss a lot out of the joy of sharing.

[Recording interruption]

SM: Wait just a minute, because the first part [unclear]. Okay. We were talking about although you like the spontaneity here and so on there are . . .

MB: Yes. I think we are afraid to commit ourselves, you know.

SM: Yes.

MB: I think one thing is . . . grandparents love their children and grandchildren in an abstract term in this culture. They love to write letters . . .