

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

Interviewee: Michael Wong
Interviewers: Priscilla Li, Tian-Tian He
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Transcribed by: Priscilla Li, Tian-Tian He (12/29/18)
Edited by: Steven Loyd (1/21/19)
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Background: Dr. Michael Wong was born in Quebec City, Canada to Chinese immigrant parents. As a young child, he moved to California, assimilating into American culture and becoming a US citizen with his siblings and parents. From high school, where he had impactful teachers in the sciences and the humanities, he went to the California Institute of Technology to study Chemical Engineering and then to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he completed his graduate studies and met his wife. Today, he is the chair of the Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering Department at Rice University and is proud to represent Chinese Americans in academia. During the interview, Dr. Wong's experience of growing up Chinese American, current Asian American representation in media and academia, and how he raises his two daughters in two cultures.

Setting: This interview was conducted in Dr. Wong's office at Rice University's Abercrombie Engineering Laboratory. Dr. Wong had a number of awards displayed in the corner of his office, which he talks about towards the end of the interview.

Key:

MW: Michael Wong
PL: Priscilla Li
TH: Tian-Tian He
—: Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: Speech trails off; pause
Italics: Emphasis
(?): Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview Transcript:

PL: Okay.

MW: Now I'm stressed out, [**PL:** Oh, no—] now that the—no, I'm just kidding. [all laugh]

PL: Um, so today is Friday, December 7th, [**MW:** Mhm.] at 9:15 in the morning. Um, we're here with Dr. Michael Wong, interviewing him for the Houston Asian American Archive. My name is Priscilla Li.

TH: Uh, my name is Tian-Tian He.

PL: Okay, so Dr. Wong, we'll start out with um, asking you where and when you were born.

MW: Mhm. I was born in Canada, uh, it's a country up north, uh, I joke a little bit, so [laughs] and I assume you'll edit as well. Um, I was born in Canada, uh, in the province of Quebec, in the city of Quebec City. [**PL:** Okay.] Uh, and that is in the French part of—the French-speaking part of Canada, uh, and not on the west side of Canada. Mhm.

PL: Okay. So um, did you grow up speaking French?

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MW: I learned French. Uh, I grew up uh, learning Cantonese at home, um, we spent a lot of time at home, a lot of snow, so we stayed indoors. And uh, when I went to school for one year, um, in Canada, I was in kindergarten, and that's when they taught me a lot more French. I learned a little bit of French from TV, but in, in, in school they taught me French.

PL: Okay. [**MW:** Yeah.] And what was your childhood like?

MW: What was my childhood like, it was awesome. [**PL:** Mmhm.] Uh, [laughs] um...I could go so many ways with this.

PL: Yeah, you can just pick out like, a couple stories, maybe, I don't know, maybe pick some stories that like, led you to where you are today maybe?

MW: Yeah, well— [**PL:** It's up to you.] it's um...What I will say is that uh, being born in Canada, um, I'm a U.S. citizen now, um, but back then, I, I mean it was, it was um...it was cold. Uh, Canada was very cold, uh, Quebec City was very cold. And I wasn't there for that long, 6 years old, uh, when we moved, with my whole family, with my siblings. And so, and so I was very young, and, you know, we just played in uh, in our neighborhood. It was very quiet and it was just very nice. But when it got cold it got *really* cold, that's one of the things I remember. Um, I also remember there were not very many Asians, uh, up in Canada where we lived. My dad owned a Chinese restaurant up there, so one of the few. [**PL:** Mhm.] And uh, it was pretty much either my siblings and I were at home, or at the restaurant. It was one of those places, um, especially during the winter. And so, it was good, I mean, I, I, I was, I was uh, it was fun I guess, and uh, but really didn't know what to make of it other than lots of snow, and snow was great but it was very cold, and uh, and then at some point uh, uh, my parents said—my mom said, "Oh, you know what, it's a little too cold. Let's go ahead and go on, moving down south." So we moved uh, to the U.S., when I was 6 years old.

PL: Oh okay. [**MW:** Yeah.] Um, how many siblings do you have?

MW: I have uh, a total of three siblings. So I'm the eldest of four. Um, I'm the eldest of four and then two years below me, two years younger than me is my sister. Uh, and then two years younger than her is my brother, and then five years younger than him is my other brother. So I have two brothers and a sister. Yeah.

PL: Okay.

TH: So where were your parents from?

MW: My parents were from...the—my mother's from Hong Kong, and my father's from uh, Guangdong, uh, province. I don't know the name of his—the small town that he lived in, uh, but the region is Guangdong, yeah. Right next to Hong Kong.

PL: Okay. Um, and then why did your parents move to Canada in the—like, immigrate to Canada?

MW: Uh, that's a [**PL:** It's a long story?] it's a, everything's a long story. [**PL:** [laughs] That's true.] You know, uh, every, every story's a—and it could be long or short, but I like to—for you guys, I'll make it long, alright? Um, my dad and mom, there's all sorts of stories there. So uh, before my mom and dad married, my dad was in Canada already working. Right. It's the old generation, it's the old school of doing things. Uh, and so his dad had many children, and my dad was the eldest of...like, seven. A lot. And uh, so my grandpa, his dad, sent my dad over to Canada. Make money, send it back home, send it back to the motherland. Yeah, and so that was what he did for many years actually. Um, he did that in, in the

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Vancouver area, and then uh, uh, working for his uncle actually, so I guess my grand uncle. Um, and then after a certain point my dad wanted, well, to have a family. So he moved, went back to uh, China, Hong Kong, and met my mom, married, and then they moved back to Canada, but instead of Vancouver, to uh, to Quebec City.

PL: Okay. [**MW:** Yeah.] Um, and did your parents also stay in the restaurant business when they came to the U.S.?

MW: They did. So, my father owned a Chinese restaurant—another story there, but I'll shrink it for you guys. Uh, owned a Chinese restaurant up in Canada, uh, and uh, it was a great business decision, why, because there were very few Chinese restaurants. So his restaurant was just popping. I mean it was so busy, and he was uh, he was, he was okay leaving, you know, uh, Canada to move to California, uh, for the sake of the family, but his business was going, was going really well. [**PL:** Mhm.] Uh, then when he, when we all moved to Sacramento, California, um, and we had relatives there, uh, my dad had to start over. And so he decided, uh, there's a lot of Chinese restaurants, uh, in uh, in Sacramento. So let's um, let's think of something else. And so he decided to um, well, work at a couple of restaurants first, and then after a couple of years of figuring out what the uh, the, the landscape was for the business, he decided he will not open a Chinese restaurant, but a barbecue restaurant. Yeah. Texas-style barbecue restaurant, [**PL:** Oh, Texas-style.] yeah. Which I did not know at the time, but that was Texas-style food.

PL: Oh okay, interesting.

TH: So how did he choose Texas-style?

MW: It was um, he was—so my dad's a very friendly person, so he talks to customers and things like that. But he was looking to strike out on his own, and so, and then he made connections and networking, and eventually he d—he learned that there was one restaurant that was um...selling and, you know, making uh, barbecue-style foods. And the owners were about to sell. He said he wants in. Yeah, so that's how he uh, got to know the, the uh, restaurant owners, and eventually he bought the restaurant from the owners, and then they retired and then my dad owned it for 30-plus years. [**PL:** Oh, wow, okay.] Yeah.

PL: What kinds of principles did your parents raise you on?

MW: Um, what kind of principles. You know, we never talked about principles, uh, in the sense that uh—you know we do the Chinese uh, you know um, observance of, of the festivals and, and holidays. Um, but there was never sort of a, any religious sort of undertones or discussion about that, we just sort of did it. [**PL:** Yeah.] Okay. And so... nothing ever was explicit, like "Oh, these are the principles that you're supposed to abide by." We don't, didn't talk, we just did it. [**PL:** Mhm.] Um, and so, but in thinking back I guess the things that we learned up when were—actually, I, I'm, I'm not sure what the right term is. Maybe it's, I don't wanna say Confucian, or, or, or, uh, Taoist or Daoist, um, but I think that there's aspects of all those things that, that came up in our upbringing, I would say. Uh, but certainly uh, the things that uh, my mom and dad taught us was hard work, you know, good education, and uh, respect your elders, and family. Family comes first. So that was one of, of course, the reasons why we moved from Canada to, to uh, California. My mom had already—her siblings, my aunt and uncle, were already living in that area. So they were able to sponsor us and that was already kind of a home—you know, kind of a built-in family there for us when we moved in, in the area, so.

PL: Um, what kinds of foods did you grow up eating?

MW: What kind of foods, everything! [all laugh] Um, of course Cantonese food, that, that's my home base. Uh, I used to love it. Um, American foods, uh, very, you know, very standard stuff. Uh, I'll tell you

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the foods that we—I did not learn how to eat or enjoy when living in Sacramento. It was only until I went to college, really. I went to college and then—but before then, I didn't know Japanese food. I heard of it, but you know, raw fish, come on now, right? Uh, Vietnamese food, that was not a thing back in Sacramento at that time. And so um, by growing up, Cantonese food. Grandmother cooking, mother cooking, and uh, and the big—all the big family get-togethers, that was, that was uh, that's very yummy. [laughs] [PL: Right, yeah. Um...]

TH: Did your parents, um, want to assimilate, or were they kind of resistant to it?

MW: They wanted us to assimilate big-time. Big-time. Um, that's something they don't say, they didn't say, they just say, "Oh, okay, Mike, assimilate." [all laugh] Um, it's just the way of doing things, and thinking back, yes, you know, we um...I would say for the three of us, before my younger brother was born—he was born American, my youngest one. So he was already kind of—he's already a little different from the three of us. But the three of us, myself, my sister, my, my younger brother, um, when we moved down, we were, you know, we were immigrants. Um, not immigrants from say, you know, China, or Hong Kong, but immigrants from Canada. So it—we're already kind of, you know, what are we, right? And um, and...but one of the things that my mom and dad wanted us to do was to get up to speed as quickly as possible. And, you know, for all, for all the good reasons, right, you know, so that it's uh, you learn easier, and, and to assimilate the culture, and um...so they absolutely wanted us to assimilate. In fact, that was um—because of that, uh, my parents said, "You know, you don't need to learn Chinese. Well, you already learn—you already know it at home." Which was kinda true, you know, we know it speaking-wise, but writing-wise, I didn't know it until I had to take it, like, much later in my life. So um, so yeah. Short answer is yes.

PL: Okay. Um...

MW: You have a lot of questions. [laughs]

PL: Yeah. [laughs] Can you describe like, your schooling, elementary, middle, and high school?

MW: Sure. Um, I would say, public school, [PL: Mhm.] that was uh, how we grew up learning and going through the U.S., uh, educational system. Um...elementary school, middle school, high school, all public schools. And we were lucky, we lived in, you know, middle-, middle-class neighborhoods, I mean we weren't rich or anything like that. But we worked hard and, and we lived in an area that was—that had some good schools. We lucked out, I mean uh, the schools now-a-days—it's a little different now. [PL: Mhm.] Um, and...we worked hard, and, you know, for me, I liked—I liked school, I liked learning, okay. Uh yeah, I was geeky in school. [PL: Mhm.] Uh, and uh...but I enjoyed it, and uh, and one of the things that uh, um...and I had some great teachers too. Um, really loved my teachers. They, they were absolutely influential. I mean, as influential as my parents, uh, were the teachers in my high school. Elementary-school teachers, I remember their names kinda sorta, you know, middle school, I know the school but I don't, I don't think about them. [PL: Mhm.] If I think about any teacher from my childhood, they're my high-school teachers. Uh, and that's why I'm a teacher today. So.

PL: So were they your science teachers, or like...

MW: Yeah, yeah. [PL: Okay.] One of my uh, my favorite teachers, um, I would say I had three favorite teachers—I had many favorite teachers. Yeah, I was a teacher's pet, okay, fine. [TH laughs] Um, but I liked it, you know? And um, and...they—my math teacher. Loved her. Um, and she—I didn't realize she was helping me out on all sorts of things, but she thought I could do well in college, and so she, you know, pushed me to go to college, and so I did. Um, wrote a nice letter. Uh, my science teacher, biology teacher. I don't do too much biology, um, but my biology teacher was very influential. Um, and uh, my

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math teacher passed away many years ago, and I still think about her, you know. Uh, my biology teacher, he's retired, but we emailed about six months ago. I got this email out of the blue. Oh my goodness, warm fuzzy feelings. Wrote an email back, and uh, so at some point I'll try to visit him, and uh, and my other teacher that I still remember—I remember all my—but the uh, third one I would say is uh, my English teacher, yeah. My English teacher, of all people. I still remember her, Mrs. uh, Mrs. Corzine. (?) Mrs. Steinberg was my math teacher, my uh, biology teacher was Mr. Di Gusta, (?) my uh English teacher is um, well, Mrs. Waugh. (?) And uh why—why do I still remember her? And she knew I was gonna be going to college, or rather she said, "Oh, you're gonna do great in college," and uh, but she knew I was going to be on the STEM side of things. Said, you know, "Mike, you know, whatever you do in uh, in, in, in science and engineering, you're gonna do a good job, but you still gotta learn English. You still gotta learn how to write and read, and um, because you don't want to be called an 'engineer' [said with a hard g] by other people." [all laugh] So, so I took that to heart. And so, and so flashing forward to where I am today, uh, a lot of these lessons come out when I talk to my students and my uh, junior-level class, and, and my own graduate students, as I—you can do all the technical stuff as best as you can, and better than anyone else, but if you can't communicate, written-wise or, or, or, or word-wise, um, um...then, then you put yourself back. Then you are not as good as you can be, and so—anyways, that's—going back to your question, yes, my high-school, uh, teachers, had some very, very um, influential ones.

TH: So uh, are there any other things that you're now, like, passing on from your teachers to your students?

MW: Yeah, all the time. Um, I don't think about it as in, you know, what did I remember from Mrs. Steinberg's class, or from even my college teachers, uh, or professors. Um, it's a sort of—things that I—make sense to me, it becomes part of me. Um, and when, and when it comes out, it just sort of comes out kind of as a, as part of my advice, um, whether it's on writing, and something I just said earlier, it's uh—if you can't communicate, you might as well not have done the research, okay. Um, if you can't think logically—if you can't write logically, then that means you might not be thinking about this stuff logically. So by writing logically, it forces you to think logically. Um, so thi—little things like that, um, I think comes from my own experiences, uh, learning what I'm doing now, but also definitely from my teachers. And so um...good handwriting skills. Gotta have good handwriting. And so that's something I remember from my English teacher. [laughs]

PL: Um, when did you start feeling like an American, I guess?

MW: Yeah, that's a great question. Um...that's, that's, that's a tough question. Um, I don't have a good answer. 'Cause I hadn't thought about that. Um...when did *you* feel like an American?

PL: I mean yeah, [laughs] I guess I never thought about it either. [**MW** laughs] Just like um, coming from Canada, when did you feel like, oh, I can become, like, assimilate into society?

MW: Yeah. Let me ask you guys, did you guys—were you born here, or did you come [**PL:** I was born...] Okay. Um, so...you guys are ABC's, [American-born Chinese] okay. Um, I'm an ABC. Um, but I correct people, I say I'm a CBC, Canadian-born. Um, and especially for those, you know, who are not, you know...Asians or Asian Americans, they, they, they don't get it, so you know, I love to talk about it, and I explain a little bit. And um...when I first thought about what it means to be American, I would say...like, to know what that word means, not that I felt it, but that there was a big transition. It wasn't when I first crossed the border. Okay, that was when I was six years old. I can barely see above the window, okay, was just driving across, one week. Cross-country. Um...I would say...I didn't feel I was Canadian in any way, I just felt, uh, there was no differentiation. And, and, and I think the schools that I went to was uh, diverse enough where it wasn't a deal, it wasn't a big deal at all. Um, I, I just, I look more Chinese than I look Canadian, let's put it this way. And there were a lot of Asians and Chinese, um, in the

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school that I was, and in the neighborhood. So that was sort of my baseline, actually. Um, when I first felt I was an American, I would say definitely when I became naturalized. So my mother applied for citizenship, uh, and in—at that time, when she went through the citizenship test and eventually got it, uh, at that time the rules, uh, the U.S. rules were if you have kids who are 16 years or, or below, those children have an option of keeping their Canadian citizenship or their uh, uh citizen of their birth country, or to switch and to drop, and then to take, and then, because at that time you could only have—you couldn't have dual citizenship. And so we all said we were gonna become Americans, and so, that felt good, that felt interesting. That felt uh, very different. Um, what did it mean, I don't know. [PL: Mhm.] I just remembered I had to say, you know, recite the pledge, and we know the pl—we knew, we were an American by that time and we knew the history and, and uh, but having that little piece of paper that says you're an American citizen now, that, that felt special. [PL: Mhm.] That felt special. Um, and so that's one answer. [PL: Okay, yeah.] And then probably as I then graduated from high school and into college, I mean, that's a whole different world. [PL: Mhm.] And literally when I moved from s—northern California to southern California, that—where what I grew up around with were all these Asians and Chinese in the community. They were not there at my undergrad school, or in the city. I went to Caltech, uh, in Pasadena, California. That was where—the city that I lived in for four years. There, it, it was such a different makeup. And so I felt different. And so there was that adjustment period, and so that's when I became more...self-conscious wasn't—isn't the word, but more aware [PL: Mhm.] of how different I was. Um, and so, I don't think you ever become a true American, you sort of evolve, I would say. Uh, but certainly, when I became a citizen, that was, "Oh, okay. I guess I *am* American now." [PL: Mhm.] Yeah.

PL: Thank you for sharing that.

MW: Mhm.

PL: Um, so how did you, like, decide to move to Caltech?

MW: I wanted to go to a college that was not close to Sacramento. [all laugh] Simply put. Um, no, I, I applied to colleges and I, you know, did pretty well in uh, in, in, in high school. And, and I could've gone to the local universities, or I could have gone, uh, to private or public schools, but at that time I, my, my worldview was very limited. Um, because Sacramento was very good to my family, to me. Uh, I was happy there. Uh, but I didn't know what else was outside of Sacramento, you know. And to think about going outside, you know, across state boundaries, I mean, that, that's, that was, that was something I considered, but at the end I, I don't think I was mature enough to, to do that yet. And so, yeah, I could've gone to MIT, but it was too far away. And so uh, the decision I made at that time, and there was no internet by the way, [PL: Mhm.] okay, it's not that long ago. Uh, one thinks about the timing and dates of all these things, no cell phones, no computers, it was all, you wanna get information from the school, you gotta write a letter. And then you get the brochure in the mail later on. So things are very slow. Um, and the communications, and you can't email the admissions com—uh, office, to talk to someone, or—who in Sacramento, uh, went to MIT or went to Caltech? Let me go talk to them. [PL: Mhm.] No, there was no—it was, it was not as it is now. [PL: Mhm.]

So eventually I applied to a whole bunch of schools and I made it to, you know, several sort of my top choices. Uh, but at the end, you know, MIT was too far away, Berkeley was a little too close, and I said, "Well, you know, uh, I do feel—I, I do like my, my STEM stuff, so, uh, I did apply to Caltech, and it's—it should be like MIT, but just in California. So I'm just gonna go ahead and go there." I went there sight unseen. I didn't visit, it just looked good on the ca—in the catalog, and people said it was good. My math teacher said it was excellent, so I mean that was a, that was a, that was a big deal. My science teacher as well. Said, "Okay!" I said "yes." And then the fall, my parents, uh, whole family drove down, dropped me off, and drove back off. And that was my first time on campus. Man... [all laugh] Uh, that's a, that's a, oh, that was a life-changing experience. So, but the answer is, yeah, um, process of elimination.

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PL: Okay.

MW: Yeah. [laughs]

PL: And Caltech culture is, like, very unique, right? [**MW:** Yeah...] You're like, you test to be in a dorm room...house?

MW: It's, it's almost like, it's uh...Rice and Caltech are a lot in many ways. Er, alike in many ways. [**PL:** Mhm.] Um, in fact actually, there, there's a—the college system here is the same as Caltech. Caltech, we call it a um, house system. [**PL:** Mhm.] Um, smaller than Rice, so instead of a thousand per class, I think it's about maybe 225, total. Um, and uh, the matching process is uh, is—well here it's random right? And so at Caltech, uh, it's random for the first week, you're sort of randomly assigned to, to the houses, and then, and then you interview, uh, the different houses, and then after a week or two, after the matching process, then, then, then you get chosen into your, into your house. And so um, there's a lot of similarities and differences, but definitely that small, uh, smallness and close-knit-ness of the community, that's uh, that was Caltech, so, yeah.

PL: Okay. So how was your experience there throughout the four years, like academically, soc—socially?

MW: Yeah, it was awesome. [**PL:** It was awesome.] Yeah, I was awesome, also. [**PL** and **TH** laugh] Um, it was tough, really tough. Um, and, just like here, you know...[mumbles] you guys are very good, you guys got in here, but you realize there's a whole lot of good people here too. So you have to recalibrate a little bit, and uh, and some people were, uh, you know, just like you, it's uh, you adjust quickly to it. Like, you know, you don't have to be the best in everything, uh, but you have to appreciate that, you know, you can't be the best at everything, but you appreciate what people are really good at, and learn from them. You don't wanna be surrounded by a whole bunch of engineers, you don't wanna be surrounded by a whole bunch of uh, of humanists, you want to be surrounded by, by a really good mix of people. Because it really gets the juices flowing, you know, both your left-hand side and the right-hand side of your brain. Caltech, it was kind of like that, but very tech-y though. Because it's Caltech, you know, Institute of Technology. Um, they still teach everything I would say, um, but definitely the focus is on math and science and the STEM side. So I happen to like—have liked it going in, and I happened to have liked it leaving. Caltech was really tough on certain people. Um, there were a lot of, lot of classmates of mine that were very, very smart, smarter than I am, but you know, people burn out. [**PL:** Mhm.] People, you know, are thinking too much on this side but not the other side. And so, and they miss that. And so some people transfer after a couple of years, some decide, "Well, I'm gonna get my degree and I'm gonna leave STEM completely." So for me, I, I was lucky. I was surrounded uh, by smart people, um, and, and, and people who, who helped me grow, I would say. Um, and so I enjoyed my time at Caltech.

PL: Um, so how did—what is—what did you major in?

MW: I majored, uh, in the major that I'm teaching now, [**PL:** So chemical engineering.] chemical engineering, mhm, yep.

PL: Okay. So how did you decide to major in chemical engineering?

MW: I decided to major in chemical engineering when I couldn't decide if I liked math more or chemistry more. And that's one of those lessons that I've, that I've taken away that I teach now to prospective students and to remind my students, why are you a chemical engineer. Uh, you don't have to choose between one or the other. If you like both equally, chemical engineering does both. In equal amounts. So that's how I decided to try out chemical engineering. It was only until I got into it, taking the core courses,

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um, that's when I decided, oh, this is an interesting subject. Um, but I thought about computer science, [PL: Mhm.] I thought about electrical engineering, um, thought about physics maybe, but that, that lasted for a day. [all laugh] [PL: Mhm.]

Uh you know, I realized there's just a lot of smart people. And um, but that's when I started to learn, well, just—at the college level, it's, it's when you try to find your passion. [PL: Mhm.] You know, if the passion is to major in three different areas, that's fantastic, that's really fantastic. [PL: Mhm.] I found my passion, I would say, not so much in chemical engineering, th-that's too strong of a word, I would say I liked it a lot. [PL: Okay.] But I liked it enough to keep going. Um, but I didn't know what I was gonna do with my degree. But I kinda go—went along with it because I liked learning. And so that was uh, and the other classes, boy...side story. To be a CS major, although if I went down that route, I would, I, I would've, I would've been rich many times over. A lot of those folks at that time, that was before the internet blew up. [PL: Mhm.] So if you were a CS major at that time, you'd be, you know, one of the big cheese in Microsoft or Intel at this point. So, good for them, you know. Um, but for me, it was something that I decided, I'm just gonna go take it semester by semester, and uh, eventually, I got to liking it. Uh, in, in college. So.

PL: Um, so then how did you decide to go to grad school?

MW: Yeah, I thought about grad school...when you're a senior, or in the junior year and you have to take these tests, you have to prepare a year in advance. And so I didn't know what I wanted to do with my degree. Um, and so, well, what did the graduating seniors in chemical engineering do, or did at uh, at Caltech? Remember, there was no internet. I couldn't just, you know, email someone, uh, at some other schools, and so communication was very much restricted to those at, uh, easy, easy communications, to those that were, you know, in that community. And so, I guess, a lot went to grad school. So I thought, "Oh okay, well, I guess I'll look into grad school." A few went to go get jobs, uh, there were some, quite a bit of uh, opportunities for jobs in chemical engineering in the Southern California region. Um...so I applied, I took the GREs, and then applied to places, and uh, and...but I think for me, I didn't feel I was ready to go get a job. It was just something that didn't excite me. [PL: Mhm.] I didn't have that passion for it. [PL: Mhm.] So I said, you know, let's just go with the flow. I mean if people are thinking graduate school is what they've been going in and doing, then maybe I'll explore that a little bit more. Jobs, I'll do it, but you know, I'll just talk to a few companies. But I didn't—it wasn't something that excited me. And so, so that, just by process of elimination. [PL: Mhm.] I said, alright, well, this is uh, less important to me, let's focus my energies on grad school.

PL: Okay.

MW: Yeah.

TH: So did your parents go to college?

MW: They did not, they did not. Um, they... when they dropped me off at Caltech, they said, "See ya!" Um, that was a big deal for them. Um, it cost them a lot of money, first of all. Um, and...yeah, there's financial aid and whatnot, but for first-generation, I mean, it's a lot of money. And for them, they...it was a family decision, also. Because they had to spend and borrow money, et cetera. [PL: Mhm.] And, but education. That's part of the As—Chinese culture. Education, go get that degree. And so they supported that, big-time. What my major was, they didn't know. They just assumed if I get a degree, I'll probably make lots of money, right. Um, so that was uh, and that was because my dad wasn't educated. But they appreciate, they knew the uh, the, the, the importance of education.

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My dad uh, to your question, Tian-Tian, is that he, his highest degree? Sixth grade. Yeah. Um, he could've been great, actually, my dad. Um, but that's the circumstances. My mom, she graduated from high school in Hong Kong, got married, started a family. Yeah. When we all moved to California, that's when she uh, got uh, she went to college to get an associate's degree. And so uh, and that, that's the extent of, of, of the education of my parents. So it's a little different, isn't it? So, I was the first one basically in my family to go on to get a, an advanced degree, and then to go on to grad school, and still to this day my parents say, "When are you going to go get a real job?" [all laugh] I'm still in school! So, of course they joke now, but uh, "Are you joking, are you...?" Um, so, but to your question, uh, they, they appreciate the, the, the, the, the, the education, but they weren't educated themselves. I think it's kind of the—well, I don't want to oversimplify, but um...I think it's kinda common. You know, I think uh, part of the experience. In any case, yeah. Are your parents like that too, or are they educated, and uh, and had degrees, and things like that? I'm curious.

TH: Mine are probably more educated than I'll ever be, [laughs] they have PhD's.

MW: Ahh, very good.

PL: My grandparents were like your parents, I guess.

MW: Gotcha, yeah.

PL: Um, so how was the atmosphere at MIT like? Were there a lot of Asian Americans? Or did you find yourself...?

MW: It's a very different world, again. Uh, so that's when I went to MIT, I went to MIT for grad school, and *way* across country. And uh, and again, *sharp* people, right. Really smart. But at that time, everyone's geeky around you, okay. Uh, but what was the culture like, it was um...there were not that many Asians. It was, it was very—at least in chemical engineering, [**PL:** Mhm.] there were not as many Asians as I thought there would be. So as I went from Sacramento to Caltech, I would say there were less Asians around. Okay, and then going from Caltech to MIT, there were even less. [**PL:** Mhm.] I noticed that, but I never thought, "why." I just accepted it for what it was. Um, at least in my field anyway. So, but other than that it was, it was a fine school, I learned a lot, and so that was certainly, from my experience there, that made me decide, yeah, I, I definitely want to be a professor. [**PL:** Mhm.] Yeah. I didn't know I wanted to be a professor going in, I was just trying to not go get a job. [laughs] Uh, but uh, that was um, but that was an important part of my life to spend those number of years away from everyone, to, to really strike out on my own as an independent person. Because once you're in grad school, at least on the STEM side, uh, they pay you to get a degree. You know, I don't—my parents didn't have to pay anything, I didn't have to pay anything, I get a little stipend per month. And uh, so it's my advisor who paid for my tuition and, and stipend. And so I was off on my own, I was my true independent self, and, and, and that was uh, that was a formative set of years there. [**PL:** Mhm.] So, yeah.

PL: So how did you decide to become a professor, like, stay in academia?

MW: Yeah, I didn't want to get a job. [**PL:** You didn't want to get a job?] [laughs] I had the opportunity to uh, and MIT was great uh, in that program where they had PhD students, um...have the opportunity to get a master's degree. The master's degree is called a master's, uh, in chemical-engineering practice, okay. And uh, it's, it's a very well known degree, especially in the chemical industries. And for PhDs, I got my B.S. at Caltech, then I went to MIT to get my PhD. Um, but they also offered this M.C.E.P., this professional master's, uh, chemical-engineering practice degree. Um, half of the people do it, so I did it. Um, and that was when I took a semester off from research, and then, to take a bunch of courses, and then during this one semester, exce—essentially do an internship at two companies. Um, but at a high level.

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You had to present, analyze a problem, provide a solution, and I did it at two companies. And um, one was a drug company, one was a chemical company, uh, I mean really hardcore chemical engineering. And after that I said, "Thank you very much, I'm gonna pick up my degree," picked it up, I said, "I do not want to work for industry!" [laughs] Or in industry. I wanted to be my own boss, uh, in a way. And I wanted to work on problems that excited me. They were working on important problems, but I wanted, for me, to work on important problems, but also problems that got me really amped up. [PL: Mhm.]

And so that was when I then asked my old profe—my profess—former professor, "So, what's it like to be a professor?" You know. Of course I could see her, what she was doing, but uh, and that's when we started to talk a little bit more, and that's when she helped me to, to do the things that made it easier for me to apply for faculty positions, so. [PL: Mhm.] And I also like to teach, too. That was a thing too. You know, my teaching—hear from all my good teachers, uh, and I did tutoring in high school, and then college I did a little bit of that, um, and then in grad school I, you know, TA'd a class, uh, and um, I liked—I like teaching. It just, it's uh, it's fun, I get a kick out of it. I mean, do you guys tutor or anything like that, uh, [PL: In high school.] in high school? Um, it's just, you know, for me, if I can explain something that's uh, in a way to someone, to, to, to a student, uh, and I define students very broadly, and they get it. Oh man, that's, it's amazing. It's just a little thing. They say, "Ohh," and they're thinking, and then that, and then that, that, that's impactful. And so it's, it's a little, little bit of a kind of mini-high, you know. Uh, and so I get that when I teach classes every year. Um, but so, that was where I decided, you know, I like my research, but I also like teaching. And that's when my former advisor said, "You know what, maybe you should think about being a professor." So...you guys thinking about professor down the road, way down the road? [all laugh] I, I tell, I tell everyone, you know, just keep your options open, you know. Uh, but also, my way is not the best way, it's one way. But it worked for me, it's just process of elimination. Um, you don't know what you don't know. Uh, life experiences will open up your eyes in so many ways, today, tomorrow, next year, you just cannot predict where you're going to be six months from now, twelve months from now. It's, it's crazy to think you can read the future and predict the future. So, keep all options open. But if there are things you don't like, well, start to shave them off, you know. And uh, if you haven't shaven off the idea of going to uh, grad school for uh, for advanced degrees, then that's an option on the table. So, so maybe you might be professors down the road, so.

PL: Um, okay, so did you face any challenges, like, as an Asian American in the engineering field?

MW: Yes, yeah, yeah. [PL: Okay.] Big-time. Um, and that was probably in, in graduate school, when I started to be aware. And I would say self-aware. Because there were so few Asians, uh, my old boss was uh, Asian, actually. She was uh, Chinese. Not Chinese American, she was um, she was born in Asia, but then moved over, uh, and then grew up in the, in America. So, and actually I don't know, I should ask her that. Um, but she was a, she was a role model, I mean, to me. She was one of the few Asians, uh, in the department as a professor. [PL: Mhm.] I was kind of a bit—you know, you don't think about, I didn't think about these things. Um, and until I think back about it, I said, that's maybe one of the small reasons why I, I gravitated towards her. I didn't know how to articulate that, I didn't say, "Oh, she's Asian, therefore I'm gonna go talk to her." It just sort of happened like that. Um, and so there's a lot of...so, and then she happens to be one of the few females within my field. You know, there's not that many females in the engineering field, in chemical engineering we do a little bit better than other engineering majors, um, but that was something that—that wasn't a thing for me. I was just, I just got along with her a lot, really well.

Um, and so...but then going through it, when she said, "Oh, you know you should think about being a professor," I started to then, started to pay attention. Well, how many professors here *are* Asian? One, two, maybe? You know, I don't see them, but you see the name on the website. That's when I started to think deeply about these things. And that, I was uh, my eyes opened up big-time. And then, and then in thinking about that, then I think about my interactions with people now. You know, through the lens of

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being, well, American, but being Asian. And it explained, explained a lot of things. Things that didn't make sense to me, you know, the year before, "Ohh." And so, it was, it was uh, these are the little things. There wasn't any particular event or anything like that. Uh, but definitely I would say in grad school, that was, that was when I became very aware of being Asian. And what it meant to be Asian, too. [PL: Mhm.] I didn't know how to differentiate Asian and Asian American. And then all that, there's all these categories, and, and um, so there's that little bit of maturation that I had to go through. Um, so, yeah. So I don't know if that answers your question, but maybe that talks a little bit about my experiences, I guess. [PL: Mhm.] But there's a lot to unpack, I would say, so yeah.

TH: So what were some of the things that started to make sense when you thought about being Asian?

MW: Yeah, um...I hadn't thought about that, uh, um, although I should have thought about it since we scheduled this thing. Um...I'll have to get back to that. I, I, I, yeah, it's um, there were things. Just a lot of little things [TH: Yeah.] little micro-interactions, you know. That uh, and, and...yeah. Huh. These are fun questions, by the way, really fun questions. Oh, I'll tell you one, I'll give you an example. Um, who, who do you hang out with after classes? Who do you hang out with in your dorm, right, in your college, right? [PL: Mhm.] So it's a rhetorical question, but for me, uh, in grad school, um—college something similar, but we'll talk about the grad-school stages. I lived in a, in a, in a house with some other chemical-engineering graduate students who were all, I mean, very diverse. Right, it wasn't a big deal at all. And so, right, so I would hang out with them, right, uh, for certain things. If we had a house party, definitely, they're all good friends. And then I have another group of friends from my lab, you know, so we'd get together all the time, um, and uh, actually a subset of us loves to play golf, that's why I learned how to play golf. And uh, and so, we kind of hang out with certain people. Um, and then there are other labmates where I don't hang out playing golf, but I hang out talking about research. So we have—so you have different groups, right. And uh...and uh, I met my, my wife there at some point, uh, maybe towards my fourth year there, and so uh, so that was that little group there. And so, but before that, um, so that was when I spent a lot of time with my wife, uh, at that time girlfriend. Um, but before that, you know, what were my group of friends? And so at Caltech, I had my kind of group of Asian friends. At MIT, did I have an Asian group of friends? I didn't, you know. I could have, and I'd been to those parties, but uh, but it was something that didn't occur to me as a thing. Um, but until I started to think and—I suppose, suppose going through this maturation process and so, um, again there wasn't any particular incident that would say, or you know, these are more sort of micro-interactions. Things that uh, sort of came about that made me think and reflect a little bit, who do I hang out with? And at MIT, I hung out with certain people, but not as a group. So there wasn't like an Asian group I hung out with. And so I thought, Oh, that's curious. I had that at Caltech, but not here. So you know, that was an example of my...thinking about my own Asian experience. Asian—Asian American experience, I guess. So yeah.

PL: Okay. Um...okay, so then how did you come to Rice from—did you come straight from MIT?

MW: I did. I did. [PL: Okay.] I, I, I um, um, just for the job. [PL: Mhm.] Uh, at that time, I—it's, it's very interesting, uh, at least to me, is uh, I just came here for the job, right. [PL: Mhm.] I knew about Rice, Rice is excellent in, in, in chemical engineering, nanotechnology was becoming a thing of its own. Um, and I applied to different places, but my family's back in California, [PL: Mhm.] so they, they asked, oh, you know, I should think about coming back to California. I just want a job. [laughs] It doesn't matter where. And I wasn't married at the time, and so I could have stayed on the east coast, it's just getting a job. I was—at that, by that point, I had done enough traveling, I felt um, I became a little bit more worldly I would say. Um, uh, but I was, I was very open, you know, to, to working in any part of the country. And so, Texas. I had a good friend from college who was from Texas and uh, came from Houston actually. And so, and I remembered, oh, yeah, um, you know, he told me about Rice, and, and, that name, you know, kept on uh, sticking in my head. And one of my labmates, uh, classmates at MIT, came from Rice. So I applied to Rice, and, and yes, there was internet by that time, and so I looked it up, "oh, that looks

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pretty good.” Um, came here for the job, I mean, very simply, interviewed for the job, and uh, and they gave me the position. Um, and uh, and at that time I said I will come, but I want to take a year off before starting, so give me a year kind of delay, so I can go back to California, do some post-doctoral training, and then before starting my job in 2001. [PL: Mhm.] So yeah.

PL: Um, do you feel like you've had to like, I don't know, I mean this might not be a question you know the answer to, [MW: Mhm.] um, but do you feel like you've had to work harder as an Asian American in engineering to like, either be recognized or to get opportunities? Or do you think it's pretty, I don't know, objective?

MW: Yeah. It's um, that was probably where, in, in starting my job here, again just kind of following sort of my experiences from MIT, uh, even—it probably started there already. Um, which is...I'm already a little different. [PL: Mhm.] Okay, um...I don't speak with an accent, but I *look* Asian. Okay. Um, and so you gotta deal with those stereotypes, and so you gotta deal with people's expectations. Uh, so it's one of those things you learn over the years, where you kinda have a sense of—have these folks interacted with Asians before, [PL: Mhm.] okay? And sometimes they have, sometimes they don't. You can tell probably in the first five seconds, right. Um, and it took me, you know, some years to kinda develop that awareness of it. And it's all good, you know, I don't take it, you know, either good or bad, I just—they just don't have that experience. And so some people are just very uncomfortable. Just uncomfortable. Have you seen that before? They're just, they're just uncomfortable. I mean, not to say that they're, [groans] like, you know, they're just—they just don't know how to say “hi.” [PL and TH laugh] You know, it's just kind of weird, right. And then others, it's just, “hey,” you know, just—there's a real difference there. And so it's not, uh, I would say, something that occurs all the time, but certainly I am prepared for it. And so whether at my job here as department chair meeting people, me just being out there. Houston's great actually. Um, but when I first moved down to, to, to Houston, I mean, it was such a different world for me also in all the different—good ways and bad ways too. Um, and so that's when I started to formulate my own, figure out what I am. [PL: Mhm.] And what is my identity? You know, I'm Asian American. I'm Chinese American. Um, and so I feel like I have to represent properly for, for *us* you might say. Um, and so...what was your question? [laughs] Patricia? Priscilla, sorry.

PL: Like, um, have you exp—do you feel like you've had to work harder?

MW: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, so, so, so it kind of goes together towards that, I have to feel—I feel like I have to represent n—where I am now, [PL: Mhm.] I feel I have a responsibility to, not just myself, my family, and Rice, but you know, for I guess my community, I guess, you know. [PL: Mhm.] Uh, I take ownership in, in, in being part of this more communal uh, um, uh, part of, of, of this, uh, the group, I would say. Um, not that I go out and sort of evangelize and talk about things. But um, I'm aware of it, and so do I have to work harder? Yes I do. Um, especially when I was starting off as an assistant professor, even as a graduate student, I felt like I had to work a little harder. I didn't know why I had to feel like I had to work harder. [PL: Mhm.] It was one of those things where I had to learn, you know. I'm, you know...my, my work was pretty good just like that other person, and yet that person, you know, got this award, or something like that, you know. [PL: Mhm.] Why is that? You know, and uh, it wasn't anything, you know—well it wasn't anything, “Oh, well it was because you're Asian, you didn't get it.” [PL: Mhm.] It was just more like people get—are attuned to certain ways of doing things. And so, well, I didn't like that. My work is just as good if not better. Uh, so that upset me. [PL: Mhm.] So but, how—for me, how do you cope for s—with a situation like that? You do with the things, and deal with the things that are within your control, which is to work harder, okay. So absolutely, you know, uh, I did work harder. Um, how much harder did I work? I don't know. Um, but did I feel like I had to work harder? Yeah, I did. [PL: Mhm.] Um, was it because I, I was a, I was a Asian American, or, or, or, or Asian, or—I don't know. At that time, I didn't, I couldn't figure it out, but I just felt like I had to work harder. I felt like I had to pop out in a different—in a different way. And so I was very well aware of that.

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Now, thinking now asking me that question, is it because I'm Asian? Maybe, I don't know. Uh, if it's 100%, 50%, or 25%. I'm an engineer, you know, so I break it down by numbers. But I think there's a, there's an important component there, so yeah. [PL: Mhm. Okay.]

TH: So people talk about like, the bamboo ceiling. Um, so did you feel a difference between like, more entry-level jobs and then higher-level jobs?

MW: Yeah, uh, the bamboo ceiling, that's an interesting one, right. So you got the glass ceiling, right. [TH: Yeah.] And then the bamboo ceiling. Um...I think it goes together. Uh, I think it's uh—is uh, is there one for me, you're asking? I don't know. It's kind of weird for me to think about that way, because if there is a ceiling, I haven't hit that yet. Um...do I have to work harder? Do I have to work harder on the things that I do now? Absolutely. Now do I have to work harder than other people because I'm Asian? I don't think about it that way, I just, I just have to work harder because everyone just is really awesome, you know. Um, is there...but the, but the question might be uh, phrased, you know, is there a glass—a bamboo ceiling in the work that I do, which is as a professor. I'd say it depends on how high you want to go up as a professor. And so if you want to be a professor, well, I'm a professor. Uh, I guess I broke through the, the bamboo ceiling, I'm very happy, okay. But if there's another professor who says, you know, "I want to be a um, you know, a university president at some other—some school, at some point in the future." Uh, and you can't—and that person can't get there, well then maybe there, then you hit that ceiling. Um, so I'm just a professor here, uh, I'm a department chair, so which is—I still do what I do, but I kind of manage the, the, the faculty, staff and the students and uh, um, for the whole—so for the, for the department of chemical engineering, and my boss is the dean of uh, of engineering. Um, so...at least at Rice, I don't think, I don't feel that there is a bamboo ceiling, so to speak. Um, and I can't say that about what might be out there in the, in the real world, right. [laughs] We are very lucky at Rice because we, you know, we are the real world, but we are very, we're very—we do things the right way, I would say. So.

PL: Okay. Um... [asks TH a question in background]

MW: [laughs]

PL: Okay, this um, this just ties back into like, current news, or like I guess a couple weeks ago, [MW: Yeah.] and is still ongoing. It's like um, what's your opinion on like, um, conflict over affirmative action, um, since you deal with students as well as like, on administration side?

MW: Yeah, yeah. So, how do you guys feel about that? The Harvard thing right? [PL: Mhm.] Yeah. Well actually I don't know, what does the, what does the Asian community of students feel about the whole Harvard thing that—the lawsuit that's going on now? I'm curious first.

TH: So personally, like, I feel like it hasn't hurt me [MW: Yeah.] because I made it here and that's like, good enough. Um, so...I, like, I support it, I want more minority students to have like, a better chance of getting into Harvard, [MW: Yeah.] but my mom is very angry about it.

MW: Angry about it. [TH: Yeah.] That and she would like it to not be that way?

TH: Yeah.

MW: Mm. How about you Priscilla?

PL: I don't know. I guess I'm also like, biased in like, I've made it this far, [MW: Yeah.] so like, I don't really have I guess—if I were on the other end of like, not being able to get to a school maybe [MW:

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Yeah.] because of affirmative action, I don't know, I can see both ways. Um, and I haven't really formed an opinion, just because I've like, I guess like, gotten to where I wanted to be. So it's hard. [MW: Mhm, mhm.] But just like, from your experience like, talking to students, or maybe they haven't talked about it, or...

MW: No, we haven't talked about it. In fact, that's one of those things that um, that I don't do as much as I'd like to, you know. And sometimes we bring it up in class about other things. Um, but that's, that's an interesting topic, uh, because it did, um, I mean it ties, it ties into my experience, uh, in a little bit. Um, it's good that you guys have a, you know...thank you for sharing, actually. Um, I like it that when people know both sides of the, of the issue and uh, to be informed about it, whether or not you have an opinion, or made a decision or sort of a, a strong opinion one way or the other, the fact that you're informed I think is the first step. A lot of people just [groans] you know. Um, for me, my opinion, come—is um, is flavored by the fact that I am sort of—I'm a professor. I teach, you know, I'm sort of part of the administration, so I, I get where they're coming from. Um, but I also speak from someone who tried to apply to Harvard. I didn't get in, okay. Um, so how did I feel about that? How do I feel about it now? Um, so...it's hard, it's such a hard thing. [PL: Mhm.] On one hand, you want to provide opportunities to everyone that uh, that deserves it, okay. “Deserve” is sort of a, you know, it's a very fluffy word, right. Then there's another objective where you want to have a student body that represents, uh, sort of a uh...that provides the full life experience to, to the university that is reflective of the diverse nature of the, of the, of the, of the country. So that's another objective. Uh, and then there's the university objective which is, you know, uh, there's based on history, you know, uh, good and bad, that uh, they, they, they want to make their alums happy. [PL: Mhm.] Okay, so there's, there's multiple objectives there. Um, and so, and that's why I don't say there's one way that works well at all schools, okay. But I think you have to be fair, um, but at the end, by favoring one group means you automatically disfavor another one because the, the, the pie is only so big, there's only so many number of slots. It's a hard question to—it's a hard problem to solve.

Um... I don't have an answer to it, but I will s—I'll take the logical sort of step by step, in one way, which is if you go completely based on GPA, right, and SAT scores and, and, and, and academic metrics, [laughs] I think I'd be pretty confident to say that uh, at a school, let's just say school "X", right, that Asians would flood. Alright, that, that that's um, the population there. Not 100%, but I mean 40%, 50%. I mean, why, because we're, we...that's part of our culture, education is built in. Um, and also life circumstances too, we can afford it, and we're, we're willing to, I don't know, to, to sacrifice for the, for the sake of education, and uh, and other families can't do that. Or they may not—they're unable to do that. And so there's already some self-selection there, and so the, the, the real question is, do you try to break through that, do you try to help them out by providing that additional help? Because if you just go straight off numbers, then, then it just favors those who are already doing well. And I think that's one of the issues that, that Harvard, representing universities, are going through right now. [PL: Mhm.] How much role does the university have to help the full population? Okay, so if Harvard just says, “I want to just bring in the best people,” well then your—the best people are going to come from the top richest folks. So you just self—sort of self-propagate there. And so what about the folks in the, you know, 99% down here, 50%? So there's that level of, of uh, societal responsibility that each university will have to have. Um, and so Rice has done a good job, when they said, “Oh, you know, we're going to support all students whose family income is less than ten thou—100,000,” or something like that. [PL: Mhm.] I mean, that's amazing. Um, and um...now, should all schools do that? I don't know, you know. Johns Hopkins, they got this huge uh, contribution from uh, from uh, Mayor Bloomberg, right who came to give the commencement, uh, speech last spring. And he's given the university, *that* university, like one-point-something billion dollars or something like that to, to give free tuition. I mean, my goodness, that's amazing. But that's at one school too. So...common to all universities I think are the—are those, those different bound—or those different, um, objectives there. How do you achieve all those objectives well?

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You can't. How do you balance it between? I think that's what each school is going to have to struggle through, okay.

Um, so to the point about the Harvard—and those, those are my opinions, by the way. So I don't have a solution to it. Um, I think having affirmative action is important, because I think we as a, you know, as, as, as a country and nation, need to support those who are less well-off or unable to break through their wall, their ceilings, okay. Just like we have a bamboo ceiling, there's other populations and other groups that have their own ceilings. And so, you know, those folks at the bottom, you know, they can't help—they can't. You know, and so to say that oh, they don't deserve because they're not working hard enough, that's, that's not right. And so, for me that, that's a little bit of life philosophy too, [PL: Mhm.] and so, um, what should Harvard do? I don't know. [PL: Mhm.] Okay. Um. But those are some of my thoughts there.

PL: Okay. Um, so what is exciting about your career today? And do you have any foreseeable challenges in the research or like, work that you do?

MW: Yeah, um, I love my work, uh, I love teaching, I love doing research. I love making this department better. I love making the university better. Um, you know, and, well, research is research, uh, you know, it's kind of like a day-to-day thing. And so I wouldn't say there's a particular challenge, more the sort of detailed challenge, you know, "Golly, why doesn't this experiment work today? [PL: Mhm.] Why can't we get this one grant funded?" So those are, I would say, um, normal, uh, struggles that uh, we as professors go through. Maybe, uh, a, a broader question is, you know, um, you know, what are the bigger challenges going forward for maybe, um...is it for me or for the department, uh, Priscilla? [PL: Um...] What do you, what, what, how...what kind of answer do you want?

PL: Um, for you.

MW: For me. Golly. Uh, just to do good, I guess, [PL: Okay.] you know. Um, you know, but I would say one thing I'd like to do more of, which is, is to learn more about, you know...the Asian American experience from the student level. [PL: Mhm.] Thinking back about it now, now that I'm sort of where I am, I, I have time to reflect a little bit more. And I do teach students in my class, and uh, and uh, but I think more things at a, at a bigger level, you know, um...how do the students deal with this, uh, sort of issue about uh, um, you know, about identity, okay? Uh, how do *you* work through it now? Thinking about my time at Caltech, I, I kind of struggled it through myself, but I had a little, you know, group of, you know, Asian kids who just hung out, and uh, and uh, and that was helpful for me. Um, and so, but that was not *too* long ago, but yeah it's kind of long ago now. Um, so I'm curious to know, going forward, you know, what *are* the challenges for you guys, you know? And do you guys think about this deeply? I know you're doing this as part of the uh...how do you call it, H-A-A-A? Or do you have a separate name for it?

PL & TH: HAAA.

MW: HAAA? HAAA. [PL: Yeah, just call it HAAA.] [TH laughs] Uh, I think it's great what you're doing, I think what Anne's doing, I think, is great for the, for the, for the community also. And so if anything, I'm much more aware of the, of—that there is a thing, okay. Have you guys seen that, you know, *Crazy Rich Asians*? [PL & TH: Mhm.] Uh, what did you guys think of that movie?

TH: Well, I don't love rom-coms in general, but I was purely just happy to see Asians in a movie. [MW and PL: Yeah.]

MW: Same—same for you, or different?

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PL: Yeah, I think, yeah, I like seeing representation. But at the same time, like, it could go bad and like, people just think of Asians as like, being rich and stuff. [**MW:** Yeah.] So there's also like, pros and cons.

MW: Yeah. Um, for me, I watched it, I loved it, I was surprised I loved it. [**TH & PL** laugh] Um, but for me, yeah, it just, there's a whole thing too about Asian representation in the movies right, I mean that's a thing in and of itself. Um, but for me, I was—I felt proud. [**PL:** Mmm.] And uh, the story was good, I liked it, uh, and uh, I think it was so, so crazy rich that I think it's a, it's a caricature, I don't think people will say that all Asians are like that. [**PL:** Mhm.] Uh, I happen to love the country of Singapore, so it makes me laugh, you know, uh, seeing some of the things they talk about. Um, but the fact for me, what really made it for me, was that it differentiated the experiences of the Chinese with the Chinese Americans, or Asians with Asian Americans. [**PL:** Mhm.] That was one of the struggles that I have with not just faculty, but just I would say, just uh, people in, in academics I would say. And I think that's, that's a fair thing to say. There's a lot of Asians—professors, okay, in the STEM side especially. But we're, we're not all the same. [**PL:** Mhm.] Okay. There's Asians, and there's Asian Americans. Uh, a lot of Chinese, not that many Chinese Americans. Okay. Some Koreans, fewer Korean Americans. You kind of go down the line like that. [**PL:** Mhm.] Okay. Uh, not very many Vietnamese, very few Vietnamese Americans. So...for those who don't think about it who has not had that experience, um, at other, at other schools. Here we do a much better job, but there are some other schools that are very, very different. And...it's all the same. It's just Asians. So I think that's one of the struggles and one of the things, uh, I want to do, see what I can do to kind of help bring better awareness to it, and I think having a movie like that that came out, that differentiates, just to compare and contrast, and they did it in a very nice and gentle way. Um, and that, that spoke volumes for me, and I think that same message I think is very applicable, um, and uh, to, to those who are in my area of work, the academic world, so.

PL: So how do you balance work and family life?

MW: Not easy. [laughs] Uh, my, my two little girls, they're 10 years old and 6 years old, and I have a loving wife, but we juggle. Juggle, juggle, juggle. Um, and you know, I'm, I'm not, I'm not a woman, uh, and I try to do my best to understand the challenges of being a woman and a mother. Um, but there's just certain things that are very women-specific, you know, um, that, that—they just have to spend, they just have to do all the things that uh, that men just can't do. Um, and uh, so, so my job as uh, as a department chair—and to be aware as a faculty is to be even more supportive of uh, female faculty who are mothers, okay. Because they're not only worrying about their teaching, and their research, but they have a family at home too. Um, and so, and that's a unique experience that I think that uh, um, whether you're Asian or not, that's something that um, um, I try to do as department chair to make better. Now, how do I balance it for myself? It's not easy. Uh, we have nanny help for sure, but our kids are that age where they're going to all sort of dance things like that. So scheduling is very important, and our family don't—do not live in Houston, they live outside. And so um, how, the answer is um, toughly. [all laugh] But it's a day-to-day ba—day-to-day basis. Every semester is different, every week is different. And you just manage. [**PL:** Mhm, okay.] So yeah.

PL: Um, so you said you met your wife at MIT?

MW: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

PL: Let's see. And how—er, how have you—dhave you been involved in the Asian American community? I know you said you want to be more involved.

MW: Yeah, I, I haven't. Um, so when I moved down to Houston, um, my...I moved down to Houston after I had come down to Houston only twice before. *Once* before, for my interview, okay. [**PL:** Mhm.] Uh, and um, had a nice interview, and, and, and, and really loved what I saw. And uh, and the department

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loved what they saw, and then we shook hands, and then got the job. And when I moved down to Houston, okay, um...I did, I did not realize how many Asians there were. That's how, how s—not aware I was of these things. I was just literally, came down here for the job. Um, I knew there were Asians, and one of the professors in this department, George Hirasaki, he's Asian, [PL: Mhm.] and so uh, and um, that was nice. But you know there was this huge Chi—there's two Chinatowns, right, and of course one's more kinda, uh, the old one and the, and the, and the EaDo right, the sort of east of Downtown, and then there's the Bellaire side. And at that time um, they didn't take me there. They didn't talk about it, and that was fine. Um, so it was a surprise for me when I moved down here, and then George says, "Oh, let's go to Chinatown for dinner." "Huh, what?" [all laugh] I heard about it, but uh, but then he, eh, his wife at that time—I was single, and Susan was at uh, at medical school. So we went to dinner at night, and so all the lights, I mean it—my mind was blown. [PL laughs] It reminded me of San Francisco, uh, and that was close—that was close to Sacramento. I said—I was flabbergasted, honestly. I, I honestly did not—I assumed it was just all cowboys and cowboy boots. I mean, that was how little I knew about Texas and Houston.

Uh, and so I was continued to be surprised about Houston and, and the Asian community. There's a lot of Asian communities here, and so I—because of the juggling of family and work, I just don't have um...that sort of—not so much time, the interest is there, not to make an excuse of it. I want to know more about it. Um...having said that, we were connected—we *were*—less so now because of all the scheduling stuff with the uh, Taiwanese community. Uh, my wife is from Taiwan, um, and so, we hooked up with the Taiwanese community, uh, taking with us Sunday—uh, Saturday language classes and things like that, and helping with their, with their uh, event and things like that, volunteering especially, with my wife. Uh, I helped by, by paying tuition for my Chinese class. [PL: Mhm.] I learned to—I learned finally my Chinese writing, uh, through, through, through the uh, Saturday classes that I took with my two daughters. [PL: Oh, okay.] Yeah. They were, they were in level 3 and 4, and uh, I was in level...they didn't call it zero, [TH & PL laugh] but it could have been zero. Uh, I knew some Japanese before, but uh, to speak it, uh, and, and Mandarin. Uh, I wanted to learn Mandarin, um, and uh, and that was not easy for me. [PL: Mhm.] Um, but I did it, it was cool. Um, I did it for a couple of years. And so that was my way of kind of giving back. And that was where I learned there was a really, just—there are a lot of Asians who were outside of academics—my world is academics, that's my world, um, and uh, and the chemical industry. But yeah, it was, it was nice to see. So, but to the point, yeah, I haven't connected too much with the Asian community. And so when I had lunch with uh, with Anne a while back, she was telling me all about this, I mean, she was telling me *these* stories [PL: Mhm.] about the folks that were interviewed, and uh, through HAAA. [PL: Mhm.] And I was like, man, that's amazing stuff, and so um, so I think that the food culture here, I think that that's such an important part of the Houston history, but it ties in so much with the, with the Asian American history, I think. [PL: Yeah.] Yeah, so.

TH: Do you now go to Chinatown to like, grocery shop or eat often?

MW: Oh, after that, after that dinner, every week. [all laugh] Uh, it's really blown up, I mean, I would say in the last um...are you guys from Houston or from outside?

TH: I'm from Houston.

MW: Okay. [to PL] Where are you from?

PL: South Carolina.

MW: South Carolina, excellent. Uh, and uh, it was just um, it just exploded, and uh, and uh, it's *Asia* town, right. It's not what we call it, Chinatown, but it's Asia town. Uh, but it's been really nice to see, um, and so, no, we go there every other week I would say. We don't go to Chinese class anymore, and so we

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don't go there as often. Um, and so I wished they have a little, little—I wish the Metro, there was a Metro stop. [laughs] Do you go there every, uh...?

TH: Yes.

MW: Good. Very good. [laughs]

PL: Um, okay. So what makes you most proud of being an Asian American?

MW: What makes me so proud, wow. Um...I think just representing, you know, um, I think the things—not to say I, that uh, you know, what, what am I trying to say? Um...I guess me doing what I'm doing and me being the face of this department, for my group, for the university, uh, representing the, the department, um, the—I think that makes me, that makes me feel good about what I do for my job. But the fact that I'm Asian American I think makes me feel extra special. There's—why? Because there's not that many of us that are kind of in the same role. You'll see them around, and so—but they, not to say that it's a numbering, counting thing. You know, I'm not counting who's doing what, but it's just uh, representing, you know, what we are as a, as a, as a, as a city. And um, there are a number of Asian Americans, uh, in, as the professor level, [**PL:** Mhm.] but also in the administration level, so it's been nice to see. Um, so I feel like I'm doing my part to—of course not only doing what I'm doing as a chemical-engineering professor, um, but also as an Asian American. So I feel like it's almost like a uh, responsibility now. [**PL:** Mhm.] So and I think that comes—maybe I guess I'm self-reflecting a little bit here, which is now, now that where, where I'm at, now that I'm seeing my kids grow up, and seeing how they're responding and absorbing things, and uh, and...I feel a true responsibility to represent the Asian American community. And so whatever I do, it's through that lens now. And so when did I become aware of this? I don't know, it's a sort of evolved process. So um, but that's how I feel now. So...other things on your mind. [laughs]

PL: [laughs] Okay, um, well I guess we can ask, uh, what are some of your proudest accomplishments so far?

MW: Oh gosh. [**PL:** I mean, yeah. [laughs]] Yeah, well, that, that's just a bunch of work stuff. [gestures toward certificates in office] I, I would say uh, I'm still active in doing what I'm doing, and so um, you know, all the—kind of all those things right there. Oh, this is my office by the way, so, my corner office. But uh, these are—all those things on the wall, those are my awards. Uh, very cool, very awesome. And then uh, my most recent ones [gets up to walk closer to plaques] were, were this guy here. This one came out this year, uh, the American Chemi—I'm a chemical engineer, but I do chemistry also. And so um, uh, they select me as a fellow of this uh, this professional society. Um, and there was one that is um, is a, is a important tie for me. So this one I received this year, it's named after—it's also part of the Chemical Society. But this was from the um, greater Houston section, it's a named award. And see the name right there? [**PL:** Mhm.] Uh, this is the name of the professor who helped hire me here. [**PL:** Ohh.] Yeah, so Joe passed away several years ago now, he's an important name and figure in—not only at the university, but in the Houston community. Uh, and so, so for me, this was one of the things, uh, I guess one of the highlights of this year, which was to receive an award named after the professor who not only hired me, but also took me under his wings. [**PL:** Ohh.] 'Cause he was doing the same research that I, that I'm still doing. [**PL:** Mhm.] So he's kind of like a mentor. [**PL:** Yeah, that's awesome.] You know, to get an award named after your old mentor, it's like, "oh my gosh."

PL: Yeah.

MW: Um, so that was [stammers] I would say something I would highlight for this year. [**PL:** Okay.] Um, but we're still doing great work in uh, I think, you know, in graduating students and creating new ideas on how to clean water. I'm a big, big fan of clean water, I mean who doesn't like clean water? Uh,

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but we use chemical-engineering technology, [PL: Mhm.] and using nanotechnology to do that in a cheaper way and whatnot. Uh so, so you know, that, that, that work will still continue I would say. Um, but yeah.

PL: Okay. Um so... [to **TH**] did you have any questions? No?

MW: You've asked everything you wanted to ask. [PL: laughs] If you had to ask any question, and this is probably the uh, the, the most candid I am, because how often do you get a chance to, to talk to a professor and ask these detailed questions, right? [laughs]

PL: Yeah, exactly. [laughs]

MW: Maybe over college dinner or something like that. [PL & TH laugh] Uh, but hard in class, or in a coffee shop. I love my coffee.

PL: Which one—sorry, did you want to ask it, or...?

TH: Okay, I can ask. So how do you balance your children's Asian and American identities?

MW: Ohh.

TH: I mean, do you talk about it?

MW: That's a good question. We talk about it. We talk about it. Um, they're learning for themselves. Um, about—they're American, number one. Um, they were born here. Uh, but number two, of course they're Asian. Why, because uh, they know that because we go to Chinatown, we talk about it, we hang out with grandparents, we go to Taiwan every couple of years, every other year, uh, or even every year. And uh, or we go see my side of the family, and so they're surrounded by, by, by the Chinese culture all the time. And so, and we took them to Chinese class, uh, for, for many semesters. And so they are aware of their heritage, um, and they are aware of—that they're American. They are both. They recognize it. Um, but they haven't gone through the struggles yet, uh, but they certainly notice that, oh, in their class, there are a few, you know, but it's not uh—at least they're not the only ones. But it's not as if half the class are Asian. And so they—not that they ask these questions, but some of the interactions, uh, no, you know, they haven't—it hasn't come up, I would say. Um, but the questions do come up. For insta—for example, um, you know, “Why do I have to learn Mandarin?”

PL: I know. [MW laughs] [inaudible] Chinese school.

MW: Do you speak Chinese, do you speak Mandarin well? No?

TH: I understand it.

MW: You understand it.

PL: My parents speak Cantonese.

MW: Oh, they speak Cantonese, oh excellent. Do you speak Cantonese?

PL: Oh, not that great.

MW: Not that great? Do you understand it?

PL: Yeah, I understand it.

MW: Um, and so, that's um—so there's that, *that* level of discussion we do have at home. [**PL:** Mhm.] Um, and is it, is it a struggle? It's not a struggle, it's more of a, it's an ongoing sort of discussion, uh, and, and things that, you know, ultimately, they're going to do what they wanna do, but they gotta do it with a passion. And so right now, they—their Spanish is better than their Chinese, put it this way. Um, but at least they're aware of it, they know it's there for them. That when they're ready to dig into it that they, that they can, that they should. Uh, I think people should be acculturated to many languages, and to other, um, countries, and to be, to be, more, you know, worldly, I think. I think that's an important part of, of, of, of um, of just being more well-rounded. And so part of that is learning languages, and for, for them, they know they're Asian, they know they're Asian American. But for them, ah, they're just Americans. It's interesting. So that's going to be my struggle as a parent now, to, to teach them what I know, but also to see them evolve and to kind of help them along the way. So um...but yes, we have those—discussions, not in those terms, but..."You should take Chinese." "No." [**PL & TH** laugh] So.

PL: Okay. Um, is there anything else you'd like to add, um, to the interview?

MW: I could go on and on [**PL:** Yeah.] as you can probably tell. Uh, no, but—[laughs] The things that I've said, is that something, are these the things that uh, are going to be helpful for HAAA?

PL: Yeah, definitely.

TH: Yeah.

MW: Okay, um, I think that one thing for me is at least the Asian American experience within—in Houston, in Texas, I learned a lot from Anne. [**PL:** Mhm.] Okay, and as she compiles these stories and to, to, to continue to support this. Um, and she gave this talk about it, uh, a couple of years ago. That's when I first met her, actually, uh, she gave this really inspiring talk, and um...and that's why I, I was, I mean, uh, I'm not retired yet, you know, uh, and um... [phone rings] we'll let that go away. Yeah okay, um...what was I going to say—I'm going to let that go away first. Um, there's still a lot of things I want to do, uh, as an Asian American professor. Um, and so it's—I would say the things that I want to do, we're still—I'm still a work in progress. There's a lot of things that I think are going to be great. And so, but I'm very mindful of me being an Asian American now, um, you know, that the things that I can do to help the Asian American..."experience" is not the right word. But just uh, just to put the good word out, you know, and just to be more, to represent uh, more actively, I think, I think that's something that that's uh, that's become—especially with my daughters now, they're becoming a little bit, uh, older and, and growing up. That uh, that responsibility, it's, it's uh, I feel it now. [**PL:** Mhm.] Uh, if you ask me five years ago, I mean, I would say, "Hey, I'm just doing my thing," you know, nothing much to say. You know, but, but it's much bigger than me.

This Asian American experience I think is a, is, it's a rich one. And it's uh, from the things that I've learned from HAAA, I've uh, those little stories that I've read a little bit, and the people, and I read the bios, there's some amazing people. Amazing people in Houston, and so, um, and you know, George, my colleague in this department, I mean, he has an amazing story. You know, compared to him I'm boring. [laughs] You know, and he—so, so he's an inspiration for me, and, but, all those before me, I would say, I mean uh, to say they inspired me sounds kinda, kinda like, you know, cheesy, but it's true. They, the things that they do, the little things that they do, I think, uh, big and small, I think it really adds to, to, to the culture of Houston, and so, um, you know, I think as a representative of Rice, as an Asian American, as the university kind of reaches out and works more with the uh, the Houston uh, community. I mean, I think we've done a really good job. You've been here what, three years now, three, both of you, three

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years or so? That um, with the, with President Leebron when he first came on board over ten years ago, one of the things he really focused on was to go, you know, “outside the hedges,” right? [PL: Mhm.] Um, and um, and everything is just really...exciting, and if you add that Asian flavor to it—not just Asian, but Asian American, uh, I think we can bridge the gap, you know. 'Cause there is a gap, right, of understanding and familiarity with uh, with what it means to be Asian, with uh, with non-Asians. And I think that's, that's—I feel that responsibility, you know. I'm not going to get a grade on it, [laughs] [PL: Yeah.] um, so I'll do my little things, big and small, and hopefully what I'm doing here today, uh, contributes towards that in my little small little way. So, how's that sound?

PL: Sounds really good. [laughs] [MW laughs]

PL: Thank you so much for your time.

MW: Good, you're welcome.