Interviewee: Mamie Moy
Interviewers: Sarah Craig, Saima Toppa
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Background:

Mamie Moy was born in 1929 in San Antonio, Texas. Her parents were first-generation immigrants from the Toishan Province of China, her mother having arrived just the year before she was born. Her father owned a grocery store in the East Side of San Antonio, as did her uncle, for whom she worked during the summers. In 1948, her father relocated to Houston to open a grocery store in the Heights.

Mamie attended public elementary and middle school in San Antonio. She then attended the private high school Incarnate Word Academy (now Incarnate Word High School). She studied for one year at Incarnate Word College before transferring to the University of Texas at Austin to complete a degree in chemistry. After briefly working in the industry, she decided to pursue graduate studies at the University of Houston in 1950. She has been there ever since—first as a Master’s student and T.A., then as a faculty member. As a professor of chemistry at U of H, she has revitalized and expanded the graduate program, and she has been active in National Chemistry Week and other outreach programs geared towards children. She has also served on several committees of the American Chemical Society and the Engineering, Science, and Technology Council of Houston, and she has served as the Regional Director of the Associated Chemistry Teachers of Texas. In addition to these academic endeavors, she has also served on the board of the YWCA and the Institute of Chinese Culture.

Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of labor and capital to develop a working history around childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities. Much attention is given to her experiences growing up and her career as a professor of chemistry at the University of Houston.

The interview was conducted in the conference room of the Chao Center for Asian Studies on the campus of Rice University. It lasted approximately an hour and a half. Mrs. Moy began by introducing herself, and then moved on to discuss her childhood, educational experiences, and her career. She also touched upon the experience of being an Asian American woman in academia and the changes which have taken place in the Chinese American community in Houston over the past several decades. She gave us valuable historical information and many wonderful insights, and she was a pleasure to work with.
Interview Transcript:
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— Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
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- Italics: Emphasis
- (?) Preceding word may not be accurate
- Brackets: Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

SC: Hi, I’m Sarah Craig.

ST: And I’m Saima Toppa.

MM: And I’m Mamie Moy.

SC: And we’re here today...um...at the Conference Room of the Chao Center of Asian Studies on Rice campus...uh...on June 13, 2012. And Ms. Moy, would you like to tell us a little about yourself?

MM: Well, I was invited to be part of this historical project. And um, let’s just start out with that I am a faculty member at the University of Houston. And I’ve lived in Houston for...oh gosh...I don’t know my arithmetic well, but for a large number of years. Most of my adult life. And I’ve found that um since coming to Houston, Houston has grown, expanded...um not just literally. But logarithmically, and particularly, with the Asian community. Um the economic growth, everything has changed. And if I look back at what Houston looked like when we first moved here from San Antonio, we can’t find the same streets, we can’t find the houses, and even now, when they tear down buildings that I haven’t been around for a while, I lose all my landmarks and I think that I’m in a different place altogether. So uh, it’s been a very exciting growth and expansion. Not only for my family, but also for myself.

ST: Can you tell—can you tell us a little about your childhood and your upbringing?

MM: My childhood, my upbringing. Well, I’m a true Texan. And I’ve lived in Texas all my life. I’ve been out of Texas. But uh as far as living, this is my—Texas is my home. I was born in San Antonio. Um, shortly after my mother came to the United States and um, grew up in San Antonio. Went to elementary school, high school, and did all of those things that...well, really, did not do all those things that the current normal teenager does. So, life was um a very different from what I see with uh our young people now. And San Antonio, at that time, the Chinese community was probably the largest Chinese community in Texas. And um, but still, it was a very small group and...
there was lots of bonding and also lots of familial activities going on. So, actually, as I can recall growing up, I probably saw more family-type um events and participated in those events more so than now because the group was small, the place was small...we didn’t have to go miles uh to get together and since the community was small, when anybody had a party, anybody had dinner, we got very excited and all attended and we had a great time. So, going to school...um...I guess, let’s see...I’m trying to remember, I went to public school for part of my life. But my best education was in high school, where I went to a private girls’ school. And uh that was a um the Incarnate Word. It’s now called the Incarnate Word High School but at that time it was the Incarnate Word Academy. So, um, you know, brought up in a fairly conservative, sort of strict family. Um, the convent school was no different. [laughs] So, that and uh made—really, that was a great time in my life. And I think that uh what I got there I could not have not gotten at home. Because my parents certainly weren’t able to give me or teach me all of the things that the school offered. Since they were immigrants. And my mother, I have to tell you, did not speak any English. And she refused to speak English ‘til the day she died. And she was 93-98. So, as the grandchildren were growing up, they had to speak Chinese if they wanted Grandmother to know about it. But if they didn’t want Grandma to know, they would speak English. But we learned later that she understood everything they said. But just wouldn’t speak. [laughs]

SC: So, how do you think going to that convent school impacted you? Um, how do you think...do you think your life has kind of taken a different trajectory as a result of that than it would’ve if you hadn’t?

MM: I don’t... [sighs] know for sure. But I do know that because my parents felt so strongly about education, um, the impact is probably not that different. Because, regardless, I think I would’ve gone on to school after high school. Because my sister, who went—older than myself, went to—graduated from public high school. And at that time, you know uh women did not go to college. There was just—unless—just women didn’t to college. But she went on to trade school—vocational school. And since we were younger—my brother and I were younger, well, it was just sort of a given that we would go on to uh...to further our education beyond high school. And the school actually just offered me uh so much more outside of what my parents could provide, outside the Chinese community that could provide. It really opened up the whole world to me.

ST: Mamie, can you tell us, just to rewind... when you were born?

MM: When I was born?

ST: Mm-hm, like the date.

MM: It’s 1929. Shortly after my mother got here. And that was after uh the...well, that’s not even called the Big War. That was after World War One. Okay, so that was a long time ago. And of course, when she came, uh she didn’t speak any English. There were no social services that we have now. I think I was born at home with a midwife. And they kept telling me—and they still keep telling me that that place is still there in San Antonio. And each time I’ve gone, I’ve tried to find it but I can’t. [laughs] I just get lost or I get frustrated, so I go on. But she had no—there were no social services. There was no help for her. Um, or even for us you know, to say, ‘You need to do this,’ ‘You need to do that,’ like we have for our children now. ‘You need to see the doctor,’ ‘Get the
inoculations’ etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. No, we were just, you know, there, just like any other little kid. And uh, fortunately, my dad did see to it that we did get, you know, care—healthcare and dental care. And so that was his— I guess, initiative to go out and reach out to all of the people he knew. And he was uh—he was quite outgoing.

SC: So, you say your parents were immigrants. Do you know what year they came to the U.S.?

MM: My mom probably came you know in twenty—in 1928. And, my dad had been here as a teenager and then um he returned and brought my mom. So—and I don’t know when he came. Because at that time, you don’t keep lots of archives. You don’t keep lots of papers. And I haven’t gone back to try to find it. Um, so, but I was born here in San Antonio and my brother—younger brother—was born two years after mysel—two and a half years? ‘Kay. And so, we’ve all lived here...uh in Texas.

ST: What were the reasons for your parents’ migration to the U.S.? And um, I’m presuming that your mom came because she married...?

MM: Yes. And that you know, even if you go back to the history—that um, coming to the United States and if you’ve read up on these immigration stories and all, this was the Gold—Golden Mountain, right? And so, whenever you came, you were supposed to have a life better than you had in the village. And uh that’s where my mom lived, in the village.

SC: Do you know what village?

MM: No. [laughs]

ST: Do you know any cities or provinces, area of China?

MM: Well, we were just in Toishan. [ST: Toishan?] Yeah, so that’s just in the southern-central—uh southern part of China. And, that’s about it. And I’ve never gone back to the village as many times as I’ve been to China. I’ve not gone back to the village.

ST: What were their occupations in that area before they migrated?

[10:09]

MM: Uh, I don’t know what my dad did. Mom was just a...a mom. Because she had to care for my sister, and care for uh my dad’s mother. You know, the old family structure. The matriarchal structure.

SC: So, did, did you grandmother come with your family to the United States?

MM: I never saw her, I never met her. All I know is, you know, we have a photograph of her. Uh but that’s it. Don’t even know where—when she died or wher—well she died when I was a young kid. But, where she was buried and all, I don’t know.
ST: Do you have any sort of indication of your parents’ uh their class or educational background in China?

MM: Oh, they had none. No education. My mom, being a woman, did not go to school. They did not send the girls to school. And my dad came when he was so young—he didn’t go to school in China. So, he picked up what he had to learn in the U.S. and I think when he came, he was living with uh relatives and I really don’t know which ones.

SC: And I know at this time there were restrictive immigration laws in the U.S. Do you know how your parents got around those, or how—how they got in, in spite of the fact that it was so restrictive?

MM: Uh, my grandfather, as I was told, and I never met him, never—just heard of him, had been brought to the U.S. to work on the railroad. And somehow, some way, he was able then, to use his status to bring my dad over as his son. And all of that come through as, what did they call—what was the general, generic term they used, um for all of these people, um…?

SC: Family reconciliation...?

MM: Uh no, you know, their occupations would be uh like um—we call them retailers now. That kind of thing. So that’s all I know. And so when he came he stayed with relatives and I don’t know too much about that. And then um, he went back, married. And then later on, came back to the States and then later on, brought my mom.

ST: So, um, did your grandfather initially come to Texas or was he in another state?

MM: He was probably in California.

ST: Mm-hm. [MM: Mm-hm.] And do you have a year or a time range for this?

MM: [laughs] No, I really don’t. Because as a child, we did go. And you know with children, when you go with adults, it’s always boring. And I hate to take a kid with me wherever I go now. Uh, we visited California and we visited the orchards. And you know, all of in—around Sacramento—not quite Napa Valley, which is…great, now. Um, but those were supposed to be visiting relatives. You know family members. And I—to tell you the truth, I don’t really remember who they are—they were and how we were related. But we were there. And it was hot. And I was tired. And I really didn’t care. [laughs] I think we must’ve been—I must’ve been eight, seven, eight, nine years old? Because my brother was about five or six and he was worse. [laughs]

SC: So, when you were growing up, did your parents still maintain ties to China? Were they still writing to relatives back home?

MM: For a while. Growing up, I remember when my grandmother—uh my paternal grandmother was still alive that there was an annual letter and money sent to them for whatever. And uh that was to support them or it was a gift, or that. But um that did occur. But we were never—as children, we were not part of it. We just heard about it
and uh we knew about it.

**ST**: What were your parents reason for settling in San Antonio as opposed to other places?

**MM**: Because there were relatives there. Again, it’s family. And I think if you look at some of my survey, that I went to go work for an uncle. And I worked in the summer and I didn’t get paid. [laughs]

**ST**: We noticed. [laughs]

[15:12]

**MM**: That I didn’t get paid and that was just the sort of thing because there wasn’t anything for me to do at home. And my dad’s grocery, he didn’t need me there. I guess he put my brother to work. I don’t know. So, I wasn’t needed there. So, here I am. So, he said, ‘Oh sure, she can go work for you, she go…’ It wasn’t working. Help you and so I would go in the morning—not too early, and come back home at night. And that was it. So, I never got paid but they fed me well and I could get whatever I wanted. But you know there was no money exchanged.

**SC**: And this is just kind of what one did during the summer? It was expected?

**MM**: Well, you know, it’s not...there weren’t many places where girls could go to work. You know, you just didn’t...especially Asian girls. You know, you’re not supposed to be out there by yourself and doing all these things. You’re supposed to stay home and do all of these other things. Uh, but um I don’t know what was expected. I really don’t know, except that I was told that, ‘You could go help him and that’ll be good.’ And uh he said, ‘Oh, great! You know, that would be fine.’ And we got along—you know I got along with that uncle, and so we hit it off pretty well. So, I didn’t get paid but as a token, and, and um he was—and I was told, he really likes me. Because when I graduated from high school, he gave me a gold bracelet and that sort of ticked off my sister because when she graduated, he didn’t give her anything. [laughs] But we didn’t say anything about that. But she didn’t work for him either.

**SC**: And so, your family in San Antonio—I know you mentioned your mother wouldn’t speak English, what about your father? Did he speak English at home or only Toishan Chinese?

**MM**: At home, we did not speak English. We had to speak Chinese because Mom was there. Okay, but we used English and Chinese. So, meeting with family, uh being good kids, you know, you spoke Chinese. Uh but with friends and other kids, we spoke English.

**SC**: And what about when you were talking to your Uncle at the grocery store?

**MM**: It was Chinese. Definitely. But then on the other hand, sometimes he would answer me in English. Because he wanted to sharpen his English skills so it was a good exchange.

**ST**: Who was the clientele for your Uncle’s grocery store?
MM: The clientele was really a very poor neighborhood. It was mostly a Hispanic uh neighborhood. And if you look at—if you Google ‘San Antonio’ and that part of town—it’s called the East Side of town. It’s still mainly Hispanic, so it was a fairly poor part of town. It was—where, I have to say, that in contrast to that, I went to high school on the North Side of town which was near Alamo Heights and Terrell Hills and the Army base, where the economic picture there was way different from the economic picture where my Uncle’s store was and where we lived.

SC: And so what about your father’s grocery store?

MM: Uh he started out—you know he worked for my uncle when my mom came and then a little bit later, he decided to do his own. So, I don’t know where he got the money, but that wasn’t my concern. Uh, he started a small store and I guess he uh accumulated sufficient funds so he bought—uh a lot down the c—down the street a little bit—fairly large and built um a store. And now, you know, if you’ve um know about the European way of life where they have retail in the front and residence in the back. Well, the store was in front and our house was in back. So, that made it very convenient to go to the grocery store. [laughs]

SC: I’d imagine so.

MM: Yeah and so, and it was a much larger place. So, we really had a fairly large house, if you want to call it that.

[20:15]

ST: How much revenue do you think uh your father’s business and perhaps your uncle’s business brought in? Was it a comfortable...um...sort of salary to live upon for a family?

MM: You know, they never talked to us about it—it’s not like it is now—we talk to our children about finances and all that. We never—they never talked about that. And it was not supposed to be a concern of the children. So, as long as we’re able to provide you with the necessities, just leave it alone. And so, that’s essentially you know what we did. I have no clue.

SC: Okay. Um but like when, when you were growing up and your family was supported by the grocery store, was it kind of a comfortable lifestyle? Or like—were you...money wasn’t a worry then...if?

MM: It was comfortable. And we, as children, didn’t worry about it. Then—we were taught to be uh I guess frugal, to be conservative. Nothing was ever flaunted. But it must have been fairly good because my brother also went to private school.

ST: Can you tell us uh how much tuition was, if you can recall it? [laughs]

MM: No, I didn’t have to pay it. [All: laughs] But it was less than what they’re charging now, I think. [ST: Of course.] No, so that was, you know um, ‘Okay, you’re gonna go to school here. We’re providing all of this. The
one thing that’s expected of you is to go to school and study hard and get the grades.’ But the grades weren’t so important. We really didn’t talk about it. It’s to study hard and to learn.

SC: And when you were in school, when you were growing up, were a lot of your friends also Chinese-American? Or was it a pretty diverse group?

MM: No, I really have to tell you—and when I look back over it now, I’m just wondering if that was the best thing. Uh there were no African Americans in the school. There were some Hispanic girls. But these were the ones that came from Mexico. And when they came to school, they came with their nannies and their—everybody to get them get settled in the dorms. Okay, so that tells you if they came to go to live—to go to boarding school in the U.S., the family’s are not [inaudible], to put it that way. And then, the other Hispanic girls—local, uh came from families that were—had businesses. And I was the...only...Asian in the school for a number of years. But now it’s changed, which I’m really pleased with. Because after I finished, my little—and we’ll call her my little niece but she’s really not—but my cousin sent his daughter there. And this uncle that I worked for, for free...uh when his grandchildren came, he sent his grandchildren to private school because he said if my dad could do it, and he thought the way we learned and what we got out of it...uh his expectations were there. And uh I just...many years now, after I left San Antonio—the kids, now they’re all grown up, I heard from one of them and um, I said, ‘Oh yes, I remember you. What happened?’ [laughs] He said...well...they went to the same high schools that my brother and I went to. The sister, and two boys. Um one of them went to MIT. Another went to Harvard. And he didn’t say much about his sister but I’m sure she went to some great university. Um they were engineers. They um...in mid-life, they worked for Boeing. And in mid-life, they changed or saw other opportunities. So, one of them went to um...um the Wharton School of Business. Okay. And the other one went to...what is the name of the business school at Yale?

SC: I do not know off the top of my head...

ST: I do not know.

[25:23]

MM: But it’s another, you know, it’s— yeah it’s like Wharton. Okay. And um what I know is, that I’m still working, and they’re retired. [ST: laughs] [SC: Wow.] So, they had...and this one that I talked to...he uh got in to...he was in, in uh Shanghai with some investment group for a number of years. So, they did okay. So, I can say, you know, ‘Hey, they did much better than we did when we went to that school.’

SC: So, can you tell us how you came to be living in Houston?

MM: Did I what?

SC: Can you tell us how you came to be living in Houston?

MM: Well, we were living in San Antonio. And you know all of that was going on and it wasn’t too bad. My dad heard about the opportunities here in Houston and how it was really growing. And that was in what? Way before your times...in the ‘50s, you know, after the War, when things were really growing, when the oil patch was really
growing strong. So, he said, ‘Well, you know, we’ve done here. Let’s see what we can do in Houston.’ And we had uh—he had talked to a couple of people and I think that if you—if you’ve been looking at some of the stuff…Jane Gee…her husband…um…related to my dad as his uncle. So, you know, that was dialog. And of course, um Albert being young and all, was a little more adventurous and came around and did all that. So uh, my dad decided, we’d move to Houston.

ST: What year was that, if you can recall?

MM: Pardon?

ST: What year did your dad decide to move?

MM: It was probably...'48, '49 [ST: Okay.] …somewhere around there.

ST: Can you describe uh the setting of Houston at that time period?

MM: We didn’t have freeways and…[laughs]

SC: Didn’t have freeways? [laughs]

MM: Yeah, there were no freeways. And there was no I-10. Um but uh, the setting here was… it was not as comfortable as San Antonio. And it was, it was growing but not as laid-back as San Antonio, which is now really full-blown. And um it got to the point where there were more things to do here and more things to see…because being close to Galveston and all that good stuff. But um I guess it was hot and humid just like San Antonio. Um and people were…it was just growing. And I think at that time, um Houston was not that inclusive. And so, the influx of…I guess you would call it foreigners. Um that had a little bit…you know, the Houstonians had to get used to it. But I think um and I think now that Houston is just so wonderful. It’s so inclusive. I think it’s so much better than the any of the other large metropolitan cities. Definitely better than New York. You know, even though there are large uh…enclaves of ethnic groups, they’re not integrated. And I think, in Houston, everybody, we’re just one. And everybody just embraces everybody else. So, we don’t have an Italian-town. We have now Asia Town. And that’s because the restaurants, and the grocery stores, and all. But, you will not find that all of the Asians are living in that area; they’re spread all over the place. We have no Little Italy, which I find a little disturbing because when you go to these other towns, when you go to Little Italy, that’s the best food in town. [laughs] So that’s how I find it. But it’s really growing and it’s really great. I think the inclusion is just wonderful.

[30:07]

SC: So, do you remember when your family first moved to Houston, what neighborhood you lived in?

MM: We lived in the Heights. And then you know, during those years, um there was a fleeing to the suburbs. Everybody left town. West U., you know they had those—now they’re all torn down. But the people left West U. and moved out to the suburbs. And we didn’t move out to the suburbs but we moved um out close to the suburbs, away from the Heights. Because that was old and the people weren’t—it wasn’t popular then. And so, um, it was
out towards Buffalo Speedway and that part of town.

**ST:** Mm-hm. What was your father’s profession when he moved to Houston? Did he own a business?

**MM:** He just worked. No...um yeah...he didn’t have a business you know he started his business. So he had a grocery store here so that’s what he knew.

**ST:** And what sort of clientele did he have here in Houston and was the business as prosperous in Houston as it was in San Antonio?

**MM:** Well, we were in the Heights. And the store was not too far from where we lived. And so, the clientele there was just a good neighborhood. And uh, then, I think you will see...if you can...picture just some of the families that lived—and that was uh, not too bad. That part of town was not too bad. It wasn’t the most affluent but it wasn’t the poorest.

**ST:** And what was the racial makeup of that part of town?

**MM:** It was mainly white. It’s mainly white. And if you look at historically, in Houston, you’re gonna find that most of Houston, back in those days, very um segregated. And as you may have read, um you know, River Oaks did not allow anybody except whites to live there. But you see, there’s gone a long ways because it’s very inclusive.

**ST:** What area of Houston do you live now?

**MM:** I’m inside the Loop.

**SC:** And so, when your family moved to Houston, did you still have that network of other Chinese-American families like you did in San Antonio?

**MM:** Not...as big of a network. It was just a few that you know we had. Like Jane and Albert Gee. And um then, some of my—my friends or the girls that I grew up with, married, and they moved to Houston. And so, I guess...I set up—started my own network. And these were from college. And um the girls—or the women that married these kids, or married ones, moved to Houston...and we just um reached out to everyone.

**ST:** Can you describe your education? And uh, like where did you go to college and how did you pursue the subject that you’re interested in, chemistry?

**MM:** Well, when I was at the Incarnate Word...and of course, you know, I guess I made some pretty good grades, so I was given a scholarship to the college. It’s a university now. And so at that time, it was unheard of for girls to go to college. ‘They’re doing good...Your family is really being nice to you to let you go to high school, and finish.’ And um so when I went to high school, my dad was criticized for sending me to private school. ‘You’re wasting your money’ yadda, yadda, yadda, so on and so forth. Well, I guess he didn’t listen to them because we
continued. And then, when I went to college, they said, ‘You’re really wasting your money. Because, you know, what is she going to do? She should marry and have a family and be happy with all of that.’ So, I spent the first year at the Incarnate Word College and it was there, that uh you know, I took all of these courses. Math and science were easy. I didn’t like the history and English and that sort of stuff. So, math and science were easy...so I went in and I said, ‘Okay. What am I going to do with this?’ Well like all stupid people, I was gonna be pre-med. Stupid. And um, until I got into that stupid biology course, I said, ‘Ugh, none of this anymore. I can’t take it.’ And so I said, ‘Okay. We’ll drop that, and just continue with the chemistry, the physics, and the math.’ It was easy...easier than the other stuff.

[35:35]

ST: Was...

MM: Sarah grins at me. [laughs]

ST: Was Incarnate uh College in San Antonio or in Houston?

MM: It’s in San Antonio.

ST: Okay. So you went back. What year were, were, was that?

MM: Oh, I was just there for one year. [ST: Oh okay.] And so, that was it. But I finished UT Austin in ‘50.

ST: Oh, okay.

MM: And at that time, it was not called UT Austin. It was called ‘THE’ University of Texas. [laughs]

ST: [laughs]

MM: [coughs] And there, the number of Asian students was really small.

ST: At that time period?

MM: Yeah, at that time. And uh so, there were a couple of them that I had known, so we did get together and it was still a very small uh number of students. They didn’t have...what universities have now, you know uh...Chinese Students Association...and so on and so forth. They didn’t have that. We just have to find our own.

SC: So, after your year at Incarnate Word, what did you do? You mentioned...

MM: I was just there one year, then I transferred to UT Austin...

SC: Oh, okay, there was [inaudible].
ST: How did you pay for your education?

MM: My dad paid for it. [laughs]

ST: [laughs] Why do you think your parents were so encouraging of education when other parents were so discouraging?

MM: Well, as we tell our students now...my dad said, ‘You know it doesn’t matter how much money you have or how much money I can leave you. But if I leave you with an education, you can do with that.’ So when you have your education, it’s yours. Nobody can take it away from you. And it’s up to you to do whatever you want to do with it. So that was—and it was the same thing for my brother. Neither one of us paid...Our parents paid for our education. And so, with that, even though they were comfortable, it still meant giving up, doing without, and just prioritizing. And I think that’s what families need to do now. Is you set your priorities. And that’s what young people need to do, is set their priorities. Yes, it’s good to have all of these fun things and good things. But with an education, it’s yours. No one can take it away from you. Unless you want to give it away.

SC: So, after you completed your degree at UH...I mean at UT, you decided you wanted to go to UH...?

MM: No, I decided I was tired of school. I wanted to work like everyone else after...you know I had enough of school. And um, so I said okay, and not knowing—I didn’t have a career counseling, didn’t have all of that...what do you do? So, you just put up. And I got a job as a lab technician. Okay, and I said, ‘Okay, um that was all right. Let’s see what it’s about.’ Well, after three months, I decided that it wasn’t for me. I put up with it until I got into—I was admitted into graduate school. And then, that’s it. But that was not what I wanted to do. You know, I said, working eight to five is not, it’s not really fun. Being in school, you know, you have control of your own time; you get to do what you want to do and all. And from that, I decided that the private sector was not for me. You just didn’t have the flexibility nor the freedom, and especially the freedom to do what you want to do. You have to do what they tell you to do.

ST: How many years did you work in the industry and as a lab technician? And what was your salary or wage in that position?

MM: It wasn’t very much and it was less than a year. Much less than a year. Because I got into it, I said, ‘I’ll put it up until I get into to...’ And then I applied to graduate school. And I said, ‘Let me see if I can get in.’ And um when I told my parents that, they said, ‘Well, if that’s what you think you want to do, we may not be able to support you.’ So, I said, ‘Okay,’ because they were supporting my brother through dental school. And um so, I said, ‘Okay.’ And after that, this sort of worked out.

SC: So, how did you fund graduate school?
MM: Oh, you get TAs, you get fellowships, and you live at home. And my dad paid for the car. You know, his credit card paid for the gas and all of that. [laughs]

ST: Uh how much was—if you can recall, of course, how much uh was the tuition rate for university or for graduate school if you can remember?

MM: Well, I do remember the tuition of UT Austin was $50 a semester for fifteen hours. And there were a few fees associated with it. But that was the tuition. And I don’t really know how much tuition was in graduate school because we really didn’t have to pay it. You know, you got part…

ST: A stipend.

MM: Yeah, a part of that, and so, I never paid much attention to that. Except that I know I picked up a check every month because I was just teaching. I was a TA.

ST: How much did you pick up in your check?

MM: Not much. Compared to now. Um it was enough. Well, not quite enough for spending money. But it would do.

SC: So when you decided to go to graduate school, did you know that you wanted to go into academia?

MM: Well, no, I said, ‘I’d find out.’ You know, what I would do, in the process. It’s going to get me a little time. And so, when I had been teaching and then the department said, ‘You know, you’ve been doing this and it’s really great. It’s time for you to try something else.’ And then before I knew it, I was just stuck in there. I was doing all of these things, putting in these new programs, and uh that. So that was exciting and that was great. And I really enjoyed it. I’m done.

ST: How, how do you compare the job opportunities in academia, especially the chemistry field now compared to when you first started?

MM: It’s about the same. It’s about the same. And you know we’re saying that um it’s tough getting a job in academia now. Well, back in those days, it was tough getting a job in academia when you were a woman also. In fact, it was—it was tough getting a job in any chemistry-related field in those days. And there’s lots of data to support all of that. And so, some of the women who did get jobs, you know, you have to hear their stories. And it’s, it’s, it’s about the same. And the war stories I hear now from the women in academia compared to the war stories of past...they’re not too different. They’re not too different.

SC: And what about Asian Americans and Chinese Americans in academia? Do you feel that there’s a strong presence of that group there? Or do you feel that, that there’s similar issues that come from that, has come from being female and trying to get a job in academia?
MM: I think that um… in—you’re talking about Chinese Americans in the STEM fields are welcomed. Because that’s a larger pool uh to recruit from and to get. Um however, I think that um, as we go through, uh they do...and they’re very committed and dedicated to their research and their teaching, but many times, they’re not recognized for what they do and for what they contribute as some of their colleagues. Other colleagues. And that’s simply because...and we—and this may not be correct, it’s due to the culture. Uh, Asians, especially—not the present generation but the previous generations, do not sell themselves well, they do not promote themselves. And I just read in the—this morning, that men get promoted—and this is with MDs, that male doctors get promoted and get higher salaries because they are more apt to ask for it and push for it than the female MDs. And I think that’s that is part of um the characteristic of women. The way that women have been raised and brought up. I don’t think that’s true of the current generation or from the next generation, because we’re teaching our girls—’Excuse me? You’re doing this? Why not?’ So, I think that’s the case. And we do not see uh that many of Asians, even though they’re well-qualified in upper administration.

ST: So, in your personal experience, have you felt the impact of the ‘glass ceiling’ being an Asian American, or being female?

MM: Oh, it’s there. And it’s still there.

ST: Can you describe any personal experiences?

MM: Well, you know, as—as that goes on, I’ve—I’ve done some, um, proactive work, and that is simply to encourage the women and actually support them in asking, in going, in reaching out and promoting themselves, and—get out there. Do it. And if, you know, if you don’t get it, you haven’t lost anything, you may actually get it, but I do stand and I support them. I said ‘Whatever you need, I will support you.’ And I encourage them to do it. So, um, as far as myself, as the glass ceiling—maybe not, it was sort of self-imposed. I had done uh lots of work in the department, I had—um, increased our graduate program by—close to a hundred percent, uh, as an associate chair, um, redeveloping our graduate program, putting in—you know, suggesting courses and getting affiliations and that kind of thing, and, uh, I had done that for close to fifteen years. And I said ‘It’s time to do something else that’s kinda fun.’ So I started working with kids, and that was a good time, because um they were just crying for proposals, uh, for STEM, we call it STEM now, activities and programs for elementary school children in the socioeconomically deprived areas. And I worked with that group for about ten years, and I still work with them, but not as intensely. So I found that that was so much more gratifying [laugh] and so much more fun, that I left it. So, uh, not going up any higher, it was sort of self-imposed because I decided to do something else.

ST: Mm-hm.

SC: And when you say you work with kids, like, you mean you go to schools and talk to them, or they—

MM: No, we do programs.

SC: Ah.
ST: Mm-hm.

MM: We do programs. We do hands-on. We do learning. Not just visit. We do learning. And, uh—they’re just fabulous. And in fact, now, uh, we’re getting ready to—and I may have you come down—to a um National Chemistry Week. And I’ve done that for the last—it’s—this is the 25th anniversary, and I think I’ve been in—been involved in that program ever since. And for about eight years I actually ran National Chemistry Week programs, at the museum, at—you know, different places in town [ST: Oh, wow] with anywhere from two hundred to a thousand kids that come through. So now I passed that on to some of our younger members to do. I’ll help them, but enough is enough, right?

MM: So we’re—we’re trying to get that done, and um, work with—we don’t know yet, but, I’m willing to put in more time to attract more kids—uh, to these events, so that chemistry is not yuck. And uh—you know, when I used to go and—and do demonstrations for kids once in a while, said ‘Do you know chemistry?’ Says ‘Yes, they’re drugs, they’re bad.’ [ST: [laugh]] You know, ‘Chemistry is bad! And they’re drugs’ you see that’s how the media has been doing it, and so, you know I work with them and we do toys, and we do stories, and get them in line with it.

[0:50:50]

ST: What are your thoughts on the model minority stereotype? Do you feel like people have labeled you with the stereotype growing up? How do you respond to it?

MM: Well you know…I just really say, ‘What you see is what you get.’ And if you don’t like it, just go away. Right, you know, there’s—you know, it’s so difficult to try to change people’s minds. Especially, you know, if they don’t care to learn about anything. So it’s gotten to the point where uh, maybe it’s a flippant kind of thing, but uh, I don’t have time to waste with that, and if that’s how you feel and how you think, um—I’m not here to change your mind.

ST: Mm-hm.

MM: So, they’d say, ‘You’re—you’re fairly independent woman,’ I said, ‘Yeah I am.’

ST: So is—I’m presuming this has happened, uh, these sorts of incidents have occurred many times? [laugh]

MM: Yeah, and in fact, you know, there was a time—and, and I know the students and you’ve probably, it’s been—it’s in print somewhere, that um, the students in one of my classes call me the dragon lady.

SC: Oh!

MM: And so, I knew about that [SC: Wow…], and that was okay if that’s what they, you know [ST: Wow] think about it, as a dragon lady, because I don’t give—I don’t give them any kind of slack when they’re supposed to be studying and doing their work, right, and learning. I just don’t. Because, you’re supposed to have a need to come, and my responsibility is to give you that—need. And—you can drop the course. You know, you don’t have to come. Well that’s fine, you know, that’s going around among some of the students, and I knew about it, but one of my colleagues said, ‘Oh, you’re a dragon lady’ I said ‘I beg your pardon.’ [long pause] It’s okay for the kids to do it, but not for my colleagues to say that. Because, it’s a—it’s a different context. The students said
‘dragon lady’ because ‘she’s really hard on me, I really have to do my homework, and I really have to pass the tests and come to class and all of that,’ that was the context, s-okay. It’s just like Tiger Mom. Every mom’s a Tiger Mom. To some extent, right? Is your mom a Tiger Mom?

ST: Yes. [laugh]

MM: Is your mom a Tiger Mom?

SC: Oh yes.

ST: Very much.

MM: Yeah, so, you know, it’s a Tiger Mom. All moms that really have the commitment and everything for their kids, they’re Tiger Moms…I know I’m a Tiger Mom. I was a Tiger Mom, but I’m not a tiger grandma, because that’s not my responsibility. Right? Yeah, okay.

ST: Can you describe your job as a professor at U of H currently?

MM: It’s fun, it’s exciting. And seen lots of growth, uh lots of changes, and change is good, sometimes it’s traumatic, but change is always traumatic. But hopefully in the long run change is good, and it has to take place.

ST: Mm-hm.

MM: And we have a woman president.

ST: Yep. And a minority—

MM: Yes.

ST: -president.

MM: An Asian.

ST: Mm-hm.

SC: So, um—

MM: She’s tough; she’s a Tiger Mom too.

ST: [laugh]

SC: And so, as a professor at UH, um—approximately what is your salary, you can specify a range or decline to answer, that’s fine, I know it’s kind of an inappropriate question.

MM: Well it’s public information.

ST: [laugh]

SC: Oh.
MM: It is, it’s public information, if you go on Texas Payroll or whatever, it’s out there, everybody knows my—knows my salary better than I do. [ST: [laugh]] Because I have not been active—and it’s dues, to uh—we won’t go into lots of political stuff within the department. [pause] I have not been given…the incremental increases as given to all other faculty. There’s a nominal one just to make sure that it’s not listed as discrimination, because as you know, there are only two women in chemistry. There have never been more than two female faculty in the chemistry department at UH in the whole history.

[0:55:50]

ST: And how many male—uh, faculty members?

MM: Well now we have twenty-eight, there’s—on the faculty’s twenty-six.

SC: [quietly] Oh my god.

MM: Rice has done a much better job, okay; Rice has done a much better job. And, in fact, Christy Landes was at UH uh, for a couple of years, three years maybe, and, um, she had an offer from Rice so, I said, ‘Hate to see you go, La—Christy, but it’s better.’ And so she’s here and she’s doing great. So you see it’s—it’s—I don’t know what it is, it’s the culture, it’s the environment.

ST: It’s a very male-dominated field.

MM: Oh, it’s a—yes, but I think that, um, Rice has been a little more open uh, to complying, and I’ll use that word, compliance—uh, than UH, um, and I don’t—maybe, the faculty at Rice don’t feel as threatened by capable women as some of my colleagues might be uh intimidated by them, um, but there’ve never been more than two. And when Christy left there was only me. In the beginning there was only one, and she was a Rice PhD, and she’s since passed away and she was on faculty, only female faculty, which was a very small group at that time. And, um, then there were two, she got moved to—she got promoted, to start up a new school, um, there’s still two, then she left and went to Houston Baptist University, it was me, and we’ve had off and on but they’ve never stayed.


MM: [pause] So, you know, my thing to the department is, ‘You know, you’re bad enough looking and if I—when I leave, you’re gonna look worse.’ [ST: [laugh]] Insofar as hiring is concerned. So, because of that, I make something like nine thousand a year, or—ninety-thousand a year for nine months, so we’re just on nine months’ contract. And so I live without—within my means. I don’t get to have all the good things I like. Hey.

ST: [laughs]

SC: And then, one last little question about your job as a professor—recently, a growing number of students in US colleges and universities have been international students, particularly from Asia. Do you feel that, like—has this had any impact on your life or your classes, or uh—what’s your perspective as a professor?

MM: No, and in fact, you know, when I, uh—when I developed the graduate program, ah we had a much more global um graduate student community. We had large numbers of students from Europe, and we were beginning to get students from Asia. And we had some students from uh Taipei, Taiwan, of course, and then, um, there was lots
of discussion and controversy when I said ‘We need to admit the student from, uh, China.’ Well, it wasn’t quite as
open back then as it is now, you know, ‘Why did that student apply, is that student a spy,’ so on and so forth. I said
‘Look. This is chemistry, this is science. If this individual is qualified, can meet the requirements, can do the work,
we have an opportunity to assess that person’s intent when they’re here.’ And so, uh, that student came, one of—
one of our best students. And when he finished he was gobbled up by Oil immediately, I mean—you know that,
and so, um, uh, we were getting more and now, uh we don’t have that many from Europe, and most of our graduate
students are Asians. Whether they’re Pacific Islanders, you know, Southeast Asia, and that, but, they’re Asians.

ST: Mm-hm.

[1:00:34]

SC: Mm—uh, I guess, moving away from academia a little bit–

ST: No, more in cultural questions, um, how has the Chinese American community in Houston changed, or
transformed over the past several decades, as you’ve seen it?

MM: It’s grown, it’s more visible, and I think they’re beginning to make an impa—well, the, they’ve—from the
beginning, they made an impact on the economy, and it’s even more so now, but they’ve um—uh—really reached
out beyond being commercialization, and uh, gotten into the, um, judicial areas. We have uh lots of, uh, legal
beagles, lots of lawyers in all disciplines, in all fields of law, and then of course large numbers of, um, medical
professionals, and engineers, the oil patch brought in uh lots of them. ChemEs, MEs.

ST: What about, um, Chinatown?

SC: Or Asian town, really.

MM: Asian town. Well there was no Chinatown when we moved here, there was one little store and we had to look
for it, and so, it was still a fun thing to do then was to take a trip back to San Francisco to shop, right [ST: [laugh]
Oh.], and whenever we were in San Francisco we shopped until, then, uh, there was that little Chinatown down by
George Brown, and uh, that didn’t—well, I don’t know what happened, that sort of fizzled out.

SC: Do you remember about when that got started?

MM: When that—

SC: Got started?

MM: George Brown?

SC: No, the—uh, the little Chinatown, I know what you’re talking about, that little two-block area, do you
remember when that started to be, like, a Chinatown type of thing?

MM: I’m trying to recall, in the—it was in the—fifties, maybe the mid-fifties, because then, um, the, um, what was
called the Chinese Merchants Association, you know, they still have that building there, was actually sort of like a
brotherhood, as—as we call it, where the others—brotherhood, where, uh, the, um, Chinese men, not women,
would meet, and—and they would support each other financially if they wanted to, you know, go into business, and
that kind of thing. And I think, um, it got, um…interpreted as being a Tong, which was ac—something, it was akin
to being a gang, so, that was the—, the—the, uh, name that was given to it. And so, but, you know, through the Association, they had, um, contacts, not only in Houston but in other parts of the United States, so they had the funds, that they could—and this wasn’t traded, on the market or anything, but with—among themselves, sort of like personal, uh, loans, uh for each other and even from other cities, that, you know, people in New York would have money and said, ‘Well, you know, we’ve got a—a relative here that needs money to do this, this and this,’ and they said ‘Well okay, I can, you know, lend this much money,’ you know. So something happened, and I don’t know what all the—thing was about, but that building then was closed down. And it was actually taken over by the FBI, as far as I know. And, uh, since that anchor was gone, then all of the shops and restaurants around there didn’t really, uh, function like they thought they would.

SC: And then with the—the new Asian town out in Bellaire, uh, do you go there often?

MM: To eat, yes. [laugh] I don’t go there as often as some other people. [ST: [laugh]] I guess I average maybe, um, once every ten days, you know, once a week, and it’s usually—I don’t have to go there to shop, because I can find everything I want, you know, in the local grocery stores. But I do go out there and we go out there to eat, and that’s about all. And when I’m out there to eat, then we do go to the Asian stores to shop, and I go to a bakery out there. So [laugh]. And when somebody tells me there’s a really nice little shop and I have to find it—there’s uh a little shop there that’s supposed to have very good gelato.

SC: Oh! Yeah.

[1:05:47]

MM: Oh, you know about it.

SC: Yeah.

All: [laugh]

MM: Tell me!

SC: Uh, it’s—do you know where the Banana Leaf Restaurant is?

MM: No. [laugh]

SC: Okay, it’s—

ST: We’re gonna cut this part out.

SC: Yeah, yes we are, yes we are.

MM: You can edit, you can edit, I know you can edit.

ST: [laughs]

SC: Yeah, um, it’s—I forget where that shopping center is, but it’s—it’s along Bellaire [MM: Bellaire?] and it’s a really big shopping center, and it’s at the back, there are a couple of grocery stores.
MM: Is it east or west of the Beltway, of 6 of, of uh, the Tollway?

SC: It’s—it’s in the area where most of the stores are, but I—I don’t know because I never drive, I’ve only ever been with friends, but my friends and I go there pretty often, so.

MM: Is it close to Hong Kong Market?

SC: I think so.

MM: Because Hong Kong Market is way out, and the other one is closer, it—it’s on this side, here’s the Beltway and Hong Kong Market’s here, and there are some shops here.

SC: It’s—it’s like across the street from Tan Tan and over, just a little bit.

MM: Oh, okay, I know where [cough] [SC: Okay, yeah] Tan Tan is, okay, and it’s—oh, it’s in the Welcome Center.

SC: Yeah, [MM: Okay] I think so.

MM: Where the police [SC: Yeah] thing is. Oh, okay. I don’t go to Welcome Center much, and I don’t know why, but—there, the gelato place is there.

SC: It’s—it’s either that one, or the shopping center next to it, but yeah, it’s—it’s over there.

MM: Okay. See, I don’t like to drive in those parking lots much, because those people don’t know how to drive. [laugh]

ST: [laugh] Very dangerous, yeah.

MM: Yeah. So that’s it, okay. So that’s—thank you.

ST: Okay.

SC: No problem. And—sorry about that, I guess, let’s see, getting back on track, now –

MM: Gelato, that’s important.

SC: It is.

ST: Uh yeah, it is. Um, as a Chinese American who’s lived in the U.S. your entire life, um, how do you relate to recent immigrants to China, since, uh, most Chinese Americans came after 1965?

MM: Well, I never knew about China before. So what I’ve, you know, seen, and what I’ve been to, are just like Hong Kong and Shanghai and Beijing, which are all—allike, New York, San Francisco, and in fact, uh, Hong Kong is not much different from…

ST: New York?

MM: From L.A.
ST: Mm-hm.

MM: And, it’s a little different from San Francisco, but from Los Angeles, and it’s just like Tokyo is no different from New York or Chicago, to me. But over these years I’ve seen, uh, the changes that have gone on in China, so, I was, you know, I’ve been to China, I’ve been to Hong Kong, uh, before China opened up. And even in Hong Kong, the change there over the years has been tremendous, even after two years, it’s different. Uh, and Beijing has—oh, totally different. And Shanghai has just changed completely. It’s all high rises and lots of money.

SC: And—how connected do you—did you feel to Chinese culture when you were growing up? Speaking the language in the home, I know, but what about, like, food and traditions and—

MM: Well, you know, with the community and as—as the families got together, we still had the traditions, and, um, respecting the elders, and the birthdays, and the funerals, and that, but—and of course always the food, but—I don’t think I was less—more—more or less connected then than I am now. Because when I go to birthday parties for the elderly they still, you know, do the same thing, with the kids it’s different, and, uh, it’s pretty much the same. I guess that’s because I stick to them.

ST: Mm-hm.

[1:10:14]

SC: And, I believe you mentioned in the pre-interview questionnaire that you have a child.

MM: Mm-hm.

SC: And, I’m just wondering, um—when you were raising your child, did you speak Toishan Chinese at home?

MM: We tried. [ST: [laughs]] We tried. And, for the growing up, for the first—until he went to school. And that was difficult. And in fact, up until he was three years old, he did not know any English. Because my mother kept him.

SC: Oh. Right. [laughs]

ST: [laughs]

MM: So, you know, he’d be at my mom’s, when I went to work, and then I’d pick him up when we got home, and then we were mandated by his paternal grandfather to speak Chinese at home. So growing up, at mealtime—that’s all we spoke. And so we tried to do that. But then when he started going to school, especially in the fourth—well the first three grades it was easy, but when he got a little older, it became a little more difficult. Because he wasn’t able to tell us in Chinese what he had learned, and what he had, you know, uh, heard and all that, the interactions with the other kids.

ST: Mm-hm.

SC: Mm-hm. And do you know whether he speaks [MM: No.] Toishan Chinese, okay.

MM: He only knows enough Chinese to order. He knows that.
ST: How old is your son now?

MM: He’s 53.

ST: Oh wow. [laugh]

MM: He’s older than your mother.

ST: [laugh] Yeah.

MM: That’s right. I have a granddaughter that’s going to be 18. [ST: [laugh]] And she just finished her first year at Tufts.

ST: That’s amazing.

MM: And does she speak Chinese? No. [ST: [laugh]] Except that—food, certain things of food that she likes. Then she makes a, you know, point to learn that.

ST: Growing up with such a—sort of like, in a traditional Chinese, with Chinese cultural values, in a time period where women were mandated to do—to behave in a certain way, um, how has your experience differed and—um, how has your experience differed, and—uh, I guess the question I’m trying to ask is, like, how did—how did you come to where you are with that—with those values that you were raised in?

MM: Well, to give you just an idea, um, at work, one of my colleagues said to me, early on, said to me, he says ‘Well you’re not a typical Chinese woman.’ I said ‘Oh?’ He says ‘You’re supposed to walk three steps behind me.’ And I said ‘Oh really? You’d better start running.’

All: [laughs]

MM: So, that’s how I took care of that. And now, you know, I still maintain my respect, right, like any other person, um and I don’t bend, or bow, uh, to any kind of—what is it—stature, I’m respectful, and I think that’s all we need to do is to be respectful, right? So whether we curtsiey to Elizabeth, to Queen Elizabeth, if we do, that’s just showing what? Respect…And that’s the same thing, when I meet—and I don’t see that many older people now because they’re all dead, uh but I still show them the respect, okay, and I expect that from the younger generation. Um, I don’t always get it, but then, that’s my problem, all right. So I can’t tell these younger people what to do if they hadn’t been raised—brought up that way. My son knows, you know, he’s respectful to his aunts and uncles, right, and all of our nieces and nephews, they’re all respectful—to me, so that’s how we were brought up and I think that’s all we need to do is to be—to respect one another’s… But don’t let that pers—you know, he says ‘Well you’re supposed to walk three steps behind me,’ yeah.

[1:15:23]

SC: Um, and then, could you talk a little bit about the community organizations that you’re involved in?

MM: Mm, let’s see, what do I do, I don’t—oh, I was on the board of the YWCA, and of course I have some, you know, I got on—I agreed to be on that board because of the programs that they have to help, uh, all of these young women in their problems, and, um, not only academic but s-socially, uh, economically, and mentally. So, the
programs, uh, I thought I could, um, make a difference and contribute to those programs, in the Y. And I served on the board of the Institute of Chinese Culture in its very young days, and I think—ah, what’s his name, uh, Smith, Dr. Smith?


MM: Uh—yeah, he was the one that, you know, sort of shepherded and was really a—uh, a pillar, in that, and was able to use—get, uh, the space that we had here at, uh, Rice, for our classes and all. And, um, that was an interesting thing, and I was—probably—they had uh lots of women teachers in the Institute, but they didn’t have any women on the board. And—there may have been a couple of officers who were women, of the Institute, because the officers did all the work, you know, the secretary working out the programs, the treasurer and so on, but on the board I don’t think there were any women, as far as I can recall. Dr. Smith could probably tell you more about that, okay. Um, and we worked, and I said that, um, was—you know, financially we’re not that well, I said ‘If you don’t take the risk, you’re not gonna find out.’ And I said ‘It’s not that costly, you know, financially, you’re not gonna be in that—so, there were some changes that were made at that time, not earthshaking, but, some changes, uh to cause the Institute to grow.

And what else. [papers shuffling] Did I do those?

SC: [laughs]

ST: Do you feel that you’ve had ample opportunities, um, or the ability to take advantage of education, or career opportunities as a minority woman?

MM: Well, I—I think there are more now, and of course um I’ve worked pretty hard, uh, with the American Chemical Society uh in that respect, because to me it’s a little more focused group, and the—the problems are the same, and our tar-target audience is very focused. And I’m on the, um, steering committee, advisory committee, of the Women Chemists of Color. And, um, I think there’s a proposal that’s going in now for another, uh, program, and this all came out of um a summit meeting from—the acronym is CEOS(?). And this was a, uh, committee that was, uh, formed to report directly to the president of the United States in terms of the status of employment of, um, women of color in the science and engineering fields. And, um, um, that has been very challenging, and very worthwhile. And I tr-, I work very closely with the women here, in terms of—all of them, the chemists—in terms of contacts, finding jobs, job opportunities, and actually pulling together, uh, events where they can have face-to-face.

SC: And then, um, this may be just a last question, um, how—how do you see yourself in relation to the broader Asian American community?

MM: I will support, you know, programs that I can make an impact. And my role is—I’m an Indian, not a chief.

ST: Mm-hm. How—how do you self-identify, like as an Asian American, a Chinese American, or just American?

[1:20:33]

MM: I’m just an American—well I’m really a Texan. I’m really a Texan, so people can take that for whatever it’s worth, and, you know, really, what difference does it make?
ST: Mm-hm. Can you expound upon this? [laughs]

MM: Well, you know, whether I’m Chinese American, whether I’m African American, or whether I’m Hispanic—Latin American as they used to call it, or what—or Native American, it doesn’t matter, does it? We’re all here to support one another, we’re all here to make a better life for everyone, but the principle thing is we’re here to support one another, and it doesn’t—doesn’t really matter.

ST: Mm-hm.

MM: So I see myself as a Texan, which is bigger than all of that put together, right? How many of these people can say they’re true Texans?

ST: What does—what does being a Texan embody, like what kind of ideals? [laughs]

MM: Well look how big Texas is, right, and look at all the things, you know, um, Dallas is coming back on TV, so Ewing and all of those people are gonna be seen again, but, I think Texas has grown, and it’s open, and, uh—it’s open, and I think, as far as Houston is concerned, uh part of Texas has embraced—everything, everyone that comes. Now we’ve embraced, you know, not just—anybody that’s not in the oil patch can’t come, no, you know, you guys from the Silicon Valley can come, we welcome you, right? Or, we say, ‘okay, you guys have come to Rice from those hinterlands up in the northeast, we welcome you, and—you know, to become part of Texas.’ And I think when you see all of that, it’s—it’s just great to be in Texas, be a Texan, and especially being an Houstonian. And it doesn’t matter...That doesn’t answer your question, does it?

ST: No, no, no, it does!

SC: It does, that was great.

MM: [laugh] Different from other Asians that you’ve talked to? [laughs]

ST: Everyone—

[1:24:05.6]
[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]

[Conversation has continued on a relevant topic, and with permission, the interviewers briefly turn the recorder back on.]

ST: [laughs]

MM: Uh-oh. That’s going to get me into lots of trouble.

ST: No no no, um—how do you—how do you see yourself in comparison to other races growing up, because we usually see race in a white-black sort of binary. W—How did you fit, along those lines, to other people? What were their perceptions of you?

MM: Well among my—uh, the Chinese people, they thought I was crazy. You know, there’s something—you know, she’s—something wrong with her. But growing up, we played with little black children, we played with little Mexican children, we played with little white children. And I know that, with the little—and I still remember it, because it has to do with food—with the Mexican family, oh this lady had eight kids, and she lived about a block and a half from where we lived. So, we’d play, those kids would come play, or we’d go down there to play, and if it was time to eat, you know she’d invite us to eat with her, with all of her eight kids. It was wonderful; it was the best food I ever had, Mex—Mexican food. And then—uh, on the holidays, my dad would always give her—because she bought groceries for my dad—would always give her a big basket, of food, and in that basket would be a big...hogshead, because she would go home, and she would make tamales. And those were the best tamales I ever had, because, if we look at it, the best part of the meat—was this part, in the pig, because he didn’t smile too much [SC: [laugh]], so it was always tender. And it was all—and so—that, and, uh, then sometimes, on her holidays, she’d cook and bake stuff, and give it to us and bring it to us.

And I know that growing up, when the black ladies came and took the laundry home, and back then we—they ironed, all the clothes, all of my dresses were starched and they ironed them. And they’d say, ‘Okay, you wanna come home with us?’ And my mom said, ‘Yeah, you can go.’ So we’d go home with them. And they’d have little kids, and we’d play. And sometimes we ate with them and sometimes we didn’t, it all depended if they had, you know, invited us to eat. So that’s how we were raised. And I still feel the same way.

SC: Right.

MM: And it’s—it’s just inclusion, you know, you have to be inclusive. We cannot say, ‘Oh! No way.’ We’re all human beings. And we have to respect and support the dignity of all peoples.

ST: Mm-hm.

SC: Yes ma’am. Thanks, that was great.

ST: Thank you so much.

[The recorder is turned off.]