Transcript

Maya Sachs: My name is Maya Sachs. Today is Monday, October 23rd, 2023, and I am interviewing Michael Chang in the Gordon Arts Center at Colby College for the Colby College Korean oral history project. Do you grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Michael Chang: Yes.

MS: Great. Ok, let's get started. How are you feeling going into this interview?

MC: Interested and confused since no one really did this interview in Colby.

MS: And could you please introduce yourself by stating your name, your age, where you're from and anything else you'd want us to know right off the bat?

MC: My name is Michael Chang, or the Korean name Chang Jae Hyo. Michael is my given name by my father as well and also my passport name, so I go by both ways, Korean and English name. But Michael's better. Korean-American born in South Korea but given nationality by my mother's, I guess, legacy. She's a Hawaiian-born American. She's also Korean, though. Age is 25. And what else? It's my second year coming back to Colby after doing my Korea mandatory service. Colby's been pretty good so far.
MS: What countries and cities have you lived in and when?

MC: Total, I lived in three countries, South Korea, Singapore, and the United States, here. You mentioned like how long? For Korea, I lived there for, I think about 13 years from birth until 8th grade until basically all of middle school. For Singapore, I lived there for four years. Basically, somewhat of a repeating or wrapping up of a middle school and then three years of high school there and then lastly. Actually, it's fifteen/sixteen years in Korea since I did my military service for two years and then took a year off and stayed in Korea. Sixteen years in Korea, four years in Singapore and then five years - that makes now the fifth year in the United States, technically, year-wise by attending college here, Colby.

MS: Where would you say home is for you?

MC: I guess Korea at the moment, just because I lived there the longest and also my family is still there. Both direct [family] and then my grandparents. My relatives - I'm not really close to them but yeah. Usually based on my memory of growing up and where my like direct families are... Seoul, South Korea is [home].

MS: What are some of your best memories from growing up in Seoul??

MC: Best memory would be when I was little like just growing up like spending time with my parents. It was towards elementary and then kindergarten time when I had more time, less studying and everything. And my parents were less busy then as well. Mostly just spending time as a family overall, not specifically really to Korea.

MS: What are some of the things you love to do with your family?

MC: First thing, I love to watch soap opera with them because I tend to narrate. And then even though they say, “Just be quiet!” still they enjoy my narration-over [and] how sometimes I'm confused about how the plot line goes of the soap opera. I used to hate it when I was a teenager, but now [something] I do [like] which is just going to department store as a family. Not specifically shopping, but the fact that because [with] both of my parents are working, that's the only time when we kind of spend time together other than like being at home and then we're all exhausted and pass out so. Yeah, those two things [I love to do with my family].

MS: Did you find it difficult to leave home for high school in Singapore?

MC: Well, I think at first, yeah, because apparently I cried a lot the night before I went to the dormitory. It was a boarding school. I had to be there alone. I had no relatives or any, like, family friends there so it was me against Singapore. I think I was scared at first because I had to leave my parents for the very first time for a long duration. That happens [leaving home for school] a lot to most kids back then, some didn't cry. For me it was very scary, but I kind of got used to it. I just forgot about being scared after a week.

MS: Were a lot of other kids in your high school not native to Singapore?

MC: By law Singaporeans are not allowed to attend international schools, which mine was. They can attend to private schools, but it's just international ones, it's just not fair for the rest of the country and also it doesn't make any sense for school designed and made for foreigners to be attended by a national student. There were cases I feel like ex-pat children, or I guess foreign-born, Singaporeans attending my school, but it was a very rare case because laws there are pretty strict. Definitely no Singaporeans there. Only foreigners. Oh, can I add one thing though, you mentioned native right? Technically there were ex-pat children who were born in Singapore, but they were not necessarily origin of Singapore. Their parents were from either India, UK, some part of Europe, Malaysia... but because their parents are foreigners, they kind of succeed that trait. So that kind of makes them non-native, even though some of their passport might be Singaporeans.

MS: Were there any notable cultural differences between going to high school in Singapore and growing up in Seoul?

MC: Oh yeah, definitely. My school specifically was, curriculum-wise, it was European model made in German and Swiss called International Baccalaureate. First of all, studying method was a lot different. Instead of just memorizing, I actually had to digest and present it [the information], which is what was a lot different than what I was used to in Seoul. And secondly, language. Just [speaking] only in English - that was a huge change and at the time my English wasn't really good. I did memorize the whole SAT or TOEFL vocab book just because I wanted to make sure that I can talk with people. Prove that it didn't really help because, you know, speaking with everybody. Language was a different issue. And lastly it wasn’t only a European school, it was very heavily Indian and white-European based school as well. Not intentionally that, the demographic happened to be like that when I joined the school. I don't know [what the demographics are] now but... It was my first time being exposed to so-called European culture, Caucasian West culture. It was a lot of new changes that I wasn't really used to, but, I kind of adapted. Took me a few years.

MS: Were there any specific things you did that made that adaptation easier?

MC: I guess. Because there weren't many Koreans out there as well... I mean, Colby, now we have some Koreans, but, in my high school, when I first joined there were about two or three Koreans out of like five-hundred student body. Most of them were European-white or Indian or British educated mostly. Some were American educated, but mostly British educated, or from UK itself actually. What I did was I tried to talk up to people. Since I didn't know much English, I just hang around common rooms - like in the dorm there were like areas called common room, basically living room for students since we had our own room or shared with a roommate or roommates. I just went there because that time I liked video games a lot. I just hung around older classmates who were playing there and just talked to them because that was the only commonality that I could find within the limited language given. So yeah, just talk to people, said hi to everyone that I recognized. Talking up and just hanging around common room [made the adaptation to Singapore easier].

MS: As opposed to moving to Singapore, what was it like then coming to Colby?

MC: Also still very – no, I mean - I wasn't crying or anything. Oh, well, but I did. I can tell you that I was crying also because when I see all those forests. It was my first time seeing a sky without a skyscraper, so I was like, “Where's the civilization?” And then when I learned that the only civilization that we has is Walmart... Well, you know, like modern standard civilization standards... Forest is fine actually, I think it's a lot better than what we have now. The amount of nature, I think that shocked me in a good way, just not being used to it. Also coming to Colby was my first time to actually being exposed to the American culture and American society. At that time, Colby wasn't really diverse. It was predominantly Caucasian, white-based demographic. 78% or 86% was all white and [back] then there were more Asian students than African American students at the time, which was how severe the polarization of the demographic was. [Editors Note: Michael entered Colby fall of 2017]. Anyway, very New England-ish. It was first time for everything so adaptation was – I was confused, but thankfully I had good dormitory friends at the time that we met over freshman week. Yeah, it was smooth. Pretty smooth compared to Singapore. Academic-wise not so much because I was more used to the European or British system and then I moved to American system. That's a whole different story as well. Coming from just explaining a lot [academically] to explain it simple this time instead but still digest, I got the half right. [The transition to Colby] it was smoother. Minor confusions though, but significant.

MS: Where do you find community at Colby?

MC: Before going off to my national service, because I knew some friends over at the dorm like starting like during my freshman year, we all spread it out from our sophomore year, but I think dorm events were one of the ways to kind of mingle. I guess through clubs as well, although at the time when I was in freshman and sophomore year, the most active club that I was in was Intervarsity Christian youth club. It's a religion club to make us believe in God together. [Intervarsity Christian youth club was like] Sunday school, something like that. I guess that's a way to describe it. Finding commonality, by having the same interest, that's how I find community. Even during classes I just try to talk to people that are next to me - back then and even now - and try to be friends with them. Some worked like some didn't work, but some definitely worked. You know Matt Brown, that's how I got to you and I mean Jasper also we just happened to be at the same airport. I heard him talk about Colby. I'm like, “Hey, you're from Colby.” [Editors Note: Matt and Jasper are two Colby students who introduced the interviewer and the interviewee]. That's a way of finding commonality. Overall, I guess finding a common ground by talking, that's how I've been able to find community in Colby. Not really necessarily by my race or my

background as Korean, which is fine, which a lot of Koreans do [find community with each other] actually in other colleges. I don't know about here.

MS: Would you say your identity has changed or mostly stayed the same while at Colby? And could you tell us a little bit about why?

MC: My identity didn't necessarily - I mean it did change, but then not necessarily because of Colby. Colby did impact me a lot, like academically it definitely trained me a lot better than I was in high school. But having an abrupt halt like in middle of my academics definitely brought me a lot of changes, not because of the Colby experience, but rather I had to leave Colby without really actually planning about it. I was forced to leave [for mandatory Korean conscription to the army]. But Colby wise... don't know. I had to take leave of absence for a total of three years. It was initially planned for two years, but I had to leave here for three years for my national service, like conscription, like in Israel. Had to do military service as a male - in Israel's case it's everyone. Because of that leave of absence and coming back to Colby without knowing anyone, that kind of made me realize Colby actually somewhat does a good job in keeping the students occupied so that you don't feel lonely or bored. Definitely there are moments where lonely or you're bored or stressed but I think Colby as a whole, it just keeps you going in terms of workload. Or gives you motivation enough to ignore other things and keep going and get that graduation. I [became] more objective oriented, compared to myself six years ago.

MS: You've mentioned that you had to serve in the Korean military a couple of times. I was just wondering if you could tell me when, where and what you did for your military service.

MC: I got my conscription letter, you know, [inaudible], it's time for you to serve. And then I had no choice because I was a dual citizenship holder. And for dual citizenship holders, the options are pretty simple. Either you give up and serve and then become a full-fledged Korea and you still have to serve. Or you give up your Korean nationality and become whatever the other nationality is, usually American, like green card, or citizenship. That's the other option and you don't have to serve. And then there's a third option, which not many people do, most people choose the second option because serving the army is not a very good idea, even though people kind of mock upon it. [The third option] is retaining both citizenship and actually serving it. Because it's a difficult choice and there are a lot of restrictions that follows even after serving, like trying to be American within Korean soil. In 2019, July 25th - wow I still remember that date. [That] was the time I went to the basic training camp. That's when I started serving. I did five weeks of basic training. Now it's three weeks of basic training so it's pretty much like a field trip honestly, nowadays. But five weeks, it's still compared to nothing of 18 months of entire service like most Korean boys do. But the reason why I had five weeks, I mean, even regular army folks, they go through five weeks. But for our case it was an intensive program. It wasn't intensive enough that they ignored any stragglers because I was apparently physically unfit to serve as a foot soldier or any part of the army within the conscription because I was apparently a little too fat compared to average male, by, how many pounds even? Like three pounds. I was like, "Okay, well, thanks?" And I was like maybe I should consider applying for the normal foot soldier job. And then my dad, who served in the normal soldier duty for three years back in the days and then he said "No, don't you dare, you take the chance because being in the normal army will not really help you at the end of the day. It might give you recognition and just respect as a common folk that you did serve, but otherwise there's no risk in harming your body or your mind," which [I] really didn't avoid that actually. I was serving in the social service agents. That's the official title. In Korean, that's called *Sahoebongmuyowon* [Social Service Agent]

or back in the days it used to be *Gongikgeunmuyowon* [Public Service Personnel] like something like that. But so even though there's a new official title called *Sahoebongmuyowon*, only one which is called a social service agent, people still call it *Gongik* [shortend version of *Gongikgeunmuyowon*]. I don't know how to translate, common good, I guess? Personnel. Because most people are used to that idea. It's kind of used as a sort of a derogatory term among people because most male served as a normal foot soldier, and then there are some guys like me who happened to be physically unfit. Some are really unfit, like they're missing a bone in their back or like the hamstring in their leg or something like that because of injuries. They're fine. They get away. But [people like] me, who are who are fat, by a margin. Not even huge chunk. It's just awkward to be like part of that derogatory. After five weeks of training, I did twenty-two months of work as a police assistant at the railway station and the railway station called Yongsan station. It's the second largest train station within Seoul, technically the only second, the other being the Seoul station. I was designated there because... No one really knows. Apparently that position is either given to higher up children or you have to apply and then you have to like get selected. It's a pretty prestigious position apparently and I didn't really know any of that because all I did was, “Hey, I'm a study abroad student and I happen to be dual citizens as well so I just want to serve and get this done fast.” Then the recruitment officer, he's like, “OK, sure, we'll see what we can do.” I had to actually prove that I study in Colby and that I’m a dual citizen as well. That was really hectic. They have to make sure that this is forged or anything. I guess a lot of people try to forge that fact. I was just positioned there not by choice, but out of sheer chances. I wouldn't call it luck because - I'm very thankful, but some of the experience I would never want to go to again. As a police assistant there, I usually did patrols around the station or sometimes across some parts of Seoul by taking the train and then making sure there are no criminals just doing their own thing. Usually, it's just illegal advertisement being posted within that train. Like unsanctioned advertisement. I don't know if you've seen those posters around, like basically those dodgy ads on online. It's basically that but in real life, it's pretty common in Seoul. But what's funny is that they are always railway police just sweeping and taking it all off every two hours. That's why the trains are pretty clean and It's a battle every day except the weekends, which is very funny. Those illegal worker they take weekend off as well. [I] did that, took out trash for the police office, mopped the floor, cleaned the bathroom. I was part of, like, recording one of the riots. I mean, there was only one riot due to COVID. But that was pretty hectic. Sometimes I chase bad people because they didn't want to be interrogated. Or otherwise, I would be just watching them while them being interrogated in case they wanted to run. I blocked the door, which few times I did. Overall, [I was doing] police work without the badge and also documentation because I don't have the necessary training or authority to do this normal police job for twenty-two months.

MS: What would you say was the hardest part of working at the railway and maybe what was the most rewarding part too?

MC: I guess actually the most tough part is the most rewarding part. I know it's cliche. Coming from private school in Singapore and also being in Colby also another private school, just in general people are a lot gentle than most part of society in both the United States and Korean, Singapore. And then coming off from there I wasn't really used to the hostility within normal society, or the given fact that people just simply become self-centered, selfish. I forget. Not arrogant, but I guess selfish would be a right word. People say a lot of things that they really shouldn't do to other people in general, even to a police officer specifically because condemning a police officer in public is an actual offense in Korea, I don't know about here, but because it disrupts the respect to the authority and the law so. Yeah. So

anyway, toughest part was being swore at my face. During the time when, usually it's mostly homeless people being drunk and swearing, so I'm not really like personally hurt, but it's just that after coming back home, I guess that kind of gets piled up in my head. Thankfully, I didn't drink because I thought I just don't like drinking and I don't have good memories about drinking just in general, so I didn't drink and I don't smoke either so. Yeah. Coping with that was pretty tough. And sometimes I got beaten up - only twice, thankfully. Well three. But the other one was I dodged it. So good thing I dodged. But other two, it hurt a lot. So one by chest like person was beating with their phone. They were, like, mentally insane. Trying to keep her contained was tough. The other was just drunk guy, but he punched my right thigh or butt really hard just because he felt like it. Those physical stuff was - I mean, actually, that was less traumatizing than the verbal abuse part but I guess sometimes I get into very cautious whenever I see someone might be twitchy in public even now. I guess that's another tough part. And I think the most troubling and toughest part overcoming was, I guess, sometimes I had to do things that were not right, but they were right by the law, like there were only two moments like that. One was very - I still remember it because I wish I never do it again, none of the police officers do it ever again. Don't worry. This isn't like any like I didn't kill anyone. But no, it was just winter, January or was it February? But it was a cold night of like mid-winter in Korea '21. It was so cold that all the homeless people came into the station. It's a huge station, you know, it's a size of basically four times at the Gordon Center here. Really big, you know, even the main hallway, it's still pretty big. There are plenty of space, but our police forces directly related to the Railway service company, that is, I think it's private owned now, it used to be government, but anyway, there's some ties to it budget wise and policy wise under the – we're not under the Korean police force, but it was more of a security enforcement force, but still referred as police under the Ministry of Land and Control, like Housing and everything. For some reason it was under them, but they were still considered equal-ish and basic sense enough as a police. Anyway, the company comes by and tells them, look, the station is starting to smell stinky. And I was like, really? And the officers are like, yeah, go on. And then the company manager, he said, we're going to drag those homeless out of the places starting by people who don't obey us. And the officers are like "Sir out of respect, we don't do that. We maintain if those guys are drunk, we send them out to refresh their head and come back in or whatever, usually leaving's better. But we don't force them out. That's wrong." And then the company on Manners said. "Well, too bad. I'm going to report to your boss and then you're going to get all bad credits for it that you didn't cooperate with us." The officers, because bad rep with the bosses are bad, we were forced to go out and start at least pretending, dragging out, but unfortunately there was this one lady, who was being quite rebellious. What happened was because the officers, they were reluctant and I was definitely reluctant too to drag the lady out in the cold on the cement. And then the company guy actually, and there were other company like workers there as well, they actually started dragging people out by force. They're not allowed to do that, by the way, because it's technically same as punching. It was horrible that night and then the guy told me, "Hey, what are you doing? Just grab her and start moving." And then I looked to the officer and then the officer shook his head and then they were doing the same thing. So I grabbed her arm and then when we were dragging around her and she was like resisting and swearing. "You're gonna kill me!" And then we had to dump her out and with their belongings. And then we did that a few times. After that in the office, no one talked for two hours until my shift was over at night. That was the most hardest part, I think, other than the swearing, that I had to, you know, push someone that they could really die, you know. Anyway, yeah. Those three things. That's actually part of the reason why I took a year off other than trying to do LSAT and figure out what I should do with my life. Because most foot soldiers, they just go through

beating and verbal abuse, which is normal in army because it's such a men-oriented and authority-oriented little society, enclosed as well, that there is a certain form of respect and authority that kind of plays out in both rightful and demented ways. Most guys or some they don't actually. But for me, most people will never get that. It took my parents two years to actually understand what I went through. Those two things were the toughest. I hope that answered it. Sorry that was a little graphic towards the end, but yeah. Those three things were tough to overcome. The first one was still a little uneasy.

MS: What were some ways that you found helped you deal with these more stressful or challenging moments?

MC: I still like to playing video games, but I used to enjoy it before my service, but now it became like a coping mechanism, which is awful actually. Usually people call as healthy ways to exercise off or hang out with friends. But some people you know, drink off their pain, you know, with alcohol or smoke it away with cigarettes. In Korea, weed is illegal in Korea. Like you go to jail, actually. Like, yeah, it's a serious deal anyway. In my case, back then I just played video games, not knowing what was happening at first so I was fine. I was just having fun and ignoring what happened that morning and afternoon. And then as the service goes on, those sort of things happen and then... I tried drinking for a few months and then I finally stopped like when I puked very hard, like just, you know, bad response from. [Laughs] This is really horrible. I'm sorry. No, but yeah, I puked and I realized yeah, I might die from drinking. I mean it was a Korean, rice wine called *Makgeolli* (Rice wine), Professor Diederich will know, but they're very fermented so it didn't sit well with my stomach. And I don't do well with wine either. I think that's why fermented - I guess alcohol in general - I don't go along. But after that I didn't really look back on drinking and nowadays, even when I drink, I don't really enjoy it. I like that, which is weird, I think it's just a taste that's exotic, that I like. I tried drinking. That didn't work. I go to church a lot. The Protestant church. Back in Korea, and here as well. I prayed a lot and then that worked, I guess. But that was just more of a habitual thing. But what really worked was, I guess I loved reading as a child, both fictional and nonfictional, so whatever I could read both on Wikipedia and books I just read and read. You know, ultimately, like playing games kind of made me forget about - it's kind of like drinking actually. I play video games to kind of forget the problem that I had or had like from the service and after the service and going back to Colby. But reading really made me help to calm down and kind of enjoy things instead of kind of being a rudimentary cycle of coping, working, coping, working. So. Yeah, reading was one thing and then another thing that I developed during the service was looking at cute animal videos, just enjoying nature documentaries. I mean, I like cute things before, but I never really enjoyed nature. But yeah, watching documentaries kind of made me relax and appreciate things instead of, “Oh, that's pretty!” Yeah, those two things definitely.

MS: On the same theme of play and games, I know you've mentioned to me that you took place in some of the War Games during your reserve training. I'm curious if you could just elaborate a little bit about the war games.

MC: They actually call it a war game, basically, its like a simulation of... Before it used to be like an open field battle. But seeing how the war in Ukraine has shifted the perspective in modern warfare, the Korean military decided to shift things up by adapting those trainings into urban warfare, basically taking in like suburban like building places. So they had like base goods containers, those steel containers from like docks, they cut them up and made it into like town walls and you know, like city building-ish. So

there's a dynamic instead of like tree, hill, cover, survive, fight back. I guess the war game is kind of like how the general war film goes, they're each fighting forces and sides, you go and then kill as much as you can. And then and this training they were given points for how you followed the directive, how much you've achieved the directive, basically kill everyone on the other side. And there were other types, but we all we did basically just shoot everyone and then try to kill much as possible. And then did you actually follow the protocol? Like, did you call before going into unguarded area or uncertain area? Did you have someone place on the high grounds to make sure you're covered? And then like, those are kind of like protocols. They give points based on that. And then there were also - it's kind of like a video game. Like they also gave points for dragging people to like a medical station and reviving them, which is unrealistic but it's to make us perform CPR and practice it so. And then that got the teammate who was dead back. This training was actually quite interesting to previous trainings were that before they used to use paintball, like paintball gun. But that kind of leaves bruises if you're hit on the wrong spot. So I guess they try to come up with something - and it wasn't really realistic also. And then the BB gun, the plastic round and they also hurt too and they weren't really accurate. So what they came up was a laser like pointer gun. But instead of the one that we see in arcade, it actually had the weight of a gun, and actually it was all attached on the decommissioned standard issue rifle of the Korean Army. So it was actually pretty realistic. And then if you pull the trigger, there's actually a recoil to it. If you go forward, it actually goes crazy too. And then we had, like those scanners attached to our body, like vital parts if our shot, we would be dead. So it was kind of like playing video game, like Call of Duty, I guess like for your reference. Yeah, which actually is horrible if you think about it. They're training young men to die for the country, which is normal in case of emergency. Not that it's right. Since it's semi-peace time, it's never been peace time in Korea because we're on a stalemate. I think that's the word. Yeah. Never ended the war. So I think it makes sense but still. Yeah, just playing those like, yeah, kind of like being physical and like a laser tag shooter but except with real rifle, with the helmet. We didn't wear a bulletproof vest, but we do wear it when we're doing live fire training. Just near full gear. I guess we were playing like a soldier basically, even though we're our service mandatory-wise is done. We were just having fun, I guess. I mean, my squad didn't because they were all like 30s and they're like, "Why are we doing this?" and the other squad that were that part in the war game, they're all like mid or early 20s and they all happen to like video games, they like shooting stuff. They're like "This is just like video game!" Some of them were, too, skinny to hold a gun, actually, but most guys were big, or, I guess fat enough that it really didn't matter to them. Aiming with that thing was really weird. It's like "Huh?" We even tried shooting at the reader, it didn't register sometimes. And then if we try to shoot ours it would register, which was awful. But yeah, that's one part of the play that we part took in as a war game. Do you want me to explain about the other play activity that we did as well? Like target, laser pointer thing that I've talked to you about. And then that one was actually new. So basically, after that we were... There wasn't necessarily an order, it was more like there were many tasks, go sign up and do it, and then you're done for that day. There was like a firing range, but without bullets. It was actually through like a laser, like registration, like shooting range. Kind of like what we do in arcades, like there's a giant screen and we point the gun and then shoot things. It's kind of thing like that, except we were actually holding yet again another - but actually it was a decommission but refurbished standard issue rifles with different laser modification thing to it and we didn't wear any vesting but the gun was heavy enough that again it felt real. And also, when we shoot there was more recoil definitely than the one that we part we used in the war game. And then I don't know how accurate the real gun and the gun itself in terms of the simulation to the real gun is. We had to actually zero in the gun before we had to shoot, which is very

important because if you don't zero in, even if you aim, the bullet will fly off to somewhere and you know you'll die because you're not fighting back properly. So after that, we were given the simulation that Seoul got invaded by North Korea. It may happen, but honestly, I don't know about what the status of North Korea, maybe China, but because they're allies and all, nothing like politically wronged us, it's normal. Russia is gone, but anyway. Yeah, North Korea invaded Seoul. There are paratroopers everywhere. There's a spy and those agents everywhere in the streets. We got to protect the citizens. That was a given context to this game, basically. And then we had to shoot like those guys just walking right this or covering behind cover or they were given more points if we execute an officer because breaking chain of command is always important. It was kind of like doing target practice shooting range, but like a video game, so. And for zeroing in actually I was at first. For some reason, even though I was the only non-regular foot soldier background like service person among my squad, when we're zeroing with the new rifle I just happened to aim best. Then I did second best with the simulation. Was it third best? There were like 12 people, but the fact that I did a lot better in the actual live shooting, I didn't hit anything during the live training, but. It was fun like doing that. I mean the premise was you have to kill people so. It was weird, but the fact that they actually came up with the simulation that kind of get used to the combat was pretty interesting. Like not instead of like showing like videos like "Hey, you see you shoot like this, you see them, you crawl like this" you know, so. Yeah, those two things I will consider playing, I guess. As an army training.

MS: And just to clarify, when did you participate in these games?

MC: I actually participated in those games this year, July 2023, June. Early June. Yeah, it was the very first reserve training program that actually utilized those new technology. They call it the Science Applied Special Unit. [Laughs] Yeah, they like to give names.

MS: What have you found challenging about coming back to Colby after your military service?

MC: Speaking in English 24/7 was little difficult. I mean I speak English with my mother most of the time just because she's more kind of comfortable with it. Although she thinks spending time in Korea for like over 20 years made her kind of get used to Korea more now. There were moments – there were definitely where preference of like talking English at home but not like 24/7 like here. That was awkward at first. Also, when I'm talking to the professors because - it's still in a habit like I'm talking to them as if I'm talking to my officers or superiors. Like "Thank you." And then like in Korea like officers if they ask me how am I and then I'll say, "I'm good. How are you?" back? Which usually isn't the case. I'm still kind of trying to fix my head not to do that, but here like "How are you, professor?" And they're like "Uh thanks?" [Laughs] Yeah and just getting used to the new slangs among like my peers or I mean age wise definitely not my peers, but I guess the classmates. It was a little strange seeing like, what are those languages? Is this how our grandparents feel like when they're around young kids? And also, just shift in like the climate in general in Colby like because it used to be heavy New England - it still is heavy New England but now I think there is a lot more diversity enough that you see visible difference as well. Like both culture-wise background-wise and ethnicity-wise. Getting used to that, more diversity was... Yeah, that took me a while because I was more used to the previous culture and how to engage in there. But now just so diverse that like I didn't know where to start with. Yeah, those three things, I guess. 24/7 English. My way of engaging people. And lastly, just more diversity in the campus and community.

MS: Do you think the way that you experience Colby now has changed at all because of your military service?

MC: Definitely, I think. Especially that I was a police assistant, I became more perceptive and more cautious. I guess some little distrusting of people as well, just because I've seen the worst side of people could actually be, especially amongst normal people as well, normal as in normal citizens. There are things that people do that they think they can't get away with, but anyway, that's not for this interview. But yeah, I'm a little cautious when I'm trying to be friends with people just because I'm not sure whether I can really talk to them and then they will not harm me back. I think that's also partially because... Overall, the police service helped me to kind of... To really engage with Colby in truest sense. It's still on in my own definition, so I guess it's kind of a little arrogant of me to do that. Overall, I guess, yeah. I'm kind of applying what I did in - during my police service basically. Be friendly with everyone, but keep distance until you know it's safe I guess just because I've dealt with so many people with so many varieties, even though it's Korean in general, but the fact that the diverse background could actually make a difference in engaging with people so. Overall, back before during my service, I was a little more naive and I wanted to be friends with everyone. But now I'm just more like... I would say hi and be friendly to everyone, but I would be careful with who I choose friends to be. Yeah, I guess it did shift overall just social-wise. Oh yeah and academic-wise before, I mean I did on-par OK on my academics. I guess coming back to Colby as a junior and the fact that I had to figure out what I should do... I mean I kind of knew I want to go to law school but I didn't really certainly have the required stuff ready at the time when I came back. I guess whether it was conscious or unconscious, I just studied really hard, like harder than before. And then even though like I had allergy outbreak and I was like nose bleeding, like every night. I don't know why. Even though - before that would kind of make me like take it easy but I kind of pushed it very hard and then kept going. I guess I became more adult-like, I guess? Trying to get the job done in terms of academics instead of trying to take excuses and not do it. That's that. Sorry, I'm like remembering as I go. I guess I became more organized because I was with the police and they had to be everything in order, on time and whatnot, because they are the enforcer of the law. I became more organized just in general, not with sleeping patterns. [Laughs] Sorry about that (in reference to arriving late to the interview due to oversleeping). Organized in terms of just getting the right materials in for classes, remembering things right, and then keeping my room tidy-ish. Although I became a little more messy. Definitely my backpack inside doesn't look messy anymore like it used to. It used to be a mess, but now everything's more organized than before, which is not a lot by whole margin. I guess I became more physically active because patrols they usually walk around for like two hours within this station. It wasn't tolling, it just was boring half the time because nothing was going on and I had to talk to the officer for forty minutes to kill time. [Chuckles] Just watching over, making sure people are not doing dumb things. That walking kind of made me realize, hey, maybe I can exercise, so kind of made me go to the gym more often than when I before going to do my service. And lastly, I mean I was never afraid to ask questions in class, but I became even more not afraid to ask questions. I don't know, more confidence, I guess? Or knowing that, hey, look, if I'm going to look dumb, so be it. What are people gonna do? I guess that kind of confident. Those five things, actually.

MS: Thank you so much for sharing about that. I want to switch topics a little bit. You mentioned that for the war games, you simulated that you were fighting against North Korea. And I was just curious, what is your perspective on Korean division and did serving in the Korean Army alter this at all?

MC: Well before... I don't really have much opinion about the Korean army, like when I was growing up because of the propaganda and everything I thought they're like, "Yeah, Korea, number one. Yeah. Korean technology is great," but growing up, I'm like, OK, I'm hearing a lot of awful things about it, but I

haven't seen it with my own eyes so I can't say much. But doing my basic training and reserve training, I'm like - then doing the war game - like, wow, the army is very heavily politicized, if that's the right word to say. They shouldn't be. They should be independent of the government, and they should be only focused solely on, you know, the good of the country and National Defense. It should be defense, not for war, because war is always bad. War for defense is OK, but war for conquer is bad, which I think a lot of countries are. I became more peace oriented. Before, I thought guns as mechanical objects, I thought they were cool. But after shooting them with it, like on a target, don't worry, [chuckles]I kind of hated it. I was like really sick when I was shooting... Shouldn't be shooting when you're sick as well [chuckles]. During my reserve training, I wasn't [sick], and even with the war game it was pretty much a real gun without a bullet at this point. I just hated it because I knew I was killing someone. And we know it's wrong. I don't know how logically to explain [how] wrong killing is other than you know, taking someone's life and ruining their families. And you know, there's all reasons. But it's just that in the Army definition, you kill to survive and protect your country. The fact that survive and protect was at the same sentence, not in different sentence was, like alienating from usual boundaries. I didn't lose respect for the army because, I mean, there are some nasty and corrupted side, but there are a lot of young men and middle-aged men who actually live and die for the country. I do gain respect that they're doing this horrible training every day to keep the country running and protected. But at the same time, it just kind of made me realize war is just horrible. The fact that young men do these things, and there may be no chance of living, even though they guarantee that they may survive by doing all those trainings. Did that answer your question, I hope? Yes, I became more peace oriented. I loved history, like military history just because there's a narrative to it. But I shifted more from people to people [history], to more non-human objects like planes and tanks, I guess just looking at them. I don't really like the battle stories just because at the end of the day it's killing people. I was just more interested in how did the tanks or planes did well and what were their flaws. I shifted more from - yeah, I think after the service, I just shifted my interest from being a soldier to kind of studying its origin and so that I don't really engage with all that killing stuff. And, sorry, going back to the war game... I think your main conclusion drawn from that is that it's really sad and petty, if I'm going to be honest, that the country is training young men to fight and die for the country. Nothing wrong with that. That's very normal. If the countries in an emergency, which Korea is. Whether it's like the boy who cried wolf and whatnot. Even though North Korea is a threat and but not really. It's really confusing even for a native Korean. I just felt like I have respect for those people who serve and who are actually doing it as a permanent job, but the country demanding sacrifice from - especially from government officials who didn't even serve in the army, or at least did what I did, you know, spend their part of their young lifetime to actually do good for the country. And they say they're doing good for the country by running policies. If they did well, I won't complain, but. I appreciate the soldiers more, but not for the government. Not anti-government, just in question, questioning. It's more philosophical.

MS: I'm curious, do you and your peers, maybe in Korea or Singapore or the US, have you discussed Korean division or reunification?

MC: I mean that's a little complicated because - to give you a short answer, not really. Because Singapore, most of my friends are all spread out now and I lost contact with most of them because none of them really had to do Korean service and they move along and got a job now, so it's hard to talk to them. Same thing with Colby. But I mean, I'm more connected with the Colby friends before my service. Well, it's still like two or three of them, but they don't have to serve... it's not like now. And we moved

on to a generation where there are no like war, quote unquote. We don't have any family [unclear] those who went to war or served in the military much. I mean, there might be cases flying time to time, but it's not really a common occurrence, like during Vietnam or Gulf War. So trying to explain to them [those who hadn't served] was tough. So I end up not talking about it. And then when it comes to Koreans talking about it, just because I wasn't the regular foot soldier division, that kind of gives me not the right to talk about anything army related because I had the "easy way" for me, even though it wasn't. The reason why we get the let down discrimination as a social service agents compared to the foot soldier is that, A. Those social service agents get to go back home, like their own home, instead of barracks which are controlled and restricted regulations. And B. the fact that you'd have to do those God-awful trainings. You can be outside, you know part of the society, instead of being in the army and being with men. I guess you can be with your girlfriend or whatever. That's where people are like "They [social service agents] get the easy way" [mocking tone]. But in reality, other than my service, what most people do is either help in the government office like City Halls or they go to like elder care centers. So they actually do all the cleaning, wiping the elders butt, mouth feed, you know, do groceries. It's being, like underpaid blue-collar worker in those cases. Yeah, I think now you get paid $2.00 an hour now, but or $4? But when I first started, it was $0.20 per hour, by the way. And that was eight hours, well including lunch so that would be nine hours five days a week. Holidays they kind of count, but sometimes they don't give holidays for other stuff. Disregarding all that, I wasn't really allowed to talk about it [Korean division]. Like with that other Korean guy here or with my father, just because I had the easy way around. My dad, in my case, he went through horrible experience because someone beat him up every month out of habit, instead of like my dad did something wrong. I mean, if he deserved it then so be it, I mean, he's an honest man. There was just some serious malpractices going on. It still is. I mean, there are many boys who committed suicide every year. Government treats it [as] if it's a normal thing, but shouldn't be [chuckles]. And one of the boys, they actually went and shot their bases, killed some of them who bullied, thankfully. Not innocent. And some of them got killed in the process. I'm not allowed to talk about any of this just because I'm a social service agent background. I didn't go through any hardship or training, blah blah, blah, even though I served longer. And in my case, I went through more traumatizing stuff I feel. But although for my part of the service, I only had one higher up like same conscription guy, he was like three years older than I was. But he came three months early so that made him a superior officer. And I had no underlings for two years, so I had no one to really talk to or give orders to do less work. And the guy above, he was always sleeping during the job so I had to do everything. I mean, nearly everything. And he always says to me, "Why don't you tell me to work?" I don't know, you're always on smoke break or sleeping, or you're talking to one of your girlfriends. Overall, I really didn't get to talk about it much with my peers. I guess I do talk about it with the people online and in Korea. The virtual community in Korea is very - I wouldn't say it's very well developed but like scale-wise it's hugely developed. I used to hang out with them to play video games, but now I am just busy and time is [inaudible]. It's inconvenient, so I don't. But whenever I hear them talk about the army and their mix of regular service and social service. Most like - I don't know why the pattern is like that but most social service agents, like background guys, they happen to be online as well. It's just because they're physically unfit. So they socially, not really active compared to regular folks who are normal enough to serve. Their opinion in general is that don't care about North Korea. We don't even have a future to live in. What's the point in fighting? Some of them have real jobs, some of them actually come from the army division, like as a permanent soldier, and some of them have a semi - they're college students, so they're still relatively young or really old compared to the general demographic who

plays video games. It's shifted a lot nowadays. They don't really care about North Korea. They're just more caring about the immediate needs of the country and themselves like, fix job employment problem, fix the tax problem, fix the policy so that you're actually functioning as government instead of being a left- or right-wing polarized government. But there's one thing in common though. North Korea will definitely burn Seoul to the ground, but we won't lose the war. We as Koreans know that they may have nuke and missiles, everything, we know that they'll burn us down. But we know that we won't go down without a chance unless they nuke us both. Even though they [North Korea] have the number and everything, we know they're starving day by day. That's, I think, One common belief. Yeah, that's a little bit of context. All in all.

MS: Do you feel at all isolated socially when you're back in Korea because of what you did for your service?

MC: Depends on which group I hang - like what I'm around with. I don't know much any peers in Korea just because I've been abroad half of my life. And most of my elementary and middle school friends – interestingly... for my elementary school - so this is very important by the way – Korea is such as tiny community and small society and half the population lives in or around Seoul. Everything's pretty tight. You know, people across like neighbor-neighbor. "Oh wait, you know that person!" It's within the town-system. For my elementary school, it was very private with a history of one hundred years and everything. Because after the Korean War, everything burnt down so that one hundred years is pretty important. I went to the same elementary school that the current Samsung CEO is. Which means it's very selective and privileged. I got in because of the lucky draw. That's the most fair one. My mom gets a number, they draw the number, you get in, hooray. I mean, there are other methods like donations and connections, but my mother's case just number she got in [mock cheering noise]. It's very tightly oriented society and that's where I got to meet - And then a lot of the kids were privileged. They didn't go to the army at the end of the day because either they say, "Oh, I'm study abroad" or "I'm a dual citizen" and then voila. Few of them did. But most of them did not for some reason. Out of the ten [classmates] only two of them went [to the army]. The rest, including myself, that'll be seven, didn't go or gave up their citizenship or, you know, they're the only son in the entire family. There are like 30 women in the family tree and there are only four men, he's the only one. They got rid of the policy. And then middle school they all give up their citizenships except like two. I went to like international - now it's called an International School - it used to be called a foreigner school because it was foreigner school. I was a dual citizen then and now. Overall, yeah, I'm pretty isolated in terms of that background. But also, when I'm around church, like family friends and everything, they all served. They don't look... At first they were confused because I'm big and like you know, looked healthy enough that I served but I ended up in the not feel the easy way around. I did get a feeling that they looked down on me. More like, "Did your family do something to get yourself in an easy path?" Kind of like bias. It took four years to convince them that I just happened to be very fat [chuckles] that I got in. I guess that kind of isolation is a thing. When I was doing LSAT Prep, there was an LSAT prep center there, and there were both study abroad and regular Korean folks. I was in one of those study groups. But just because I was social service agent, woman didn't talk to me. I mean partially because I was fat then as well. But they would just talk to this guy who just got off the army and then there's, "Oh, you're so funny" and everything. There was that kind of isolation as well that there is an expectation that unless you're physically handsome or gets a good grade in studying, people just usually regard the social service agents as unfit - sorry, I'm going to say this word – pigs. Or you know, what's it called? Anchovies. That's a word in Korea. Anchovies here

are pretty fat but in Korea, they're really tiny and skinny. You should ask Professor Diederich, she will know what I'm talking about. I think it's anchovy.

MS: Thank you so much for everything you've shared so far. I think we're going to start to kind of wrap up, but I wanted to end by asking you a little bit more about Korean history. You mentioned that you like history. And I'm wondering, how often do you think about the legacy of the Korean War? And did this change during your military service?

MC: Definitely like before the service, I didn't really care about Korean history much. I like the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897) and all that ancient stuff. But modern history, because Korean government didn't really teach much during my middle school and elementary school, probably still, I don't know if they do, but it seems like compared... From what I'm hearing from people in Korea, they don't really cover the democratic movement and everything. Or the Korean War. They only focus on the fact that the Japanese in the colonization was so oppressive that it hurt our country, and I don't know if they still do, that the curriculum might have changed now, but [that's how it was] when I was growing up. Then, they even gave out pamphlets and comics and played cartoons and movies about what North Korea did every single week or day, by the way. Even sometimes the army official came by and gave us a talk about - or heck, even my elementary school they sent kids to the army to be reminded of their grandparents' suffering during the war by experiencing a soldier's experience as a ten or nine-year-old, by the way. So I didn't really have a good opinion about Korean War or anything like that. But after serving, I think I became appreciative of the sacrifices those men made. There are definitely women who carried - like they couldn't fight, the colonization just ended and their rights start to kind of came back because [colonial] woman were not treated well under Japan overall. I recognize the sacrifices just because when I did my basic training, carrying a gun was a lot tougher than I thought compared to the Hollywood movies tend to do. And actually shooting people, and then having that courage to [think] "it doesn't matter if I die, as long as I protect the country." The fact that people put their lives to save the country and people as a whole against North Korea. Started to think about my own history instead of the Western once more dominant, more important so called. I never went to the War Memorial in Korea properly. But after my service - I mean I went there to see the tanks on display. But when I read the Korean War part about it, felt pretty horrible just because we all get this convenience and quality of life stuff, but those men... And they [the men who died in the Korean war] didn't even know that the country even survived and then they were now being in danger of being attacked after nearly ten years after being liberated. No, not ten years, five years after being liberated. Those are all young men like I was like twenty-one and twenty-two. Overall, what I would like to say is I became appreciative the sacrifices that the older generation made. My parents generation also say those things like, "You don't understand what it takes to be hungry to actually make things through. You don't understand what it's to live in a one room with four people or even six people, and then you live day by day, just to make a difference for your generations." And I'm like, "OK." [nervous chuckle] After the service I'm like, "Wow, they really just had rubble and cockroaches everywhere and burned houses, no food, no education, no government." I know it's cliche, but I became more appreciative of the sacrifice of the older generation because they painted with blood to [de]fend the land so.

MS: In your family, are there any other ways that you feel or notice legacies of the Korean War?

MC: Definitely. My paternal side, they don't really talk about history much. My grandmother, my paternal grandmother, she ran away during the war. She was like three or seven and then she saw the

famous Hong Kong bridge burning down by bombing to cut off North Koreans. She saw that. And she was very young when the war happened, but all she knew was that everything was burning and dust. The war took away the life from her, part of it. The great grandfather passing away was more of the impact, but. In my grandparents case, it wasn't exactly the war itself. Because my grandfather, maternal grandfather, he was a console and - He was a diplomat for the Korean government for many parts of the world. He was ambassador for the South Africa for Korea, the entire South Africa because they didn't have any office other than Swaziland at the time. Because they've seen the infiltration and the aggression that was more open and obvious during that time instead of now, they [his grandparents] became very anti-Communist, anti-North Korea and very pro-American. Very common narrative among that generation just because they've seen what North Korea can do to really break the country [South Korea] down. That's kind of an influence or memory of the Korean War. That anti-Left and anti-communistic idea and being patriotic. After the impeachment, they kind of calmed down. My grandfather, he passed away three years [ago]. My grandmother, her political view kind of shifted towards anti-Left wing or Communist or North Korea just because of what North Korea did during the 60s and 70s, not necessarily the war. The war itself, it's more of - it's a fading memory for folks, but the aggression it's still being reminded. Aggression by North Korea, I mean. Technically, my father, when he was serving there was another infiltration going on during the 80s or early 90s, I think, and that killed a lot of servicemen. I think some people he knew got killed during that infiltration. I don't think that really - I mean, he was bothered, but he [inaudible] or anything like that. My mother did tell me that he was not talking about her for a few years when that happened. There was that impact of - it's not the war itself, but the aftermath of the war kind of still influencing people to this day, and even myself, by doing conscription because of the current stalemate.

MS: That kind of leads me to maybe our concluding question. How has your family and your family history impacted or shaped who you are?

MC: A lot. Both my parents come from an very unusual background for normal Korean folks. Like first of all, my mother being semi-foreigner at first, now she's a full-fledged Korean. But that really definitely made me fluent in Korean and more exposed to the Western culture, which wasn't really a thing when I was growing up from like age of six to twelve in Korea. Western culture wasn't really a thing. It wasn't blocked, it wasn't recognized or understood. Now it's very trying to be understood, which is crazy by the way. That ten years, it just took them ten years when Japan took like thirty years to actually digest and they're still resistant to it, some parts of it. The fact that my both of my parents, college wise, they're Western educated here both in the United States. I think that really kind of led me to be on the Western education path and that's why they work so hard to send me abroad to study instead of staying in Korea. Partially because they knew that I wouldn't do well under Korean system, but also they knew it would be better for me to know the world instead of being in Korea. That was fine too, but because of their experience, they wanted me to do - at least experience what they did by knowing the Western culture, which they though it would be more important. Singapore was a unique case because they wanted to keep me nearby instead of sending me all the way here [the US] because I was still young, thirteen to seventeen or fourteen to eighteen. I think my parents, because they're at Western educated and they study abroad part of their life, that kind of made them to send me away from home to study outside of Korea overall. And to look at things outside of the box instead of just follow, that's what people do. At first they will say that, “Don't try to stand out among the crowd,” but later they will say, “You gotta do what you believe in Michael.” You shouldn't manipulate yourself but they say, “You gotta make your

own decision. Don't let the community decide what's good for you. It's your life." They're kind of very independent. Overall, they influenced me a lot. My parents especially influenced me a lot.

MS: Thank you so much for your time today. I think we're going wrap it up here. Our interview today is going to be such a useful addition to our collection of oral histories. I want to really appreciate you for being so honest and open. I will send you a recording of this transcript so you can look it over and make sure that everything you want is in there. Thank you so much. I hope you have a great rest of your day. Thank you.