

Transcript:

Leila Gerry: My name is Leila Gerry. Today is October 18th, 2025 and I am interviewing Man S. Oh through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish its interview for educational purposes?

Man Oh: Okay, even though I'm not really that sure whether anyone would be interested in my life story or your interview on me.

LG: I'm sure there are lots of people who are interested in your life story. Can you please introduce yourself and state where you are from?

MO: My name is Man Oh. I was born in South Korea in 1941, and I graduated from medical school in Korea in 1966 on February 28 and then came to the United States on June 28, four months later, and I have stayed here ever since. I completed my education, the postgraduate education, in the US, then remained in the medical school ever since, and I'm still teaching quite actively.

LG: Can you please describe your hometown in South Korea?

MO: Name of the hometown?

LG: Yes, what was it called? And what was the area like?

MO: It's called Jeollabuk-do. That's a province name and Gochang-gun Seongsong-myeon Sansu-ri Bangchuk. Bangchuk is a very small, rural village where I was born and grew up until I entered middle school, which was about - how many miles would it be? - about twelve miles away from where I was born.

LG: What type of house did you grow up in?

MO: What do you mean by type of house? The only houses in Korea at that time had a roof that's made of rice straws and they have to be replaced maybe every five, ten years.

LG: Can you describe the structure of your nuclear and extended family - who was in your household?

MO: Yeah, see, altogether we had five siblings. I was the youngest and I had three elder sisters and one elder brother, and of course, I had a mother and a father and a grandmother and a great-great-grandmother who was actually quite old. She died at age ninety-eight and she was actually quite a remarkable woman, because at that time no women, or very few women, were educated, but she actually educated herself and learned how to read and write and so on. She would read many novels and she would tell me the story. And when I was growing up,

my grandmother, she thought my elder brother was her responsibility, and my great-grandmother thought I was her responsibility, so I had a much closer relationship until she died.

LG: Did you have any other family members like aunts or uncles and cousins in the area?

MO: Actually, I had just one aunt, the elder sister of my father, no other close relatives, actually.

LG: What did your parents do for a living?

MO: Agriculture. And agriculture meant mostly growing rice and a little bit of the barley.

LG: Was that what most people in your hometown did for a living?

MO: Yes, almost to everyone. There was no industry at that time. As a whole, Korea didn't have any industry when I was growing up, and even after I left. It became a very prosperous country soon after I left, but until I left, the country was extremely poor. As I told you last time when you interviewed me, I had not seen a single case of diabetes because everybody was starving, starving, literally every day. They were constantly hungry. And when you're hungry like that, you cannot develop diabetes.

LG: Was your family religious?

MO: No particular religion, but in Korea, a lot of people had some faith in Buddhism.

LG: Did you and your siblings work at all, or did you just go to school?

MO: My brother, he went to school and I think he was briefly involved in communist movement. I'm not sure whether you know that there was a Korean War that started in 1950 which lasted for three years. And I was nine years old when the war broke out. My elder brother was nine years older than I am, so he was already, I think, a senior of the high school when the war broke out, and that's when his education got essentially interrupted. And like many students in Korea at that time, they were influenced by Communism very briefly. But then, of course, he realized it was nothing.

LG: So, was your family's financial status pretty comparable to the financial status of other families in your area?

MO: Actually, it was much better than most other families in town. We didn't have to starve at least, and the really poor people didn't send their children for high school, even middle school. I went to medical school eventually, so we had enough money for me to go to medical school.

LG: What was it that enabled your family to have access to food consistently while other people didn't?

MO: We had more rice pads [sic], so that was the main source of income for most people in Korea. I think when I was growing up, like eighty percent of the entire population were farmers.

LG: What did a typical meal look like in your family?

MO: Rice. Rice was the main meal. Occasionally wheat, wheat flour, but mostly rice, and occasionally some barley. But people preferred rice to barley.

LG: Did you have any favorite foods or food you would eat on special occasions?

MO: We had Korean cakes. You probably know that during the autumn festival, cakes were eaten quite a bit.

LG: What were your favorite activities to do as a child? I know you mentioned that you would read books.

MO: I cannot think of any particular activities I was engaged in. I didn't play any sports nor musical instruments until I went to medical school. I played violin very briefly.

LG: What was a day like in your primary school classroom in your hometown?

MO: I didn't get the last sentence.

LG: What was a typical day like in your primary school classroom in your hometown?

MO: What were we doing? Primarily, we went to classes, and I had to walk to school. There were no buses at that time, so it took me maybe half an hour to go to school and come home by walking. And that was about - what would be the distance? - about one mile away. I had to walk every day.

LG: Did you walk with your siblings?

MO: Yes, I had an older sister who went to the same school.

LG: Did you have a favorite subject at school?

MO: No. Nothing, no favorite subject. I just learned whatever was taught.

LG: You mentioned that after primary school, you had to start traveling further away to attend school. What was that like?

MO: They're very similar. It's a very didactic lecture. Students rarely ever ask any question. They just write down whatever the teacher teaches.

LG: Were you living at home during this time, or were you staying somewhere else?

MO: I didn't stay home. Once I went to middle school, I was away from home and only came home during weekends and during the vacations. By the way, in Korea, winter vacation is much longer than summer vacation. For obvious reasons, it is very difficult to heat homes. They didn't have heat, I think, during my middle school years, very little coal, so they had to rely on wood for heating.

LG: Who did you live with while you were going to school?

MO: When I was away from home? With the other people who actually went to the same middle school from my hometown, then later I had to stay with the lodging. There are lodging houses where they will provide room and the lodging, room and board. And so I stayed with them.

LG: So, were you totally by yourself without adult supervision during this time?

MO: Yes, no supervision. Once I left elementary school, I was entirely on my own. Middle school, high school, and then, of course, college. And that is probably, as I think I told you that last time, that it was a blessing, because a lot of people study, a lot of children study, not because they want to study, but because parents force them to study. And that creates some kind of automatic rebellious feeling towards learning, and I don't have any of that.

LG: So at the time, were you very appreciative of the opportunity to go to school?

MO: Did I appreciate it? I don't have a particular kind of that feeling. And in fact, I went to school because I had to go to school. I knew that in order to get the occupation, a job, you have to get an education. And I went to medical school because that will secure my future. And I didn't have any particular feelings towards learning. All that happened actually, after I came to this country. I was not particularly industrious.

LG: Did your parents have a higher education? Or were you the first generation in your family?

MO: No, actually my brother and myself are the first people who are educated - formal education. Even elementary schools are very scarce. Most people, in fact, got education at home. I was born - yes, I told you - before the end of World War II, I was four years old when World War II ended, and the Japanese were not particularly interested in educating Koreans at that time.

LG: When your older brother was attending school, he was under Japanese occupation, correct?

MO: Yeah. He was attending school. So he was eighteen when war broke out, and I was four years old, and he was 13 years old when World War II ended, 1945. So I think he was in middle school at that time.

LG: Do you know if he learned Japanese in school during that time?

MO: No, I wasn't in school because I was four years old. You don't go to school at that age.

LG: Did your older brother learn Japanese at school? Because he was in middle school.

MO: I never actually asked him, but he must have been in Japanese school. All the Koreans about his age spoke Japanese.

LG: But you grew up speaking Korean?

MO: Yes, I never learned any Japanese.

LG: Were your older sisters also able to go to school or just you and your brother?

MO: Me and my brother.

LG: Did your sisters attend elementary school or no school at all?

MO: There are very few elementary schools actually, during the Japanese era, so they wouldn't. They were not able to attend schools.

LG: Did they learn to read and write at home?

MO: Yes, they studied at home. Actually, I take that back. My sisters had elementary school education. So I think at that time, there were schools that, especially after the war ended, there were elementary schools, and they had the elementary school education.

LG: Why did you decide to go to medical school?

MO: Actually, my elder brother thought, and his thinking was much more practical than I was. I was interested in engineering, and that could have been actually a very good choice for me, because I wanted to be a mechanical engineer, and so I applied to Seoul National University, which is the best university in Korea for engineering school. And then my elder brother kept insisting that there is no future in engineering. We didn't have any industry in Korea, but we will need doctors, so I should go to medical school. And I was eventually persuaded by him to go to medical school.

And at that time, the deadline for application to Seoul National University has ended, so I could not change the application there. So that's why I actually ended up in Gwangju. Remember you, you went to Gwangju? That is the town where I went to medical school. And in retrospect, that was really a very good decision, because your grandma's classmate had a degree from Seoul National University engineering school, which is quite prestigious. You know what he did when he came to the US? So he came to the US around the same time as I did, and he couldn't find a

job. So he became a fish merchant. He had a fish store. He was selling fishes, and he had to get up at like four o'clock every morning to go to the Fulton Fish Market in New York to buy fish. And he eventually made quite a bit of money, but his life was miserable, and so if I went anywhere in school, I wouldn't have had any job, actually.

LG: At what point in your life did you learn English?

MO: What?

LG: At what point did you learn English?

MO: We learn English in middle school. No English in elementary school. We had English class. And in high school. And, of course, in medical school, throughout.

LG: Do you have any recollections of the impacts of World War II from your childhood?

MO: Very little. For some reason, I remember the Japanese policeman coming to my town and beating up some people for not supplying enough metals. In fact, near the end of the war, they would collect all spoons, metal spoons, even to make weapons. And I must have been really very young at that time, but for some reason I remember that particular episode.

LG: Did any older members of your family tell you stories or anecdotes about things that happened during World War II?

MO: Not really. For some reason, I wasn't that interested in learning about the experience during Japanese rule. My father must have had ample experience, because he is obviously much older than I am, I was four years old. Sorry, but I never actually asked even once about his experience during the Japanese rule.

LG: How did the Korean War affect you and your family?

MO: Were we affected? Not really. And it was very brief. Even though the war lasted quite long, as you know, I don't know whether you know much about how war evolved and North Korea occupied the entire South Korea, except Busan. Have you ever heard of that story? Then General Douglas MacArthur got involved with them and they were pushed back all the way to, I think, Pyongyang. Then the Chinese got involved, and so then they were pushed down again. And then the war lasted much longer afterwards, another two years, then finally, the truce happened in 1953.

LG: When you were growing up, what were you taught to believe about North Korea?

MO: When I was growing up? You mean after the war? Before the war, I have very little recollection of what was happening. But I really wasn't that interested in politics. So I didn't have any particular opinion. Subsequently, of course, I'm a very strong anti-communist. Even now,

there are some people who have some nostalgic idea about communism, and that, of course, is completely misguided. The idea, because we are all born, in a sense, very selfish.

LG: How do you feel like you developed those anti-communist beliefs?

MO: How did I develop that idea? Because I'm a very clear thinker, and I think Marx is an idiot and he doesn't understand human beings. Look at every prominent communist, they're extremely selfish and they preach that we are not.

LG: Was communism something that was discussed in your family or at school?

MO: No, no, it was rarely discussed.

LG: So, I know you said that you personally weren't very politically engaged. Were there other members of your family that were more engaged in politics? I know you discussed that your older brother participated in communism for a little bit?

MO: Yes, no, they were not interested in politics at all.

LG: I know that around the time that you were in college, there were a lot of major student protests. Do you remember witnessing those at all?

MO: How do you know about it? Did you read about the student protest? Yes, I wasn't involved in it, but the town where I went for medical school, Gwangju, is very famous for its student activism. That happened due to a - I think that was in 1960 - have you heard of Syngman Rhee, who was the first president of Korea, and he was ousted, and that uprising started in Gwangju. And also, there was a famous student movement during the Japanese era, and that started in Gwangju also,

LG: Did you know people who participated in those political movements?

MO: Well, in Japanese - or, actually, your grandma's father was involved within this Gwangju student movement during the Japanese era. He was one of the student leaders, I think, and there is a plaque for the students who participate in that movement against Japan in Gwangju. I think his name is included there. That will be your great-great-grandfather.

LG: Do you know anything else about my great great grandfather's political involvement?

MO: Anything else about his involvement? I think he had some involvement in communism, subsequently, like many idealistic students were.

LG: Did the military coup in 1961 have a significant impact on your life?

MO: Significant effect on my life, no nothing.

LG: What were your views on the military?

MO: I take it back. A lot of people don't like him, because he was a dictator, until he was assassinated, and he was going to be a dictator for life, but I think he is responsible for the current Korean prosperity because he industrialized the country, and he devoted his life for that purpose. And another fascinating aspect is most politicians made a lot of money, and because of that, they were subsequently jailed and so on, and there is no evidence at all that he accumulated any wealth while he was the president.

LG: You talked about Korea's industrialization. What changes have you noticed that Korea has undergone since you left?

MO: Well, as you know, Sony. Do you know that Sony, the company in Japan, was the predominant electronic firm in the world, and so much more advanced than Samsung, you know. Now Samsung is much bigger than Sony. It has a much bigger market cap and television and electronics, Samsung is dominating. The Galaxy telephone, of course, after Apple - in fact I think that ninety percent of all smartphones are either Apple or Samsung now. So this change occurred, I think, maybe late 2005, 10, up to that point Sony was the predominant company. Then suddenly Samsung took over. So that is just one example. There are many other companies, for example, LG is a dominant electronic company and did you know that another company - what is that company? - it's a company that makes a very important chip used by the Nvidia company for AI computers. A particular part of that which is currently the most important part of that Nvidia chip is made by a Korean company also.

LG: What led you to immigrate to the United States?

MO: Because I knew there would be a lot more opportunity in the US.

LG: How were you able to get a green card?

MO: I didn't get a green card, actually. When I left Korea, every man in Korea had to serve in the military for three years and so when you graduated from medical school you became an officer in the medical corps and had to serve for three years. But, one year before I graduated, Korea set up a system where medical graduates can go to the US and get five years of training and come back then serve. So I knew that particular opportunity existed, but actually we had to pass the exams to use the system. So I passed the exam and came here, and after five years I was supposed to go back and serve in the military, and I didn't have a green card, as I told you, so I was resigned to go back after five years. So, I came to the US in 1966, completed education by 1971, and I was going to go back. Then the US had a huge shortage of doctors because of the Vietnam War. So many US doctors went to Vietnam. So they changed the law so we could get a green card right away. So I got a green card and the rest is history. Five years later I got US citizenship. So this is kind of a lucky break. And do you know when the Vietnam War ended? Do you know what year? 1975, so four years after I got my green card, but if the war had ended

earlier, then the US would not have changed the law, and I probably could be living in Korea at this point. You may not have been born, probably.

LG: What was your experience like settling in the United States? Was it a smooth transition?

MO: It was a huge cultural shock. Everything is so different in this country. Everybody had a car, and in fact I was one of very few classmates who got a car right away. Three months after I came to the US, I bought a car.

LG: Were you able to maintain contact with your family in Korea after you moved to the United States?

MO: Of course. And my mother actually came to the US in 1973 and she stayed in the US for six months.

LG: How did you engage with Korean culture once you moved to the United States? Did you still eat Korean food? Were you part of a larger Korean community?

MO: Korean foods were not readily available. In New York City, we had more Koreans than most other cities, and still, there was one small Korean grocery in Manhattan, and most of the Asian foods I had to buy, I went to Chinese stores in Canal Street. Have you heard of a Canal Street in Manhattan? At that time, that area wasn't really that nice, and that's why there was a Chinese town there, because it was not a luxurious area. But now that area has changed so much - you've probably heard of Tribeca? Tribeca is the triangle below Canal, and that area is now a most expensive area. But I used to go to Canal Street Chinese Town to buy Korean - Asian groceries.

LG: How long were you in the United States before you returned to Korea for the first time?

MO: I was in the US for sixteen years, from '66 to 1982, and that's when I went back to Korea for the first time.

LG: Was Korea very different?

MO: Actually, it hadn't changed that much by '82. The more rapid industrialization occurred after my visit - late 1980s and 1990s.

LG: Have you returned to Korea more frequently since then?

MO: Yes. After '82, I went back in '85 when my mother passed away. In '86 I went for my 20th medical school reunion, then '94, '99, 2002, 2010, 2014, and I went there with you in 2017, and 2019 again - that's when you left Japan, 2019, remember? - and then I went in 2022 and last year, 2024. So I went back many times after 1982.

LG: Are you part of a Korean community in the area you live in right now?

MO: Actually, I don't have too much contact with the Korean community, in part because I don't go to church. As you may or may not know, many Koreans who live in the US go to church. I would say maybe eighty or ninety percent. They are much more religious than Americans. And since I don't go to church, so I don't have much contact - that's probably the reason why your mom never learned Korean very well. Because when children go to church they have to interact with other Koreans, they tend to go to Korean school also, but your mom and your uncle never went to church with me.

LG: When you were raising your kids, did you try to keep them in touch with Korean culture?

MO: No, that's what I told you. Korean culture was sustained through church, so that did not happen.

LG: Well, thank you so much. This has been super, super interesting. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview with me.

MO: Okay. As I told you, my life is really not that interesting. There are so many more interesting figures in history. The last time, I told you, I now love history more than novels because their lives are more interesting than the characters in novels, and my life is certainly not one of those.

LG: I think your life is pretty interesting!

MO: Okay.