

Narrator name: May Kao Xiong

Interviewer: Victoria Pham

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VP: My name is Victoria Pham. Today is May 7, 2020. And I am interviewing May Kao Xiong through Zoom for the UCSD Race and Oral History Project. Can you please state your full name, date of birth, and place of birth?

MKX: Sure. My name is May Kao Xiong in English and in Hmong, May Kao Xiong. And I was-- [Portion redacted for privacy] And I was born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand.

VP: Also, can I please ask you for a verbal signature for the recording and archiving of this interview by reading the following?

MKX: Yes. So I, the interviewee, May Kao Xiong [Hmong pronunciation] and May Kao Xiong [English pronunciation], hereby transfer to the university the rights to publish, duplicate, or otherwise use of recordings, and transcribed interviews and any photographs and/or videotape footage taken during the interview. This includes publication rights in print and electronic form such as on the internet, the right to rebroadcast the interview or portions thereof, and permission to transfer the interview to future media.

VP: Great. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your family background?

MKX: Sure. I was born in a refugee camp in Thailand. My family fled to this country, was sponsored by a Catholic Church in Illinois. We ended up in, well, we went through the passage of Hawaii, California, Texas, and then finally made our way to Illinois where the rest of my extended family were living. And all of us made it through, all 10 of us. My whole immediate family made it through. But my grandparents and extended family had already arrived in the U.S. at that time. So I grew up pretty much in Illinois, and I went to school. So I came over when I was three years old, and grew up mostly in Illinois in the Midwest and went to school at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and then on to my first grad program at the University of Missouri, Columbia, and eventually started working for higher education at the University of Illinois, University of Wisconsin. And now I'm a full time graduate student in the interdisciplinary humanities program at the University of California, Merced.

VP: Great. Do you remember any special foods from childhood? And do you still make those dishes today?

MKX: Yes. So our--So Hmong cuisine, if you want to call it cuisine, is very much Southeast Asian. So a lot of--So we made a lot of like, pho. We made egg rolls, noodle dishes. So I remember a lot of that growing up, usually made it during special occasions like a buffet style, family style. So, because of that, I, you know, wherever I moved to in the Midwest, or even in California here, I would, if I'm able to find the ingredients, then I would make any of those dishes that I'm craving at the moment or, but I love egg rolls. I really love egg rolls. And so I try to make that when I can, but sometimes if I can, I'll just make the--The ingredients that are inside the egg rolls and eat it with rice [laughs] so that's just--Reminds me of home, quite a bit.

VP: Do you have any special memories about these celebrations that you're talking about?

MKX: Yeah, so [pauses] sometimes it was going to the New Year's and having the all sorts of Hmong food available so--So you go to New Year's to see family and friends but sometimes it was more about the food [laughs], at least for me as a kid, it was always about the food [laughs]. Because you could go you know, you can go with your cousins and just kind of go and see the different beautiful gowns that were made and the jewelry. And so, but when--But it was always good to go and get something to eat. And so that was always a special occasion when we could go to the New Year's, but at the same time, back at home, I think a lot of times where I grew up there were not--At least in the 80s, there were more Hmong families that were family friends that were Hmong, as well as like, extended family. And so we would get together at the park for picnics, whether it'd be July 4th celebrations or Memorial Weekend, we would all gather together as a Hmong community and we would make all the Hmong dishes and barbecue and, you know, kind of do a fusion of Hmong and American food. So it--And the kids would come, we would play volleyball, we would play--Some kids. I mean, this was more during the summertime but in the fall, sometimes go kite flying and stuff like that. So I do remember the memories of going to the summer picnics and all the Hmong families in the community, we gather together and celebrate. And as more Hmong families moved away to Minnesota, Wisconsin, then there were more just more immediate and extended families that were still around in our small little town in Illinois--Danville, Illinois. And so we would still carry on that tradition of getting together and having those picnics, but sometimes even like for special cultural events, like we have the Hmong blessings. And so for newborn babies--And so we would have a lot of those whenever a baby was born. And a lot of my siblings were still living in Danville, even though they were, you know, married and had kids of their own place. They remained in Danville, and Illinois. And so we would get together to do family blessings for the newborn babies. And so at those gatherings, where we would tie a white string as blessings to the family and also especially to all the kids in the family, so not only just a newborn, but also all the

kids in that family. And so--And then the elders would come and also acknowledge the birth of the new baby and bless the new baby. And so we would get together in that regard, and make Hmong dishes as well to celebrate. So it was always a--You knew that you were going to eat well when you were going to these gatherings. And so I have all those fond memories of going and celebrating all my nieces and nephews that were born and right now I have about like at least--I'm losing count, but it's like 32, 34 nieces and nephews. So we had a lot of celebrations when they were all coming into the world, so that's kind of nice.

VP: What do these gatherings mean to you?

MKX: I think--They mean--Now I'm gonna get emotional but they mean life; they mean family, community, [pauses] celebration, like imparting tradition, heritage, customs [pauses], and maintaining a connection with your ancestors. Because we would also have not only just these kind of gatherings to celebrating life, but it was also, you know, we would also gather for funerals, family funerals, but we will also gather for Shaman, you know, healing ceremonies as well. So I mean, even though my family was--My family's Catholic because we were sponsored by the Catholic Church, and we were--We converted in the camps, so that became our religion in the U.S., but at the same time, some families like ours, continue to practice Shamanism. And so my family practiced that, along with being Catholic, although that--The Catholic Church didn't really agree with that. But our family, like family friends, who were Catholic disagreed with that, but we continue to do it because it's still part of our culture. And so--So it meant a lot when we would gather in these ways, whether it be for funerals, or these blessings or Shaman healing ceremonies. They meant a lot about sustaining a connection with your ancestors. And I think we continue to do it because it was a part of who we were, as refugees in the U.S. It was a way and it still--Being tied in some ways to the homeland, or what we call the homeland for us. And even though a lot of us like myself, you know, grew up pretty much in the U.S., or even like my brother, my baby brother, who actually was born in the U.S, even though we grew up pretty much in the U.S., we still had that direct connection to our identity as being Hmong. And these were the ways in which we continue to sustain that connection with our identity.

VP: What challenges did you face in the U.S. as a first generation individual?

MKX: Probably more in school than anything. The Catholic school I went to was very--Was not very diverse. It was mostly, demographic wise it was mostly white. We had like, maybe two biracial students in our class. I, myself--Myself, and another student were the only Asian American students. He was my friend in that class, his was--He was Vietnamese. And I was the only Hmong, so--And then a couple of them started to move out of the community. And so it was pretty much white. There, everybody was white, and then myself who was Asian American. So I went to a Catholic school and it was very small, the student body was very small. So I think

that--That also, you know, shows a different kind of demographics in that respect. But when I went to high school, it was a public high school. And it was more diverse. I, you know, the demographics were African American students, Vietnamese students, lots of Vietnamese students, Hmong students. Some of my cousin's went to the public school system. So by the time I went to high school, I joined them in the public school system. But--And then mostly white students after that, but yeah, definitely the public schools were more diverse in that respect compared to the private school I went to in my K through eight years.

VP: When you went to high school with a more diverse community, how did that make you feel?

MKX: It was--It was--It was different. Different in the sense that, I had a--I don't know, I think I felt like I had a very odd [pauses] diversity experience as a--As a kid growing up in a working class town in Illinois--A small working class town. And at the same time, we also had, like, you know, we were sponsored by the church, but we also had two sponsors that were there. Like, probably second generation, German American, and they were like--Our sponsors were deeply a part of our lives. So they were definitely white Americans who, in some ways, like helped to transition us into or adapt into, into the American community, in many respects. But we grew up in the housing projects in Illinois. So in the housing projects, it was predominantly with--In the 80s, there were more Hmong families also in the housing projects. But then by the 90s, there were very few Hmong families that lived in the housing projects. But it was predominantly in the 80s; it was predominantly Hmong families and African American families in the housing projects. And then in the 90s, that when a lot of the Hmong family started moving away out of Illinois, it became more just my family. My extended family, they were all moving out and living and you know, buying up homes and so they moved on more into the other parts of town that were a little bit, I guess, like more gentrified in some respect. Whereas, like, my family was still in the housing projects, and so our neighbors were African Americans. And so at home, it would be that kind of environment and then going to Catholic school, it was predominantly white. And then, and then we had godmothers; we call them our godmothers, they're our sponsors, our American sponsors, and they--They were white as well. So they helped, like, adapt, help us adapt and transition into living in America. And so my family would then--But at the same time, then I would go to school and my environments would be different. And then when I went to public school there was more diverse--So then, you know, I think I, in many ways, I think in high school, I got a better taste about the world outside of the different spaces I existed in that were very predominantly one population or another. And so I think it, you know, it made me by the time I went to high school and it was more diverse, I think it made me realize [pauses] that the world is not just the kind of, you know, it was more diverse than what I was experiencing, whether it be in the housing projects, right, where it was predominantly African American. And then--Or in a Catholic school where it was predominately white, right. So I think public school, high school, really exposed me to the idea that there is a bigger world out there, right. And so

how did it make me feel? I think it was, you know, when you're in high school, I think--And a teenager, you're just trying to figure out who you are. So I think there was a lot of struggling through understanding social issues, because we were--That was a--It was like the main--There's another--There's another high school but it was the Catholic high school. So there are really only two major high schools, the public high school and the Catholic high school and that I've seen the Catholic high school was not very diverse. But the public, the public high school was pretty diverse. And so I think it really opened my eyes to what might be outside of my small little working class town. And I was waiting for--And it made me look forward to college because of that experience too, but in terms of the diversity, it really did make me feel at times--I think as a kid because I grew up mostly in the white kind of spaces, I always kind of felt [pauses] like, that was kind of the world I was always in. But then I went home and it was predominately African American. So in some ways, it was almost like okay, the world is kind of, you know, black and white, right. It kind of felt like that as a kid, but I think the--Especially when I went to college, in high school, it really did suggest to me that there is something more to our society, right. But I couldn't figure all those kind of components out yet and then going to college really did just kind of opened this whole new world for me. So in terms of the challenges too, [sighs] I think it was always like trying to adapt. That was always I think, challenging. I think some--Sometimes these cultural, I think like these cultural components of like being exposed to our godmothers who were predominately white. I mean, they are white. And I think like, learning from them, what that--You know, they were not only white and Republican, but they were [pauses] also kind and I think as a kid, you know, trying to figure out your politics and who you are, and also, you know, because they wanted us to transition to being Americans or however Americans are defined, right, at that time. I think they--And, and we were young so I think they were always trying to get us to speak more English, right. Speak more English. At home, it was a bilingual household because us kids would speak in English but whenever we spoke to our parents, they didn't speak English so we would speak in Hmong. And I think my godmothers would--They would always tutor us on the weekends. We would--We would spend the weekends with them to do our homework. to--To get help with schoolwork and learning English. And a lot of times, you know, they would teach us how to answer the phone if they would call and, you know, and things like that. They will always say to us, like, you know, "practice your English," right. And sometimes when you were--We were at home and they would call, then we would, you know, we would answer and we would say--We would, you know, say "Hello," this and you know, "This is so and so," "How can I help you?" or something like that. They would teach us how to answer the phone and once in a while, like I remember specifically moments where they would say in response on the phone, "Your English is, is very good." You know? I mean, they would say things like that and as a kid. you know, you just don't see that as any different, you--You just feel good that you're actually, you know, you did somethi--You, you felt like that was something good that you did, right. And of course now you know, when we study about race, then there's all these other layers that are kind of built into that. But, but I think--Yeah, the challenges are kind

of noticing some of these moments, but not fully understanding them at those moments in your life. And sometimes feeling like you had to choose [pauses] which way to be as an individual. And I think that's definitely some of the challenges is like what--So academics was fine because I always tried to be a good student. I, you know, and of course, being in a Catholic school, they teach you religion and, you know, you try to be a good citizen or a good Christian, right [chuckles]. So there's all these things that are built into the curriculum in a Catholic school. And so, I didn't struggle too much with that, because that was kind of, you know, you're a kid and you go through that process of education. So you kind of adapt to it, you kind of accept it, right, as a process. And so I didn't have troubles navigating or negotiating that. I think it was, obviously when you go to college, then that's kind of where most of the time those kinds of issues or even in high school--I think even in high school, I was starting to question certain things about the faith but also about my identity. You know, who am I? And how do I, you know, how do I navigate my identity as Hmong but yet I live in America?

VP: Where do you live now?

MKX: I live in Merced, California.

VP: What is your relationship with your community in Merced?

MKX: So I had worked on a research project last summer and I recently moved here a year before starting grad school year and--And we moved here because my partner had a job offer at UC Merced. And so we moved--We relocated here and so when I moved here, I was trying to reach out to the Hmong community in different ways. I was connected with Professor Ma Vang and so I reached out to connect with her and she also shared with me other ways to be connected with the community. Because there's also another, like, a Hmong Women's Initiative Group that's in the community. And so she encouraged me to engage with that community group, because I was asking her about different ways. And so she shared some of the community groups and clubs, you know, social--social groups that could engage with and so, I, you know, when I first moved here, it was a bit of a transition. And so I didn't, right away jump into getting too involved with a community but then last semester or last summer, I worked on this research project where it would involve engaging with the Hmong community and I really then started to connect with various people, a lot of the professional class of Hmong community members. Those were by nature, the groups that I connect, or the particular individuals that I connected were groups. Individuals I connected with, they happened to be in the professional class. So I became involved in, you know, working with them on this research project. You know, learning more about the community in that--In that way, and got to know some of them personally outside of--Outside of just that research. And so that was my way of connecting with the community. And I think also for me, I had--I've been working for like 10 plus years outside of my first grad program after I

finished my first grad program. And so I was starting, I was going to start it into the grad program here, the doctoral program here and I was still transitioning to--To being a Californian or to live in California. And so I think for me, it was a lot of just transitioning that I didn't get involved right away with the community. And I think I'm still trying to, you know, build upon that in different ways at this point in time, because I'm still heavily involved in my program and my graduate program. And I also feel like, you know, I'm getting old and I want to finish the program. But at the same time, I also want to engage with the community and try to find ways I can still do that. And doing the research project last summer was one way of getting to know the community better. And I did, I learned a lot about the community by talking to various members of the community in this town and that I guess that would--Was like just one way of me, learning more about the community and finding ways to engage [sneezes]. Excuse me. So yes, so--So that's the limits. I was hoping before the pandemic--I had hoped that I could--We have a supervisor that's running--A Hmong supervisor that's running for office in town. And I had hoped that, you know, I didn't know that the pandemic--Nobody knew the pandemic was ever gonna happen, but had that not had happened I had thought about okay, you know, maybe now's the time I can become a little bit more involved in the Hmong community, by political through political, right, support, and by helping her campaign. But right now, I guess we're just all kind of waiting to see what our ways, right, that we can still engage with community without you know, by being in sheltered in at this point in time. So...

VP: What are you currently studying at UC Merced?

MKX: [pauses] Wait, did you say where? Or...

VP: Sorry, I said, "What are you currently studying?"

MKX: Oh, "what," [laughs] I just wanted to clarify. Okay, so I--Right now, our program's called interdisciplinary humanities. And so specifically with it--So really it's interdiscipline, right. Interdisciplinary, but--But within that, the focus is on critical race and ethnic studies, and also history. So those are my fields that I'm interested in but within this broader humanities degree program.

VP: What research do you specialize in and why is that your interest?

MKX: So my research interest is in higher education and particularly looking at diversity and you know, minoritized populations within the structure of the, you know, the university and how, you know, how policies impact, whether it's undergraduate students or graduate students. But the students, overall and also trying to also look at the impact of diversity with regards to faculty and staff, right. So the whole sense of the campus. And this campus being, you know, built in the

21st century. What does that, you know--There's a term that we think about with regards specifically to this campus, and obviously something I'm still working through, but it's a neoliberal university, and that's what this campus is. And so looking at diversity within that kind of framework and structure of a neoliberal university. And so that's--That's my interest. And I'm interested in it because having worked at different universities and higher education from cultural centers, to advising undergraduate students, to working with graduate students in the graduate school--So having all these different kinds of experiences, and working especially with underrepresented and first generation students too--That all these experiences have made me start to question how we think about policies and how we also think about supporting our students and the different levels but also from very different backgrounds, right. And different experiences and--And that to me is really important and how we think about diversity and how universities sometimes looks at diversity as something that can work for them as a demonstration, but also, we--You know, we as students ourselves or even as instructors, that we also think about how does that play out in terms of supporting our students, right. Not just something for the university to market about their institutions, but also how we--How do we still support these students, despite all these other issues that are going on on campus? And how universities, you know, capitalize on that, really. So these are things I'm interested in because of the fact that I have seen lots of students go through different campuses and different institutions and what their experiences are like, and what kind of backgrounds that they come from and how much struggle they have, and how some, you know, some offices on campuses, don't--They're not able to provide that much support. And my whole thing is like, how can we change that, right? How can we do better? It's a question in higher ed that a lot of different institutions and scholars are also trying to answer. But it's something that I care deeply about. And it's something that once I'm done, I want to continue researching the balance and also being a part of that community.

VP: Can you expand on your definition of a neoliberal university?

MKX: Yeah, of course, you were gonna ask that tough question [laughs]. Yeah. So when I think of that term, I think about, you know, I think about how the university is--How they market, marketize? I think one of my professors saying like, there's some words that--Oh, monetize; he doesn't like the word monetize, but--But it's how the university markets their institution, right, and whether we talk about diversity because like--Our university is heavily known for its underrepresented population and the reliance on financial aid. Like a lot of our students are dependent on financial aid as other universities, but our university here is especially so and it's a new university. And so when I think about that term, I think about how we, you know, how do we--How do we think about ways in which the university is doing things that serves just the university, but not really the students who are part of the society that's on this university, and that is through how they--How they market diversity, right, how they talk about how certain populations is something that this university is known for, the number of Hispanic students. And



secondary to Hispanic and Latina, and Latino students is Asian American students, but they don't disaggregate the Asian American or Asian. I mean, they just kind of group everybody together. And so, those are concerns that I have about how they market those things. And then the third group that's the top demographics on our campus is white students. And you know, what about our African American students? After that is our African American students but very small percentages, and then our Native American students, which is barely 1%. And so you know, there's all these kinds of issues that we have, but then we celebrate and we mark it how this university serves a huge portion of Latina, Latino students, Hispanic students, which is true; we do serve them and our institution is a Hispanic serving institution. Even though we do have a huge portion of Asian American students on this campus and Asian students, and so, you know, and not to mention we have international students, too. So when you have that on the mix, how does the university use these demographics to sell their university, how they also use it to determine policies, right, that support certain students, but not the rest of the students, right, or limited service to the other students, right. So these are how I think about that neoliberal university term, right. And then if you start looking at faculty, you can look at hirings of faculty. And you will notice that there's not certain representation of faculty of color. And, you know, it's not very diverse in terms of the representation. And you know, what is the university doing about it? And then you can look at channels of where money's being spent at universities and how much money is being spent in certain spaces, but not others, right. Like we think about, I guess, like the general comment a lot of times is STEM fields get a lot of the funding, and not so much the humanities, right. So these are ways when I think--So neoliberalism university to me, is this broad, you know, broad term that really encompasses all these other issues of how money is being spent across the board, across the university, and in what sectors of the university and for what benefit or what means, right. And so that's--That's what I mean when I use that term is really to look at how the direction of higher education, the direction of how this campus is going, is--In what ways is money being spent? How is money being spent? And you know, tied down with that is another layer of that diversity component. So that's the part that I'm interested in.

VP: What kind of challenges have you faced in your studies?

MKX: In terms of my current studies?

VP: Yes.

MKX: So, I think for me transitioning not being in school for like, I don't know, 17, 20 years [chuckles] is probably 17, I think. 17 or 13 years. Having been out of school for that long, I think that the challenge was like transitioning back to--Oh, writing papers. Oh, reading and weekly write ups, you know, things like that. Deadlines, right. The different kind of deadlines to like writing a report for about some of the year and strategic goals. And what do we do in the coming

years for cultural centers is very different than writing like a research paper for a class. And so I think it's for me the challenge was like transitioning and my age to come back. And to have that mentality of being a student again, but being a different type of student, in my mind for myself, not in comparison to my classmates but more for myself as an individual in terms of my growth and my development as an individual and just as a person, you know, as a Hmong--Hmong woman, actually, to continue to further my education. So I think the challenge has been more of the mentality of transitioning back into graduate school. I, you know, having been in a graduate program, I do remember that, Oh, yes, it's gonna be hard. Oh, yes, it's gonna, you know, require me to do work, lots of work. Sometimes, you know, staying up late at night and working through the whole day, you know, things like that, so I expected that. But I think this whole transition of coming back to the mentality of being a student again, that was I think--That was a little bit of a challenge because I had been out of school for at least like 13 to 17 years. So yes, so it was it--I think it was just--That was my--Probably my biggest challenge. And then trying to I think, in classes, you know, connecting with a younger group of students, but that hasn't been as challenging as I thought it might be. Because of--Some others in the program, some of them are, you know, they have lives already. They have worked already, but a couple of them are directly, you know, coming from undergrad, too. So, yeah. But the biggest challenge is like the mentality to try and shift my gears from being a professional, you know, career professional for 17 plus years and then coming back to being a student full time.

VP: What do you think is rewarding about your studies?

MKX: I think definitely the intellectual stimulation, the intellectual curiosity, the critical analysis, the engaging discussions and classes, the faculty who do the kind of work and their approaches. I think, for me, it's a different way of thinking. I had been in a grad program, my master's program before, and it was earlier in the millennium. This kind of dates me but early in the millennium, I was in my first grad program, and it's very--It was very different. I definitely noticed the changes and so now I think, you know, what's interesting is like, the approaches and the techniques of mentorship that comes from the faculty are hugely different than what I experienced in a, you know, in my first grad program. The faculty here are extremely supportive. And I--Being a first generation college student, particularly grad student, when I first went to my first grad program, I really struggled. I struggled because I had no idea how to navigate it. I was just trying to figure it out every week, but because I have gone through that experience, and then starting this program, and I had lived a little, right. I mean, kind of had my career, professional career, too. I have seen other students go through it, right. And so for me, that--That kind of--All that kind of experience, really, in some ways got me somewhat ready to know what this experience would be like. But I think I love the most is like, the support from the faculty in our program. And I don't know if that's just unique to our program, it might be. But I just find some of them really dedicated to helping us grow intellectually, but also personally as individuals, and

especially, you know, being in a CRES program, critical race and ethnic studies program, I had never been in a program like this before. And the different scholarships that I read, really, you know, really pushed me to think about what kind of human being I want to be in our society. And I think things that I've studied before were in some ways trying to speak to that--Those kinds--That kind of question, but it was--I--My grad program, I was in a history program, and I studied Irish history, so completely different than what I'm doing now. But in essence, some of the kind of key questions--I mean, it was about empire. It was about, you know, colonialism towards Irish, like Irish immigrants coming here, but also I---The Irish--The Irish and Ireland and the colonialism that they experienced there by the British. So it's definitely about empire, too. But I think the--The kinds of scholarship I read now in critical race and ethnic studies gives me frameworks to not only think about in terms of how I think about research and writing, but also how one lives, right. How one lives like, in our every day, you know. And I--And I think it's a different kind of meaningful experience for me now than it was when I was going straight from undergrad into my first grad program, and trying to understand everything, not just the academic stuff, but also life stuff about navigating that graduate space. And now, it's completely different for me. But I love the kinds of lessons and the kinds of scholarship I'm reading, and how these scholars really think about these issues of humanity and how they write about them. And, and it's things that you walk away from that you think about how--How do I put this into practice, right? And so I think that's what I appreciate a great deal about our program, and particularly what our history and CRES (critical race and ethnic studies) program here tries to do within the interdisciplinary humanities graduate program.

VP: Okay, so moving on to COVID-19 questions, but how is your everyday life been impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic?

MKX: [sighs] I think it's caused a lot of like, discombobulation, right. I mean, I think it's really, it came all of a sudden. I mean, even though like we're now trying to trace it back to like, when--When was it that the pinpoint of it when it happened in the US, right? And when it did happen in Europe, in Paris and all this stuff, right. So, I mean--So we're starting to kind of do that now. But I think we didn't really have an idea about the impact it would have in terms of shifting things for us. And when--When it was, it just--It was almost like overnight, everything had changed. And I think because of that rupture, I--It made us all feel like we have lost a sense of control, right. And so I think for me, it has been feeling that loss of sense of control, like, you know, like every week, I would know, okay, well, I'm reading this for class. I'm doing this for, you know, my RA-ship or my research assistantship. And then suddenly--And then some of my colleagues and peers, they're TA-ing and so suddenly it just becomes this kind of, okay, now we're going to try to do everything remotely, you know, via computer, the internet and Zoom and everything. And it's just like everything that was planned for for the year suddenly became no longer the plan, and it was shifting into crisis mode in some way. And I think because of that, I

think it's really shifted how we, for me, it's made me become very focused on existential questions when you read the news and you hear about people dying every day. And--And you have loved ones that maybe, you know, who are frontline workers, whether they're still working at the essential, you know, businesses like grocery stores or factories or what have you, right. And--Or they're nurses, because you know, one of my cousin's who I'm very close with, she's a nurse, and, you know, and she has a family, like an infant and you know, the older girls, but it's things like this that make you think about the people you care about, more deeply, and trying to stay more connected with them. I mean, you--You stay connected with them before but you know, it becomes even more so at the forefront of your mind. But I think the biggest thing, [pauses] it's really the shift in like everything now. Classes have become--What do we do with them to finish up this semester? Right? I mean I think that became more of the question, but I think when everything just kind of shut down, it was just just like you lose that sense of control. And especially, just to hear every day, not just in our country, but around the world tell so many lives were lost to this. And it just becomes how, how do we--How do we continue living every day? You can find distractions, like gardening or what have you, or going for running or something, but how do you--How do you deal with the fact that [pauses] people are dying every day, when you turn on the news, or read, you know, on the internet, read the news. I mean, that's--That's the hard part is to really feel that--How real that is. So yeah, so definitely that's the impact COVID 19 has had on me is trying to cope with a lot of that even though it's not people I know but it's--It's people who also are human beings who are dying.

VP: Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your cultural practices and if so, how?

MKX: [pauses] I think it [pauses] and I think it's just maybe more connected with my family, trying to reach out more to them, whether it be through texting my family. Like before, my siblings and I would just, you know, individually text from time to time and then now it's more we have a group chat that we communicate and we are sharing things with each other via--Via texting and you know, a phone call if we need to. But most of the time, yeah, it's been--I think that's--In terms of culture, I think just being more connected with my family.

VP: What do you miss the most during quarantine?

MKX: The freedom, the freedom to, right, to--If I want to go anywhere. I know this sounds weird, but to be able to go get books from the library like the school library. I know that sounds weird, but I do miss that. I do miss being on campus, seeing friends. You know, actually engaging physically like in terms of like being in a safe space, have discussions with people. First--I mean, I know there's the internet and Zoom and FaceTime and all that, but it's different. It's just really different. So I miss the people socializing in real person with others. I miss that the most and the freedom to be able to like get in my car and go anywhere. I mean, you can go but

it's like, to the grocery store or you know, certain places like that. It's not like you can go, you know, not that I want to go to the mall, but it's not that exciting. But, you know, but just to be able to--Like if I want to eat out, I could, you know? But I can't now, so I spend more time cooking now which is probably a good thing because I do love to cook, but that has really changed a great deal for me and I missed that. I miss being the--Being able to go and you know, have coffee with friends or, and I can still do it. But it's just a different kind of atmosphere altogether.

VP: How have you tried to navigate these challenges posed by the current pandemic?

MKX: I think [pauses] for me, I've started to run again. I love running, and I did a lot of that before school started, before I started my grad program, and then I stopped running. But I think the pandemic has really forced me to be more active outside. Like go running, go for walks. Started to garden a little bit. Those are my coping mechanisms. I think the first couple weeks of COVID-19, it was really hard, like emotionally and so I couldn't even do any of that. I think it was just trying to figure out a sense of control in whatever space I had. So, but now, I'm coping by-- I'm trying to learn to meditate a little bit, too, which is still hard for me. But--So these are different ways I'm trying to cope. I do also want to bring up that, you know, when I go running too though, because there has been this backlash against Asians and Asian Americans because of COVID-19, it [pauses] you know, I've seen some of those videos and they're just like, so troubling. And it's just one part makes me really mad. And then the other part is just making me feel really sad, you know, and there's also fear, too, because when I do go running, I have to, you know, I have to think about where I'm running, and try to be smart about places that I--Routes that I take. Or, you know, people I'm around, you know. So I think that has also been a huge change for me before. I--before COVID, I could like go anywhere and not feel too much of that racism. I mean, I've had my own experiences at the grocery store before COVID where I experienced racism, but--But just seeing more of it in social media, worries me about certain places if I'm not, you know, if I'm not with my family, and I'm by myself. I do--I try to be more cognizant of my environment because of what I'm reading, what I'm seeing in social media, you know, and then I also worry about my family members who still are in these spaces and even now, because of what we're starting to see this backlash from white supremacist groups towards, you know, towards regulations about shelter in and how people are bringing guns into certain spaces, right, to protest. I mean, I do worry about that in terms of people I care about who are having to be in this essential business spaces where they have to open and--And if they try to, right, if they try to say something to people who come in don't wear masks or what have you, right. If there are certain reactions that happen out of that, those kind of incidences, so those things kind of worried me, given that what we're starting to see a little bit more of the backlash that's happening with shelter in. So all these things are things I'm worried about with COVID-19. And how do I cope with that? I--I don't know how to really cope with that. I think--I think for

me, it's about survival. You know, it's just about, like, I think about how refugees coming over, how my parents had to survive in this country, enduring racism themselves. And now, just makes me think that we haven't really moved away from that. And so for me, I'm not sure if I know exactly how to cope with that other than try not to read the news so much, right. But you need to be informed. If there's some sort of incident happening in town you need to know about that, right. So it's almost like you can't completely cut your way--Cut yourself away from the news. You still need to be informed. So it's about trying to find that balance. And I think all I can do is like try to learn how to meditate better and you know, go for my runs, but being very conscientious about how I do it in my environment surroundings, and just, you know, limit my--Limit my--My reading of the news from time to time, you know, and not to be so glued and tied to it. I think the first couple of weeks of COVID-19--I think literally every day it was just reading newspapers and trying to see what's happening on social media just to see what is happening in the world. And then it was like just so too much for the first couple of weeks. And then finally, I just learned to just break away a little bit and start to focus on got to eat, gotta make--Gotta make meals, all these things. So I think trying to, you know, get back to normal, whatever normal is these days. So that's kind of my way of trying to cope. But the racism stuff, it's been really hard. I've been just trying to keep up with what's happening in the Asian American community through social media outlets, or if they're having some Zoom webinars or events, you know, I try to participate in those to be aware of what's--What is being done. Right now there is, I know this is a plugin, but there's that special PBS [laughs], Asian American series, a five part series that I think is a wonderful way to really think through how Asian Americans have been a part of our community for a very long time in the, you know, the experiences they've gone through from racism to, you know, racism to how they have built community in America and supporting each other, too.

VP: Is there anything else you would like to add that has not have been--That has not been asked or anything else to clarify?

MKX: [pauses] I think, you know--I think, yeah. I think I might want to add a little bit something about--About being a refugee in the Midwest, where you don't have a lot of community. Maybe earlier on right after coming, there were more community. But in terms of probably in the 90s, when things started shifting, it became harder and I think, you know, it was really hard on my parents and they have always survived in ways that I can only imagine [pauses]. And I just think how I think about community is based upon how they try to create a sense of community for themselves when they arrived here, and even living in the projects where our neighbors, you know, were African Americans, but my parents who did not speak a lot of English would--I mean they became friends with our neighbors, and, you know, exchange. They both had different gardens and they would exchange, you know, garden harvests with each other, you know. And I think that, you know, things like that as a kid, watching my parents kind of transition as refugees

in this country, really--Maybe I didn't know it then, but I'm sure really inspired ways of how I think about how do I create community now. And so a lot of that has to do with how my parents survived, and also how they created a life for themselves in the U.S., but also about the kind of life they want for us. And you know, one thing that my parents always stressed growing up was about education. And for me, as living in a very traditional Hmong family, when my dad was the head of household, I think for me, I realized as a kid is that as long as I did well in school, my parents would allow me--Or if I could connect anything with education, my parents would allow me to do whatever I wanted that was related with education. I think that's why education became such an important tool in some ways for me as my own way of surviving in my family, to be able to, you know--And it inspires me to continue through my advanced degree because of that, too, as because education was always my escape or my freedom to--To be who I wanted to be as--as a Hmong woman, as a--As a woman, to be able to, you know, even travel internationally on my own and I did that. My parents were very upset with me trying to be able to do that, but after I finished my master's program, I traveled on my own and it was probably the most important period for me because of what I was able to do for myself, that I didn't need my family to protect me or anything like that, but I did it on my own. And so yes, I would have to say education was a key, too. And I think that's probably why I study higher education is because it's all for me come full circle, about my experiences and also how education has been extremely important for me as an individual and the key to my independence of some kind.

VP: What would you like viewers to take away from this interview?

MKX: [pauses] Oh, that's really tough. I think--I think, you know, for viewers who are in a war, I mean, there's so much because we're in a pandemic right now. But I, you know, I think the biggest thing is that no matter what we go through in life, whether we have gone through it, our ancestors have gone through it, our, you know, our families have gone through it, it is all a part of who we are. And that's something that we embrace. At the same time, it's also something to help us understand how we can contribute to like our society in different ways, right. I think the biggest thing is that Learning to be compassionate and building community is so important to creating better lives for--For all of us, you know, not just for yourself alone, but for others around you and about the good about humanity and in the whole process. I mean, I think that's probably the biggest thing that I hope viewers take away that you know, it's about what we can do. And I know it sounds cliché-ish but--Right, it's about--I like that saying about [pauses] leaving the world a better place than you found it. And I think that's probably, for me, the biggest thing about life is that even if I don't change the world, like, you know, famous people, or whatever, but then if even if I can touch one life in some ways, and maybe it might just be my local community [pauses] I think I'd be happy about, you know, I've lived my life, and I've been able to contribute in some small, little way, you know, and I think that's what's important.

VP: Thank you. That concludes our interview.

MKX: Thank you.