

A TEI Project

Interview of H. Cooke Sunoo

Contents

1. Transcript
 - 1.1. Session 1 (June 11, 2008)
 - 1.2. Session 2 (June 27, 2008)
 - 1.3. Session 3 (July 9, 2008)
 - 1.4. Session 4 (July 18, 2008)
 - 1.5. Session 5 (July 25, 2008)

1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (June 11, 2008)

Cline

This is Alex Cline, interviewing Cooke Sunoo on June 11th, 2008. This is our first session. We're at his home in Los Angeles.

Cline

Good morning.

Sunoo

Good morning.

Cline

Thanks for taking some time to sit down and talk. We always start at the beginning in these oral history interviews, and I'm not going to deviate from that. I'll start with the question, where and when were you born?

Sunoo

I was born in San Francisco, May 25th, 1945.

Cline

Tell us, if you can, a little bit about your parents, starting with your father, what his name was and what you know about his background.

Sunoo

That could take an hour and a half or more.

Cline

Okay.

Sunoo

Okay. My father, he was born in North Korea. His name is Harold HakWon Sunoo. He immigrated to--first he left his small village near Pyongyang, North Korea. This is during Japanese occupation, and his father had passed away, and he went to Japan with his mother, where he attended high school. Apparently then--actually, through today, because he is still alive--was a very strong Korean nationalist and got himself into quite a bit of trouble in Japan as a Korean nationalist high school student in Japan at a time of Japanese colonial control over his homeland.

Sunoo

I understand through him that his mother was imprisoned by the Japanese and eventually died in a Japanese prison. I've never been able to fact-check that; I don't know, but that is his story. While he was living with her--he is the only son of an only son of an only son--

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

--which, in those times in Korea was pretty unusual. Also, prior to his leaving Korea, his grandfather, who would be my great-grandfather, came to the United States. So Tom Sunoo came to the United States at some point in that history, which might have been seventy years ago or so. My father is now ninety, and so when he was a teenager, his grandfather immigrated to the United States, and Tom Sunoo, who was also--he's a pretty fascinating story.

Sunoo

We don't know a lot about him, but I did meet him. Well, he lived with us for a while when I was in high school. Apparently he has tales of--then again, it's strictly oral--but that he says that he had a role in some silent movies, doing more dangerous stunt work. But he was a great storyteller as well. I know for a fact that he ran a small grocery store in North Hollywood, and I know, in fact, because I was there, and stayed at a small hotel in Hanford, California, and that owned a small grocery store in San Francisco across the street from the old Lowell High School when I was in high school. So he was very much a presence in my life, growing up.

Sunoo

I remember also that he was, as you can imagine, somebody who would leave Korea at that time in history, was pretty much of an adventurous sort. The most adventurous thing I remember of him is his favorite drink. We were a very conservative Christian family, but Grandpa Tommy drank whiskey, and he sliced into it raw liver. He said it was a Korean delicacy, and he drank--so he put these very small slices of raw liver into his whiskey and threw it down.

Cline

Wow, a tonic.

Sunoo

So that was Grandpa Tommy. My father went to high school in Japan and then, I'm not exactly sure how he got to the United States; sponsored by somebody, I suppose, of that era. But he came to the Los Angeles area; worked as a houseboy; went to a conservative Christian college down here. I'm not sure which one it was. Eventually--let's see; so he went to this Christian college down in L.A. Lived in L.A. for a while, and then--I'm not sure that he went up north to visit or moved up north to San Francisco area, where he met my mother and married and lived there.

Sunoo

Is it more convenient for me to continue on his path or to bring my mother in?

Cline

Let's bring your mother in now, what you know about her background, and then we can take it from where they meet, and bring it forward.

Sunoo

Okay. So my mother was born Helen Sonia Shinn. She was born in San Francisco of Korean immigrant parents. She was born in 19--I don't know--15; yes, 1915, in San Francisco. She had three brothers, my Uncle Daye, my Uncle David, and my Uncle Daniel. They grew up--my grandfather, my grandfather was an immigrant, as I said, from Korea. He went first to Hawaii. Apparently he worked the sugar cane fields there, and this was, I guess--well, anyway, he worked the sugar cane fields in Hawaii; moved to San Francisco. He was Henry Shinn, and he brought my grandmother, who was Kang-Ae Park; married her in San Francisco. He brought her over as one of the infamous picture brides.

Cline

Oh, picture brides.

Sunoo

Right.

Cline

This whole thing is a very typical immigrant scenario of the time, yes.

Sunoo

Yes, it's a typical kind of--right. He ran a barbershop in Chinatown. He ran a dry cleaning shop for a short while, and then ultimately they ran a small hotel in Chinatown at Kearney [Street] and Bush [Street]. I guess, for historic purposes, his barbershop was in Chinatown on Jackson Street just below Grant Avenue and across the street from the Jackson Café, which is still there.

Sunoo

My mother went to Jean Parker Elementary School and went to Galileo High School in San Francisco; went to San Francisco State College. Had the misfortune--well, I don't know if it was a misfortune. She went through college with the ambition of becoming a secondary science teacher, and went in her last year at SF State was invited to the dean's office and asked what her vocational plans were for the future, and she just reiterated that, yes, she'd been studying and majoring and expected to get a secondary job in science.

Sunoo

And was told by the dean or the counselor at SF State that, "You know, I have an offer for you here. The offer is, it's a full scholarship. It's a full scholarship for a school of cosmetology, because, as we all know, Oriental women are not hired to teach secondary school in San Francisco."

Sunoo

So my mother was somewhat brokenhearted. She sucked it up and took the full scholarship to cosmetology school; went to cosmetology school and actually ran a beauty shop, also in San Francisco, on Powell Street, next to what used to be the Korean Methodist Church. She ran that for a few years. Some of her more famous customers were some of the girls that used to dance at the Forbidden City Night Club in Chinatown, which was a all-Chinese revue club.

Sunoo

Actually, it's a little bit of a digression, but my Uncle Daye actually married one of the dancers from the Forbidden City Night Club, and they went off for a very short marriage and had a quick divorce.

Sunoo

My father met my mother at the Korean Methodist Church, and they subsequently were married. They lived in San Francisco for a short while, and then my father, who had in the interim gotten into graduate school at UC [University of California] Berkeley, but then got a teaching job in University of Washington in Seattle. So he married my mother, and they moved up to Seattle. He got his master's in Far East studies or something along those lines.

Sunoo

Got signed up into a Ph.D. program and then was told by his professor, after he had been there for a year or so into the program, he was told by his professor that he was--under his head professor, what is it called, the-- anyway, the guy that was supposed to guide him through his academic work told him that he didn't think that a Korean was capable of getting a Ph.D. in East Asian studies under his particular guidance.

Sunoo

My father tells this story in two different ways. He said it was because of his being Korean that his professor said that he wasn't going to be successful in getting his Ph.D. Sometimes I've heard my father spin the story to say that because of his leftist political leanings was the reason that his professor had told him that somebody of his political ilk would not be capable of getting a Ph.D.

Sunoo

Whatever the story is, my father then left University of Washington and left my mother and my brother and me in Seattle. She took over--he was teaching Korean to U.S. armed forces personnel that were at the University of Washington. So my mother took over that teaching job and supported my brother and myself in Seattle while my father ventured off in search of a Ph.D.

Sunoo

He first went to London School of Economics, and then, following his left leanings, went further left to the King Charles University in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Cline

[Laughs] Wow.

Sunoo

He stayed there, got his Ph.D., and over the course of the few years that it took him to get that Ph.D., wrote letters back to my mother trying to convince her to move the family to live under the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. My mother refused, and ultimately told my dad to come home. My father did come back to the United States, I believe in 1949, but it was just before the Iron Curtain was dropped. So he was pretty fortunate in terms of his timing to get back into the United States without any major issue.

Sunoo

When he came back, he did have his Ph.D., albeit from a Communist country during the [Joseph] McCarthy era. So it didn't do a whole lot of good in terms of securing--he was blacklisted and couldn't get a teaching job. When he came back, also thanks to his left leanings, he did get a union job at the San Francisco Chronicle. He was there for a few years, and as much as I can tell, his

job was--and this is kind of archaic stuff at this point, but the ticker tape, I guess, used to actually print out on a adhesive-backed tape, and his job was to paste the ticker tape as it came off the machines in a certain pattern onto these sheets of paper, and then that was the extent of his work.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

Because the stock markets are on Eastern time and close early, he was done with his job very early in the afternoon, but he had to work his full shift. So the rest of the day he did a lot of reading and writing on his own personal interests, which tended to be Korean, specifically Korean history, Korean politics, and he did an immense amount of writing during the afternoons at the sponsorship of the San Francisco Chronicle. At that time we lived on Pierce Street in San Francisco in an apartment, and we had a--I guess it was a two-bedroom apartment that was lined wall to wall with orange--old days again--they had wooden orange crates, and we had orange crate bookcases that lined our living room and dining room.

Sunoo

In all of his waking hours my dad would research and write manuscripts. It showed a tremendous amount of fortitude on his part, because a lot of his transcripts--his transcripts were never published, and he didn't have an audience. But he simply read and wrote because of his--as left as he was and is, he was also very Confucian in a lot of ways. I think his scholarship and his dedication to scholarly work was part of this. The other trait that was strongly Confucian in him, I think, is the idea of vertical relationships between man and woman, between father and children, and seeing things in terms of black and white. I think he still has that characteristic.

Sunoo

Ultimately, he left the newspaper, bought a small grocery store, and ran the grocery store for a few years. Bought a small hotel, again, just near Chinatown on Bush Street and ran that for a few years. He got what the Methodist

Church calls a local preacher's license. What this is, is it's basically a lay preacher's license. Oh, somewhere in there, he had been in the army, too.

Sunoo

One of the more fascinating aspects of his life is--and I don't know much about it--but apparently a group of Koreans were trained by the--I think it was called the S.S.I., but it was a precursor to the CIA. They were being trained to do work in North Korea. His story is that he had some falling-out with his civilian supervisor. He was a civilian, and he had a falling-out with his civilian supervisors and kind of walked away from the project. His claim is that as a result of walking away, he then got drafted, and they drafted him into the army, but lost him in the bureaucracies of the U.S. Army.

Sunoo

So he served out the rest of his tour of duty in Texas or Arizona, where he found a Princeton [University]-educated captain that was in charge of a group. He was simply a buck private in the army, part of the infantry, and the Princeton officer recognized that he wasn't much of a soldier, and also recognized that the guy had a Ph.D. So he utilized my dad to give lectures on Asia to his troops. It was kind of not related to anything that they were doing, but it was a way for this Princeton captain to just show some respect and, I guess, befriended my dad and gave him a fairly easy assignment. So after that he did come back to San Francisco and did the Chronicle job and the grocery store, etc.

Cline

Now, how old were you when he reached that point where your dad had the grocery store?

Sunoo

My brother and I were in high school at that point.

Cline

And what's your brother's name?

Sunoo

My brother's name is Jan. Actually, my full name is Harold Jung Cooke Sunoo, and my brother is Jan Jung-min Sunoo, our Korean names. Mine means righteous nation; my brother's means righteous people.

Cline

He's older or younger?

Sunoo

He's sixteen months older than me.

Sunoo

During all this time that my father worked at the Chronicle and was an entrepreneur, he always wanted to teach and wanted to get back into teaching, but, as I say, was blacklisted. When he came back to the United States from Czechoslovakia, he was called before HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee], and he was interviewed, apparently--I know that he was interviewed on television, and this kind of drops back, but he was interviewed on television about--and I'm not even sure, except that it was a television program where he had to talk about his Communist leanings. I'm not sure if he had to bite the bullet and say how terrible it was, or if it was simply an interview that he was required to do.

Sunoo

I just remember that I was in grammar school and very excited about the idea that my dad was going to be on television, and my mother told us, "Don't tell anybody that your dad's going to be on television." We simply didn't understand that, but apparently there was some embarrassment about him being on TV, and he was either having to expose himself or talk tongue-in-cheek about the evils of Communism. I have no idea which it was.

Sunoo

He was also interviewed by HUAC. I don't think that he actually had to go to Washington [D.C.] for that. It could have been their staff coming out here. But I know that he was interviewed. The whole time, though, he's always been Christian.

Cline

Yes, I've been waiting to ask this question, how this squares with his conservative Christian background.

Sunoo

Well, the conservatism, it was simply, I think, that was a college that somehow was open to foreigners coming in as the white man's destiny kind of a thing, and bring the poor natives in and give them an education. But he was always Christian and continues to be Christian.

Sunoo

While he was at the Chronicle and then through his entrepreneurial years, as a result of his having been in the army, he had some GI Bill available to him, and so went on a part-time basis to courses at Claremont Seminary in Berkeley and got this local preacher's license, but also got some transcripts from the seminary. I don't know how long his job search for a teaching job really was, but he strategically took the seminary courses to prove that he wasn't just a Commie, but that he also had some Christianity in him.

Sunoo

As a result of that, it paid off in that he got a teaching job at Central Methodist University--at the time he went there, the Central Methodist College--in Fayette, Missouri. I guess he must have been about fifty at the time that that came to pass, and it happened at somewhat a fortuitous time for me as well.

Sunoo

I had just dropped out of a junior college in San Francisco; wasn't sure what I was doing with my life, and living at home. But it was certainly to the horror of my parents that I had dropped out of college. That same year my father got this teaching job at Central Methodist, and so he grabbed me and took me with him. None of the family had ever seen Missouri, and my father went back for an interview; told us it was a wonderful place. My mom said, "Yeah, you said the same thing about Czechoslovakia. I'm not so sure. You go check it out."

Sunoo

So my father and I went there in 1963 for a year by ourselves, and then the subsequent year my mother did come out, and we stayed there. [Telephone rings.]

Cline

Do you want to pause it? [Tape recorder turned off.]

Cline

Okay, we're back.

Sunoo

Where were we?

Cline

You were going to Missouri.

Sunoo

Yes. So I lived a year with my father in Missouri, and then the next year my mother and brother also moved out. My father spent the next thirty-five years or so in Missouri, teaching at Central Methodist College. It's a college of a thousand students.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

So very small and small faculty, and as a result, my father went over teaching intro[ductory] political science and negotiated to get one course in East Asian survey, or East Asian history. Over his thirty-five or so years that he was there, taught everything from intro poli sci to senior seminars in any aspect of political science. I know that a couple of years he had to teach intro sociology and intro economics as well, just to kind of fill in the voids.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

But he enjoyed it, and from Fayette, Missouri, he was very active, still is today, in--well, starting out, as I mentioned, as a Korean nationalist, he started out in his youth fighting for Korean independence from Japan; subsequently, for the democratization of Korea under the dictatorship of Syngman Rhee. Subsequent to that, liberalization under the--after Syngman Rhee there was a military junta that was in, and so he fought for freedom under that government.

Sunoo

When Park Chung-hee was first elected, he thought, "Oh, this is great, a democratic president," but Park Chung-hee, as history shows, turned into a little dictator himself, so my dad was back on the streets fighting for the overthrow of Park Chung-hee. Subsequent to that, there was a chain of different levels of authoritarian presidents, but he kind of shifted focus more to the reunification of Korea. The reunification of Korea, although it sounds fairly noble, to Koreans, when he first started advocating this, they saw this as kind of a Communist ploy.

Sunoo

So for a while he was going back and forth to Korea. Then he got his visa revoked for being too outspoken about reunification in terms of kind of a federation with the North Korean government rather than South Korea taking over the Communist regime in the north. So he was banned from going to South Korea for a while.

Sunoo

He maintained a network of folks internationally that had a similar agenda of peaceful reunification. He took a guest professorship at CCNY, City College of New York, and that happened to coincide with the opening of the North Korean Mission in New York City. So he actually met on a clandestine basis with a number of North Korean observers. He thinks, in his heart of hearts, he thinks that they were clandestine meetings. I would personally be just a little bit surprised that anything that the North Koreans did, once they stepped outside of their residences, was clandestine at all. But my father would talk about, "Oh, yeah, we would take subway rides and we'd talk on the subway."

Or that, "We would go to these cafés where nobody would find us." I've got to believe he was being observed.

Sunoo

He also was able to, during this period, and I can't really recall--I can't time-date it for you--but he managed to get a couple of trips in to North Korea well before anybody was publicly traveling to North Korea. They went through various countries that had relationships with both the United States and North Korea, and he would travel from there to the north. After doing this for a number of years, he's been given a number of different awards, gold medals and things that, if he chose to, very colorful ribbons that he could wear around his neck with a big medallion at the end of it, attesting to his friendship with North Korea.

Sunoo

Then a pretty miraculous thing happened about five years ago, where he was invited to South Korea for the first time in probably a good fifteen or twenty years. He was invited as a group of Korean Americans who had been immigrants to the United States and had done good for the Republic of Korea, being South Korea.

Cline

Right, and this was a more liberal regime five years ago, yes.

Sunoo

Yes. Yes, and they gave him a South Korean gold medal, so now he's got a bunch of medals, including a South Korean ornament.

Cline

Wow. Interesting. So I'm curious, with his leanings towards Communism and his being from the north and all this complexity that happens in the interim, what his feelings were about the situation in North Korea.

Sunoo

I think the general American public will see North Korea as a totalitarian regime that allowed its people to starve while it fed its armies and built nuclear weapons. My dad is loath to criticize the North Korean regime. He

won't say that those things didn't happen, but he will say that, "You know, people talk badly about North Korea, but you know that they really want peaceful reunification. You know that actually there are churches, because I've preached at them, and we have sent Bibles to these churches in North Korea. You know that the Americans will always put a bad spin on things." He won't refute that people had been starving, but he'll talk about the positive aspects, and he'll talk about that, "Yeah, that the Americans say that they want to help, but the only way that they want to help is for the North Korean leadership to essentially capitulate, and they can't capitulate." I haven't really challenged him that heavily.

Cline

Yes. What about your mother in all this? It sounds like he's very absorbed in all these pursuits. What was your mom doing, and what was her feeling about his interests?

Sunoo

Well, my mother has always had a great deal of reverence for my dad. They argue a lot, incessantly, about day-to-day things, but she's had a tremendous amount of respect for him. She tells stories of before they were married that, you know, when my brother and I were young, we'd say, "Well, why did you marry Dad?"

Sunoo

She'd say, "Because I wanted a good father for my kids. I wanted a man who was just very intelligent. I wanted a man who was Korean, of course--of course." [Cline laughs.] "But somebody who had just good intellectual abilities, because I wanted my children to be smart kids, and I was looking at that." She used to tell me; she said, "Your father is the smartest man I know." Ultimately, she got her master's in child psychology, so I don't know if she was trying to psych us out, because our father is an immigrant, and he had some immigrant trappings. His English has never been--well, his English is fluent, although grammatically really bad, even to this day. His Confucian attitudes about things were a little divergent from our American friends, and his lack of knowledge of American sports or American popular culture, given the fifties, sixties, seventies, all the way up through today, is pretty minimal.

Sunoo

So I'm not sure if my mother really believed that he was the smartest man she ever met, or if she was simply trying to justify in his sons' minds that "Your father is really a great person." But I know that she did have a lot of respect for him. As you can imagine, my father was constantly in either the preaching or the speaking circuits, and my mother would come home and say that, "Your dad did a really good job today. There were three speakers, but your dad was clearly the best. He was the only one that really made sense. He lined it up. He had points one, two, three, and four, and he made his points, and people appreciated it." So she was very, very supportive of him in that respect.

Sunoo

She also really let him have his professional way, in a lot of ways. I think she was adventurous but not in--she was more adventurous in terms of, "We ought to try camping. Let's take a car trip to Yellowstone [National Park]. Let's go out and do or try new things," in terms of popular culture. We grew up--we didn't have much money, but in terms of finding different foods to eat or exploring in San Francisco. There's the Sigmund Stern Grove, which is an outdoor concert venue, and so I'm sure it was her initiation that would take us out for weekends at Sigmund Stern Grove or would take us for a picnic on the beach, with my dad in tow. I'm absolutely certain that it was she that must have gone out and bought the baseball bat and the softball and forced my dad to pitch a few balls at his sons, because he ought to bond with his kids.

Sunoo

I guess some of it worked, I mean, because I have those fond memories of camping with my parents. When I look back on it, and I see my father today, I know that it was way outside of his element to go camping or to pitch a softball at his kids. So she kind of controlled that aspect of our lives, while at the same time fully acquiescing to my dad going out and buying a business. I'm sure that she would have had him stay at the Chronicle, pasting up the financial stuff coming off the ticker tape.

Sunoo

So they've always had that type of a relationship where he would have his domain and clearly lead the forces there. Often, you know, my mother is very

feisty and would not simply acquiesce, but would allow those things to happen. When they were in Missouri, and this is when they were getting into their sixties and seventies, my mother would drag my dad around. She became an avid amateur photographer and would drag my dad around to all these photo shoots, and take him out to shoot the dogwood in the spring or to do other camera club activities, where they'd go on these weekend trips in search of autumn foliage or whatever else might be.

Sunoo

My father actually mouthed the words of enjoyment, saying that, "Yeah, we had fun this weekend. We went out and we shot autumn foliage."

Cline

Wow. So, considering your dad's level of activity and interest, combined with maybe his Confucian foundation, how would you describe your relationship with him?

Sunoo

Well, he's never been my best buddy. I've always had a tremendous amount of respect for him, and I think that's my mother's doing. As a teenager, I rebelled pretty much against a lot of that and probably came back around to it, came back to the being respectful of it, especially when I became a father myself. From the time my kids were infants, I had a much clearer view of the different roles that my father played, that of being a father and--because I think before that, before I had kids, I really saw him as the scholar-gentleman, as the political activist. I was neither scholarly nor politically involved in the realms that he was.

Sunoo

He went out and participated in San Francisco in some of the early Civil Rights movements. I was maybe in junior high school at the time and wasn't really interested. He invited us to go, but didn't push us to go, my brother nor myself. But he went out. It was kind of a disconnect. I saw him as the person that was going out and doing these things, going out and having meetings all the time with his Korean cronies. I didn't participate or appreciate any of it; I just--that was what Dad did.

Sunoo

I didn't appreciate the role, and when I looked at him, if somebody were to ask me back then, you know, what kind of a guy was he, I would probably list all of the political and outside activities that he was involved in, but being a father was probably too close for me to see. So it was after I had kids that I could see him in retrospect and understand that, oh, this man played a very active role as a father as well, and appreciated that and gained a level of respect, not just for him as a father, but then as him as a fuller person than I had seen before. When you see that kind of fullness, you can then start to appreciate more of the man.

Cline

How would you describe your relationship with your mother?

Sunoo

My relationship with my mother was--I think I felt closer to her. She was American born. She knew social culture, popular social culture. She's a child psychologist, so she was probably gaming us half the time, but we never knew it. [Cline laughs.] She was a whiz in the kitchen, and that's always a good way to your children's hearts. She was the one that was planning the camping trips. She was the one that talked to us about things that were more important to us as children growing up, our social relationships with kids and kids that we were growing up with, meaning that, at an earlier age, if we had disagreements or fights with our friends, she was always an open ear and good counsel. As I grew up into a teenager and I had relationships with girls and girlfriends, she was a good listener, and I ended up being very open with her.

Cline

What about with your brother?

Sunoo

My brother, again, I think my mother played this fabulous role as a child psychologist. We were very close in age. We're sixteen months apart. He was older than me. But I remember the mantra that she said, "You're always each other's brothers, but always be each other's best friends as well." She says,

"It's not the same, but be your brother's best friend." I think even to this day, we're still each other's best friends.

Sunoo

I had to respect him, because he was my older brother. He was always ahead of me in school, so he was always conceived of as being smarter than me and ahead of me. He pretty much stayed that way. He was kind of what was described as being kind--well we were both pretty--a silly term, but we were both "goody-goody" boys. We obeyed our parents; didn't get into too much trouble.

Sunoo

But if you put us both in that general category, I was a lot more trouble-prone than he. In high school I got into these fights with other kids at school. He would never lay a hand on anybody. I kind of ditched a few classes, and he would never think of doing any of that. Then when I graduated from high school--well, my brother and I both went to Lowell High School in San Francisco. In San Francisco, Lowell High School at the time was what they called a non-districted college-prep school, and you had to apply to get in there, and you had to have recommendations from your teachers. It was seen as somewhat an elite academy type of a school. Kids from anywhere in the city could go there, so long as they got accepted.

Sunoo

My brother was accepted there, and so my parents said, "Well, that's where you've got to go to high school, too." I didn't have the strong academic background, but managed to be strong enough. I never knew, but I think the fact that I had a sibling going there helped, so I did get into Lowell High School, and I went, so I was in this elite school.

Sunoo

It's kind of amusing that even to this day, when I tell people that I'm from San Francisco and I went through high school in San Francisco, and if they're from the area, they'll say, "Oh, well, what high school did you go to?"

Sunoo

I'll say, "Oh, I went to Lowell."

Sunoo

They'll raise their eyebrows and say, "Oh, you--," so that was kind of a cool thing. Now, the fact that I didn't do particularly well there academically, and probably didn't really belong there, and as a result of all that, when I graduated, I did end up going to San Francisco City College, which is a junior college. Then I dropped out of that junior college without any plans. That was when we moved to Missouri.

Cline

Right, you go to Missouri. Okay. Let's talk a little bit about your childhood in San Francisco. First of all, in your home, considering your parents' situation, did you grow up hearing Korean spoken in the home at all?

Sunoo

Yes. My mother, although she was American born, she learned Korean to a low level of fluency, and I believe that in her young adulthood got better in Korean, just from the stories that she tells. I think that my mother is really probably a very, very smart woman. She has these flashes, signs of just intellectual strength; bookwise, I think of it. Sometimes when I was looking at some academic subjects and needing something, and it was stuff that she was unfamiliar with, that she was able to kind of look at my textbooks and kind of figure stuff out and get back to me. Or when I was in high school and I had some advanced biology classes that I was in, and struggling with, she had pulled out of her memory bank high school biology, which she hadn't looked at for over twenty years and was really pretty good.

Sunoo

So, anyway--and she also, when she got her master's in early childhood development, child psychology, and she was actually enrolled in Stanford [University] at the time and was going to get her doctorate down there. So she had to be pretty smart to be accepted down there; and then declined continuing the program because it required a year of on-campus residency, and at that point both my brother and I were in--oh, where were we? I guess we were in late grammar school. she just said that there's no way that we would either move to Palo Alto or that she would live down there, separated from her family.

Cline

What about any sort of Korean cultural traditions or connections?

Sunoo

So Korean, for some reason somehow she--and I think it's just because she was just a very smart woman that her Korean became quite good. I think being married to my father probably helped that as well, because he is an immigrant. As we were growing up, we heard some Korean. They spoke mostly in English, but occasionally they'd be speaking to each other in Korean. I mentioned that my father had all these Korean political friends, so my mother actually did a fair amount of the entertaining at home of these Koreans, so she used her Korean with these folks quite a bit.

Sunoo

Around the house--we'll skip forward to it later, but I was in the Peace Corps after college, and I went to Korea. So growing up, I was exposed to Korean language. I was exposed to some Korean food and a lot of Korean people in the house. But the extent of my knowledge of Korean culture was very limited.

Sunoo

I've told the story, that my dad, when he left Korea in high school, had a bottle of Korean dirt that he brought with him. It was like this is his country. We used to look at it, because he kept it just on one of these orange-crate bookshelves in the dining room, and he told us, you know, "That dirt is from Korea." I remember, growing up, seeing the bottle of dirt, sometimes taking the bottle of dirt and shaking it up and looking at it, and thinking, "Ah, this is Korea." So I heard Korean. I saw my father writing in Korean, as well as English; but I saw him writing in Korean, talking in Korean. Then we had some Korean food. But that was kind of the extent of what my feelings or knowledge of Korea was.

Sunoo

Over the years it grew somewhat more, because about twenty years ago or so I had the opportunity of visiting North Korea, and I found it irresistible to bring home a bottle of Korean dirt, which I now have on the shelf in the dining room. Every now and then I'll go to the dining room cabinet and take the dirt

and shake it and look at it and kind of think, "Hmm, this is Korea. Here we are."

Cline

[Laughs] You walked right into answering what I was going to ask about, which was what your knowledge was at the time of Korea and what being Korean was. You mentioned that your dad had these political friends. What was your sense of what kind of Korean community there was at that time in San Francisco when you were there?

Sunoo

Well, the Korean community, when I was growing up, was very small. The predominant institution was the Korean Methodist Church, and I remember distinctly the Korean Methodist Church family roster, which was three pages, double-spaced, typed and then mimeographed, of all of the families in the Korean Church.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

So that must have been a list of seventy families or so, less than a hundred, anyway. We went to the Korean Church. We went to the Korean Methodist Church through about junior high school, and we then moved to a non-Korean mainstream church. Part of that had to do, I think, with my parents not liking the politics of the Korean Church, so we just kind of pulled away.

Sunoo

My father's friends, I didn't know one from the other; to me, they were all just foreigners that were my father's cronies. The Koreans that we were friends with were more people that my mother had grown up with and their kids, so they were my mother's generation. All of the parents, they all spoke English fluently without accent, and they all had kids that were very much like my brother and myself. If anything, they had more of a disconnect from anything Korean, because they were too second-generation folks. They were all Korean; somehow they had all just intermarried, so their kids were 100 percent Korean, ethnically, genetically.

Sunoo

But my father was kind of--not an embarrassment, but he was kind of the oddball in this group, because he was the immigrant. So we grew up with these other kids, and we're still friends with some of them. But I know that growing up, I knew that I was Korean, and one of the worst fears that I had was I knew that I was going to have to marry Korean, and I couldn't see myself marrying Gail or Denise Whang or Diane Choy, and those were about the only three girls that I knew that were Korean. [Cline laughs.] So it's a poignant little story, because on the one hand, there wasn't much to this Korean identity, but on the other hand, there was something that was so strong that we knew that we would be marrying Koreans.

Cline

Yes, right. Right. Interesting.

Sunoo

I don't think that Gail and Denise and Diane had that same--they knew that they were Korean, but I don't think they had that same sense of kind of nationalistic loyalty that my brother and I did.

Cline

Interesting. What was your neighborhood like in San Francisco? What kind of people lived in your neighborhood? You said you didn't have much money, but--

Sunoo

Yes. I grew up--well, we moved around quite a bit. My mother traveled from Seattle back down to San Francisco so that I would be born--she says so that I would be born in San Francisco, and I would therefore be a native son of California and entitled to certain rights. I still haven't figured out what the birthrights of a native-born Californian are, but she felt that there were some. I think it was more likely, or as likely, that she came down to San Francisco because that's where her mother was and to have her mother around when she gave birth to her second son.

Sunoo

Then after my father had moved to Czechoslovakia and my mother had continued teaching in Seattle, I think we stayed up there for about a year, and then we moved back to San Francisco, and we lived with my--and I was an infant. You know, I was an infant, but it must have been for the next four or so years that we lived with my mother's parents. We actually lived--because I remember living there.

Sunoo

It's probably some of my earliest memories, living in a--in my grandmother's--at that point, my grandmother and grandfather owned a small hotel at the corner of Kearney and Bush Street in San Francisco, which is right on the edge of Chinatown. Our family lived in one of the hotel rooms. And then while my father worked at the Chronicle, so that was home until I was five, I guess, because when I was five, my parents bought the apartment on Pierce Street, near Pierce and Oak, and I know it was with financial assistance through my grandmother and grandfather that we were able to buy that apartment building.

Sunoo

So we lived there for a number of years, through grammar school, and then I moved out to the Sunset [District] area, Seventh [actually 9th Avenue] and Lawton [Street] through the beginning of high school. Then in high school my dad bought a hotel, which is actually only a block away from where my grandmother's hotel had been; she had since given up that business. But, ironically, my dad bought a hotel a block away from there. So I spent my high school years again in a hotel, in the manager's apartment of the hotel, basically working after school as the chambermaid for this small hotel.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

In all of those instances, our neighborhood was just kind of a working-class neighborhood or Chinatown.

Cline

I was going to say, what kind of people? I mean, a lot of Chinese or Caucasian?

Sunoo

Yes, mostly Caucasian. In our apartment or in the Sunset, it seemed like they were all Caucasian that were around us, and that was kind of the school population that I had where I went to school.

Cline

Would it therefore have been just assumed that you were Chinese?

Sunoo

I guess so, if somebody saw us on the street. In school people knew, because not knowing what it was, I was proud to be a Korean, and maybe--I don't know. I guess in school certain things get exposed really fast and get broken down really fast. Part of it, I guess--it always seemed natural to me that one of the first things that--well, people would say, "Well, Sunoo, Sunoo. What kind of a name is Sunoo?" They'd say, "Is that Chinese or is it Japanese?" I guess, actually, a lot of--and it wasn't just me. I remember, especially in grammar school, that people would say, "What are you, Chinese or Japanese?"

Cline

Right.

Sunoo

Then I would say and my brother would say that, "We're Korean," and people just would not know what that--I mean, these were grammar school kids. They'd never heard of Korea.

Cline

Right. Yes, this was my next question.

Sunoo

I remember taking my lunch to school, and I remember only once, and I believe it only happened once, because that's all it would have taken, was I took some Korean food to school for lunch, and I was just chastised by my schoolmates.

Cline

What would it have been, do you remember?

Sunoo

It was kimpop, and we loved kimpop, you know, which is rice rolled in seaweed. It was a really special treat, because my mother didn't make it very often. Ironically, thirty years later, thirty-five years later, I made lunch for my kids when they were going to school, and they would beg me to make kimpop and then take it to school. [Cline laughs.] They went to an elementary school actually right around here. At the time they went there, it was probably 25 percent Korean. Fifteen years later it's 75 percent Korean.

Cline

Interesting. Then growing up in San Francisco, which, of course, had a huge Asian population, did you run into any situations of discrimination?

Sunoo

You know, I ran in--I don't feel scarred by them particularly. It's hard to imagine today, but they were just kind of what it was. We got a lot of "Ching Chong Chinaman" kind of stuff, which is just other kids. What was it, "Ching Chong Chinaman, sitting on a fence, trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents." It was just kind of a taunt that kids would have. I look back on it in retrospect and say, "How did I tolerate that? How could I live through that?" You know, "What kind of deep scars could that have left?" I don't know, really, the answer.

Sunoo

I look back in rage, but [Cline laughs] at the time--you know, when I look back, you know, I look back at my father going down to the Civil Rights demonstration, and say, "Of course he did." I guess when you're that young and living through it, you don't realize it.

Cline

Right. Right. What were your interests in school, or what kinds of things did you find yourself doing?

Sunoo

Not particularly different from an all-American kid. Maybe they were. I didn't have the interest in sports, and I think a lot of sports interest is stuff that you, if you grew up with it around the house, you kind of inherit that. So I wasn't interested in sports particularly. I don't know that I had any real special interests. I was in the school band. I played a clarinet, but I had no passion about it.

Sunoo

You know, we had our different church youth groups, and I participated in them. If anything, I think kind of the core of my social life when I got to high school was our church youth group, and took a lot of interest in that. Not so much from a religious point of view, but more from a social circle. There were no Asians in that circle. They were all white. Yes, and I had various girlfriends during that period, and they were white.

Sunoo

It's kind of interesting that my parents never objected to my girlfriends, on a racial basis, anyway. Even when I was in college, I had white girlfriends, because I went to Central Methodist. I ultimately graduated from my dad's college. I think there was one other Asian on campus, and he was a foreign student. I had Caucasian girlfriends in college as well, and really no objection from my parents.

Sunoo

There was one that my parents didn't care for, but the comment was more that, "You know, she's really manipulative." She says, "I don't know about you, Cooke, but we can see that she says 'Come,' and you jump, or if she says she doesn't want to go somewhere and it's somewhere where you really want to go, you end up not going, and that type of thing." So it didn't seem to have anything to do with race.

Cline

Well, there can't have been many Asians in Fayette, Missouri, anyway.

Sunoo

No, there weren't any. There weren't any. [Cline laughs.] I guess, to their credit, they just tolerated all of that, because they knew, they knew in their

hearts, as I probably did, and I don't know that I ever admitted it, or I don't know that it was a controversy in my mind, but they knew, they knew that I was going to marry a--well, they knew that I was going to marry a Korean. They were mistaken. I ended up marrying a Japanese American, but clearly with their blessings. I think at the time they--quote--"knew" that I was going to marry a Korean; but I guess what they really meant was that I would marry an Asian.

Cline

Right. Right.

Sunoo

But, on the other hand, if I were to have married a white girl, they probably would have been just as enthralled with--they wouldn't have rejected her on race, because basically if I had chosen to marry somebody, it probably would have been somebody that they would have approved of, and they would be equally as happy. But in their mind's eye--

Cline

What did your brother wind up doing?

Sunoo

He married a Korean girl.

Cline

There you go. [Laughs]

Sunoo

Yes. Well, he went to college. He moved with the family back to Missouri, graduated and went to the University of Minnesota and got his psychology degree up there. Up until that point, too, he had been dating Anglo girls all along. It was during his summer between his first and second year of grad school that my parents financed a trip for him to come to Los Angeles to meet some Korean girls.

Cline

[Laughs] There you go.

Sunoo

As it turned out--and my grandmother [Kang Ae Shinn] was living in L.A. at the time, and so he stayed with her during the summer. As it turns out, she knew somebody who had a daughter. She knew a Korean second-generation family that had a daughter that was about my brother's age--it turned out, a couple of years younger. Well, she knew a couple of families, and so my brother ended up dating this one Korean girl for a few times, and really, there was no match there, and then met this other Korean girl and, you know, just became enthralled and ended up marrying her. Here they are at thirty-eight, thirty-nine years later, and they're still married and still happy.

Cline

Wow. Amazing. So we're kind of coming up to the time here.

Sunoo

Okay.

Cline

One last thing I wanted to ask is about the Korean War. Were there any kind of ramifications surrounding that in your family? Evidently, it didn't even sort of create a blip on the radar screen with your classmates as to knowing what Korea was, but what about that in terms of the impact that may have had in your--

Sunoo

Didn't have a whole lot of consciousness-raising on my part. I knew that the war was going on, and I knew that it was in my father's home country. It had little to do with me. You started seeing Korean orphans appearing on the environment.

Sunoo

One of the most impactful outcomes of the Korean War on me was that there was a new comic strip called Dondi, and Dondi was this Korean orphan who befriended himself to the--the whole strip was about Dondi and the GIs in the Korean War. They would take Dondi around. They'd hide him in a big duffel

bag and take him around, so he was kind like the adopted kid of the troops. So I used to love reading the stories of Dondi.

Cline

Interesting.

Sunoo

There was a Korean children's orphan choir that used to make the circuit. I kind of remember them. But they were almost an embarrassment, in the sense that, "Hey, don't mistake me for--I'm Korean and I'm proud of it, but I'm not that kind of Korean. I'm not Korean Korean, I'm Korean." I never said "Korean"--I guess maybe I did, but I thought of myself as Korean, but Korean American, not Korean.

Cline

Right. Right. Yes, interesting. Okay, well, I think this will do it for now, so we'll let you go to work, and we'll pick up next time talking more about your time as you get older, what becomes your life direction. You mentioned some things already, going through college and your dropping out from junior college and then going on to other things and the direction your life takes, which I know will take us into Korea. [Laughs] Okay?

Sunoo

Okay.

Cline

Thank you very much.

Sunoo

Okay. Look forward to it. [End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (June 27, 2008)

Cline

All right. It's June 27th, 2008. This is Alex Cline, once again interviewing Cooke Sunoo at his home in Los Angeles. This is our second session.

Cline

Good morning.

Sunoo

Good morning.

Cline

Thanks for sitting down. I know you're on a tight schedule. Last time we talked a lot about your childhood, specifically a lot of information about your parents, especially your father. He had an incredibly interesting and unusual sort of life, and he's apparently still with us, which is also amazing. I wanted to ask you a couple of things just to follow up on sort of the family life picture. You've talked about how your father was both sort of inclined towards left-wing politics, but also a Christian, and you also described that he was involved in things like Civil Rights activities in the sixties, and that you really weren't totally aware what that was all about, but that was part of what was going on.

Cline

I wondered, since particularly during the sixties it was a time when the church was really associated with a lot of activism, people like Martin Luther King, Jr., and others coming out of the church. You mentioned that your own activity in the church was sort of more purely social, but I wondered, growing up in that environment, what the church ultimately sort of--what its function was for you in your life and how much interest you had in it, both spiritually and otherwise.

Sunoo

Well, I suppose if, at the time I was in high school and earlier years, my primary purpose in church was more social than religious or spiritual, it also created a moral environment and a spiritual environment in which those social activities took place. I think that that as a moral and spiritual keel in my life, it's always been there. I don't know if I've ever had the moment when Christ or God came to me, but, you know, I'm still a fairly religious and fairly irregular church member and participate in our church here in Los Angeles today.

Sunoo

I guess there have been gaps throughout my life where I was not particularly associated with any church, but I guess I never felt that the structure or the organization of a church was that important to me religiously. It was more of a personal and internal moral and spiritual belief.

Cline

Yes. What about your mother? I know that you all went to church, and your father had this kind of applied sort of involvement. What were her beliefs and her feelings?

Sunoo

I'm not really sure. I mean, she grew up in the [Korean] Methodist Church in San Francisco, and she attended. She encouraged my brother and me to seek out a non-Korean church, and I'm not exactly sure what the motivation was, but I think it had to do with internal church politics, and I think my dad might have been put on the fringes of the Korean Church because of his leftist leanings, and that made it awkward for him, and he just didn't like that environment. At the same time, my mother wanted us to get a broader exposure to societal things, and the Korean Church, although it was the core of the Korean community in L.A.--it was a pretty small community.

Sunoo

My brother and I had friends and joined a larger, basically Anglo, Methodist Church in San Francisco. Once my brother and I started going, my parents started to participate in that, in the church activities there, and they became church leaders in the Trinity Methodist Church on Market Street in San Francisco.

Cline

Wow. I will probably come back to this as we go forward in time into the sixties; you went to Powell High School.

Sunoo

Lowell High School.

Cline

Lowell, sorry. Lowell High School. You mentioned how that was kind of an elite school. Were there many nonwhite students at Lowell?

Sunoo

There were a lot of Chinese students there. There were a number of African American students there, more than a token amount. There was a significant amount of African Americans. I know that there were a lot of Jewish students that generally--well, it was a fairly mixed school. I wouldn't characterize it as being--it had kind of a funny slice to it, in that it did have probably a disproportionate number of Chinese, a disproportionate number of Jewish kids, and a disproportionately lower number of African American kids. But it wasn't totally off the scales.

Cline

Right. So you went from high school for a while to, you said, a junior college, which was San Francisco City College.

Sunoo

Yes, I went to San Francisco City College. Well, I graduated in January. I was a mid-year graduate and went immediately into junior college and really had no aim, no sense of what I wanted to do or why I was there, except that as the son of Dr. Sunoo, of course I would go to college of some sort. So I went to City College.

Sunoo

I've got to say for a city college, City College was a fairly sophisticated school. I went to the classes, and it would have taken a significant amount of diligence to go--I had a world history class, an economics class. I don't recall what else; a literature class. All of them required a lot more academic rigor than I had really ever given previously. So that, compounded with the fact that I really wasn't motivated to be there, my friends and I found a sunny spot on the south-facing lawn, and we spent a lot of time out there and not as much time in the library or studying as we might have.

Sunoo

As a result, my grades started to drop off fairly precipitously. I saw that I was in this downward spiral, so what I did was technically I took a leave of absence

from the college, and didn't bother to tell my parents that I had done that and continued to leave the house every other morning or so and go sit on the south lawn with my buddies, and just basically cruised through the rest of that spring. By the end of the semester I guess I must have been cornered into having to tell my parents that I, in fact, wasn't enrolled and that I had actually taken a leave of absence.

Sunoo

The timing worked out, I think as I mentioned previously that around then is when my father got this offer to teach in Missouri and declared that I was going to restart my college career at Central Methodist College. So off I went. Fortuitously, when I went to Central Methodist in Fayette, Missouri, I was really pleased to be there, and I found that there were really a good group of kids. I had never been in the Midwest before and had just the general stereo--growing up and going out there as a San Francisco born and bred kid, I had certain expectations that were very low of what life in the Midwest might be like.

Sunoo

But when I went out there, I found my fellow students and professors to be very engaging people and very welcoming. I joined a group of guys; eventually joined a fraternity. We played a lot of sports, intramural sports, and dated the Midwestern girls and had a very good college experience. Academically, I picked things up and did well enough in college.

Cline

Backing up just a little bit, before you left San Francisco and you were hanging out with your friends on the south lawn, etc., what sort of activities or interests did you have in the city at the time? Did you go various places? Did you hang out various places? What was happening?

Sunoo

You know, during that time when I was--I think the church was basically the core of my social life, and it was--well, let's see. This was in late fifties, early sixties; yes, late fifties, early, early sixties. You know, my activities were kind of not part of, I guess, the stereotypic norm for kids growing up in that era. I was

a pretty avid speed skater on ice, and there was a small club of us that went out and did speed skating once or twice a week. I hung out with my brother a lot. I guess we did a lot of bike riding and just all over the city and Marin County.

Cline

Wow. That's a serious place to bike ride, San Francisco. [Laughs]

Sunoo

Well, yes, it's a serious place to bike ride, and, parenthetically, it's a serious place to learn to drive a stick shift.

Cline

Yes, right. [Laughs]

Sunoo

I ended up doing both of those things.

Cline

But you weren't aware of, you know, like sort of the whole kind of Beat scene going on or any of that.

Sunoo

No. The Beat syndrome [phonetic] was not part of our milieu at all.

Cline

Yes, okay. You mentioned last time that you were dating, as you just now said, Midwestern girls. These were Caucasian girls, and that this was essentially--I mean, you didn't have much choice, but this was okay with your parents. I was wondering what it was like for the girls' parents for their daughter to be dating an Asian guy, if you had any sense of that.

Sunoo

Well, yes. I don't have much information there, because for the most part, my parents met every girl that I dated, because it was a very small town and a very small campus. It turned out that both my parents ended up on campus. My father got his job, and he and I lived out there for the first year. During

that year, my father managed to get my mother, who at that point then had her master's in early childhood education and psychology, so he managed to get her a teaching job on campus as well. So they were both on campus all the time, so they naturally met the girls that I was dating.

Sunoo

The girls' parents that you asked me about, I never saw them, because these girls were away to college.

Cline

Oh, I see. Okay.

Sunoo

I did go home with a couple of them over a weekend or a holiday thing. They were very cordial to me. I don't know what was said behind doors to their daughters, but they were always cordial to me, and the girls continued to date me after we came home from those weekends.

Cline

That's good.

Sunoo

It was good Midwestern cordiality, you know.

Cline

Yes. So people weren't necessarily from that area that were going to the college there.

Sunoo

They were pretty much from the area. Probably more than half of the kids at college were from the state of Missouri, and then the other half--well, the other 40 percent must have been from the adjoining states, and then maybe there were 10 percent that were from two or three states away, including maybe half a dozen of us that were from either coast.

Cline

Oh, yes. Now, Missouri was technically, when these things mattered, aligned with the South.

Sunoo

It was a border state. It was a border state, and what it meant was that there were certain enclaves within Missouri, even today, or even thirty years ago, that were more liberal or more conservative in terms of civil rights. When you looked back at it, it was pretty astounding. On our college campus there, I believe there might have been two African American students, and they were treated fine. I think there were two girls; I think they shared a room in the dorms. They took classes alongside of everybody else, went to the cafeteria, etc.

Sunoo

What I didn't realize, though, for almost the first whole year that I was there, was that in the town of Fayette, which is a town of about 3,000, and there are a lot of African Americans who live in the town. From everything I remember ever observing, they were all lower-income folks, and they looked like they were rural, low-income folks. They sat around on the street corner. There was a--I don't know if you call it a ghetto or a neighborhood. There was a neighborhood that was the black neighborhood, and it was a pretty sorry neighborhood, very, very rundown. But it looked like, okay, that impoverished people, very poor people, are living there, and they are black.

Sunoo

What I didn't realize for the first year that I was there, at least, was that regardless of their economic status, the African Americans were not allowed to sit on the main floor of the theater. So they could sit in the balcony. It was a small town thirty years ago, and they had drugstore counters in the drugstore. You'd go there, and there'd be a soda counter, and you could buy hamburgers, milkshakes, whatever. I had never noticed, until it was pointed out to me, that blacks were not allowed to sit at the counter. They could order takeout and stand at the end of the counter and wait for their order and then pick up their order and exit the place.

Sunoo

An interesting thing happened, was that--and these Midwesterners, they're wily folks. There was a professor on campus who was--there were a number of professors on campus, and a number of them were more liberal in thinking. There was this one sociology prof[essor], and he said, "Look, we're going to bust the color line. We're going to take a bunch of you--we're all going to go upstairs in the balcony and sit down and watch the movie." Civil disobedience, only--they did. So they went there, and they watched the movie, and they left and patted themselves on the back for breaking the color line. And nothing ever came of it the next day.

Sunoo

Similarly, there was an organization at that time called SNCC, Student--S-N--Student something [Nonviolent] Coordinating Committee, Student National--but it was a group like a more radical group than, say, CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] or the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. So SNCC had a University of Missouri chapter, and the University of Missouri was about thirty miles away from where our campus was. They had announced plans to go down to that southern enclave, Fayette, and they were going to bust the drugstore just wide open.

Sunoo

So they came in, and they sat down, and they got served their lunch, and then they left. I suppose they had a big celebration about it, but again, the next day, nothing had happened. There was segregation in that town, and it was very clear if you looked for it.

Sunoo

I had an awakening where I had a--one of my two or three best guy buddies on campus, and he and I did everything together. We had meals together. We played sports together. We did other things together. It had never come up in conversation, but at one point I remember him saying something about, "Oh, them niggers" this or that.

Sunoo

I was deeply offended, and I said, "Tim, wait a second. Call them Negroes, huh? You really ought to call them Negroes."

Sunoo

"Why should I call them Negroes? They're niggers. That's all they are is niggers."

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

I stormed out of the room, and I never talked to him for the next three and a half years that we were on campus. But I guess that must have been--you know, it had just never--it had never come up, you know, because we talked about a lot of things, but race wasn't one of them. I suppose that a lot of those really great kids that I went to college with probably had that same attitude, but, you know, it just never surfaced, and I as an Asian was put outside of that sort of a division.

Cline

Interesting. Aside from the racial situation, coming from a cosmopolitan center like San Francisco and going to a small town in Missouri, culturally how would you describe what that experience was like for you? I mean, clearly it didn't meet the lowest expectations that you had, but what was that transition like for you, in terms of how that affected the kinds of things you liked to do?

Sunoo

You know, it was kind of interesting. In some ways--just a couple of minutes ago I said that the church had been the social circle of my youth, and that I didn't really participate much in popular culture in San Francisco, although it was a hotbed of a lot of stuff. I guess, in some ways, going to Central Methodist College was like being in that church social circle twenty-four hours a day. That might have been part of the reason that I just felt so comfortable, because these folks, although they weren't--it was not a--well, there are certain trappings of a religious college. There was a weekly mandatory chapel service, and there was a couple of religion classes that were mandatory for graduation or required coursework.

Sunoo

But overall the classes did not start out with a prayer. The professors did not try to teach things from a religious perspective, etc. So the environment there, it kind of mirrored, on a larger--it became a larger scale of what my social circle had been with regards to church in San Francisco, and in neither instance was religion a primary piece of that. It just happened that it created the environment.

Cline

What were you focusing on academically at the college?

Sunoo

Not a whole lot. I graduated with a political science-economics major.

Cline

Oh, okay. Any way you can describe what made you choose that area?

Sunoo

No. I guess I wasn't terribly motivated. I'll tell you a story in a minute--

Cline

Okay.

Sunoo

--which will highlight kind of the lack of any kind of professional or academic direction I had at the time. But I'll get to that in a second. But I want to also say that one semester of my college, which was a very important semester to me, I spent in New Jersey at Drew University. I went to what was called a intensive United Nations [U.N.] semester. What we did was, we went to Drew University, and we took a couple of classes on campus. But then twice a week we would go into New York City by bus, and we would spend the entire day talking with U.N. officials about the various functions within the U.N. and did a pretty extensive research paper on some work aspect of the United Nations.

Sunoo

That, to me, became a really important semester, because it gave me a sense at that point--which I've wandered away from, but at that point gave me a very strong sense of the importance of international relations, international

politics, and just a broader vision of the world and a sense of the smallness of the world. So that was a very important semester that I had had.

Sunoo

Also--I don't know if I mentioned this earlier, but also it was at Drew University that I was first introduced to rugby.

Cline

Oh, no, you didn't mention it.

Sunoo

So I joined the--they don't call them teams; they call them clubs. So I joined the Drew University Rugby Club. That was a very, very exciting experience, also. I had the good fortune of playing against Harvard [University], Princeton [University], Yale [University], and a number of other Ivy League schools. It was exciting, in a sense, because that was the only contact that I had ever had directly with any Ivy League school. Previously it had been simply that, gee, those universities, you know, they're the things that legends are made of.

Sunoo

But it's kind of interesting, because then when you play rugby, which is a very heavy contact sport, you're banging up these Harvard boys, and they're kicking you back. [Cline laughs.] At the end of the day, a rugby tradition is, at the end of the day you have a joint party, and there's a lot of beer consumed and a lot of frivolity. So that was an exciting period, and exciting not just for the athleticism of it but for the--again, if this semester away did anything for me, it gave me a different worldview, but it also gave me a different view of some of the elitism that I had subjected myself to up until then.

Cline

You described yourself last time as not being particularly interested in sports, probably because your father wasn't sports-minded. How did you get involved in rugby, of all things?

Sunoo

Well, I guess what happened was that once I went to college, intramural sports was a very big thing. Although I currently weigh 165 pounds and that's

been my standard adult weight, when I was in college, I actually weighed 30 pounds more. I was a hefty guy, and I guess I had some innate brutality and some innate speed and things that are necessary. In a college of a thousand, you can't pick and choose; you can't be too picky, I guess, in who you put on your fraternity team. So I played a lot of fraternity sports. We played touch football, and I enjoyed playing on the line in touch football.

Sunoo

So when I went to Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, I had never seen a rugby game before, and a couple of the guys that were in the U.N. program said, "You know, we're here at Drew University. You can play on the rugby team, because you're a Drew student." So I just went out and I played with them. They taught me the game, and I just found it totally captivating. Rugby, like soccer, is pretty much a nonstop sport. It's continuous play. It's a fairly rough sport, but on the other hand, what we would say about the sport is that it was a ruffian's sport played by gentlemen.

Sunoo

What that meant was that you really have the ability and the opportunity to do serious harm to your fellow players, because there is no protection that you have. There are no helmets, no padding. So you can do a lot of serious harm, and people were injured all the time. But generally, you didn't play the sport to hurt somebody. You played the sport to win.

Sunoo

I know that in our intramural so-called touch football games, at least on the line, if you were up against another fraternity that you didn't like, you were there to hurt them so that they couldn't continue play, and you would hit them as hard as you could, not as hard as you needed to.

Cline

Oh, right.

Sunoo

So in some ways I did find rugby to be more of a fun sport, because there seemed to be more of an emphasis on the game.

Cline

Also, I imagine a different culture in New Jersey and certainly different weather. How did that suit you?

Sunoo

It wasn't a problem. I had been in the Midwest, so the weather--and also I was there, I believe it was, the spring semester. Yes, I think it was the spring semester that I was there.

Cline

What year was it?

Sunoo

Oh, I don't know. '66 maybe?

Cline

Oh, okay. In the mid-sixties there starts to be a lot going on in terms of popular culture in the country, music and other things. How much of that were you following, if any?

Sunoo

Not a whole lot. My brother and I during the summer of '64 and '65 had the opportunity of going to New York to work at the New York World's Fair, which is another defining experience. We were sixteen and seventeen, seventeen, eighteen, maybe, at that time. Some in-law relatives were actually operating a restaurant at the Hawaiian Pavilion of the World's Fair.

Sunoo

The reason for mentioning our age was that the legal age for drinking in New York at that time had been eighteen, and so the job that I had taken--or not taken, but was given--was being in charge of a snack bar during the day, which was basically selling pineapple, fresh pineapple and coconut ice cream and things. But in the evening I actually supervised the cocktail lounge. So here I was, this eighteen-year-old kid from the Midwest, and I was actually supervising the cocktail waitresses and the bartenders at the cocktail lounge.

Sunoo

Part of that was that they wanted somebody that they could trust, and they felt that they could trust family more than anyone else, because as supervisor I also was the cashier and handled all the transactions and monitored all of the bar activities. There were a lot of places where they taught us people could skim, take cash, and so we were advised of all of that. So this eighteen-year-old kid from Missouri was supervising a New York bar. It was quite an experience.

Cline

Well, speaking of--

Sunoo

Oh, so with regards to popular culture, you know, we hung out mostly with the Hawaiians, but we were aware of some of the psychedelic stuff that was going on and brought a little bit of that back to Missouri with us, but not a whole lot.

Cline

Speaking of legal ages, how much awareness or concern did you have at this point about the draft, since this is when the Vietnam War was going?

Sunoo

Okay, well, you just skipped to where I wanted to come in when I was telling you about my somewhat indifference to life in academics at that point.

Cline

Okay. All right.

Sunoo

So during this era they were drafting people, but if you were in college, that was good for a student deferment. It meant that as long as you were in college, up to four years, and then after four years they would start to question, the draft board, individual local draft boards, which were very, very powerful. They could make the decision as to whether you should get your student deferment for a fifth or a sixth year, or whether, "Four years is enough; you're not getting anywhere. We're going to draft you."

Sunoo

I don't know if it's unusual, but I know that a lot of people that actually, physically, went before their draft board, which was a board of--I don't know--half a dozen, three or four people, that were just folks, and they were making decisions about whether this--I guess it was all men--whether these young guys should be drafted or deferred.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

So when I was graduating from college, in my senior year in the spring I had talked to my draft board in Missouri. You can imagine that they were fairly conservative; they were. They congratulated me on finishing college and told me that, "I guess next, boy, you're going to be serving your country."

Sunoo

I said, "Well, okay, if that's what I got to do, I guess that's what I'll do."

Sunoo

During my senior year of college a couple of things happened. There was an army recruiter that came onto campus. I had a long conversation with him, and he convinced me that if I were to go join the army, the best place for me to go would be to something called the Army Security Agency, I believe it was called, and that with my grades and with my intelligence, I would be accepted in there, and he could fix it so that I could get that as a predetermined place to go.

Sunoo

I said, "It sounds good to me," and he fixed it. I got a letter back, and it said, "Congratulations. The Army Security Agency is looking forward to your joining us."

Sunoo

But at the same time I sort of Pollyannishly [phonetic] ignored my draft board, and I applied to grad school. I said, "You know, I'm kind of interested in

following up on this international relations stuff." I was all set to go to--it was a toss-up. I was wanting to go to either Fordham University in New York or to the American University in [Washington] D.C. It was--basically, I was thinking, "Do I want to be in D.C. or do I want to be in New York?" And thinking, "I guess international relations is what I'm interested in."

Sunoo

There was another visitor that came onto campus that senior year of mine, and this was a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer. I had talked to her. She came onto campus, and I spent the entire day with her. I don't think anyone else was particularly interested in the Peace Corps. But I talked to her and talked to her, and we hit it off very well. In the end she convinced me that I ought to submit an application for the Peace Corps.

Sunoo

So I did, and there I was, sitting in probably early May just before my graduation. I literally had on my desk three little envelopes, or I guess two; two graduate school envelopes, my army envelope, and my Peace Corps envelope. And thought, "Well, which way should I go?" By then I had really determined that I thought that the Vietnam War was bad policy, but my brother, who is a conscientious objector, was ready to go to Canada over this, and I wasn't. I kept thinking, "You know, if my brother has that level of commitment, he knows what he's doing, and he's going to exercise his prerogative of doing what he thinks he has to do. I don't feel that level of commitment to this thing." I felt maybe I ought to go and find out my level of commitment by actually going inside the belly of the dragon.

Sunoo

Then I was pragmatic enough to say that, "If I go into the belly of the dragon, this guy tells me that the Army Security Agency is the most protected personnel in all of the military. So if I do that, I probably won't get hurt." So that was my thinking.

Sunoo

When I applied for the Peace Corps, on part of the application it says, "What country would you like to go to?" I wasn't real sure, but I said, "Well, yeah,

maybe Korea would be a good place to go." So I put down Korea as my first choice. But then I said, "Beyond that, I really don't care much," and I put a second choice, anywhere in Africa. Then third choice, I said, "I don't want to go to Latin America." There was no profound reason for any of this. It was just kind of, well, what do you think you want to do, and I said, "Well, let's go somewhere exotic," and I felt Africa was more exotic.

Sunoo

So as it turns out, I did choose the Peace Corps, and the--I think it was September--August of the year that I graduated, I went into the Peace Corps. For the draft, the Peace Corps was what they called a deferment. It wasn't a substitute for service, but the legislation was such that it said if you are in the Peace Corps, you will not be drafted for the duration that you're in the Peace Corps. So that worked well for me.

Sunoo

The end of the story of any potential military career that I might have had was that while I was in the Peace Corps, the government switched over to a lottery system, and if you were chosen number one--anything from 1 to about 100--you were pretty sure that you were going to go. My number came up as 360, so I became absolutely safe by the right ball falling out of that--whatever it falls out of--at the right time.

Cline

Wow. What about your brother? What happened with him?

Sunoo

You know, he never went to the army, and he never went to Canada, so I'm not quite sure how he beat the draft. He never officially got the Conscientious Objector status. I think he might have been deferred on something called alternative service, where he was working in a poverty clinic. Ultimately, he got his master's in psychology, what they call community psychology, and spent a lot of time working in--or spent the first part of his career working with low-income neighborhoods.

Cline

So what did your parents think of this decision?

Sunoo

Well, they liked graduate school, but they realized the folly of following up on that. My father, you can imagine his utter disgust of my considering the army at all. Then the Peace Corps, they thought it was a great alternative, and in hindsight, I thought it was a great experience as well.

Sunoo

So tell us what happened. You had to be trained, I suppose, at some point before you went away.

Sunoo

Yes. Peace Corps provides training for all of their volunteers, and so we spent three months in the late summer in a ski resort in Pennsylvania, Blue Knob, Pennsylvania. I think there were about 125 of us that started training. Unfortunately, it appeared to us then and it appears to us now in retrospect, that the Peace Corps saw this as a weeding-out process rather than a training process, and the mental attitude of a lot of the trainees was how to avoid getting weeded out. That being said, Peace Corps training was pretty uneventful, and eventually, I think 88 of us were shipped out to Korea.

Cline

So you went to Korea.

Sunoo

So I was not deselected, as they say. During the training they had language class. They had three types of classes. One was language, one was Korean culture, and one was job skill. The job skill was that we were to go over as a group of English teachers, although out of the eighty-eight of us that went over, probably a dozen of us had ever taught or had taken an education class in our life. But it was seen as something that anybody who could speak English can do, which, of course, is folly.

Sunoo

But the real mission of the Peace Corps, I think was then and continues to be somewhat, is an idea of embedding Americans into foreign cultures, where they set a good example of Americana in their being, in the way they act, and

the way they interact. The actual teaching that they do or the value of the service that they're there to provide is somewhat diminished--or not diminished, but is of a lower level of importance.

Sunoo

Now, ever since the beginning of Peace Corps, the Peace Corps has said that it's moving away from that model and more to one that provides strong technical assistance of a meaningful sort. But the returned volunteers that I talked to who have come back over the last five or ten years seemed to indicate that the general sense overall that it really is about putting Americans in places where they can be seen and interact with other country people on a grass-roots basis. I don't think it's bad; it's just that--so that the idea that eighty-eight of us would go over to Korea to teach English, even though none of us, or a dozen of us, might have been teachers.

Sunoo

If you talk to most any of those eighty-eight people that went over, and we just had our--what would it be--our thirty-fifth year reunion last year, or this spring, and I think we'll all say that we didn't do a lot of teaching, but we did interact positively. I think probably to almost every single Peace Corps volunteer I've ever spoken with, it's been a really good experience for them, myself included.

Sunoo

For me, it was doubly so, because not only did I get to live and experience a foreign culture, on a real grass-roots level, because generally the Peace Corps volunteer is put at --we went over as English teachers, so we lived under conditions similar to Korean English teachers from Korea. So it was not an opulent lifestyle at all. It was not a typical foreign service experience, you know, with all this, servants and chauffeurs and all of that. So it was really walking the dirt roads to school alongside your fellow teachers and learning about Korea at that level.

Sunoo

So learning a culture, any culture, to me was just tremendously rewarding. And for me, as a Korean American, it became just doubly, maybe tenfold more

important than I think to what any other Peace Corps volunteer might have felt. When we were growing up, my father tried to teach us about Korean culture, but he did it verbally, and verbal education comes in--I'm surprised that as much stuff stuck as it did.

Sunoo

I may have related to you--I relate often this story of when my father tried to teach us Korean as young kids. He was trying to pound it into us, and my mother, as a child psychologist, was saying, "You know, you can try to teach your kids Korean, and you might succeed, but you're really going to lose their love."

Cline

Right. Right.

Sunoo

So he gave up teaching us Korean and opted out for our love instead. [Cline laughs.] Yes. So we learned a little bit of Korean, but not enough, not even survival Korean. But then when I was in Korea, the most exciting thing happened to me, and that was that it came to light one day--I went there in early fall, and when the winter started rolling in and it started getting kind of cool and crisp, I saw on the side of the street in my small town of Non San, I saw a sweet potato vendor. What they do is they have a little kind of a hibachi kind of a stove, and they toast a whole sweet potato.

Sunoo

You know, I could tell you that story, and you'd say, "Oh, that's interesting." But to me, what really hit home was the fact that my father had told me that, "You know, when I was a kid in Korea, in North Korea growing up, there used to be these sweet potato vendors. You'd get a sweet potato, and it would be the nicest thing. You'd get two of them, and you'd put one in your pocket, and it gave you a nice, warm feeling. Then you'd eat the other one, and it would just feel good going down."

Sunoo

So this crisp day on my first fall in Korea, or late fall, early winter in Korea, I saw this potato vendor, and it was like such a coming home of reality. That's

one of those little grains of things that my father had talked to us about, and it really didn't mean much to me, growing up. But then the linkage when I was actually in Korea--and that happened time and time and time again in different types of things.

Sunoo

I guess the other thing that happened was, while I was in Korea, I learned a fair amount of Korean language, and that was pretty exciting. [unclear] skip ahead, and I'll come back, but when I came back to the United States, my mother's mother, my maternal grandmother, was a picture bride, so she came over at the turn of the century, and her English was never very good. But when I came back from Korea, I spoke to her in Korean, which I obviously had never done previously. That was a pretty amazing connection. My Korean was good enough that there was nuanced stuff that I had never spoken to my grandmother at that level previously, so that was pretty amazing and a real funny result of the Peace Corps experience.

Cline

Wow. What years were you in Korea then?

Sunoo

I was in Korea from '67 until '70. I was there for a little over two years, two and a half years. I had spent one year in a small town of Non San, in Chung Chung Nam-do, which is kind of--it you start at Seoul in kind of the north end of South Korea, it's about halfway down to the end of the peninsula. It's a little town. Some paved roads; a lot of dirt roads. I'd spent a year there teaching in a boys' school. Then my second year I moved up to Seoul. I was transferred up there and taught in another boys' school for part of the time, and then created a--the Peace Corps headquarters was in Seoul, so I had managed to make a job for myself in the Peace Corps headquarters.

Sunoo

I remember crafting the title myself, and I thought it was very clever. I titled myself the materials coordinator, which said really nothing, but for some reason I liked it at the time. What my job was, was to basically--let's see. So we had these eighty-eight Peace Corps volunteers from the United States,

trying to teach English, not doing a very good job. At our national conferences where all the Peace Corps volunteers would get together, everyone complained about the lack of good teaching materials. Now, they weren't teachers, anyway, but they had sort of started to pick up some of the ideas about what makes an English teacher work, or what makes teaching work.

Sunoo

So they said, "It would be really helpful if we had American textbooks," and we knew that to import American textbooks would be prohibitively expensive. We also knew that Korea, at least at the time, did not adhere to the international copyrights [conventions]. So what I did, my Materials Coordinator job, was to go around to the various Peace Corps volunteer sites and say, "Okay, given the best of everything, what textbooks, what English language materials, what American materials, would you like to have?"

Sunoo

I had a bunch of samples. I felt like a book salesman; I'd go around with samples, and they had other ideas. They'd say, "Oh, I really like this book."

Sunoo

I said, "Well, okay. How many copies could you use?"

Sunoo

They said, "Well, we've got a thousand boys in our school. Everyone would buy one," because kids had to buy their own textbooks.

Sunoo

So then I would go to the bookstore, and I would say, "If I could guarantee you a thousand sales of this, can you give me a price on how much you'd retail it at?" Then I went to the printer's in Seoul. After going around the countryside picking up different orders, I would go back up to Seoul and negotiate with the big printer up there and say, "You know, I want 10,000 copies of this book. How much can do it for me for?"

Sunoo

So I arranged to have American textbooks pirated and then distributed and sold through this network of Peace Corps volunteers.

Cline

[Laughs] Oh, wow. Right.

Sunoo

It was a good time.

Cline

A couple of things. First off, what was your sense of the locals' reaction to this Korean American among them?

Sunoo

They had two reactions. I guess the first reaction was that Koreans tend to be very, very nationalistic, back then, now. You could see it in the new immigrant populations here in Los Angeles. So the fact that I was pretty Americanized, I was also, at 5' 10" and 190 pounds, significantly larger than the typical Korean on the street, and both my dress, my hairstyle, which is kind of long, everything about me except the fact that I was Korean by blood, everything else made me very foreign. But the fact that my blood was Korean, they accepted immediately and totally that I was one of them. They had a little trouble socially, trying to figure out how to fit me in, but there was absolutely no disconnect in the fact that I was one of them.

Cline

You said there were two reactions. What was the other one?

Sunoo

Well, no, I'm thinking the reaction one was that I was so foreign.

Cline

I see. Right, and then the other was the--okay.

Sunoo

And then the other was that I was really one of them.

Cline

We think of Seoul, Korea, now as being quite the huge, economically booming sort of place. What was Seoul like in the late sixties?

Sunoo

When I landed in Seoul, I remember we came out of--well, actually, no. We landed at [Seoul] Kimpo Airport, and I don't have much recollection of what happened there. But one of the things I was going to say is I remember that in the streets of Seoul, when I first went there, they had oxcarts that were plying the streets. They had lots of buses and lots of taxis and a smaller number of private cars, but they also had lots of oxcarts. I remember that.

Sunoo

I remember that we went to a street vendor, and they had something that looked like a Hershey bar. Somebody bought one and found that the packaging looked similar to a Hershey chocolate bar, and on the inside there was something that was kind of brown, but it tasted nothing of chocolate. Sugar was an expensive commodity, and just the very slightest sweet sensation to this so-called Hershey, Korean Hershey bar.

Sunoo

I've forgot the name of it now, but they had a Korean cola that was terrible. And just in the two and a half years that I was there, by the time I left, oxcarts had been banned from the city streets totally; they weren't allowed inside the boundaries of Seoul. Coca-Cola had come in a year and a half before, and Pepsi-Cola was just hitting the streets as I was leaving. For a good year and a half they had started making Haitei chocolate bars, which were a very good chocolate bar.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

So those were kind of small signs, but a tremendous modernization had occurred. The beginning of this very steep climb of modernization occurred, and I think it really started taking off during the time that I was there. I have not been back since, but from all I've heard and all I've seen in terms of pictures and videos and television, it just seems to have continued to grow.

Cline

Right.

Sunoo

About twenty years ago, maybe twenty-five years ago, I had the opportunity of going to Pyongyang, North Korea, and interestingly--about twenty years ago, I guess--Pyongyang, in a lot of its trapping--well, yes, it is totalitarian. Yes, it is very isolated. Yes, it's very controlled, and yes, you have no freedom to wander on your own. All that being said, we did have the opportunity of visiting one of my father's relatives in a countryside village. His countryside home reminded me tremendously of the countryside home that I had lived in in Korea that is fifteen or so years before that.

Sunoo

In talking to those relatives, and again, if the connection of blood makes one Korean bond with another, the connection of family bonds one Korean even tighter with a fellow family member. This was clearly obvious in meeting with my relatives from North Korea. The conversation that we had had was so similar to the conversations that I had had with numerous South Koreans, it leads me to think that there really is something--this nationalism among Koreans clearly, clearly cuts across the demilitarized thirty-eighth parallel, and that if there were ever to be a reunification, that I don't think there would be a major problem.

Sunoo

There's a huge economic hurdle to overcome. There are huge political problems to overcome. But on a personal level, the commitment or the sense of national identity is just so strong that I can't feel that it would be anything but successful in terms of just a will of people to eventually bond and work together.

Cline

Of course, that amplifies the tragedy of that divide being there.

Sunoo

Oh yes.

Cline

Considering your father's nationalistic characteristics, how did he feel about your being in Korea as a young man?

Sunoo

Oh, he was so proud of the fact. I never had the heart to tell him that I would have been just as happy in Africa. [Cline laughs.] And in retrospect, I don't think I would have been. It couldn't have possibly been the experience.

Sunoo

I kind of went through changes while I was there. I know initially when I went there, I felt the same thing that the other Koreans did. I felt the bonding; not as strong, but I felt a bonding, with the reaction of, "Oh, I'm home," especially when I went out to the countryside. I had this feeling that I was home, and this was Korea, and I'm Korean, and this was where I should be, and this is just wonderful. So I had that feeling, and then I also had the feeling of just being totally awash in a strange land. I had both emotions any number of times during my stay there.

Cline

Interesting. Especially when you were in Seoul, how much awareness did you have of American military presence [unclear] foreigners?

Sunoo

How much influence or--

Cline

Just awareness. Did you see them or did you interact with them?

Sunoo

The American military presence was not that overbearing. I was there during the Pak Chung-hee years, and what was more overbearing was simply the Korean police and military presence. A lot of it had to do with the fact that-- you know, you go to New York City; you see a lot of police. But you don't see a whole lot of police carrying automatic weapons and wearing army fatigues. So I'm not sure that there were that huge number of military in the city, or it was

just that the police--the police were there, and they were dressed in what we would consider to be army uniforms. And the fact that they didn't limit themselves to sidearms. They carried automatic rifles. That is intimidating.

Sunoo

Then instead of driving police cars as we would know them, black and whites, they drove military jeeps. So there was a sense. And there was a curfew. Some of the times that my American Peace Corps friends worried about me the most was when we were out violating curfew, and because I'm Korean, they just felt that--what would happen, we typically would be out partying, so as you were staggering home down the street, they would always be sure to stick me in the center of the group so that it was very clear that that one Asian face was really part of this sea of white faces.

Cline

Oh. Wow.

Sunoo

I actually--you know, you asked me what the reaction was, because I also--because of kind of the strangeness of my appearance as a Korean, but clearly not an Anglo, during my stay in Korea I was actually picked up by the police and the military when I was in the countryside any number of times, where they thought that I was a North Korean spy.

Cline

Well, you walked right into my next question. The level of suspicion when you were there must have been quite high.

Sunoo

Yes, and I was this arrogant American rugby player, and been fairly active in small demonstrations in Fayette and New York. Sort of just a general liberal kind of anti-police mentality. so whenever I was stopped, I would always give them a bad time. They would ask me, "Where are you from?"

Sunoo

I would tell them, "Well, I'm from over there."

Sunoo

They'd say, "What do you mean, over there?"

Sunoo

I said, "Over there, you know. Over there. What, you don't understand Korean? I'm from over there."

Sunoo

They said, "No. Tell us where your home is."

Sunoo

I said, "My home? My home is wherever I am. I'm at home wherever." [Cline laughs.] I would aggravate them.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

Especially if I wasn't on a particular destination and under a particular schedule, I would allow them to then pull me into the police station. And ultimately, the trump card was that I had a Korean Ministry of Education card that was signed, actually signed by the minister of education. Usually an ID card is signed by your immediate supervisor, so when they saw my ID card as being signed by--you know, it would be like the secretary of state or something in the United States. It was signed by the minister of education. Then they would look at me, and they would get really pissed off, but they knew couldn't do anything, and I knew they couldn't do anything.

Cline

[Laughs] Wow. Quite a lot happened, not only in the country but in the world, during the particular years that you were in Korea in the Peace Corps.

Sunoo

Right.

Cline

We're talking about the late sixties now. How aware were you of what was going on, or conversely, how isolated were you and therefore didn't get to participate in what was happening in the world at that time with so many changes?

Sunoo

Well, yes. This is Vietnam era. There's an international edition, Asian edition, of Time magazine, Newsweek magazine, New York Times--or New York Herald, we got. There was no Internet, obviously. Usually our Newsweeks and Time magazines, the New York Herald, came through pretty uncensored. Occasionally they would be censored. It must be this incredibly labor-intensive thing, because they would take a black paint and just brush over, and they would brush over faces if it was a moral issue and Britney Spears was on the cover; whoever the '67 version of Britney Spears was, Joan Baez or whatever.

Cline

Janis Joplin.

Sunoo

If they didn't like her, then they would paint her out, this big, black paint. We'd kick ourselves, because we should have kept some of those covers, because they'd make great memorabilia. So to the extent that we read, you know, we were aware of things to the extent that we could read them in Newsweek. There was no radio except for the U.S. Armed Forces Radio, and that was pretty heavily censored as well.

Sunoo

In terms of our own activism, you can imagine that as Peace Corps volunteers, they're a pretty liberal group of folks. But we also had a very strong sense of mission, of what we were doing in Korea, and realized that the conservatism of our host government. We felt, you know, we could get kicked out of the country. We felt we could get kicked out of the country pretty easily. So the furthest extension of anything we did was we wrote both individual letters back home to senators, lawmakers, and newspapers, as well as relatives, of course. So we did a fair amount of letter writing.

Sunoo

We were very cautious, probably overly so, but at that time maybe it was not overly so. But we did--very cautious about the stances that we would take. We did a few petitions, a few petitions. We were clear to say that although we were Peace Corps volunteers, this doesn't reflect the Peace Corps and doesn't reflect us as a body, but reflects us individually. You know, that whole disclaimer thing. So our activism in terms of participating in any of the world and American events at the time was pretty limited.

Cline

So when your Peace Corps experience was coming to an end, what happened and where did you go?

Sunoo

Well, what happened was that at the end of two years, I was still really enjoying myself there, and the Peace Corps offers an option, or they did at the time; they offered an option of a year's extension. So the initial term is two years, and they offer a year's extension. If you take a year's extension, they give you a free trip home. That, to us at that time, was really a big give. So I thought about it, and I said, "You know, I'm not sure. I could go to graduate school." Oh, and by then my number had come up, and I was safe from the draft.

Cline

Oh, okay.

Sunoo

So I was pretty free to do whatever I wanted to do, and I decided I wanted to stay another year. So, and this does sequel into the next chapter of my life, is that I had planned--my brother had then, toward the end of my second year, my brother had become engaged, and they had planned to get married that fall. So I said, "Well, perfect timing. I'll come home for your wedding."

Sunoo

So I came to Los Angeles, which is a city that I had always abhorred, but it happened to be the city where my brother's wife was from. They were getting married in L.A., so I came to L.A. I didn't know anybody in L.A. I came in a few days before the wedding, and said, "Hey, you know, I'm in L.A. Let's go out."

Sunoo

My brother's not from L.A. He didn't know anybody. So he said, "Yeah, I'll get you a date."

Sunoo

So his bride-to-be said, "Oh, hey, you know, I know; I'll get Elaine. She just broke up with her boyfriend, or she's breaking up with her boyfriend, anyway. So, yeah, I can get her."

Sunoo

So she called up Elaine and said, "Hey, you know, my husband-to-be's brother is in town for a couple of days. Why don't we all go out?"

Sunoo

Elaine said, "No, no, no, no." She had just gotten home from work. She had just washed her hair. She didn't want to go out.

Sunoo

I said, "Let me talk to her." So I got on the phone, and I said, "Hey, Elaine, I don't know you; you don't know me. But, you know, I'm serving my country. Come on, let's just go out."

Sunoo

"I just washed my hair."

Sunoo

"Well, you can dry your hair, too, then."

Sunoo

And carried on this ridiculous--I don't know how I had the balls to do it, but just convinced her, because I wouldn't step back, and she said, "Yeah, yeah, okay."

Sunoo

So we went out, and we had a really good time, and, you know, in the end, I ended up marrying her. [Cline laughs.] My brother got married in October, I

believe, and then after staying in L.A., dating her while I was here for the few days before the wedding, and then I swung back through on my way back. My home visit was a ticket to Missouri. So then on the way back to Korea, I stopped in L.A.

Sunoo

It's a funny little snippet, but--so I obviously had a paper ticket, because they didn't have electronic tickets at that time. I had a paper ticket, and I was due to go back to Korea two days later. I really was enjoying getting to know Elaine, so I long-distance called, which was a big deal at the time. I long-distance called to Washington, D.C., and told them, "Gee, I seem to have lost my airplane ticket. What do I do?"

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

They said, "Well, you shouldn't panic. Are you okay? Have you got a place to stay?" They were very paternal to me, and they said, "Look, we'll mail you a new ticket, and it should get there in the next ten days."

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

So I stayed in Los Angeles an extra ten days, and I got to know Elaine pretty well. Went back to Korea, and we started writing aerograms, letters, back and forth to each other. Then she came out in December to spend Christmas in Hong Kong with me. We have a couple friends, who we're still friends with, and the three of us were going to go to Hong Kong for Christmas. Then I wrote to Elaine and I said, "Can you come?"

Sunoo

Through a series of several letters, she agreed that she would. She sent me a telegram, a five-word telegram, that said, "I'm dropping everything. Will meet you in Hong Kong for Christmas." So that was, I guess, the beginning of the serious phase of our relationship.

Sunoo

We went to Hong Kong, and she had planned, and then she came back up to Korea to visit us in Korea. She actually stayed with me for a while, and then I quit the Peace Corps and came back to Los Angeles in February.

Cline

What year was this then?

Sunoo

February '70. Yes, February '70. Came back to Los Angeles. I actually got a job as a Peace Corps recruiter for a few months and worked through the summer. We got engaged, and then that fall I went to graduate school at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. She stayed in L.A. to finish her B.A., and we made wedding plans; got married in the summer of '71. She came up, and we lived in Vancouver for a year, and then came back down and lived in Los Angeles after that, and have been living here ever since.

Cline

And lastly, since our time is up, so what was it that was so egregious about Los Angeles? Why did you hate it so much?

Sunoo

Well, I'm a San Franciscan, and I don't think I have to say anything more than that.

Cline

Well, I know that part, but was there a real specific reason?

Sunoo

As much as Koreans love Koreans wherever they are, San Franciscans just don't like Los Angeles for no good reason.

Cline

Had you spent much time here?

Sunoo

No. I had visited Los Angeles a total of maybe three times in all of my life before I came in for my brother's wedding.

Cline

Right. Okay.

Sunoo

I have an uncle who lived in Los Angeles, but I think the only reason we came to L.A., frankly, was to go to Disneyland. So I went to Disneyland and visited my uncle, and that was kind of the extent of it.

Cline

I see.

Sunoo

At this point, I've got to say that I'm very happy to be in Los Angeles. I'm not sure that my wife would agree with this, but my understanding was that when we decided to get married, that she would come to Vancouver and work hard to support me, or to support us, in my final year of grad school. Then she had a year left to finish her teaching credential, so we would go to Los Angeles and live in L.A. for a year while she finished her teaching credential.

Cline

Oh, I see.

Sunoo

Then we'd decide where we wanted to live.

Cline

Right. Right.

Sunoo

Well, what happened during the year that she was getting her teaching credential, I had, in fact, formed a number of different linkages and developed both a political and social and community circle of people that I had started some fairly significant work with, and I wasn't ready to leave L.A. after a year. The longer I've lived here, the more kind of entrenched I've gotten with

different--not entrenched, but more I've kind of expanded the different types of things that I've been involved in, and different ways of having fun in life. I love L.A.

Sunoo

On the other hand, my daughter [Lesley Sunoo] just moved to Northern California, and she asked my wife, she said if she got married and had kids in Northern California, is there any way that we would consider moving to L.A.-- or would we consider moving to Northern California?

Sunoo

I hadn't really given it much thought, because I figured I was going to die in L.A., until Elaine said, "If you had kids, we'd be up there in a heartbeat."

Sunoo

I thought about it, and I said, "You know, it would be really wonderful living in San Francisco again." So, who knows?

Cline

Very expensive these days. [Laughs]

Sunoo

Yes, it is. So is L.A.

Cline

Yes, right. Okay, well, this will finish us for today. I want to find out what those linkages were and ask you a little bit more about the period when you guys were finishing up your education and when you were in Vancouver, for example. But we'll pick that up next time and then proceed through your years in L.A. and your connections with the Korean community here eventually. Okay?

Sunoo

Okay.

Cline

Thank you. [End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (July 9, 2008)

Cline

Okay. Today is July 9th, 2008. This is Alex Cline interviewing Cooke Sunoo at his home in Los Angeles. This is our third session.

Cline

Good morning.

Sunoo

Good morning.

Cline

Last time we talked a lot about your college years and then your post-college experience joining the Peace Corps, creating a deferment situation for you from the draft during the Vietnam War years. I had a couple of follow-up questions about that before we move into your post-Peace Corps period that took you to here, Los Angeles.

Cline

First of all, I wanted to know, based on what you've said about your father's attempts at sort of educating you or making you somewhat culturally competent with regards to things Korean, you chose as your first choice to go to Korea when you joined the Peace Corps, and you wound up actually going there. Before you got there and before you were trained by the Peace Corps, what, if any, were your expectations, or perhaps preconceptions, about what going to Korea might be like for you?

Sunoo

I'm not sure that I had a lot of expectations or imagination of what it was going to be like prior to going. I think, as I mentioned, although I did list Korea as my first choice, it was not a strong first choice. I think I had listed Africa, anyplace in Africa, as a second choice, and I was frankly equally excited about the prospects of going to somewhere in Africa. So it was like somewhere in Korea, somewhere in Africa; you know, let's flip a coin and see where we go. It

just so happened--not just so happened, but there was a leaning towards wanting to go to Korea, but it wasn't an imperative by any means.

Sunoo

Most of the sort of cultural education that my father had given me growing up, I think, was actually pretty--I guess he would have seen it as being fairly overt. I didn't feel that. I guess I had a strong sense of being Korean, but no real sense of what being Korean meant, in that a lot of the things that he had taught me culturally were really subliminal, and that going to Korea was the realization of that. I think I had mentioned the sweet potato vendor on the street.

Cline

Right.

Sunoo

There were numerous things like that, where it just started to click. He had talked about the undol floor in Korea; it's a clay floor with a paper layer on top of the floor, and beneath the clay floor there were chimney flues. The kitchen was a step down in level from the living-room floor, and by stepping down to the kitchen, the cooking fire then had a chimney flue that went under the room and up the other side of the house. As the smoke from the cooking fires passed under the living quarters, it would provide heat that would heat the clay under the paper floor.

Sunoo

My father had explained this, and I had heard about this. He had told me it was the most wonderful sense to sit there in the wintertime on a nice, warm floor, and that same floor was the floor that you slept upon. He told me these, but I had no visualization and no real sense of what he was talking about, except that he had talked about it.

Sunoo

Then while I was living in Korea, I, in fact, had an undol floor to sleep upon, to live on, because it's a living environment. Your home, or your one room in your home, is where you sleep at night on a thin mattress; but then it's also the same floor that you--you put your mattress away during the day, and you

sit there on the floor with a short table, and that's your writing table and your eating table and your reading table. So, really, going to Korea was an opportunity to live the experiences that my father only told me about and that I had no real sense of, prior to going.

Cline

In terms of sort of the standard of living and that sort of thing, which, of course, was quite different in Korea then compared to now, did you have any expectations about what sort of the quality of life would be like compared to what you were used to growing up in San Francisco and being in the Midwest?

Sunoo

Well, yes. I mean, I think all the Peace Corps volunteers understand that they're going to a country that's significantly less developed than the United States, and we were told that our living standard would be of the country to which we were going. Because we were going to a country that was less developed, living at a standard that was comparable to our counterparts in those countries, I was the country schoolteacher, so I was to live at the standard of the country schoolteacher.

Sunoo

I expected and was prepared to live in a less modern environment, and I certainly was exposed to that. It was both foreign and qualitatively--well, qualitatively may not be the right word, but convenience-wise, certainly at a level significantly less than what I had grown up with.

Sunoo

But I think the general mentality of the Peace Corps volunteer was that we understood that piece of what was referred to as sacrifice, and that was part of the reason that we had signed up for what we were doing.

Cline

Sure.

Sunoo

I'm not so sure how much of a real sacrifice it was, because we were well taken care of in the sense that we had comfortable quarters. There were two

of us volunteers in this small town of Non San in Korea, and we lived separately. We rented rooms in private people's homes. In my case, I rented a room from a schoolteacher; actually, he was a teacher in the school that I was assigned to as well. So I had a private room, and it had the undol floor that I had described. I was fed modest but fairly delicious food, and the work schedule was not overly taxing. The physical conditions, it was pretty cold in the winter, pretty hot in the summer, but I was also twenty-two at the time, and it didn't seem to be a terrible burden to bear.

Cline

Right.

Sunoo

While I was there, I ended up getting quite ill. A number of indiscretions that I had taken with the type of food I had eaten and places I chose to go to drink, and as a result got a number of different intestinal diseases while I was there. But again, you know, I was twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four at the time, and it didn't seem so much a sacrifice as that was just the way life was led for a Peace Corps volunteer in Korea at that time.

Cline

Yes. I guess I was wondering partly what your sense of that was before you thought about the Peace Corps, based on your father's descriptions and things like that; if your sense of Korea was as a--quote--"underdeveloped" country or--

Sunoo

Yes, I don't think I really had that much of a sense of what Korea might be, and that's why I didn't really have an excitement, any exuberant excitement about going to my fatherland. It didn't excite me. It was just, "Well, okay, it's an opportunity; I might as well try and see what comes of it." So there wasn't that much expectation going. I think as I lived there, the realization of what was happening to me and the realization of my own ethnic cultural background came to life for me in a very real way, and that became very exciting.

Sunoo

I don't think I mentioned, but I went through a couple of phases while I was in Korea. When I first got there, it was indeed very, very foreign, and I had a hard time. I thought of myself just as an American in Korea. For me, I think growing up, what happens is that as a--physically, obviously, I'm Asian, Korean, but an interesting thing is that I as an individual see things through my eyes, and I don't see my own body. It's the physical phenomenon; you can't look at your own face without a mirror, but in looking out at the world.

Sunoo

So I went to a Midwestern college [Central Methodist College] that was basically all white, and I had grown up in San Francisco in pretty much a non-Korean environment, although we had Korean friends and relatives. But through my eyes, I didn't see this Korean guy in a white American situation. You know, I suffered some discrimination growing up, but basically through my eyes I didn't see this yellow guy in a white society. That was especially true, I think, in the Midwest, that I didn't see myself as a strong minority. The African Americans, I saw them, and I saw the way they were treated, and that was pretty troublesome, but I never saw myself as a foreigner in that environment.

Sunoo

Now, the reverse of that is when I went to Korea. I suppose if I stepped away and looked at myself in that environment, I might have seen one sort of American-dressed, slightly physically larger Korean among Koreans. But I didn't; through my own eyes I was my brain. I was looking out as an American. When I first got to Korea, my initial reaction was, "Here I am, an American, and look at all these Koreans." So that was kind of phase one of being there, in terms of ethnic identity or non-identity, as it was.

Sunoo

Subsequent to that, three months, six months into the experience, it dramatically shifted. I think it took a while for the stories that my father had told me growing up, and some things coming from my mother as well, but to then realize or to think, "You know, I'm really Korean. I am Korean. This is it. This is what I am. This is me. This is my country. I'm one of--I'm not one of them; I am at one here." I came to that realization, and held onto that for a

whole 'nother phase of being in Korea, which might have been six months; it might have been a year. There aren't clean breaks in this realization.

Sunoo

But I know that kind of in the second year, after a year and a half--I was there for almost two and a half years--somewhere around the tail third of my stay there, it started to balance out for me. I realized, and it sounds really naive and silly at this point, but I came to the understanding of being an Asian American in Asia, and that there were distinct differences, but on the other hand, a lot of what I was had to do with my being Korean, and a lot of what I was was clearly American. So in retrospect, it was just a very exciting--from a personal growth point of view and a personal kind of understanding of myself, it was a phenomenal experience, and in that sense, a very different experience than any other Peace Corps volunteer had, except for the one other Korean American who was there.

Cline

Who was that?

Sunoo

Greg Pai, and actually, Greg came--I think he came a year and a half after I had already been there. He went on to--let's see. He was an architect, and he ended up going back to Hawaii, where he worked for the governor of Hawaii, I believe; had some high-ranking official position years, years later.

Cline

He was from Hawaii?

Sunoo

I believe he was from Hawaii.

Cline

You mentioned the food that you were eating. What was that like for you, encountering the food? What were you eating?

Sunoo

Well, I want to put it in perspective a little bit, in that when my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century, she came over as a eighteen-year-old or a late teen, and didn't have--well, two things. Didn't have a lot of experience cooking, and then once she came to America, especially at that time and then throughout the rest of her life--well, not the rest of her life, but from the time she came until for the next fifty, sixty, seventy years, there was no Korean society. There was not a large Korean community in anywhere she lived.

Sunoo

As such, her Korean cooking, and most of the food she cooked was--quote--"Korean," was all the Korean food that I had ever been exposed to. She made kimchee, and she made different jigae and different foods, and that was my exposure to Korean food. There weren't any Korean restaurants, and there weren't Korean grocery stores. Today in Los Angeles, as you know, you could go to a Korean supermarket, and they've got lots of ready-to-eat takeout foods, or there's hundreds of Korean restaurants that we can go to and enjoy various types of Korean cuisine.

Sunoo

But that wasn't the experience when I was growing up. My father, yearning for a dish called naengmyun, which is cold noodles, Korean cold noodles, had tried to imitate it at home, and I remember clearly. Korean naengmyun is a noodle that's made out of yam, and it's a very chewy, somewhat translucent noodle; it's served in a cold broth, and it's served generally with half of a hard-boiled egg and some slices of meat that's been boiled and several slices of Asian pear. The Asian pear, we're pretty familiar with today, a crunchy, delicious pear.

Sunoo

So my father, as we were growing up, tried to make naengmyun, but the naengmyun noodles were not available anywhere in the United States at that point, so he did the best he could. He found some Italian vermicelli, and for the beef broth he used Campbell's consommé. He got the half boiled egg down pretty well, but then for the pear, the only pear at that point was the Bartlett pear. So he sliced up this very sweet, soft pear, put it on the vermicelli

and Campbell's consommé, and poured some vinegar in, because that was-- and he got the vinegar okay. That was his interpretation, and that was my only experience with naengmyun until I had gone to Korea. Then once I went to Korea and tasted this naengmyun, which was a totally different dish, I had to laugh, because it was so ridiculously different.

Sunoo

So you asked what my experience was with Korean food, and in going to Korea, what it was like. Well, it was radically different from anything I had had, but vaguely similar. When I had had that naengmyun, and I found it then--I still find it--very tasty, but to eat it and to realize what my father had been trying to imitate so unsuccessfully. And also understanding why he wanted to imitate it, because I thought it was delicious. But it was just so radically different.

Sunoo

So my experience in Korea then was learning a lot of true Koreana, even to the basics of like kimchee, that the ingredients for making good kimchee simply weren't available in my growing up. Either that or was it my grandmother, who had immigrated as a very young woman, didn't ever really get the art of making it, and so for the next sixty years of her life, sixty, seventy years--well, for the next fifty, sixty years of her life never really made kimchee that was any good. I thought it was. I thought it was okay, growing up, but I didn't realize it until I had gone to Korea.

Sunoo

One interesting note is that when I came back from Korea in '71--let me just think; '71, so I was twenty-six. So she must have been sixty-something at that point--seventy maybe--sixty-seven [phonetic] years old. But at that point, when I came back in '71, the immigration laws had changed in the United States.

Cline

That's right.

Sunoo

In 1965 there was the beginning of the Korean immigrants coming over, a new wave, and she had found a role for herself. She was single, widowed, and living alone in Los Angeles, and she had found a role for herself in helping Korean immigrants, informally, just the other people that moved into her apartment in what was ultimately to become part of Koreatown. But she had helped these new immigrant families get used to living in the United States. She helped them buy bus passes. She helped them sign up for utilities. She took them by bus--we were aghast; she took them by bus from central Los Angeles to Disneyland.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

I guess she must have been seventy at the time, and jumped on the bus and took these immigrant families down for a little visit to Disneyland. But the amazing thing that I noticed was that at that fairly late age, her cooking just became remarkably better than it had been for all my life that I had known her before, which would have been thirty-some-odd years. Or I guess--no, it would have been about twenty-five years of my growing up with my grandmother around.

Sunoo

And then to realize that at what seemed like a late age, her cooking improved so dramatically, and it had to do with her befriending the new immigrants, going to a Korean church where they served lunch after the church services, historically and traditionally, and then they stayed for afternoon worship. But her exposure to this gave her the ability to taste the difference, and also, I guess what was happening, in the early years, in the seventies, there were a couple of grocery stores, Korean grocery stores with Korean ingredients.

Cline

Right. Exactly.

Sunoo

It all became much more authentic, and the ability to do things in a truly Korean way started to happen.

Cline

Right. Right. Going back a little bit further, I wanted to ask you about there was a year where, when you first moved to Missouri, it was just you and your father, when he started his job.

Sunoo

Right.

Cline

You had talked a bit about your relationship with your father in an earlier session, and I wanted to ask you what that year was like when it was just the two of you, and how that may have affected your relationship, or whether your time together--obviously, he was working and you were going to school, but without your brother and your mother there, what was that like for you?

Sunoo

It wasn't revolutionary. My father is a very--he's been able to kind of move with the environment that he's cast into. What this meant was that we rented a part of a house, small. Actually, part of the time we were there we lived in what had been a slave house on a ranch just outside of the town [Fayette, Missouri], or it wasn't even outside; it was about half a mile away from the campus. During that time we actually shared one room. It was a one-room slave house, yes, and so we shared it. So our lives were pretty closely intertwined. We were both on campus during the day and both sleeping in the same room at night.

Sunoo

Adaptable, in the sense that--I don't know at what phase in his life he had ever stood behind the stove prior to that, but he figured out pretty quickly that we had to cook for ourselves.

Cline

I was wondering. [Laughs]

Sunoo

That was one revelation. He had a set menu for the week. I don't recall the exact order, but I know we had pork steak one night and fried chicken one night and something else and something else. But every Monday we could depend on having that pork steak or whatever it was, and on Sunday we always went on campus and ate at the dorms. The dorm food was pretty bad, but it was a real treat to have it after eating our own cooking for a week.

Sunoo

I guess, to his credit, he pretty much left me alone to have my own life, pretty much, on campus. I guess I came home every night and went to sleep, sometimes later than others. Sometimes he would be sleeping when I got back. He kept an eye on me. I studied in the library a lot.

Sunoo

I guess part of it, too, was that things started clicking for me a little bit in college. Having done disastrously academically at SF [San Francisco] City College, when I was moved over to Central Methodist, I found it to be a much more hospitable, warm environment, and academically I functioned pretty well. That, I think, was the barometer of how my father treated me, so it was kind of like so long as academically he's doing okay, everything else, he must be doing okay, also. I think I mentioned I really enjoyed the social life of that small college.

Sunoo

In the small school he was the lead political science professor, but also became the chairman of the Social Sciences Division, and the Social Sciences Division included economics and some other things, sociology. Because it was such a small college, his division, I think, had maybe half a dozen or ten professors. So I ended up taking--not a lot--a few courses from him, and that was kind of a unique experience.

Sunoo

It was unique. On the other hand, it wasn't too out of character, because my father is such a scholarly guy. I think I mentioned when I was growing up in grammar school that we had--in the house--these [wooden] orange-crate bookshelves, and he was always writing his manuscripts. So it was very natural

for me, and although he had been a union worker at the San Francisco Chronicle, and although he had been a grocer and a hotel clerk, I didn't think it was unusual, or it didn't strike me as odd at all, to see him behind the lectern in a classroom. So I thought that was very much in character, and so having him be my professor, it wasn't as unusual as it might seem it would be.

Cline

So moving forward a bit now, you told last time about how you met your wife on a trip to L.A., your brother's wedding--at that time not your wife, but eventually you did get married, and you quit the Peace Corps. You went to graduate school at Vancouver University--the University of Canada, is it?

Sunoo

The University of British Columbia.

Cline

British Columbia, in Vancouver. How was that venue selected for you?

Sunoo

You know, it's a little embarrassing to say, but it was selected not unlike the way I selected Korea as part of the Peace Corps. What I did was I had decided that I wanted to go to planning school. I looked at the schools, and at that point I still knew, I knew, that I didn't want to be in Los Angeles for any longer than I could possibly have to be. So that took the Southern California schools out of the works. I liked the West Coast, and I thought about [University of California] Berkeley a little bit, but frankly, I wanted to go somewhere where it would be a little bit more laid-back. Just my impressions of Berkeley was that there was so much political activity going on and that I didn't want to get wrapped up into that arena at all.

Sunoo

So I continued looking up the coast; the University of Oregon, not a bad place to be. I had spent a couple of preschool years in Seattle; my dad taught at the University of Washington briefly, and I looked at the University of Washington. Then just almost serendipitously, I was looking at a map and looking at Seattle and thinking of going to school there, and I noticed the proximity of Vancouver. It hadn't occurred to me prior to that, and I thought, "Hmm,

Vancouver, that would be kind of nice." I said, "I wonder if they have a university there." Looked it up and saw that the University of British Columbia had a planning school, and found that the University of British Columbia planning school was a decent school.

Sunoo

I thought, "You know, my experience--"; I was just getting off the Peace Corps experience. And part of my reason for not wanting to go to Berkeley and get involved in the--was that there's a certain amount of reacclimatization [phonetic] or reacclimating to America. Living in Korea, I was living really more than arms-length away from all that was American, and I really enjoyed that. So the idea that I could spend two years in graduate school living in Canada, maybe being closer to but still a little bit distant from jumping back into the fray of America, appealed to me. So I don't want to say that I stumbled into it, but it wasn't a really carefully researched decision. It was more of a feeling, more of a sense of what I wanted to do.

Cline

What made you choose planning?

Sunoo

What made me choose planning was that, specifically, that I've always, from the time I was a kid, always loved being in the city, and I've always loved urban life. Living in San Francisco, living in Seoul, Korea, which I guess were my two major life experiences at that point--during college I had spent two long summers working in New York City. So I wanted to do something that had to do with cities. I liked the way cities worked, the coming together of transportation and economics and all of that.

Sunoo

I remember one flashpoint in my thinking about it was, I had paid a visit to my old neighborhood in San Francisco, and I had seen how much it had deteriorated. I thought, "You know, this is really bad and shouldn't happen. There's got to be a way to make cities grow, be organic, and not deteriorate," and I thought that planning might be part of the solution. So that was a fairly--even today, I think, a fairly decent rationalization for going into the field.

Sunoo

Ironically, through my life's careers, I've never held the title of planner and never had a real "planning" job. I've directed projects and done other things where I've worked with planners, but I've never been a "planner" by title.

Cline

So your wife's being not only from but in Los Angeles wasn't enough to compel you to stick around?

Sunoo

Not at that point.

Cline

[Laughs] Wow. What else might you have to add to the experience of coming back to the United States, having been in Korea so long? I know that can be a real culture shock to return. This was the seventies now. There was quite a lot that had happened in the wake of all the changes that happened in the late sixties; a lot of heavy popular culture going on. Is there anything you can add?

Sunoo

Yes, the culture shock of returning, and I think I mentioned, growing up I was never much of a popular culture guy, and coming back, the popular culture didn't strike me so much as just things American, kind of the flash. I remember once--it might have actually been during my visit when I came back for my brother's wedding when I was visiting my mom at home. The scene was her standing in the bathroom with a hair-dryer bonnet on while holding her electric toothbrush and brushing her teeth. It just seemed very absurd.

Sunoo

You know, it was that type of thing; it was so distant from--and at that point I had gotten very used to life in Korea and saw that, which was at that period in time--their electrical devices today are far more than what we have here in the United States, I would guess. But at that point, back in the late sixties, early seventies, they didn't have those things, and life was pretty real, and I enjoyed that a lot, the simplification of things. Some of the houses that I either lived in or visited in when I was in Korea, they didn't have running water, but

they had a great pump outside, and all you had to do was go and pump the handle a few times, and you got water in a bucket. That was great, and it was just outside the kitchen door. You didn't have a flush toilet, but, well, what the heck; you had a toilet, and it worked.

Sunoo

So the idea then of coming back to the United States--that was the beginning of car culture in Korea, but still private cars were few and far between. There were a lot of taxicabs and lots and lots of buses that took people around, and they took people around pretty efficiently. So to come back to the United States and see all the multicolored cars, because in Korea they were basically all black or they were all tan, or they were jeeps. So to see that, to see the electrical appliances, to see the vast amounts of space that we consume. I had mentioned that I lived in one small room, where I ate and studied and slept, and to have separate rooms for all these functions seemed not wasteful, particularly, but just so unnecessary.

Sunoo

When I came back, the other thing that I did notice, though, was that--I hadn't lived in Los Angeles previously, and when I came to Los Angeles--it would have been in 1970--and at that point you could see the beginnings of the Korean immigration coming to L.A. I had never seen that in the United States. Los Angeles has always had a larger Korean community, always had had a larger Korean community than San Francisco; but I wasn't exposed to that at all. But when I came to Los Angeles to stay, I came in home in February of '70, I guess. So when I came to Los Angeles at that point, I saw more of a Korean community that was in Los Angeles.

Sunoo

I sought it out. Having just spent two and a half years in Korea, I was hungry for things--literally and figuratively, I was hungry for things Korean. So I sought this out. So returning to America was coming to Los Angeles and finding things that were Korean. Those were new experiences to me in America, and it was kind of overlaid with sort of the crass consumer culture that we live in.

Cline

Right. Right, and still the rise of things Korean here in Los Angeles wasn't enough to compel you to settle down here?

Sunoo

To stay here.

Cline

What about the political side of things? You know, we're talking about the [Richard M.] Nixon era now. I know you didn't have total access to all the news where you were. You mentioned the censorship and things like that. What was your sense of what was happening here as far as that went?

Sunoo

Immediately upon my return--I came back in February. I came back in February, and then by late summer I had left for Vancouver. When I first came back, I did spend a few months working for the Peace Corps as a Peace Corps recruiter, so in a lot of ways I stayed somewhat in that Peace Corps shell. The people that I worked with in the office, and then also on recruiting trips with, were all former Peace Corps volunteers, and we spent a lot of time talking about Peace Corps and our mutual experiences and the strategy of recruiting volunteers and kind of going over--at the end of the day, talking about the various potential volunteers that we had talked to during the day. I really didn't get involved politically, I don't think, in any aspect.

Sunoo

But later in the summer I ended up working in a warehouse just to make some money before I left for school. Again, I was the sole employee in the warehouse. I spent a little time with the truck drivers and a couple of people who worked in the office, and a lot of time with my girlfriend, who then became my fiancée during that summer. So my life was really not about politics or about popular culture.

Cline

What feelings may you have had while you were in Korea, say in '68, when both the Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert [F.] Kennedy assassinations happened? In other words, kind of what I'm wondering is, were you

developing a feeling about what was happening over here while you were away?

Sunoo

It was so far removed and so unreal. The Martin Luther King assassination occurred when I was in the smaller country town, and at that point my Korean language ability was fairly limited. I forgot what the--they had a name for Dr. Martin Luther King, and it wasn't Dr. Martin Luther King. I don't recall what it was, but a couple of people came to me and told me that--and I didn't know the word for "assassination," either--the assassination--or "killed," I don't think; "died," I knew. But they were telling me. They were saying, "Oh, you know, this is terrible, terrible. This person--something happened to this person in America."

Sunoo

I didn't understand who it was that they were talking about or what they were talking about for probably the better part of twenty-four hours, or maybe a couple of days, even. Then I managed to get together with the other Peace Corps volunteer in town, and we had pieced the story together. But as devastating as it was, we were also so remote from it. There was no kind of collective reaction that we could have as a community, because we were a community of two. I remember the frustration of that, because the Koreans were looking to us for reaction, and both our language limitations and, I think, our isolation was such that it was hard to react.

Cline

Interesting. So what was Vancouver like for you then as an experience, both culturally and educationally?

Sunoo

I think Vancouver was a great place to reacclimate to North America. I spent one year up there by myself, renting a room in somebody's house. I came down the summer and got married and went back up there as a newlywed with my new wife, and we lived up there for a year. So they were really blissful times.

Sunoo

I think one of the frustrations of living in Vancouver at that time, as well as one of the things that made it somewhat blissful, was the idea that in some ways, and this was, I guess, '71--'71, '72--and one of the things that made it such was the fact that, well, the lack of--this is pre-Internet, and the speed of communication was just a step behind what it is today.

Sunoo

And there is a Canadian national identity. Although they follow American politics and American news very, very closely and are affected directly by it, there's still a Canadian national identity, and living in Canada is living in a foreign country. So it's like a step behind or a beat away from being in America. I think the Canadians, because America is a different country, they tend to be just a little bit arms-length about things and a little--there's not the edginess that there is in America.

Sunoo

I think that was useful and helpful in terms of reacclimating to North America, because I didn't feel like I was living on the front edge of anything. I was kind of living on the trailing edge of the news and the trailing edge of things, and that was fine. I think it was really good for me to reorient kind of slowly back into America.

Cline

Vancouver ultimately wound up having perhaps the largest Asian population outside of Asia. What was it like when you were there?

Sunoo

Oh, it certainly did. The Chinese population was very large. It had at that point the second-largest Chinatown, just behind San Francisco. So for me, having been born and raised in San Francisco, I loved that aspect of it and the idea of being able to go down to Chinatown as a grad student and eat cheaply and in great volume and very familiar food, it was just wonderful for me.

Cline

What about the weather?

Sunoo

The weather was fine. I grew up in San Francisco, so it's foggy in San Francisco, and it's more foggy in Vancouver. At that point I had been away from that type of weather at all for four years of college and the two and a half years of Peace Corps and a summer in Los Angeles. So living in Vancouver, it was great.

Cline

But you didn't stay there. [Laughs]

Sunoo

No. The deal was that my wife would take [phonetic] me through the second year of planning school, and then we would return to L.A.

Cline

And you did.

Sunoo

And we did.

Cline

Where did you settle when you came back?

Sunoo

When we came to Los Angeles, we had settled in a--let me think. As soon as we came back, we stayed with her dad in the Crenshaw area just for a short period of time. She grew up in the Crenshaw area. Then we found a great apartment about a half a block off Wilshire Boulevard near Normandie [Avenue], on Ardmore [Avenue], in particular. Old Spanish-style apartment--

Cline

Yes, in what would now be Koreatown.

Sunoo

What would now be Koreatown. Yes, we lived there for, I guess, a couple of years. Great apartment; it was much larger than our first home. It had a hallway that was almost ten feet wide, and that was just the hallway. It had a living room where, actually, this eight-by-ten-foot rug, we put it off on one corner of the living room, because we set up a little couch and a living area,

and it took up less than half of the living room in the apartment. It was a wonderful place.

Sunoo

When we went to buy our first house, I told Elaine, my wife, I told her that, "You know, okay, we're putting down some roots here, but yeah, okay, let's buy a house." It seemed like the right thing to do. I said I didn't want to live any further west of--I wanted to live near downtown, and I wanted to live no further west than, I think, La Brea [Avenue].

Sunoo

She, being from Los Angeles, kind of wrinkled her nose and said, "You want to live near downtown? There is no downtown," or, "Why would you want to do that?" But she also realized that I was acquiescing quite a bit by agreeing to continue to live here, so staying east of La Brea was okay with her, and we found a very nice little home just west of Highland [Avenue] on Mansfield Avenue.

Sunoo

Again, it was, interestingly, half a block north of Wilshire Boulevard. We lived there for, I don't know, enough years, and then we moved to this present location where we are now on [536] Bronson Avenue, a block north of Wilshire Boulevard. [Cline laughs.] So I think my life was destined to be in Los Angeles near Wilshire Boulevard.

Cline

Which is saying something, because it's a really huge place. Could have been a lot of other places. You mentioned last time, you started to make some linkages once you were staying here.

Sunoo

Yes. What happened was, when I came to Los Angeles to live, or to finish Elaine's final year of school to get her teaching credential, I had come into Los Angeles and really didn't know anybody or much of anything about L.A. I think I had mentioned my previous couple of trips before meeting Elaine. My previous two or three trips to Los Angeles was only to visit my uncle and to

visit Disneyland, and that was kind of my overriding impression of Los Angeles was a combination of my uncle and Disneyland.

Sunoo

So when I came to L.A. after grad school, there was one political event that was going on that captured my imagination, and that was the Native American occupation of Wounded Knee [South Dakota]. We had found, somehow we had linked up with a group of Asian American activists who were in support of the Native Americans in Wounded Knee. As any activists, you have a series of meetings and interminable meetings, and we had a lot of meetings.

Sunoo

So I got to know a few of them, and as a result of that I found that there was a group of them that were also involved in what was called the Anti-Eviction Task Force in Little Tokyo, and that became really pivotal and key to my life in L.A. I had just gotten my degree in planning, and I thought that, "Well, you know, here's a group of young activists in Little Tokyo, and they're dealing with anti-eviction, which had to do with redevelopment, and I've got some knowledge about that area."

Sunoo

So I went down there, and I met with them and went through, again, a lot of meetings. Within that group, there was basically two schools of thought. One was that redevelopment was a capitalistic ploy to upend the community, and we're going to lose it, but we'll make a political lesson out of it as we go down. The other school of thought was, redevelopment is a very powerful tool, capitalistic tool, but if harnessed by the people, could be used to do good. That was clearly the camp that I fell into.

Sunoo

So we worked as a group, and during this time I had gotten some other work. Ultimately, this led to my meeting some people from the mayor's office and ultimately an interview with the deputy mayor for Tom [Thomas] Bradley at that time. The mayor's office is very large and with a lot of staff, and they were looking to fill a number of different niches in that office.

Sunoo

It so happened that there was enough niches that I could fill that I got myself a job. The niches that I filled was, he was looking for a staffer that could research and write about urban policy. He was the president of the National League of Cities, and they were writing some position papers on some pending urban legislation, and he wanted somebody in-house that could write for him. So I was hired to do that.

Sunoo

At the same time, there was a need in the office for somebody to have liaison with the Redevelopment Agency Board of Commissioners. I had learned a fair amount about redevelopment during the year--I guess a couple of years--that I had been in L.A. at that time. And he had never had, and there was a growing need, political need, to have a Korean staffer. So I filled those three niches, and I was really happy. I thought, "Wow, this is really great." It was a good position. It was called a--I think I was a senior project manager in the mayor's office. And to deal with urban policy on a national level; to deal with redevelopment, which had consumed most of my nonworking hours at that point; and to be the first Korean American staffer in the mayor's office, it was a lot of fun.

Cline

And you were in downtown.

Sunoo

And I was in downtown.

Cline

And Little Tokyo is in downtown as well.

Sunoo

Right. Right.

Cline

What was the concern about the eviction? Who would have been being evicted in Little Tokyo at that point?

Sunoo

Little Tokyo, well, because it was redevelopment, redevelopment by its--well, not by its nature--historically, redevelopment had torn down old buildings, consolidated property, and built new, bigger buildings. In Little Tokyo, Little Tokyo was a historic community that had been there--let's see, '78--I guess it had been there almost seventy-five, eighty--no, it had been there almost about ninety years at that point, in existence. There were a number of residential hotels, where single old folks lived. There were a lot of Nissei--second generation--owned, small businesses. Actually, there were a significant number of Issei--first-generation--immigrant-owned businesses at that time.

Sunoo

So there was the displacement of all of those people, or the displacement was being threatened. The actual--I just have to add a piece, and then we'll come back to that, because after working in the mayor's office for about four years, five years, maybe, the actual position of the director of the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project opened up. The Redevelopment Agency had gotten to know me fairly well and recruited me for that position, and over the protests of the then-councilman, [Los Angeles City Councilman] Gilbert Lindsay, the Redevelopment Agency hired me to manage the Little Tokyo project.

Sunoo

Again, my philosophy, my principles about redevelopment, had not changed--I don't believe, had changed very dramatically. I still felt that it was a capitalistic tool, but if harnessed, it could do good for the people. I spent ten years there, trying to make that work. There were a fair number of successes; some failures, but I think a fair number of successes as well.

Sunoo

For instance, with the old hotels, which are residential hotels, we had delayed the demise of those buildings until after low-income housing was built in sufficient number to offer it as a replacement. People who were living in SRO--single-room occupancy--hotels were able to move into one-bedroom apartments and actually pay a comparable rent because of federal subsidy.

Sunoo

It turned out a lot of the old men didn't want to do that, because, they said, "Gee, if I move into a one-bedroom apartment, who cleans the bathroom? Who cleans the kitchen?" [Cline laughs.]

Sunoo

I said, "Well, sir, you do."

Sunoo

He says, "I don't want to clean the bathroom. I never cleaned a bathroom in my life. I'm seventy-five years old, and I don't intend to start now."

Sunoo

So some of those guys actually--there were and still are a few SROs in Little Tokyo, and those guys, some of them did find other SROs to move into. Some of them took the relocation money that was offered and simply moved somewhere else. But a lot of them ended up in the apartment buildings that were put together.

Sunoo

In terms of the small shopkeepers, we worked some pretty unusual rent subsidy programs for the shopkeepers to move into new shops. Part of what redevelopment does is it sells property to new developers, and there was a very strong bias towards having local folks become developers. We got with a lot of first-time real estate developers. Previously they had been either landowners or shopkeepers, and we took them through the development process. We spent a lot of time with them, and then required them as part of the subsidy--part of our subsidy to them required that they, in fact, reduced rents for displaced shopkeepers for the first several years until--theoretically, until the shopkeepers kind of became less sleepy shopkeepers and more aggressive shopkeepers, and marketed at a higher level. Some of it worked; some of it didn't.

Sunoo

You know, we did the same thing, where we very heavily subsidized the development of the [Japanese American Cultural] Community Center so that the nonprofit groups that were in other buildings in Little Tokyo could move

into the Cultural Community Center. Again, there was some pretty heavy subsidies involved there.

Sunoo

There were some mistakes. Some good things; a lot of really stretching the envelope, and that was really fun doing that. So I did that for ten years. I did that for ten years. I worked for the Redevelopment Agency. I was moved over to the Hollywood Redevelopment Project, where, when Mike [Michael] Woo was councilman, and I think Mike--I think there was probably a little bit of racism [on the part of the Agency administration] in terms of thinking, "Oh, well, Cooke Sunoo would be a good partner."

Sunoo

The Chinese[-American]councilman really wanted to redevelop Hollywood. That was kind of the centerpiece of what he wanted to do, and the Redevelopment Agency wanted to work very closely with the councilman in accomplishing that. It was a shared goal. So I think somebody in the Redevelopment Agency--I don't know who or where or what level, but I think somewhere in there, subliminally or not, the idea that, "Oh, well, we have an Asian project manager that's been doing some kind of edgy stuff. Let's stick this Asian guy with the Asian councilman, and they'll work together." Well, it turned out that--I don't know if it was a racial thing, but Mike and I worked together pretty well. Weren't as successful as either one of us wanted to be, but had some good years together.

Sunoo

Then following that, I was assigned to set up the Koreatown Redevelopment Project. So that was a lot of fun.

Cline

Well, we'll get to that.

Sunoo

We'll get to that. So that's kind of the professional--

Cline

That's the trajectory.

Sunoo

--trail that I took.

Cline

I wanted to ask you, particularly since there's a historical and cultural component to the whole Little Tokyo thing, a couple of things related to that. This was the period when the Cultural [and Community] Center went in and the Japan America Theater, all those sorts of venues. You mentioned there was a fair amount of subsidy behind all this. How much of this was related to the amount of business property lost by the Japanese in that area during the internment, during World War II?

Sunoo

No relationship.

Cline

No relation.

Sunoo

No.

Cline

The other thing I wanted to ask you was how the Japanese business owners and people in the community felt about working with a Korean American guy.

Sunoo

Well, I think they would have preferred having a Japanese[-American] project manager, but I was there for ten years. I never penetrated kind of the social circle of Little Tokyo, and yet I was really an important player in the neighborhood, but was not part of the organizations, either the social or business organizations. I do believe that they had a lot of respect for me, because of the office I held, and then I think it grew to a professional level of respect where they appreciated the work that I was doing.

Sunoo

Interestingly, by taking the kind of position that I did, I did come head to head with some elements in the business community that definitely felt that bigger was better and that new was better than old--

Cline

Right. That was going to be my next question, yes.

Sunoo

--and that housing of low-income Isseis and Nisseis out of the SROs was not their first priority. Their first priority was to tear down those old beat-up hotels and put something new and splashy there. They didn't like the idea that there was a year's delay before they could do it, just because there's some old guys in the hotel that didn't want to move, and, "Aren't we paying them to move, anyway, so they should be happy to move."

Sunoo

There was not universal support in the community for providing the kinds of subsidies that the Redevelopment Agency ultimately did for the nonprofit organizations in the community. There were some businesspeople that objected strenuously to the fact that existing businesses would be given a subsidy in a free-market society for their rents, and the fact that they had been in those locations for--some of them went back to prewar locations and simply reopened their stores. Some had been in business prewar and opened in different locations, so although they weren't exactly in the same location, they were Little Tokyo businesspeople that had been there for fifty years or more.

Sunoo

So some people just felt that, you know, Little Tokyo should move on, and that Mr. Shimizu with his dry goods store, you know, people aren't buying that stuff anymore, so why should we keep him?

Cline

Interesting.

Sunoo

I mean, he's seventy-five years old now, anyway, so he can afford to retire. So there were mixed feelings. I was fortunate, in that there were a cadre of people that were supportive of--I didn't go in and say, "These are my principles of redevelopment, and this is what I think you ought to do," but there were enough people in the community that were willing--not willing, but espoused the same point of view, that it allowed redevelopment to take place along those lines.

Sunoo

An interesting sidelight is that I never hid my politics--in this sense, my grass-roots community politics of anti-eviction. I never hid those, either from the mayor when he hired me--

Cline

Yes, I was wondering, actually.

Sunoo

As a result of my not being shy about my local politics, it took me, I think it was, four or five interviews to get hired by the office, by the mayor's office. I remember a very distinct conversation that I had with the deputy mayor, Grace Davis, before I was hired, and that was that she said, "We understand where you're coming from. We understand your politics, and you're free to have them in this office. We want to hear a different point of view. Know that once you go outside this office, you represent the mayor, and whatever position the mayor's office holds is your public position."

Sunoo

I kind of crossed my fingers behind my back and said, "Well, yeah, okay, I understand what you're saying, and I'm comfortable with going out, being in public, and saying the mayor's office' position is--"

Sunoo

And she said, "No, that's not good enough. You don't say, 'The mayor's office's position is--, however, I don't agree with it.' You go out there, and you say, 'This is the position,' and you speak it like you believe it."

Sunoo

I really had second thoughts about doing that, but ultimately felt, "Well, it's just a job. I can quit if I'm not comfortable," and I went in there ready to quit.

Sunoo

As it turned out, I don't recall any real points of conflict that I had to go out and be untruthful to myself or to the mayor.

Cline

There's also--I'm sorry; were you going to say something else?

Sunoo

I might have been. [Laughter] So the mayor's office, the mayor himself, knew my politics going in, as did the Redevelopment Agency when it hired me, and it was basically for those reasons that the city councilman objected to my being hired. [Note added by Mr. Sunoo at time of editing: Gilbert Lindsay told the Agency that he did not feel me to be "pro-business" enough. The Agency Administrator told him that hiring staff was not the councilman's prerogative.]

Cline

Oh, I see. Interesting. Also, Little Tokyo being so heavily culturally and historically identified, it's very different in that way from Hollywood.

Sunoo

Well, yes and no. Actually, before leaving Little Tokyo, one last comment is, one of the things that made it much more comfortable for me to be there was the fact that my wife was Japanese American, or is Japanese American. Her grandmother was a pillar of one of the bigger, well-known Japanese Buddhist temples in the Crenshaw area, but her father also had been a lifetime employee--"employee" really understates. He grew up with the founder of one of the biggest pillars in the JA [Japanese American] community. He grew up with George Aratani.

Sunoo

If you go to Little Tokyo today, you will see the George and Sakai Aratani Japanese American Theater. You will see in the Japanese American [National] Museum, the largest pavilion there is called the Aratani Pavilion. The Aratani family, and George and his wife Sakai, are major pillars and philanthropists in

the Japanese community. My father-in-law grew up with George and had worked with George in the development of the companies that he owned. George is very much the public face of the companies and the foundation. People who really knew George really knew who my father-in-law was.

Sunoo

So to have Tets [Tetsuo] Murata as my father-in-law, and both George and my father-in-law have pure reputations of being very moral, very straightforward, very soft-spoken but very strong businesspeople. You couldn't ask for better role models in the community. So to be attached to those families meant that I couldn't be all bad.

Cline

[Laughs] Indeed. You were going to say something about Hollywood. You said "not necessarily."

Sunoo

Well, just Hollywood--Hollywood was a fun experience. I spent five years up there. It, too, is a very culturally strong community. There's a strong neighborhood of people that have lived there for a lot of years. Hollywood Boulevard, which is the center of a lot of our redevelopment activity, has such similarities to Little Tokyo, in the sense that there's a lot of old shopkeepers up there, or there were a lot of them. I take that--there's a few old shopkeepers. There's a lot of old property-owners, and a lot of the properties, well, they've changed hands over the last ten years, but when I was there, there were a lot of properties owned by the second-generation property owners.

Sunoo

Entrepreneurs are really tough, tough people. They've got balls to do what they do. They're very strong-backed, with leathery skin, in order to survive. The second generation of them, though, those aren't necessarily inherited characteristics, and a lot of second-generation entrepreneurs who have inherited the family properties or inherited the family businesses, have not had the same level of ballsiness, leather-tough skin, or backbone to do what their dads did. In some ways, that made it more difficult to deal with them, because they had kind of inherited--literally inherited--these positions,

and didn't have the entrepreneurial acumen to put a deal together, and were more of the ilk of not wanting change of any sort, good or bad.

Cline

Interesting.

Sunoo

I found that both in Little Tokyo as well as in Hollywood.

Cline

Wow. I presume also you started your family during this period.

Sunoo

Yes.

Cline

When was your first child born?

Sunoo

Let's see. Grant [Sunoo] was born in '78, and Lesley [Sunoo] was born in '81.

Cline

Oh, okay. So you waited a little while.

Sunoo

Waited a little while. Actually, Grant was born less than a year before I started working as project manager in Little Tokyo. I made a point of saying a number of times in different presentations that, "Although I'm Korean American, my kids are Korean Japanese American." I think they have appreciated the Japanese, being part of Little Tokyo. I think they both feel strongly that way, as do I. It's just that I don't have the ethnic connection.

Cline

During this period, by this time now you've lived in L.A. for a number of years. What was your feeling, now that you're stuck here?

Sunoo

Today or in '78?

Cline

Then.

Sunoo

Back when I started having kids, at that time?

Cline

Yes, right, and it looked like your roots were getting deeper.

Sunoo

You know, the work that I did, my professional life had gotten to a point where it was just a very exciting--life was exciting. The parallel thing that was going on was that there was a Koreatown growing, and, you know, it's, "My god, there's a new Korean restaurant. Oh, my goodness, look at--there's another Korean church." It was exciting to see all that happen.

Cline

Next time we're going to talk a lot about the development of Koreatown and ultimately your involvement in the Koreatown redevelopment.

Sunoo

One of the things I did for the mayor, I guess it was the first year that I was working for him, and I don't recall--I probably could think about it, but anyway, the first year that I was working, there came a request from the Korean community, which came to me, or got filtered to me, that they wanted the mayor to ride in the Koreatown parade. I looked at the request and passed it on with a negative recommendation. I said, "You know, I'm willing to ride in the parade, but I don't think we should go any higher than that."

Sunoo

So in the Koreatown parade, I rode in the mayor's car--or it wasn't the mayor's; it was the car designated for the mayor. And a lot of people turned out for that parade, a lot of people. [Cline laughs.] The mayor saw the clippings on it--

Cline

Uh-oh.

Sunoo

--and he was pissed. [Cline laughs.] He said, "Cooke, why did you not send me to this parade?"

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

I said, "I really apologize, sir, but I thought it was just going to be a small-town parade, and frankly, Olympic Boulevard is a huge boulevard, and it would be pretty embarrassing for you to ride down Olympic Boulevard with 150 people watching." Well, I don't know the number, but there were thousands and thousands and thousands of people watching that parade.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

I believe it was in the L.A. [Los Angeles] Times as well as the Korean papers. I brought the Korean clippings in. Every Korean parade after that, the mayor personally rode in.

Cline

Wow. I know that we're running out of time here for you, but I wanted to ask one more question, if that's okay.

Sunoo

Okay.

Cline

What was Tom Bradley like?

Sunoo

I really loved Tom Bradley. He was such a gentleman and so smart and so willing to meet with a broad array of people. I didn't work directly with him, obviously, that often, but I had a number of meetings with him, both small meetings where there would be three or four of us staffers in the room with him, and in those meetings he would do two things. He would ask very incisive questions, and demand that the answers be clear and thorough. If the information wasn't available in the room, he was disappointed, but he was also very willing to have the follow-up delivered to him in the next twenty-four or forty-eight hours. He was very patient--that was as a boss--and pretty clear about where he wanted to go.

Sunoo

The other types of meetings I had with him were--well, I guess there were three types. A second type of meeting that I had with him was where usually three--three, four, five, six folks from outside wanted to meet with the mayor over a particular issue. It was held in an inner office that he had. He was a real diplomat. He listened to people, let them know that he was listening, and always took a few notes, and then people were very satisfied, having met with him; a very calming influence.

Sunoo

We would always, always hear, either later that afternoon or the next day, off of his notepad, what the follow-up was to be. As often as not, it was stuff that we would have done anyway, but he was dictating to follow up on some particular issue, and if there was a conflict, what he thought the important things that ought to be weighed in that conflict should be. I think he could have been more forceful and dynamic as a leader, but perhaps that was his gift, that he was more of a diplomat and more wanting to ameliorate rather than charge forward on his own personal what he felt was absolute.

Cline

Interesting. I think this will do it for now. Does that work for you?

Sunoo

Works for me.

Cline

Okay. Next time we'll talk more about the development of Koreatown from your perspective, watching it take root and watching it grow a lot.

Sunoo

You know, a lot of that I--well, I don't know; we'll see where it goes. I fear that a lot of that might be just observational, and I don't know how much of a role I played in any of that.

Cline

Well, observation is good.

Sunoo

But I was there.

Cline

Yes, that's what we want to hear about. Then we'll follow the direction that your career went, follow that trajectory up closer to the present.

Sunoo

Yes. Actually, I think some things occurred in the redevelopment work in what's called the Wilshire Center Koreatown Redevelopment Project. It was a good confluence of--and this occurred--I don't know. When it occurred, it was happening at a time when Koreans were dominant in Wilshire Boulevard in this area; dominant, but not to the point that they are today. So there were some conflicts that occurred there.

Cline

Okay, and this, of course, will take us probably through the '92 [Los Angeles] riots as well. Okay?

Sunoo

Yes. Actually, the timing on it is that my entry into the redevelopment work in Koreatown was post-riot, and the redevelopment was a reaction to the riots.

Cline

See, I guessed that. [Laughs] Okay. Thanks a lot for today.

Sunoo

Okay.

Cline

I'll see you next time.

Sunoo

Thank you. [End of interview]

1.4. Session 4 (July 18, 2008)

Cline

Okay, it's operating, and we're ready to go. This is Alex Cline, interviewing Cooke Sunoo at his home in Los Angeles once again. This is our fourth session, on July 18th, 2008.

Cline

Good morning again.

Sunoo

Good morning.

Cline

We talked last time quite a bit about the beginnings of your work here in L.A. at the mayor's office, and then specifically your involvement in the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project, particularly. We talked a little bit about Tom Bradley, and your settling in L.A. after years of not wanting to have anything to do with L.A., your Wilshire Boulevard-centric choices of residence.

Cline

One of the things I wanted to start with today is, you mentioned that some of these areas where you lived or where you had relatives living turned out to be ultimately part of what came to be Koreatown; Koreatown going from being something that I think most Angelenos didn't even notice to something phenomenally large and unavoidably noticeable. Los Angeles, after the '65 changes in national immigration policy, became the place for Korean

immigrants to relocate in the United States. And here you were in Los Angeles, where they were all coming.

Cline

What do you remember about Koreatown when you first came to Los Angeles, and how you started to see things growing and changing during the time that you were living and working here and raising your family not far from what became this huge neighborhood in the city?

Sunoo

It's ironic that my wife and I chose to live in this particular area. When people look and talk to us today, they say, "Oh, yeah, you guys are living in the heart of Koreatown," and assume that at least my locational criteria had something to do with that. When we first started living along Wilshire Boulevard in '72, the primary reason for choosing that as a location was that I, being from San Francisco and having a job downtown--well, this is even before I had a job downtown--but I, being from San Francisco, had a orientation towards the denser areas of the city. I felt that I wanted to live close to downtown.

Sunoo

My wife was a little chagrined at that, her being an L.A. person at a time when I guess her friends--she had actually grown up towards Central Los Angeles, in the Crenshaw area, but as her high school friends were getting married, they were tending to move out towards the South Bay area, Torrance--

Cline

Gardena, maybe?

Sunoo

Torrance, Gardena, moving out to the San Gabriel Valley a little bit, Altadena, and Orange County. So it was a little bit unorthodox for her husband saying that he wanted to stay within a certain radius of downtown. It had nothing to do--nothing--nothing to do with Koreatown or a Korean community at that point. Our first apartment was on Ardmore Avenue, which is near Normandie [Avenue] and Wilshire, and it was conveniently located to a couple of landmarks that no longer exist, one being the I. Magnin's department store at Wilshire and New Hampshire [Avenue], and the Bullock's Wilshire department

store closer to Vermont [Avenue] and Wilshire Boulevard. Bullock's Wilshire is now, of course, the Southwest University School of Law.

Sunoo

The other locational criteria for me was that it was close to Hollywood, which, as a non-L.A. person, that still had some mystical charm to me. It also had a couple of good used record stores up there. And then it was close to Beverly Hills, and it was close enough to West Los Angeles, where we also had friends. So to me it was the central location that drove us to locate in this area, where we've been for the last over thirty years.

Sunoo

At the time we moved here, there was really no sense that this was a Korean community, because it wasn't a Korean community, and there was no sense that it would grow into what has become probably the largest Koreatown outside of Korea. South of the [Interstate] 10 Freeway on Crenshaw [Boulevard], there was one Korean restaurant that we knew of and we had actually gone to a couple of times. I don't recall at this point; there may have been one other Korean restaurant in the general Central Los Angeles area that we knew about. There were no grocery stores, no Korean signs up anywhere. This was just after--well, I guess it was 1972.

Sunoo

During the seventies it became clear that there was very rapidly a growing Korean community, and probably by '73, '74 even, you could start to see the Korean churches coming into play, a few more restaurants. We noticed one Korean grocery store opened on Olympic Boulevard, somewhere near Western Avenue. I wish I could remember the name and the date, but that was a real landmark happening in terms of time, because that was a store that wasn't a Japanese store with some Korean goods in the corner. It wasn't a Chinese store with products that were similar to Korean goods. It was a true-to-life Korean store, albeit very small. It was probably about a 3,000-square-foot store.

Sunoo

Today, of course, there are half a dozen supermarkets in the Koreatown area, all of 30[000] to 50,000 square feet. So things have changed quite dramatically.

Sunoo

It was during this era also that there was a Korean immigrant who was a real Koreatown booster before there was a Koreatown. Again, I can't give you his name, but his strategy was to provide free signage, exterior signage, for Korean businesses, and he put that signage in hangul, which is the Korean alphabet. So his point was, Koreans knew where these stores were, but it gave a sense of identity to the beginning growth of a Koreatown, because it gave Koreans the sense, not just for an individual barber or beauty shop or an individual restaurant might be, but it gave the Korean community more of a sense that there was a collection of things happening in Koreatown, and that there was actually a geography that was growing to this string of different Korean entrepreneurial endeavors.

Sunoo

It grew very quickly in the mid-seventies, to the point that along Olympic Boulevard, around Western Avenue and then going east and west a few blocks, maybe half a mile, you started to see these hangul signs advertising or identifying various different types of Korean businesses. He did that with probably several dozen stores, maybe more than a few dozen stores or different types of businesses, and then it just sort of caught on, where all of a sudden people, Koreans who were opening their businesses, started putting their signs in hangul.

Sunoo

The growth of Koreatown, it was pretty phenomenal, because every few weeks you would notice that the boundaries kind of stretched a little broader and broader. It didn't have a real density to it; it was just kind of strung out. As an urban planner I saw this, and I thought it was kind of an interesting phenomenon that was happening, and that was that, whereas Little Tokyo or Japantown or Chinatown, or most Chinatowns, which tended to be older in the United States, grew up during a time of pre-automobile, pre-mass transit, became very pedestrian oriented, very geographically restricted areas, in the

Koreatown phenomenon, number one, it was built in Los Angeles, which, of course, is automobile-centric. But also it grew up in an era that everyone owned automobiles, and everyone would drive. So there was no necessity to have all these Korean stores and businesses located within a pedestrian proximity. The idea of generally locating within, say within a mile's radius or a couple of mile radius, was important, but not the pedestrian proximity.

Sunoo

The other thing that happened was that in the late seventies, or in the mid-seventies, then, Korean businesses were starting to become much more visible, but they were basically leasing spaces in existing buildings, displacing existing storefronts. There was a strong welcome, actually, by a number of folks in city hall [Los Angeles City Hall], politicians, because this particular area was not very vibrant at all. It was kind of a sleepy commercial area. My wife, who is Japanese American, reminds me that the area, when she was growing as a Japanese American in L.A., was known as "J Flats"--or Uptown; I'm sorry. It was known as Uptown.

Sunoo

At the corner of Olympic and Normandie was the Uptown Nursery, and down a few blocks there was the St. Mary's Episcopal Church, which was essentially a Japanese congregation, a Japanese Episcopal congregation. It never predominated the area as the Koreans grew to do, but it was, in fact, was historically the Japanese American Uptown area.

Sunoo

As the Korean businesses started to grow, what happened was some real estate developers then started to move in. This was also an era of development, across L.A. and in the country, of these neighborhood mini-marts, or mini-shopping centers. The typical architecture of this was, at streetside to have a couple of rows of parking, and at the back of the lot would be either a one-story, or if there was more demand, a two-story mini-shopping center. If you cruised Koreatown during the eighties, you could start to see the development of these mini-shopping centers.

Sunoo

The mini-shopping centers started out small, with three or four storefronts to a mini-shopping center; eventually gained two-story status, where there might be four on the bottom and half a dozen offices upstairs, or a beauty shop upstairs, until later in the eighties what you saw were pretty large mini-shopping centers. But they all held the same architectural style, which was rows of parking on the street and the shops in the back.

Sunoo

As an urban planner, urban planners looked at this and just felt that it was killing anything that encouraged any kind of pedestrian activity in neighborhoods. And it did, although in some areas, along Olympic particularly, there were so many of these so-called mini-shopping centers, and they were of such scale, large scale, that you could, in fact, kind of walk within the mini-shopping center and then traverse the next-door parking lot and continue your pedestrian activity. So it was kind of an interesting phenomenon, and architecturally very ugly. But it didn't matter, because there was just a lot of vibrancy that started to really show itself. Probably by the mid-eighties this was pretty rampant.

Sunoo

Then afterwards, in just thinking of the architectural images, that eventually as the commerce and as development increased by Koreans in the Koreatown area, there were a number of actually enclosed shopping centers that were then developed as kind of the anchor places that people liked to go.

Cline

What was your sense of the change in the types of businesses as Koreatown started to grow? You mentioned early on things like restaurants and markets. How did that change?

Sunoo

You know, a lot of Korean entrepreneurship was kind of unimaginative and kind of copycat. In terms of--well, let me go outside of Koreatown for an example, and then I'll try to come back in. But in terms of outside, the stereotypic business was that Koreans would go into low-income neighborhoods, buy up corner grocery stores, liquor stores, and go into areas

that--and I don't know for a fact, but where they said that Jewish merchants had previously set up and worked their shops, and then the Koreans basically took them over to where a large majority of small grocery stores, liquor stores, beer and wine outlets, in lower-income neighborhoods, typically owned by Koreans.

Sunoo

The same is true of dry cleaners, where the Korean dry cleaners own a majority of the dry cleaning establishments, or they did ten years ago. I think that that demographic is actually changing now. But they did ten years ago, certainly owned a majority of the independent dry cleaners in L.A. County. Gas stations was another thing, that Koreans owned a lot of gas stations. You see the demographics of ownerships in those industries are shifting, but for a long time they did predominate in those areas.

Sunoo

It wasn't, I don't believe, it wasn't a matter that the Korean immigrant came from Korea to the United States thinking that they would become a grocer or a dry cleaner. It's that once they got here and they saw what their friends were doing or what their cousin or uncle was doing, it was an easier path to follow than trying to open a doughnut shop.

Sunoo

Parenthetically, the doughnut shops, the independent doughnut shops, are predominantly owned by Cambodians in the L.A. area. It was the same type of thing, where the Cambodians started to immigrate, and they saw that--and they weren't as large in number as the Koreans, but they dominate the independent doughnut shops now, both horizontally in terms of all of the different independent doughnut shops, but also vertically, in the sense of the manufacturers and sellers of doughnut-making equipment and the wholesalers of the doughnut flour and doughnut-making products are controlled by Cambodian businesspeople.

Sunoo

So anyway, in terms of the growth of Koreatown and the types of businesses, frankly, I think there was a lot of the same copycat businesses. Korean cuisine,

there's a pretty good variety in terms of different types of Korean foods, but you never would have known that if you went to a dozen Korean restaurants back at that time, and there were dozens to choose from.

Sunoo

But if you went to a dozen restaurants, you would find the standard things. You would find bulgogi, which is the Korean barbecued beef, and you'd find mandoo gook, which are the little dumplings, meat-filled dumplings--actually, they're more like a ravioli than a dumpling, but the popular translation of "mandoo" is "dumpling"--and a few other dishes, totally ignoring any regional differences in the food or even the styles. There are specialty foods that actually today, fifteen years, twenty years later, you can start to see the specializations coming out.

Sunoo

The other types of businesses that grew up in the Koreatown area were, if you think about them, just the obvious businesses that were catering to the community. Lots of beauty shops. There were a number of clothing stores selling western clothing. A few hanbok or Korean dress stores. Koreans were not wearing traditional hanbok particularly often, but key players at a wedding would always wear hanbok. Or if there were special parties, the guests of honor would wear hanbok. My brother and I wore hanbok to my father's--it must have been his seventieth birthday party.

Sunoo

So the types of stores, just through run-of-the-mill things that you would expect any community to have. Then, as I mentioned, the number of grocery stores started to grown both in number and in size. There were a few guys selling cars, not as dealers, but as agents, so that they would go out and just sell an individual. You come in and tell me what kind of car you want to buy. I'll go find the car and bring it to you at a low-margin price.

Cline

What was your perception of the effect or the impact of all this growth combined with the profusion of Korean signage, which is fairly unique, I think, particularly in view of the non-Koreans who were watching this occur?

Sunoo

Well, my personal point of view is that this is an incredibly exciting period of Los Angeles history. To be Korean and to see it go on, and having just come--recently returning from my Peace Corps stint, it was as if the Korea that I had witnessed overseas was kind of growing up around me. Every time I saw a new restaurant or a new stores open and I'd go into it, it would be an exciting experience.

Sunoo

It was also an exciting time, just in terms of the demographics of Los Angeles overall, because from the late seventies through the turn of the century, just in the number of immigrants overall--of course, Los Angeles has a long, long history of the Mexican American population, but to get the Central American population coming in with a different--with pupusas and a totally different tamale. Also a different physical appearance from the Mexican American, especially the Mexican American multi-generational folks that had been living in Los Angeles. It was just exciting to see this change go on.

Sunoo

At one point when I was working in city hall, a co-worker [Don Bodner] and I had been crunching some demographic numbers. We looked at South Central [Los Angeles], which at that time was almost entirely African American, but there was a beginning of growth of a Latino community in South Central. We looked at the demographics, and we said, "You know, given the age structure, given the birth rates, given the immigration coming in," and this was--let me think. This was in the mid-seventies. We said, "You know, by the turn of the century South Central is going to be half, at least, Latino." We looked at each other and said, "Nah. We must have made a mistake." [Cline laughs.] Because it was just so unfathomable to think of that.

Sunoo

We went back, and we re-crunched the numbers and still came out with the same kind of results. We just kind of buried them. We said, "It doesn't make sense. It makes sense, you know, theoretically, but it doesn't make sense." So we just kind of buried those numbers and didn't make a big to-do about them.

Sunoo

True enough, our numbers are pretty accurate. So kind of that demographic changed. The Eastern European immigration, the multiple different Asian immigrations to Los Angeles, has made it, to me, L.A. just a very vibrant and exciting place to be. People will sometimes comment that, "Yeah, it makes it kind of look like a third-world country," because, in fact, a number of the immigrants are economically at a lower strata. But I think if you look beyond kind of the superficial elements there, the idea that there's such dynamic change going on is really, really exciting. Over the years, I suspect that, as people become more firmly rooted in their new environs--Koreatown is a fairly mature community at this point after thirty years. But other communities, diverse ethnic communities, I think, will take root--are taking root, and will show maturity over the years, and that's going to be a lot of fun.

Sunoo

In Koreatown you see sort of the transition from these small mini-shopping centers to more multi-story, enclosed malls. A multi-story, enclosed mall, to me, is not a great sign of culture, but it does show a certain amount of permanence. What's also going on around it is the new residential developments, high-rise residential developments, that are catering to the Korean American buyer.

Sunoo

With that, also what's happening--I skipped a step here, and that's that as the Koreans were moving into and as the Uptown area was becoming Koreatown, there were lots of Koreans moving in. But "lots of Koreans" is really a relative term. From a business point of view, in the number of businesses, if you take a census of who owns how many storefronts, it's clear that a vast majority of the entrepreneurial efforts in the Koreatown area are Korean owned, whether they're catering to Koreans or to the other residents of the area.

Sunoo

If you look on the residential streets behind the commerce, a large majority of the--well, the Koreans have never been a majority of that residential population. We ran some numbers, I guess it was in the eighties, and we saw that the percentages of Korean residents in the broad Koreatown area was

something like 25 percent or so, and it's never gone much above that. It's actually shrinking a little bit. What's happening is that the area which is largely apartments is also largely Latino, and it's lower-income immigrant Latinos from Central American. It has become, through overcrowding, the densest population in Los Angeles. The Koreans that are living in the area tend not to be as overcrowded. So they may occupy the same proportionate number of households as they have over the years, but as a percentage of total population they're diminishing slightly.

Sunoo

Most of the apartments in the area had been kind of lower-cost apartments, and that's what attracted the lower-income Central Americans. The Koreans liked the area because it was Koreatown, and it was a perfect point of entry for the new Korean immigrants. Kind of the demography of the Korean immigrant is to land--and this is shifting as the Korean communities throughout L.A. area are growing, but kind of the historic demography or immigration pattern had been to land in Koreatown, and then if you gained some level of affluence, to move out of Koreatown. Depending on your level of success, you could be moving to Orange County, Garden Grove. Or if you were a little bit successful but not as successful, maybe it would be the San Fernando Valley or maybe Gardena, or slightly outlying areas.

Sunoo

But the sense is that even if you live in Gardena, and Gardena has got a lot of Korean commerce going on down there, but that still they like to come into Koreatown, because Koreatown has developed what I had mentioned earlier-- it didn't at the beginning, but it has now developed specialty restaurants and specialty gift shops that don't exist out in the outlying Koreatown areas.

Sunoo

The other thing that is happening, as I mentioned, that is the high-rise developments are occurring in this area now, and they are being marketed to the Korean population. My sense of this is that a lot of Koreans immigrated to Los Angeles from Seoul, which is a very dense, very intense city. Los Angeles is a far cry from that, and Koreatown is no Seoul. Koreatown is a small town compared to any area of Seoul. But the Koreans from Seoul are very

comfortable living in what Los Angeles sees as very dense, but the Korean immigrants sees as not very dense. The Koreans from Seoul are very comfortable living in a high-rise condominium building.

Sunoo

That's coupled with the fact that there are a lot of Korean entrepreneurs that have businesses in the Koreatown area or in the downtown area. Private entrepreneurs tend to work seven days a week, so the proximity to their businesses does make a fair amount of sense for them.

Sunoo

Along the Wilshire Boulevard area from Western to Vermont, and slopping over a little bit on both ends, there are several millions of square feet of high-rise office buildings. These office buildings historically had been kind of grade-B offices in the city of L.A. They were built as insurance company headquarters offices in the sixties--fifties, sixties. During that era all businesses, but insurance companies in particular--this was pre-computer, certainly pre-desktop computer, and if you had an insurance company, insurance companies thrived on the backs of clerks. These clerks handwrote documents, typed forms, processed paper, and it took hundreds of clerks to run an insurance business. These were their headquartered offices. John Hancock was here, Prudential Insurance, Mutual of Omaha, a number of different insurance companies.

Sunoo

What happened was that the ratio of clerks to executives was that there were lots of clerks and few executives, and what that meant was that the offices had large steno pools or large pools of clerks, and clerks didn't need window space. They just needed to have what they call large floor plates. As that industry changed and became computerized, the physical needs of those companies changed very dramatically. It meant that they had these buildings that had these large floor plates and windows all the way around the edge, but a lot of interior space with no windows. What happened was that the rental rates just plummeted, because nobody had need for those kinds of spaces.

Sunoo

There's a Dr. David Lee, who came into the L.A. scene probably in the nineties. He's a medical doctor, had a good practice. He bought a couple of the Wilshire Boulevard buildings in Koreatown and divided them up into small office suites, some as small as just a few hundred feet, the larger being a few thousand feet. The institutional lenders would not lend to him for his acquisition and conversion of these buildings, because there was no anchor tenant, which is very important in the real estate industry. He claimed, he said, "You don't need an anchor tenant. I'm going to fill these buildings up with Korean entrepreneurs. There are thousands of office entrepreneurs, guys that are importing, guys that are selling a couple of insurance policies; small brokerages, small real estate agents. 'you name it, we do it' types of stuff."

Sunoo

He turned out to be absolutely correct, that the Wilshire Boulevard address is important to these entrepreneurs. They did all of their business outside of their offices, so he could cheaply change the configuration of these office buildings with the large, deep floor plates, bunches of windowless offices. He was initially known as kind of a slumlord of offices; didn't maintain them particularly well. He financed it with his own personal money and capitalized by a group of his colleagues that were personal investors. They put a lot of cash into these buildings, but they were buying them very, very cheaply.

Sunoo

Then the arithmetic of office leasing is that if you have a small office, you could lease it at a higher per-square-foot charge than a larger office, typically. So he filled these places with people that might be paying \$1,000 a month, \$500 a month in rent for these tiny offices, and he filled up building after building along Wilshire, to the point now where I believe he owns 85 or so percent of all of the office towers along Wilshire Boulevard between about Vermont and Western, and has gone on to buy other major pieces of real estate throughout L.A. But that was the model.

Sunoo

Now, if you think of that model and you think of these thousands, literally thousands, of office entrepreneurs that are Koreans that are living in the area or that are going to their offices, it makes sense that some of them grew into

larger offices, so that instead of 500 square feet, they're now up to a few thousands of square feet, to some that are even larger than that, but are still located in that area, are in the Koreatown area, and driving up a demand for living in proximity to their workplaces.

Sunoo

That, coupled with the fact that in Koreatown you're close to downtown, and in downtown is where we have the international garment district of L.A. A huge portion of that is Korean dominated, again vertically from importers, manufacturers, designers, every element of the garment trade, where there are huge proportions of Korean businesses, or Korean owners. That garment industry is very proximate to Koreatown, so that's become an additional draw for people to live in the Koreatown area.

Cline

Right. Considering the percentage of Koreans actually living in the Koreatown area, which was fairly small, and considering the impressive and obvious growth of Koreatown, what was your sense of who was being targeted as far as clientele of all these businesses? This kind of goes back to my question about signage, because I think that the perception seemed to be that this was a rapidly growing but seemingly kind of insular and impenetrable area to the non-Korean which drove through it.

Sunoo

Yes. No, I think that's absolutely correct, that the Korean businesses, even to this day, for the most part, cater to Korean customers. Again, that goes, I think, to a comfort level, and the idea of what I had mentioned earlier as being copycat businesses. Well, you know, we're selling bulgogi. We're selling bi bim bop, a mixed-rice kind of a dish. You know, Koreans are interested in that, and no one else is. No one took the bold step to try and sell out to the--external to the Korean community.

Sunoo

Actually, a family friend of mine did open something called Sorabol, which was--which still is--it's a fast-food Korean bi bim bop restaurant in a mall, and he did it in West Covina. There was no Korean population, no measurable,

significant Korean population when he opened it, and that was probably twenty years ago. He managed somehow to survive, and I think part of it was that--we found that people, non-Korean people, really do enjoy Korean food. Often the hottest or most spicy foods are a little intimidating and not universally liked, but the idea of--we're just talking about foods, but sesame, sesame seed oil, lots of garlic, what's not to like? Lots of vegetables, lots of meat.

Cline

Right.

Sunoo

So I've always found that people like Korean food. Sometimes, often, people will say it's pretty heavy-handed with the spices, a little too much sesame, a little bit too much garlic. But the basic flavorings are fun and enjoyable. This Sorabol guy managed to stay alive out in West Covina. I just noticed that--was it a couple of years ago?--maybe last year, when the Century City [mall] food court reoriented itself into much more of an upscale--still fast food, still go up to the counter, pick up your plate, and sit down at a table, but much more upscale. I noticed the Sorabol opened there. I think that really speaks--it's almost like a metaphor for what's going on.

Sunoo

I think that as the Korean community has the maturity of the Koreatown area, that Koreana, Korean stuff or the Koreana piece, is growing in--well, it's growing globally. Thirty years ago--well, thirty-five years ago, for God's sake, I was in Korea as a Peace Corps volunteer, trying to help these poor people come out of the dark ages.

Cline

Yes. [Laughs]

Sunoo

It's been over a decade that the Peace Corps was politely excused from having to go to Korea, because Korean modernization, such as it is, no longer needed do-good American Peace Corps volunteers to come in and teach those poor souls. So on a global scale, I mean, everything from electronics--LG telephones

are a pretty hot telephone. Gold Star microwaves are a pretty decent product. "Made in Korea" thirty years ago was comparable to what "made in Bangladesh" is today, if you're looking at a garment being manufactured. The Hyundai automobile was introduced to America, what, less than ten years ago, and was seen initially as a really cheap, both price-wise as well as quality-wise, automobile. Now it's gotten a little bit of--more self-respect.

Sunoo

The idea that things Korean are not seen with disdain or not looked down upon on a global scale, I think, has also happened on a local level, in terms of things in our own neighborhoods that are Korean. You had mentioned Korean food. I think most people today in Los Angeles, I would guess that if we walked down the street--not in this neighborhood, but in West Covina--if we walked down the street in West Covina today and asked everybody on the street, or a hundred people on the street, if they knew what kimchee was or if they had ever heard of kimchee, I'll bet the answer today is that more than half of them will have heard of kimchee, and probably a good number of them have actually tasted it, and some of them even like it.

Sunoo

If you had tried that same experiment on Wilshire Boulevard in Koreatown thirty years ago, you probably wouldn't have had as many people who had known about it or liked kimchee. Yet today Ralph's Market--not only Ralph's Market here in Koreatown, but Ralph's Market throughout their chain, is selling kimchee. I was down in Costco, and I saw kimchee for sale down there. So, you know, Koreana is part of at least Los Angeles culture, and the restaurants here in Koreatown and the other businesses are, in fact, reaching out more, or reaching out beyond the Korean community.

Sunoo

A phenomenon that's happened over the last ten years, and I'm not particularly happy about it, but it is a phenomenon nonetheless, is the Korean nightclub. There are a lot of them. They don't necessarily operate within all the regulations of the law, but there are a lot of them, and they have a lot of patronage. The interesting thing here is, if you look to the young people as kind of the forefront of things happening, if you go to a number of these

nightclubs, they're still predominantly Korean, but there are a lot of other Asian folks that are there, a lot of Vietnamese, Chinese. In kind of the Asian American social circles, the Japanese American or the Chinese American will talk to their Korean American friends and ask them to take them out clubbing in Koreatown. So by reputation, they'll come out and seek out entertainment in Koreatown.

Sunoo

The restaurants, similarly, if you go to a number of the Korean restaurants, you will see a significant proportion of non-Koreans at them. It used to be unusual to see a non-Asian person in a Korean restaurant. I think it's almost usual to see at least one table that is non-Korean or non-Asian. They still depend on and market--their market planning is based on having a predominant number of Korean clients.

Cline

Yes. When I was asking about the change in businesses earlier, I was going to work toward the nightclub thing, so I'm glad you brought that up. Another thing I wanted to ask you is that you mentioned earlier about these sort of more planned ethnic communities that are geared towards pedestrian traffic, like Chinatown and Little Tokyo. Frequently that sort of plan also includes sort of a nod, albeit maybe a somewhat tacky one or token one, to traditional architecture of the country that's being evoked. This has not happened in the case of Koreatown. I can't think of anyplace in Koreatown that sort of presents Koreana as sort of a modern cultural re-creation to the tourist or to the Angeleno. Do you think that's something that's lacking, or do you think that perhaps that's a good thing? What is your feeling about that? Sort of no trademark or Koreatown maybe kind of shopping area or tourist attraction.

Sunoo

Well, historically, I guess, if you think of Chinatown or Little Tokyo, Chinatown or Japanese towns, the genesis was not a tourist attraction. They evolved and started to attract tourists. There also, the history is much longer in the United States, so that some of the root beginnings of what I agree is kind of tacky-looking, Chinese-y architecture kind of grew up in a different era. I don't see that, and I would disagree that Little Tokyo has that--

Cline

Well, it's not to the same degree.

Sunoo

--Japanese-y kind of architecture, although while I was there, one of the developers--it actually was a partnership of about twenty local businesses put themselves together and developed Japanese Village Plaza. The hallmark thing that they brought in was a Japanese roof tiles, which are very traditional. Also, in Little Tokyo and elsewhere you'll see the Buddhist temples, and temple architecture tends to be very traditional. But that's a religious thing, not a tourist thing.

Sunoo

Chinatown, I don't know. Chinatowns all started out as communities unto themselves. It's kind of interesting. I don't know why. I don't know the history of when non-Chinese started thinking that Chinatowns were quaint and started going down there, and all of a sudden--I don't know if all of a sudden or over the years or when that happened. Certainly when I was a kid, which was a half a century ago, Chinatown in San Francisco was very much a tourist place. It was a tourist place, and as a tourist, you'd say it's a tourist place, but it really was a community as well, and although you go along Grant Avenue and you see all of the shops that are oriented strictly to tourists, now it's just an overlay on a very, very vibrant and very, very important, or a fully faceted Chinese community, where everything from the herbologist to the barber shop to the tailors that made traditional Chinese clothes to the fish and produce markets. They were all there.

Sunoo

It's very clear to me that those businesses that catered to the Chinese in Chinatown, San Francisco, even fifty years ago, that the economic mainstay of that community was the Chinese community and not the tourists, although the tourists added a lot of dollars on Grant Avenue.

Sunoo

Tourism in Koreatown, I don't know. Koreans are immensely proud of their cultural and historic past. There is actually a monument that was recently

built--I believe it was fundraised among the Koreans on Olympic and Normandie--that is kind of like a little shrine, historic shrine. Koreans raised the money, together with the Korean government, to put the Korean bell down in San Pedro.

Cline

In San Pedro, right.

Sunoo

If you look around, there's a few Buddhist temples around that are kind of traditional Korean temple architecture. But I don't know which comes first. You know, in Chinatown, do the tourists start going to Chinatown so that the Chinese then said, "Oh, let's make it more Chinese-y"? Or did they make it more Chinese-y to attract the tourists? I don't know which one of the--

Cline

Yes, but I was just--

Sunoo

Part of it could be, too, that that Chineseness from a hundred years ago, maybe it was somewhat authentic to what was going on in China at that time architecturally, and then it just got cheesed up. I don't know. If you think about that, then you could think about Korea; that as Koreatown was developing, first with a little bit of signage in the seventies to what it is today, in Korea, the parallel development in Korea is very kind of a Western architectural style. There's an occasional nod here and there to things Korean. I think if you look closely at some of the more modern--like take a modern restaurant; Chosun Galbee is very modern in architecture, and yet there are nods to traditional Korean architectural elements.

Cline

Right. I was thinking that perhaps the Koreans in some way are more modeled after the Japanese in their modern style of presentation and the way that kind of demonstrates or acknowledges a certain level of achievement. Certain of these large indoor shopping centers in Koreatown that you mentioned earlier remind me a lot of similar things that the Japanese did, you know, maybe ten or twenty years earlier, whereas, say, if you go to Little Saigon in Orange

County, there is often, even though it's mostly a profusion of mini-malls, these very token little architectural elements added, literally almost tacked on to make things look more--quote--"Vietnamese"--unquote. You don't see that kind of thing going on much in Koreatown, I guess is what I was saying.

Cline

I think the perception of the non-Korean is perhaps, you know, well, that maybe they expect that, so they don't know what Korean looks like, you know. So what's Korean? You go to Chinatown, and they think that looks kind of Chinese. You know, they go to a sushi restaurant, and it's got these elements of traditional Japanese architecture and style. But people aren't clear on really what's distinctly Korean. Is there a need to demonstrate that, or is that at this point pretty much irrelevant?

Sunoo

Let me just make one comment, initially.

Cline

Okay.

Sunoo

I think you said that is the Korean following the Japanese model. I don't think there's a Korean around who would 'fess up to the idea that they're following anything Japanese.

Cline

I'm sure. I'm sure. I know that's a risky proposition.

Sunoo

So I think that they would say that no, they're not following the Japanese, but that what they're doing is they're--I think it may have to do with the modernization of Korea has occurred very--well, not rapidly, but over the last thirty years. From what I can tell, in Korea there's a very strong element of protecting culture and history, but new is better and new is kind of a Western vernacular. So that if that's the growth model in Korea, it would be natural that that would follow suit here in the United States.

Sunoo

Actually, architecturally there's a lot of Korean architects in Los Angeles that are commissioned to do buildings in Korea, and there's a sense that they know what the Western flair is all about, or they've got a Western design sense, so let's bring that in. I guess that's not unlike Beijing and the [2008] Olympics, where they chose all the Western architects to build or design the facilities for the Beijing Olympics.

Sunoo

So I don't know. The Koreans are real proud of being Korean; don't try to be anything else but. There's just a kind of a Westernized interpretation of that.

Cline

Right. Also, I wanted to--well, we're going to have to schedule another session, since you have a time limit today. I wanted to at least start in on working towards the 1992 [Los Angeles] riots, which really are kind of the landmark event that made the rest of America aware of what the Korean American community was, at least in Los Angeles. But, I guess, think of something that we can talk about without going into that, because that's obviously a big topic.

Cline

Going back into what you observed in terms of the development of Koreatown, clearly, by what you've said, you found this exciting. This was something that appealed to you as a Korean American. What was your sense of, particularly in relation to you personally as somebody who was born and raised in this country, of particularly during that wave, that big wave of immigrants from the seventies into the eighties, of who most of these immigrants were, particularly in connection to your experience living in Korea for a while? Who were these people largely, and what was aiding them in getting established here in the United States, in L.A.? How were they able to, for example, get into these business ventures and figure out what to do and sort of learn what the ropes were, so to speak? What was your sense of that?

Sunoo

I think as with any immigrant, the cut of folks that choose to immigrate are slightly more ballsy than the population in general. If it's the idea of simply walking across a border, legally or illegally, or whether it's, as in my grandparents' case, getting on a boat and sailing across some huge ocean, these guys and women are really ballsy characters. Regardless of how bad their life might have been in the old country, no matter how good the dream might seem on the other side of the ocean, it's unknown. And in today's world of communication, as much as you might know about the place to which you're going or destined, you're still getting up off your rear end and you're taking those steps, and you're going into something that you really don't know. You really don't know what's going to happen.

Sunoo

So I admire immigrants a lot because of that, the ability to just take that change and go with it. I think that, first of all, that is part of the key to success. So you've screened the population coming in to be a population that has got some positive drive working for it to begin with. And I think the Korean immigrants tend to be of that ilk and then some, and tend to be very tenacious and very--they're risk takers.

Sunoo

I keep thinking that some of this might go back to a kind of a Confucian idea. I think that this Confucian philosophy is something that is very, very much part of the Korean culture. The best illustration that I can think of is, if you look at the yin and the yang, which is emblematic of Confucianism, and you say, "Look at the Korean flag. Oh, hey, right in the middle of the Korean flag is the yin and the yang. This Confucian stuff must be something that they take seriously or is really embedded in them."

Sunoo

If you look at the yin and the yang as a symbol of their being, and you look at the yin and the yang, you realize that it's an interesting symbol, the intertwining; but you also know that things are seen as black and white, and there is no gray. Traditional Confucianism said this has to do with the relationships in the universe. A man is superior to the woman. A teacher is superior to his student. This is good, and this is bad. You keep thinking about

that, and it evolves into, "Either do it or you don't." It leads to dynamic decision making.

Sunoo

So I really feel that that helps the Korean entrepreneur, the businessperson, to get up to the edge of the cliff and then make the decision.

Cline

Wow. [Laughs]

Sunoo

I think that that's a really important piece of what drives the Korean mentality. I see it in my parents, who have been here; my mother, who was born here. I see it less in myself, but I certainly see it in the Korean immigrants that I deal with.

Cline

Right. What was your sense of the most common sort of reason to come here, to make the leap?

Sunoo

I think they come for their family. They know that it's going to be tough. They don't know what tough means, but they know that it's going to be tough.

Sunoo

I'm working with small businesses now, professionally [at the Asian Pacific Islander Small Business Program], and I know that a number--well, I'm thinking of this one guy who is typical. He owns a grocery store in South Central [Los Angeles]. He's been down there for close to twenty years. He started out leasing the property, and then he ended up buying the property, I think it was a year, a couple of years after the riots. [Note added by Mr. Sunoo at time of editing: Actually he bought the business several years before the '92 riots. It was looted and badly vandalized. He took off a week, went home to Korea to "think", then came back and re-opened his business.] He has been robbed at gunpoint any number of times. He's been shot. His wife has been shot. He's not making a lot of money. He's getting by. In the twenty years that he's run that grocery store, he said he's never closed. He's been open every single day,

and 99 percent of the time it's him that opens the store. On a rare occasion his wife will close the store.

Sunoo

He told me once--oh, I wish I could--yes. I said, "You've never taken a vacation."

Sunoo

He says, "Well, yeah, you know, as a matter of fact, I took a two-day vacation after about fifteen years."

Sunoo

I said, "What did you do?"

Sunoo

He said, "Well, I drove to Yosemite with my daughters."

Sunoo

I said, "And your wife?"

Sunoo

"No, no, no, no, no. My wife had to run the store." He said, you know, she agreed that he deserved a vacation.

Cline

Wow.

Sunoo

I said, "When you were shot?"

Sunoo

He said, "Yeah, when I was shot, I went to the hospital, but it was--." I forgot where he was shot, but it was nothing life-threatening.

Sunoo

So you wonder, you know, why are you doing this? He's doing it because--and he's not dramatic about it. He doesn't feel like a martyr. He says, "I do it

because I want my kids to get a good education. I want them to succeed, and I don't want them to have to run a grocery store for their whole lives." I think he's sixty, so he's been doing this since he's been forty. I don't know; he must have immigrated a little bit late in life. He did, as a matter of fact, because he said he got married late. He's sixty, or sixty-one or -two, and his daughters are twenty-one and twenty-two, something like that. If you call this life, he got started in life a little late.

Cline

Right. Yes.

Sunoo

But it's not atypical that these guys run their businesses, and go down there and open and close and open and close. He says, "You know, I kind of like the wintertime, because in the wintertime," he says, "it's too dangerous to keep the store open when it gets dark. So in the wintertime I close at six-thirty." I think he opens at eight o'clock in the morning. So during the wintertime, he only has a ten-hour day, or a ten-and-a-half-hour day.

Cline

Amazing.

Sunoo

And it's seven days a week.

Cline

We're right up to the time that you wanted to end. I'll save the question about basically, unless people already had family here, who helps these people.

Sunoo

That's a short answer; I don't know.

Cline

Oh, you don't know. Okay. Well, you know, you hear about, for example, the church being very involved in that and things. This was before there were all these service organizations, these nonprofits that are proliferating. Because so much of what has helped define the Korean American community here in L.A.

came because of and after the '92 riots, so I guess we'll talk about that in our next session. Does that work for you?

Sunoo

Sure.

Cline

Okay. Thanks for today. It was great. [End of interview]

1.5. Session 5 (July 25, 2008)

Cline

All right. Today is July 25th, 2008. This is Alex Cline, once again in the home of Cooke Sunoo. This is our fifth and presumably last interview session.

Cline

Good morning.

Sunoo

Good morning.

Cline

Thanks for taking some time to meet with me again. We talked a lot last time about Koreatown and about the changes in the community with the growth of Koreatown, and you ended by painting a picture of kind of the typical Korean immigrant, small businessperson, somebody who had a store, a market in sort of South Central L.A., and the grueling and relentless sort of work schedule that typifies that sort of entrepreneurial effort at that level.

Cline

One of the things that I had begun to ask, and you said you really didn't know the answer to was, who helped these people when they would come over. One of the things I wanted to ask you related to that is, based on your sense of the community, when these immigrants would be coming over and trying to get a foothold here businesswise and otherwise, what do you think their greatest challenges or challenge was or were?

Sunoo

I don't know that there was a single greatest challenge. I think I had mentioned before that I think the immigrant is a person with a tremendous sense of adventure. I think I referred to it as ballsiness, just the ability to pick up stakes, go across the ocean, even if it's only an airplane flight now and not a multi-day voyage on a ship as it was when my grandfather came. But still, the idea of giving up all that's familiar and coming to a different land with a different language and culture, it takes an adventurous sort of person.

Sunoo

Once they arrive, they just have to deal with challenges on multiple levels, everything from finding housing to navigating the school system for their kids, if they have kids, to almost immediately trying to find some type of livelihood. Most of the immigrants that came over, and most of them that are coming over now as well, have a severe language barrier or a language handicap in terms of employment. What that means is that, one, if you're a Korean, you could get a job working in a purely Korean environment. A lot of women end up working in restaurants as waitresses. Some of the men, I guess, work in various service industries or in the grocery stores.

Sunoo

Then the other alternative is, if you have any kind of capital asset, to be able to go out and to become an entrepreneur. The hurdle of becoming an entrepreneur is that you are your own boss, which means that you do have to run the operation, and that, too, is a very--it's difficult to learn whatever the entrepreneurial venture might be. I think consequently, you'd look to your friends and relatives, and if your friends and relatives, as often was the case, owned a small convenience store or a grocery store, then they could help you learn the ropes or learn how the pricing or the buying of such a venture might work out. For that type of a reason, you ended up with a lot of people in very similar lines of business.

Cline

Right. Right. What about the cultural institution that created, the kind of collective underground banking sort of situation?

Sunoo

I don't know if it's underground banking so much as the relationships are really very important in the Korean culture, and relationships are not ad hoc and who you happen to meet at the bar or on the golf course or tennis courts. Relationships are structured, and what that means is that if you are the alumnae from the same high school, that's an immediate bond and a very strong bond.

Sunoo

Then it goes back to some Confucian ideas that if, in fact, you graduated before or after somebody from that same school, then you are seen as a superior or inferior in that particular relationship. That amount of structure, which is Confucian, that amount of structure in society works out pretty well when it comes to things like what you referred to as underground banking, and I would say simply it's a financial arrangement.

Cline

That was sort of a facetious comment.

Sunoo

The idea of being able to borrow money because it is so structured and the relationships are so structured you wouldn't think of violating them. As a Korean, you would honor that relationship and do everything--it's not a casual event to borrow money from somebody else, especially you know that that person, whether he's your inferior or superior, the relationship is a bond, and that makes the ability to lend more trustworthy.

Sunoo

In the Korean communities there are these organizations called kae, and those are lending circles of sorts. It's a situation--it's fairly commonplace--where if there are ten people in a circle, I believe you draw lots to begin, but then every month or every period of time you will deposit--say there's ten people in the circle and you're depositing a thousand dollars every time you meet. If you meet every month, it means that you're putting in--and it's not uncommon you would put in a thousand dollars every month. When your number comes

up, you're able to draw out that entire \$10,000 that everyone has contributed to.

Sunoo

So it works as a kind of a savings, but it also works as a cash cow for you when your turn comes up. Then there is some bartering association that goes on occasionally to pick your number out of order. It's done, but it's done with a lot of negotiation. These groups are, in addition to being structured because of any Confucian background, they then become structured also because of, obviously, the financial tie that they've all gotten themselves into. [Note added by Mr. Sunoo at time of editing: i.e. Kae are organizations that are based on trust initially because of an alumni or other relationship that become more profound because of monthly meetings and the regular cash investments.]

Cline

Yes, interesting. Most of the country's awareness of the Korean American community, particularly as a force in the business world, in specifically Los Angeles, in this case, was due to the riots in 1992 in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. A lot in the media, a lot of controversy, and a lot of suffering, frankly. Where were you when that happened, and what were your feelings at the time?

Sunoo

Well, it was what, April 19th, "sa-i-gu." Koreans mark historic dates by the number of the month, in this case April, which would be "sa," which is four in Korean, "i-gu," which is one-nine. So it's four-point-one-nine. That's how Koreans refer to the riots of April '92.

Sunoo

I remember on that day that I was at home and it started in the evening. The verdict, the Rodney King verdict, as you mentioned, was announced in the afternoon. I guess I was at work, but when I came home and I turned on the afternoon or early evening news, it happened in very real time, where there were demonstrations that were starting to go on across the town, and I

remember in particular watching they had some cameras down at Parker Center, which is the L.A. Police Station [headquarters] downtown.

Sunoo

I was very familiar with that building and the exact layout there. I saw them demonstrating in front of the building, making a lot of noise, protesting the verdict. Then I saw people getting on top of a little parking kiosk in the parking lot, which I had used, and they were standing on top of the parking kiosk, and people were banging up against it. It started to look on TV that it was getting a little bit ugly. You could see the masses just grow, and the masses were there, clearly, protesting the verdict.

Sunoo

Then you saw it erupt on television, live coverage, that as the number grew, it moved over from Parker Center, which is at L.A. [Los Angeles Street] and First Street, down to the intersection and up to the L.A. [Los Angeles] Times Building, which was a block away. At that point you could see that they were knocking over some newspaper vending--what do you call them?--vending stand, newspaper stands. Then you saw somebody pick up a vending stand and throw it through the front window of the L.A. Times.

Sunoo

Then you saw them, this mass, what had been very clearly a demonstration, a civil demonstration in protest, become a mob. The cameras then started showing the mob moving down Broadway, moving into other areas of downtown, breaking windows, and the beginning of the looting.

Sunoo

As we watched through that evening and through the next day, you could see them moving in different places in L.A. I remember most particularly along Olympic Boulevard and along the western corridors, coming away from downtown. At that time there wasn't a whole lot of commerce or nothing too breakable, I guess, until you got up to the Koreatown area. In the Koreatown area you could see the looting going on, and at this point it was a little difficult to catch the magnitude of it all, except that there were TV crews taking shots

at various places around Koreatown, and then they flashed down to certain areas in South Central.

Sunoo

What you could see was you could see looters going in, and there was no semblance of any kind of civil disobedience or demonstration of anything, other than the gleeful look on looters' faces. You could see how they had, just over the few hours, learned how to pry open the security grates and bars on stores, and how they had been able to get [through] roll-down doors, and they learned how to force them open. It was ugly and frightening. The fires started, so that there were many, many, many shopping centers [Koreatown mini-shopping centers] that I had spoken about earlier that were torched, going up in flames.

Sunoo

The interesting thing to me was that, and I think I still hold to the idea, that--I didn't see this, I don't think it was a racial thing, where Koreans were targeted. We have the statistics. UCLA did a very extensive study. We have the statistics. We know that Koreans were the most harmed group economically as a result of the riots, because any civil disobedience turned into a riot, and it's clear in my mind that it was absolutely a mob mentality and without a message.

Sunoo

But I don't think it was anti-Korean, because I looked at Koreatown. I was there the next day. "Sa-i-gu" was the nineteenth. On the morning of the twentieth or through the night of the nineteenth, we had seen a lot of coverage on television. We had heard sirens, because we live in the neighborhood. We didn't realize or understand exactly how widespread the damage was. I worked for the Redevelopment Agency, and I drove downtown that morning. Smoke was still coming out of the--between my house and downtown there were, without exaggeration, eight to a dozen smoldering building fires that I passed by.

Sunoo

Throughout the day we had heard reports, and because--this is interesting. It's because I worked for the Redevelopment Agency, which was seen as an

agency that was to fight blight. Clearly, blight was happening before our eyes. Our agency was called upon to help out with some emergency measures. We were not first responders at all. What was I, a bureaucrat. I was a city planner by training, not any kind of specialist in terms of--well, what we got sent out to do was we got sent out to do some board-ups on stores and just basically to see if there was anything we could do to help the shopkeepers that were out there, particularly in what were designated as redevelopment areas.

Sunoo

Frankly, we weren't able to do a lot. We were able to go out and put people in touch with the right phone numbers downtown to get whatever it was that they needed, water, power, cut off or turned on or whatever it might be. I remember that we had--I guess we must have rented out a fleet of kind of oversized pickup trucks and loaded them up with plywood, and delivered them out to a number of stores. I guess the situation was such that nobody in the city knew exactly what to do, and I guess because of our agency's kind of general sense of mission, felt that we were somehow responsible to help out the communities in which we worked.

Sunoo

So we went down there. I had never boarded up a store, and it ended up I didn't board up any stores, but went out with the guys and took down some plywood to people in the neighborhoods in which we were working. That was on the twentieth, and then I think it was the next day that the city--basically, most of the city offices just told most of their employees just to stay home, because the systems were such a mess and there was such uncertainty.

Sunoo

I just remember the sickening feeling of being in my own neighborhood, and for several days after that, you could smell the air was of smoke. The riots lasted a couple of days, but the tenseness in the air stayed around for probably several weeks after that.

Sunoo

One thing that was at once humorous and tragic, at the same time tragic, was that I remember the--a number of Korean merchants had access to guns, and

there were a couple of shootings where Korean merchants were defending themselves and ended up shooting people. But what I was going to say was what was at once humorous as well as tragic was at the Kaju Market, the California Market at Fifth [Street] and Western [Avenue], the owner of the supermarket had on the rooftop--oh, and during this time LAPD was at a loss. They weren't quite sure what to do, and they were understaffed and ill-prepared to respond to anything of this magnitude.

Sunoo

It was absolutely a city that had lost control of itself. I remember thinking during that time that, you know, it's utterly amazing to me that--I guess it's not amazing, but to me, it occurred to me that it was quite astounding that we actually had quite a level of civil order to ourselves, and we were quite civilized as human beings, because there was no civil authority at that point. It was simply the fact that obviously the huge, vast--all of us, 99 percent of us, at least, were totally without external controls. We basically functioned as a society and didn't go crazy. And I thought, "This is kind of interesting." You tend to think that you behave yourself because there are certain laws and regulations, and at this time there was clearly no regulation, and yet society was able to stay together.

Sunoo

The visual image that I had that I started on a minute ago was that at the California Market, where the owner of the supermarket had armed his staff--I don't know if they were staff or family--and then they had created bunkers on the roof of the supermarket that were built out of sacks of rice. So he had all these twenty-five-pound, fifty-pound sacks of rice stacked up on his rooftop, and he had, as I said, staff or family members or friends up there with automatic rifles. It was kind of that kind of vision of--a sort of real clarity that there was nobody really in charge except the individuals in charge.

Sunoo

You would see merchants standing around their shops, inside and outside, and there were a lot of guns that became very, very visible during that time. So that was kind of, you know, one of those indelible impressions or images that people in those few days had lived through.

Cline

What was your sort of emotional sense regarding what was happening to these Korean American merchants, especially in light of the lack of police presence, and ultimately the lack of National Guard presence as well and, as you described it, the system just kind of breaking down?

Sunoo

I don't believe that we did anything to quell the riots or to calm people down. I think people themselves realized that they had kind of gone through the cycle and had spent themselves and that this wasn't a revolution in the sense of the society was now going to change. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that it was simply rioting and looting, and not a revolution. Some people like to think of it as a social revolution or a political revolution, but it wasn't, because it died as quickly as it erupted.

Sunoo

After the riots themselves, it became very clear in the Korean community that the damage was very severe. In a lot of ways, it clarified the mythology of the affluence of merchants. Prior to the riots and the exposure of the fragility of these merchants, I think there was a general understanding that, "Well, these folks are doing pretty well. Look, they've got all these little shops here, and things seem to be bustling along. Those Koreans are doing okay."

Sunoo

It was very hard to have any kind of--and I had been involved previous to that, for a number of years, on the board of the Korean [later Koreatown] Youth and Community Center [KYCC], which was basically a social service organization, where we did counseling for at-risk kids and their families, and helping lower income Korean families find their way through the social service systems. People would frequently kind of look at me and say, "Yeah, but the Koreans don't have those kind of problems."

Sunoo

I'd say, "Well, yeah, I believe they do." I knew that they did, because we always had a full client load, and we knew that the problems were there. But they weren't really visible.

Sunoo

What the riots did, interestingly, was that it kind of laid naked the problems that existed beyond just the looting and the rioting. They showed that there was no safety net for these folks, and that they weren't successful merchants. Because of case study, we know that a lot of the merchants that got burned out had zero insurance and zero cash [reserve], and that they had been running their businesses basically on a month-to-month basis without any kind of operating reserve. We know this because we know that a number of stores never reopened.

Sunoo

We know this because, in the Koreatown area, a lot of the merchants were also apartment dwellers, and we know that a lot of the apartments, they were unable to keep up their rental payments, to the extent that a number of them gave up their apartments, moved in with other family members or wherever they might move into with doubling up, and that there was an actual real estate crash among apartment owners because of the spike in vacancies, and their inability then to make their monthly mortgage payments on these apartments. So there was that kind of a snowballing. We know that.

Sunoo

I was shocked initially. It probably took us a couple of weeks to establish these food banks at a number of the churches in Koreatown. As we were starting to organize them, I remember my own personal skepticism, saying, "Okay, fine. You know, no one's doing it. Sure. We know that there's been a lot of stores burned down. But, you know, give me a break. Who's really going to come and pick up free sacks of rice and cases of ramen noodles?"

Sunoo

But others more knowledgeable than me, obviously, encouraged that we should not just cooperate but to lead an effort to get donations of groceries and to solicit the partnership--well, actually, churches became more the leaders, but the churches didn't have the organizational abilities to--what we did--"we" meaning the Koreatown Youth and Community Center. What we did was we brought together social service offices to the food banks so that the

merchants could, in fact, find the appropriate services. So we coordinated all the social service end of things, and the churches organized the food part of it.

Sunoo

There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of folks that were coming through these food lines on a regular basis. We brought out insurance companies. The insurance companies, frankly, didn't have a lot of work to do, because there weren't very many policyholders, but they saw the kind of damage, so they figured that--and insurance companies are pretty good about disaster response. So they were there. They didn't know the extent of their exposure, and it wasn't very great. But they knew that there had been a disaster in the city of L.A., and so to their credit, they sent out adjusters and folks, the appropriate people.

Sunoo

The other thing that happened was that a lot of the college students, well, they had to come home, because there was no longer a source of support for them from their parents, who had lost the cash flow off their businesses, and there was no savings to dip into to keep the kids in school. So there was quite a large number of kids who came home from school for the lack of tuition and room-and-board money.

Cline

Wow. What was your feeling about the way the Korean community here was portrayed in the media?

Sunoo

The portrayal in the media?

Cline

Yes.

Sunoo

You know, I don't have strong media images of the entire event. It was kind of interesting, because in some ways, when you see the cover of Time magazine with flaming storefronts. You look at it, and it looks pretty tragic. But, you know, that was a lot less impressive than seeing the reality of it, so that, you

know, when we saw it on national news, it didn't impress me particularly that it was on national news, because the reality was so traumatic.[Note added by Mr. Sunoo at time of editing: Media did portray the drama of the rioting and burning, what they missed was the economic and social impact on the Korean community. Most every "recovery effort" focused on the neighborhoods (the rioters) but neglected generally the economic victims, the Koreans.]

Cline

You were eventually working in the Koreatown Redevelopment Project. Based on your involvement in KYCC and in that and being here in the community, I know this is a large question, but how did the '92 riots ultimately change the Korean American community in Los Angeles, perhaps nationwide, even?

Sunoo

Yes, well, certainly it brought them onto the map. People knew that there were a lot of Korean businesses in L.A., both locally as well as nationally. You know, I'm not so sure. Ultimately there was a lot of rebuilding that went on, and when they rebuilt, basically they built bigger and kind of better centers, bigger and better in the sense that the first round of mini-shopping centers that we had talked about previously were pretty drab and pretty uninteresting.

Sunoo

In the rebuilding effort--I don't know how to describe the magnitude. There was a lot of burned-out buildings, and most of the burned-out buildings were irreparably damaged. They might have been ten years old; maybe they were fifteen; maybe they were older than that. But ten- or fifteen-year-old buildings that were built on the cheap, burned out totally and then rebuilt, and so when they were rebuilt, they were rebuilt at a slightly nicer--and by the time they were going into rebuilding, it wasn't a pioneering effort, just throw up four walls and call it a Korean grocery store. That wasn't enough, because the critical mass of Koreatown had built up in that interim.

Sunoo

So the need to build something that was more competitive also came onto the front, and so in the rebuilding, you could see that things were built with this--

where one-story mini-shopping centers had previously been, there were two-stories, and instead of simply two stories, there were two stories with higher ceiling heights, which makes it a little bit more upgraded in terms of retail environment.

Sunoo

Still a lot of the rebuilding was simply mini-shopping centers, but now they were a little bit larger and a little nicer. But also what started to get built were buildings with subterranean parking. What that does is it just gives you architecturally more opportunity to build a more esthetically and functionally pleasing building. So you started to see some of that occurring, just as a result, I think, of the small ugly mini-shopping centers being burned down.

Cline

What about within the community itself, the leadership in the community perhaps finding new ways to address the issues that, as you put it, were kind of laid naked after the riots?

Sunoo

You're right. Part of the response to the riots was a lot of Koreans finding a political voice, going down to city hall, demanding; demanding that the riots was a civic disaster and that the city owed the merchants, basically Korean merchants, a civic response. Most all of that fell on deaf ears, from what I had seen. I had joined in on a number of those where they wanted somebody to speak before the city [Los Angeles] City Council. They wanted somebody to go down and meet with the council members, and they wanted people in committees and before commissions. That was the milieu in which I had spent my professional time, so I ended up in a number of those hearings.

Sunoo

I think almost every one of them just ended in naught. There was no response. There was sympathy. So they found a voice, spoke out pretty loudly, but I'm not so sure that it really became ingrained. It wasn't perpetuated, so that voice was somewhat lost. I think there are probably a number of people, individuals, who are able to speak on behalf of the community and speak on behalf of needs, but I'm not so sure that any permanent changes were made.

Sunoo

I know that there was an effort in South Central, because of the number of beer and wine licenses and the number of liquor stores. I think it was Concerned Citizens of South Central, along with several other organizations, wanted to take advantage of the burnouts to say that they shouldn't be reopened. I think it trying to take advantage of an opportunity, but it was a little unjust without compensation to not allow a business to reopen. So there was that argument. I don't think the Koreans won it because of Korean political maneuvering. I think the Concerned Citizens of South Central lost the day because what they were asking for was something that, in the end, didn't make a whole lot of sense unless there was a huge amount of compensation offered up to those that were going to be damaged, and the city was unwilling to do that, although I guess as a result of it, they did somewhat cap the number of licenses to be issued.

Cline

What was the fallout like at city hall [Los Angeles City Hall]? You've mentioned your admiration for Mayor [Thomas] Bradley. This was not the kind of thing you want to see end an illustrious political career, but what was the feeling like around city hall after the riots?

Sunoo

I think there was basically a clear sympathetic ear, but it was a sympathetic ear and not a desire to pick up--well, let me look at it in two ways. One is in terms of those that were damaged, the victims of the riots were the Koreans. There was sympathy for them, but no impetus, no desire to--or I don't know, "desire," but there was nothing that was really done about it. So you had the victims there; they were damaged, and that was kind of "too bad", and they were left [to fend for themselves by those in City Hall].

Sunoo

The other part of it, of course, was looking at it as what people saw, politicians, bureaucrats, saw as the roots of the riots, which they saw as poverty and neglect of South Central Los Angeles. So there was a great deal of effort. I don't know how much bore fruit, but there was a lot of dollars spent, energy exerted, in trying to address the economic inequities of South Central

Los Angeles, which is appropriate. It's an issue, and it's an issue that I would certainly support. Ending poverty is an incredibly important fight that goes on.

Sunoo

It irritates me that the impetus for getting this thing started in the nineties was riot and looting, riot and looting. But I suppose that same thing happened in the earlier Watts Riot--

Cline

Yes, that's right.

Sunoo

--a decade before.

Cline

Exactly. Yes.

Sunoo

To me it's kind of an irony, because it was clearly riots, and it was clearly not a [political] demonstration of any kind of--it wasn't a demonstration of any kind of principles behind it. But yet it resulted in a lot of attention, a lot of economic development activity being [focused on] South Central L.A. The only nod to it [Note added by Mr. Sunoo at time of editing: addressing the huge financial loss caused in part by the LAPD's inability to maintain civil order for two days as the citizens rioted] was in the Wilshire [Boulevard] Koreatown area, where a redevelopment plan was ultimately adopted for the rebuilding of that area.

Sunoo

By the time that that redevelopment plan got into place, it must have been '96, maybe, so it took three or four years. Getting a redevelopment plan approved is a lengthy process, and it's a long-term strategy, so it was definitely--again, somebody saw the riots and '92 and said that, you know, "We need to rebuild that part of the community." A lot of rebuilding had already started. So the redevelopment plan came along, but as I said, redevelopment is a long-term strategy, not a first-responder kind of a attitude or strategy. [Note added by Mr. Sunoo at time of editing: The city did nothing

to address the overnight disaster that affected the livelihood of thousands of its Korean citizens.]

Cline

So after the riots you have redevelopment going on in Koreatown. You also start to see some of these service organizations, nonprofits, starting to crop up more, ostensibly to address some of the issues that people now were seeing as facing the Korean American community that maybe weren't being handled to the degree that people would like. Where do you see the roles of political office, nonprofit organizations, and, in the case of the Korean American community here, certainly, the church, in addressing the sorts of issues that the Korean American community here seems to be dealing with?

Sunoo

I don't know. That's a broad-ranging question.

Cline

Yes. Well, let's start with the political end. Where do you see Korean Americans headed in terms of political involvement? Because you still don't see a lot, but you're starting to see more, certainly.

Sunoo

Yes, I think actually, kind of historically, Koreans have tended to donate money to various political offices, back at least as far as the Bradley era, without an agenda, and generally it seemed to be [for] personal status almost. Kind of the classic thing was if you donate enough money to a political campaign, you could get yourself named as a city commissioner. Little was known beyond that, except that a commissioner is an important role. It's like being on the board of directors of a city department, and that's pretty hot stuff, I guess, or they guessed. Not a whole lot of those offices are--and those commissions are appointed. They're appointed by the mayor; or state-level commissions [by the governor] or county commissions [by the county supervisor] as well.

Sunoo

So when I actually--I think I had left the mayor's office, but I had enough contacts in there, and it was clear that the mayor and the mayor's office, if they were getting pressure from Koreans who had contributed, to be

appointed to honorary positions such as--or not honorary, but to be honored by a commissionership.

Sunoo

Kind of the running joke in the mayor's office was the different staffers who had liaison role to the various commissions, and therefore the departments; such as, if somebody had the liaison responsibility to the Building and Safety Department, and that individual mayor's staffer would talk and be in communication, direct communication, with the director of Building and Safety, and that was the person that interfaced most directly with his commission.

Sunoo

So the running joke in the mayor's office was that they would get feedback from the department heads to the mayor's staff to, "Please don't give me a Korean," because Koreans were being appointed, and they were being appointed and then either going to the commission meetings and not knowing what to do, or not doing anything, or worse, just not showing up for their meetings. There might be a five-member commission, and if one of them was a Korean that didn't do their work or show up, it was more difficult to get a quorum, it was more difficult to make assignments to the commissioners, etc. So there were a couple of very sleepy little offices in city hall, and Koreans were often named to a couple of those commissions, because they could do least harm, and yet they were still given the badge of a city commissioner.

Sunoo

Some of that changed for the worse, in terms of finding out that there were other types of not status but actual power that came with being close to politicians. There were a couple of politicians that were fairly notorious for making some rather outlandish pleas on behalf of their constituents that happened also to be their large donors to their campaigns. That became not commonplace, but it became apparent that that was kind of another area in which Koreans were getting involved in the less positive aspects of political power in Los Angeles.

Sunoo

I think today we see--and actually a number of politicians started hiring Korean field staff or Korean aides because there was a growing community of Koreans, and it became a legitimate constituency. But also it became a fertile area for political contributions, and by having the right Korean staffer on board during the non-election years, the relationship was strengthened between that political office and Korean would-be donors. And some of the Korean staffers learned how to manipulate the city system and lobby on behalf of donors to their boss and work for exceptions to the rule or finding narrow ways to skirt restrictions, kind of the more sleazy operational things that are made out of politics.

Sunoo

So kind of the universe of younger Korean Americans being in political office as staffers started to grow. On the one hand, you had this kind of distasteful end of things where people were currying favor in anticipation of getting campaign donations the next year, or had gotten campaign donations the prior year. A lot of times these staffers would either take time--if they were being aboveboard, would take time off during campaign season to go out and work for the campaign and then solicit the same constituents that they had helped in the year prior. Or sometimes they would continue to work eight hours a day and then solicit campaign contributions during their--quote--"off-hours" in the evening, or would take a coffee break to go out and get a campaign contribution.

Sunoo

At the same time, however, I've got to say that there were a number of young political office workers that were really learning skills, learning how to legislate appropriately and correctly and to work the corridors in a positive way. I think that has continued, and today, frankly, I still run into a lot of the young Korean legislative analysts or legislative aides, and they're getting into places that are pivotal positions, that are exciting to see. [Note added by Mr. Sunoo at time of editing: Hopefully, it seems the majority of Korean Americans getting involved in political offices are motivated by a desire to make significant policy change and to better governmental operations. NOT to participate in the "sleaze" of politics.]

Sunoo

At the same time, what's happened is that their breadth of interest has gone well beyond that of simply the Korean community, so that you see--and this is not limited to legislative at all, but in all fields. You see, whereas in the past law firms, for instance, or accounting firms, would hire somebody because they needed a Korean professional staffer to kind of round out the resume of the company, to send somebody to deal with the Korean clients, and so they would be kind of this affirmative action hiring for those purposes. The skill of the Korean professional was, first, if they were Korean.

Sunoo

I think you're seeing more and more nowadays that Korean professionals, Korean staffers, are being hired because they are good professionals. A lot of them don't even speak Korean anymore. I see that as just a real positive sign for the future, where the idea that they could speak Korean--those who could speak Korean, could speak Korean--and could deal with Korean clients is just an added benefit rather than the primary benefit.

Sunoo

What that then does is it brings Koreans into the--gets them woven into the fabric of the entire breadth of what's going on in the city, and that's kind of where I see, you know, the future of Koreana. I see that as being really a happy situation.

Sunoo

I had mentioned previously the idea of kimchee being available in Costco. To me, it's really a sign that Koreans are not going to stay as an isolated community, and yet the Korean community is going to be--I would hope and imagine that it will be a distinctive community, at least for the next couple of generations.

Cline

What about the nonprofits and some of the activities that are being done by those? Also the fact that some of these organizations seem to be virtually--at least from the outside, and sometimes people criticize this--virtually kind of professional at the level that they're operating at. It seems like there's a lot of funds passing through, and a pretty broad scale of real grass-roots kind of low-

budget operations to very slick, very broad-reaching, very kind of extremely prominent sorts of organizations. What's their role, do you think, at this point?

Sunoo

Well, there's a number of different roles, of course. First, with regards to small, fledgling, grass-roots efforts vis-à-vis multimillion-dollar operations, I think there's a place for both, and I think they're both really important. The smaller ones, I've always been very supportive of, and I think that they tend to be a little more fringy in the way they think and maybe take more of a political and blend a political philosophy together with their social service philosophy. I think it's just really important that that lesson be taught to people, that the type of politics that they will include in their message as they provide a social service, will be one that has to do with economic inequities, racial inequities. Those are important messages to be kept alive and to be pushed. They'll always be there.

Sunoo

It's kind of interesting to me, because some of them are getting more sophisticated, and their budgets are starting to grow a little bit. Korean Resource Center I like very much.

Cline

Right down the street here.

Sunoo

Right down the street on Crenshaw [Boulevard]. I don't know how they've managed to survive over the years. They do a great blending of culture, political, and social services. They teach Korean traditional arts and drumming, music, dancing, language, and at the same time the very strong [unclear] stratification [progressive political message], and at the same time provide good counseling to clients that they work with.

Sunoo

At the same time they've been working for the last couple of years, and are on the verge of breaking ground on, I think it's a three- or four-story apartment building on their site, a multimillion-dollar project, that will have low-income apartments and their offices all in the same building. And that's great, but it's

also they're becoming a little bit more--they spend a lot of time focused on the financing of the real estate project, because they have to, because it takes a lot of energy to put one of those projects together, and if you're a fledgling organization, it takes all that much bigger proportion of your energy to do something like that.

Sunoo

So I think that they're an exciting group. They do good work. What's their future? I don't know. Are they going to stay, you know, kind of a hand-to-mouth kind of an operation and be able to continue to teach the politics of economic segregation? I don't know. But I think that that's important, for them to be there doing that.

Sunoo

Kind of the other end of the spectrum is--I've mentioned KYCC, Koreatown Youth and Community Center. I was on the board of that organization for decades. When we started out, it was called the Korean Youth Center. Then the agenda enlarged; it became the Korean Youth and Community Center, because the organization started getting involved in some economic development activities.

Sunoo

It's an interesting growth cycle. We started out as a youth center for kids and quickly realized that in order to do that successfully, you really had to interface with the parents, and in order to interface with the parents, you had to deal with other family issues, domestic violence and other [beyond] just educational; a lot of different problems. So the agenda expanded, and we called it the Korean Youth and Community Center.

Sunoo

Then more recently--"more recently" being over the last half a dozen or so years, maybe even ten years--the realization that although there is a particular need among the Korean immigrants unearthed by the riots--we knew it before, but that really showed it, and the importance of dealing with particular Korean issues and problems, specifically with Korean language abilities and an understanding of the culture, how important that was.

Sunoo

At the same time we realized that we existed in Koreatown. The "Korean" community is an ethnic community. It's Korean. "Koreatown" is a geography, and that was the big difference. We realized--and we always realized it, but we just never recognized, addressed it--the fact that we were in Koreatown, where Koreans never made up more than, say, 25 percent of the total population. We said, "Can we ignore 75 percent of the population?" For a long time, we said, "Yeah, there are other organizations. Somebody's going to take care of--"; basically there was a Latino population. We said, "Nah, there are Latino organizations around."

Sunoo

There aren't a lot in that area. The more we realized that, the more we realized that, you know, what we're talking about is we're talking about Koreans. We're trying to integrate them into America, into the Americans' mainstream society, and what is America but a bunch of different people? If we're not addressing a bunch of different people, we're kind of like looking at things from a very isolated point of view.

Sunoo

One of my favorite illustrations of this is, a lot of times when you go to these Korean student panels, intellectual panels at UCLA, and we're talking about interracial relationships, Koreans and blacks, and you'd have a panel of five Korean experts talking about the Korean-black issues. Well, why aren't there a few black people on that panel talking about Korean-black issues? So in that same vein, here we are sitting in the--at that time, the Korean Youth and Community Center, talking about integration, trying to make people learn to work together, and yet we weren't doing it ourselves. And here we are sitting in an area that's 80 percent or 75 percent Latino, and the color of our clients certainly do not reflect that.

Sunoo

So a conscious effort was made to say, "You know, let's see what we can do about opening up our programs." The change in name took place then, to say, "Well, let's deal with it as a geography, not simply as an ethnic minority that we're working with." We kept the "Koreatown" rather than calling it "Mid-

Wilshire," because clearly our roots--and the same reason we kept "Youth" in the name--is clearly the roots of the organization, and what makes us distinct, or what makes them distinct, is the fact that they deal with Koreans and they deal with youth, and that's the core of the mission.

Sunoo

But now it's much broader, and now Koreatown Youth and Community Center, half or I think a little more than half of their clients are now Latino. So your question about, "And so what about these multimillion-dollar nonprofit organizations?" I think that as we as a Korean community kind of grow, taking on that kind of responsibility of not just working within our own community, but working--never losing sight of our community, but at the same time having our mission go beyond simply our community is really important, and having a larger, more sophisticated organization gives us the platform from which to do that.

Cline

The third thing I mentioned was the church, which was kind of providing some of these services in its own way before all these other organizations existed. It still seems to be pretty much the social and cultural and certainly religious center of the Korean American community in Los Angeles. Where do you see its role along with all these other things, and what is your sense of where it might be headed, particularly as the generations become essentially more Americanized, perhaps, culturally somewhat distanced from their parents, etc.?

Sunoo

The Korean churches have always been a little bit of a mystery to me. I've never been a part of a--well, I was when I--since I left the Korean church in San Francisco in about sixth grade, I've never been a member or involved directly in a Korean church in any meaningful or long-term way. But I think that the Korean churches hold a lot of keys to the future of the Korean community. They're such strong institutions. Many Koreans tithe, meaning give 10 percent of their income to the church, and very few mainstream churches approach that [level of giving] at all. It's highly unusual to have somebody tithe in a church, outside the Korean community. There may be certain religions that

do, but typically--I'm a Methodist, and I know in our church tithing is not usual at all.

Sunoo

So just financially they're very big operations. One of the reasons that there are so many splinter churches that can stay alive is because of this tithing phenomenon, so that if a church splinters off and it pulls away and has a hundred members, that's clearly enough to support a pastor and his family. But the large churches are so large and have so much money, not just money but loyal parishioners that come out every Sunday, and not just every Sunday, but every Sunday all day, and during the week for a prayer meeting. I don't know that they've ever really harnessed the forces that they have available to them, so I don't know what role they're going to play in the future, but I do see second-generation Korean Americans still being loyal to their churches and spending a lot of time and energy at their churches.

Sunoo

I don't know [how] to organize them or how to make them into something more of a social force, "social" in the sense of a social service force. I've always felt that they are a tremendous resource to the community, and they are untapped.

Cline

What is your time situation like this morning, just so I know what I'm dealing with here?

Sunoo

Okay, we could get twenty minutes, half an hour maybe.

Cline

Okay, no problem then. Thanks.

Cline

We've mentioned these various things. What right now is your involvement with the Korean American community, vis-à-vis these organizations or any other involvement that you're currently actively doing?

Sunoo

I think my involvement with the Korean community is kind of--I've kind of marginalized myself, or it's become kind of--I don't know if "marginalized" [is entirely accurate, but] it's become a little marginal.

Cline

Okay.

Sunoo

I guess structurally you could say that I'm involved in a couple of different ways. One is that I direct a small business assistance program [Pacific Asian Islander Small Business Program], and that program is a collaboration of five different community organizations, one that serves the Chinese, another that serves the Korean, the Filipino, the Japanese, and the Thai ethnic communities. So in that sense, clearly a big--well, 20 percent of my professional life is spent--well, 100 percent of my professional life is spent directing an Asian small business program, and of that 20 percent of it is a Korean program.

Sunoo

I guess for myself I see that the--I would like, for myself, to be able to raise the issues of the Korean community in the context of an audience that's broader than the Korean community. I see that, taking that message beyond the Korean community has involved me in not simply working in the Korean community, so that if you take my program, for instance, it's an Asian program. With that Asian program as a platform to stand on, I can then gain a voice, a bigger voice, in policy issues. We work with the Small Business Association, the SBA, so I can take an Asian voice to the SBA and affect policy changes more so than I would if I simply had a Korean voice to speak with. So that to me has been very important.

Sunoo

I'm a board member on an Asian revolving loan fund for small businesses. Again, it's the idea that I can speak as a board member of a loan fund to other lenders, and there is no Korean loan fund to speak from. I'm on the [California] State Small Business Board. It's a statewide board; I think there's

seven of us on that board. There my voice is the immigrant businesses and the necessity of having the state address issues that immigrant businesses have. Language is a big deal when we have a [California] State Board of Equalization that needs to be sure that it approaches all of its constituencies in languages that are appropriate to those businesspeople. The other board that I serve on is the National Federal Reserve Bank Advisory Board. There, as on the state board, I find my voice more in speaking of immigrant issues.

Sunoo

So what you've seen then is that as a Korean, I can gain a little more voice by speaking as an Asian. Where the audience gets broader, my platform has to broaden out a little bit, and so the idea that I could speak on immigrant issues clearly includes then the Latino immigrant. When speaking to the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, they're not going to listen if I'm talking simply about Koreans or Asians. They'll listen, but if I can speak about issues that affect immigrants, including--and I'll always underscore and say, "I'm a Korean American, son of an immigrant, and these are really important issues, and we deal with Korean and Asian immigrant clients every day, and the problems go well beyond that," it gives me a better platform. So in terms of my advocacy, my own role, I see it as working for the Korean community from a slightly broader perspective, and I find that very, very exciting.

Cline

How do you, if you do, see or define yourself at this point? I mean, you're a Korean American. You are a product of this culture. You spent some time in Korea. You have a little sense of what that was like, at least back in the late sixties. You're married to a Japanese American. You're the voice of these various immigrant communities. What about you? How do you view yourself, or does it even matter at this point?

Sunoo

It doesn't [unclear] matter. [Laughter]

Cline

Some people, that's important for them, and others, it's not so much, you know.

Sunoo

Well, I don't know. We're kind of getting to the end of this, and I guess--let me just say that I find that life has been really, really good to me. It's been a wonderful process. I see it as continuing to evolve as a process, or continuing as a process. I've never really felt that I'm at the end of any kind of a journey or that I've reached any--maybe a milestone but not a destination. I think that I've been really, really fortunate that--I never could have seen a roadmap for myself. I've just made decisions that have affected my own life as I've gone along. I'm really happy at this point that the decisions that I've made in the past have led me along a path to where I am today, and it's all been able to build on itself.

Sunoo

So from as early as staying in college with my dad as a professor, learning about Korea, not knowing what it was about for my dad and my mom and my grandmother, to then deciding to not go in the army but to go into the Peace Corps, and ending up in Korea. You know, it was almost serendipitous that I put Korea as my first choice and anywhere in Africa as the second. But I was motivated to put it in as first choice, and it led to my going to Korea, and that led to two and a half wonderful years of finding a lot about my cultural background, and a long enough period of time to really have that internalized as part of myself.

Sunoo

The idea of coming to Los Angeles and being hired into the mayor's office, and part of the reason for being hired is that I was Korean American, and part of the job responsibility of working with the Korean community; that led to really getting to know a number of Korean businesspeople, a number of Korean community leaders, getting me involved with the--at that time--Korean Youth Center.

Sunoo

Those roots that were thrown down during that period made it really important that when I eventually became the project manager for the Wilshire Center and Koreatown Redevelopment Project--actually what happened was, during that time I had a strong hand in actually writing that plan, together

with the community, and the community was a community of Koreans and non-Koreans. I felt that I was ideally situated to be able to work--and there was a fair amount of conflict between the non-Koreans feeling that the Koreans were coming in to take over, and I, as an American-born Korean American, was able to really mediate the two groups and put together a pretty good working group.

Sunoo

So that was an excellent experience that also put me back in touch with working with smaller businesspeople that led eventually to my working with the program that I'm currently working with. I find that all very, very satisfying.

Sunoo

I have two adult kids, and they are both half-Korean and half-Japanese, and I think they recognize and respect their Koreanness. So they're at peace with themselves. They have a good, healthy understanding of who they are.

Sunoo

Now over the last few years the idea of being able to take this, taking my Korean self and throwing it out there into a broader context has been just a lot of fun and very satisfying. My Koreanness has never been diminished along the lines. It's always there. It's who I am and what I'm proud to be.

Cline

Speaking particularly as a person with planning background and working in redevelopment in places like Little Tokyo and certainly Koreatown, and you may not know, and that's okay, but what's your sense of where Koreatown is headed, as it seems to certainly get bigger and snazzier as the years roll by?

Sunoo

Well, it gets bigger and snazzier every year. It's interesting, because as the level of capital investment increases, the permanence of that investment is here. When you see--we were talking about it the other day--Chris' [Christopher Pak] high-rise condo project at Wilshire and Western on top of a subway station, that building is not going to go anywhere. It will be sold largely to Korean buyers, and it's being built across the street from a little

shopping center, [actually] a good-sized [Korean] shopping center, at this point, with a couple of movie theaters. I think that Koreatown is going to be here for a while.

Sunoo

The hope that I have for it is that as things Korean get woven into the American fabric more and more, and it is happening, that as that continues to happen, that the patronage to these places also will become a broader patronage, so that the profile of the customers--sure, there will be lots of Koreans, maybe predominantly Koreans, at the Korean restaurants and the Korean movie theaters and the Korean boutiques that are out there. But likewise, maybe like Koreatown Youth and Community Center, you'll have Latinos and others patronizing it as well. I think it's a real possibility. I think it will probably happen. The percentages and proportions of non-Koreans, I don't know. I wouldn't want to hazard a guess; but increasing numbers.

Cline

What about the parameters geographically?

Sunoo

You know, I've always said--and that's interesting, because we've never talked about the boundaries of Koreatown. I think in some ways there are no boundaries to Koreatown, other than the boundaries of your mind. [Cline laughs.] I say that very seriously. I say that seriously because I can tell you that as we sit here on Fifth Street and Bronson Avenue in my house, I'm sitting in Koreatown. But if you talk to my wife, she would never say that she is sitting in Koreatown in our living room.

Sunoo

The point is that Koreatown, although there are a lot of physical trappings of it, Koreatown is also a frame of mind. If you're a Latino living on Sixth [Street] and Normandie [Avenue], you don't say that you're living in Koreatown. You're living at Sixth and Normandie, and you're living in an apartment house that's got lots of Latinos in there. You go to the Latino grocery store that's just down the block on Third Street, and you go to the pupuseria that's down the street.

So you're living in the geography, but you're not living in the reality of Koreatown.

Sunoo

So to me Koreatown really--yes, it's kind of around here. You could look at intersections and say, "Yeah, Wilshire and Western, heart of Koreatown." But where does it end? Does it end on Beverly [Boulevard] because there's some Korean restaurants up on Beverly? Or, wait a second, there's Korean restaurants in Hollywood. Or does a Yum Yum Donut franchise owned by a Korean constitute a part of Koreatown or not? I don't know. If you look at who owns the businesses, then what do we call South Central?

Cline

Yes, exactly. What about all those Latinos who are living in Koreatown as things become more--at least on the surface--sort of gentrified-looking? What's your feeling about their status?

Sunoo

I would say what about all those lower income folks that are being gentrified out of the area, or will they be gentrified out of the area? I don't know. One thing is, I know among Koreans, Koreans from Korea are not--it's not uncommon to live--historically, living in Korea or a number of Third World countries, that poverty and affluence kind of live next to each other. Clearly, in the case of Wilshire and Western, they're selling those condo units, and yet there are some of the lowest income, densest low-income neighborhoods right half a block away, and it doesn't seem to affect the sales of half-a-million-dollar and up condominiums.

Cline

Yes. Interesting.

Sunoo

So maybe there's coexistence out there.

Cline

Yes. Well, there is now, anyway. You've mentioned the entrepreneurial nature of the Korean immigrant. We've talked about the economic influx in

Koreatown. You've mentioned Koreana becoming kind of more slightly mainstreamed, kimchee at Costco, all that sort of thing. What do you view the Korean contribution to Los Angeles, historically and culturally, being, if it's indeed unique or not?

Sunoo

Well, first, I think that L.A. is incredibly--and I mentioned this before--it's an incredibly exciting place to live in this particular incredibly exciting time in history, and a lot of it has to do with the dynamic nature of the city. Things are really changing, and we see it one year to the next how things are--I just said "pupuseria." Seven years ago--I don't know; I don't know when I first became aware of the fact that there was such a thing, and yet it's commonplace today. The multicultural richness that we have in the city is just very, very exciting.

Sunoo

If you look at it as a weaving of cultures, I don't know what particular Korean threads we have. Hopefully, the contribution of Koreans is more than simply kimchee at Costco.

Cline

Right. [Laughs]

Sunoo

I think what it is, is that the Korean contribution is--maybe if you think of it in terms of looking in a classroom and seeing Korean kids next to Latin American kids next to Eastern European kids, and seeing that as the Korean contribution, being a part of that. You know, what particular thread is added by the Koreans, maybe that's less important than the fact that the Koreans are part of what's happening here, and what's happening here is the weaving of just this incredibly rich new fabric.

Sunoo

When I tend to look at the Korean contributions, my mind goes to the mundane little things, the kimchee at Costco kind of things, and that's not it. You know, that's not it. The "it" really is how I can go into a Thai restaurant and enjoy the food there as a Korean, and at the next table there's a Mexican American guy. Yes, sure, most of the people in the restaurant are still Thai, but

that fabric of who's in that restaurant and this kind of coming together of these different cultures, to me it's kind of the whole, not the part, that's important.

Cline

Right. We've had now, I guess, three mayors since Mayor Bradley, and Los Angeles, while being dynamic and exciting, continues to go through a lot of changes, certainly a lot of development, especially in Koreatown and downtown and where your office is in Little Tokyo. What's your sense of where Los Angeles has been headed since the Bradley era and after the '92 riots and all these things that have happened? It may make no difference, but from your point of view, where do you--I mean, we had Mayor [Richard J.] Riordan, who really, I think, at least gave lip service to trying to pump some money into the economy of the lower income neighborhoods and bring in business and all that. Now we have our first Latino mayor [Antonio R. Villaraigosa]. That's been kind of an interesting little story.

Sunoo

So where is Los Angeles going?

Cline

Yes, where is L.A.--you never wanted to live here. You've been living here for years. You worked in the mayor's office. You've watched these changes happen. You've been in the middle of some important redevelopment projects. Do you have a sense of things, L.A. as a city?

Sunoo

I think when you step back a little bit further and say, "L.A." in the context--if you're looking to where L.A. is going, you have to be looking in a context of where is L.A. going vis-à-vis the West Coast and American cities, the world. For as rich and exciting a place as I just finished saying that I think it is, I don't know that I see the political leadership of Los Angeles leading us anywhere particularly. I almost see L.A. as being sort of an organism that is just kind of evolving on its own. If you want to look at leadership, you know, I think that there's a lot of global potential that is really not cultivated and fostered in the city.

Sunoo

I don't know that Los Angeles has such an image internationally in terms of being the leader of anything. Pop culture, maybe, pop music.

Cline

Right. Movies.

Sunoo

And movies. Actually, I was thinking Hollywood, but then, you know-- multimedia, a little bit of casual fashion, but even that kind of moves around from center to center. It's certainly not a financial leader. It's not an industrial leader. Maybe we'll end up being the--we used to have the stereotype of L.A. being an endless suburb, an endless suburb without a downtown.

Cline

No center, yes.

Sunoo

Maybe that's what we're going to be [Cline laughs], only it will be an incredibly rich little organism sitting here without leading the world anywhere particularly.

Cline

[Laughs] Fascinating.

Sunoo

Antonio, it's great. We've got our first Latino mayor, and he has evolved himself into somewhat of a political superstar, but, you know, I don't see him leading the city anywhere, particularly exciting.

Cline

So what about you personally now? What's next for you? You're working in the job that you just described, but what about your family and where you see life going for you?

Sunoo

Well, I don't know. I've never had a final destination in mind. Maybe that's a good thing, because if I had reached that final destination, I don't know what I'd do then. I've mentioned the fact that I've seen life as a process, and I am really pleased that the decisions that I've made have led me in a path that I've been very happy with. I see no reason to get off the bus at this point. [Cline laughs.] The latest evolutions for me professionally is what I mentioned, both working at a state and national level in terms of kind of policy, policy-wonking [phonetic] stuff, or at least shouting at policy makers, and that is exciting.

Sunoo

I don't necessarily look for a state or national platform. I think we're staying in L.A., and I think that what I would like to do is to kind of come back, extricate myself from Sacramento and Washington, D.C., and see what areas of kind of civic thinking I can influence locally. I'm not sure what that really means. We'll see what it means. [Cline laughs.]

Sunoo

So there's that, and then kind of at this point just waiting for grandchildren to happen.

Cline

You may not have to wait too long, huh?

Sunoo

We'll see. [Laughter]

Cline

Well, at this point is there anything in particular that you would really like to add to the record, or to say that you haven't said that you think is important?

Sunoo

I think this is a really ambitious project, and as we've spent some hours together talking, I can't imagine people being interested in what I had to say, but I've found it very interesting, listening or forcing my life into these few hours of recording. Actually, I've thought it would be very, very interesting to listen to the likes of some of the other people that you're interviewing in the same context. I think that [unclear] Tammy [Chung Ryu] in her ascendancy to

the bench, and it should be very interesting. I don't know if you're interviewing her husband [James "Bear" Ryu] or not.

Cline

I want to. He has to say yes.

Sunoo

I think he absolutely should say yes, because I think Bear is really--he's been chronicling the history with a real good understanding. I think the idea of interviewing Chris [Pak] is fabulous, because Chris is a real power broker in the city, and how he got there and what he's--you know, I'm a traveler, but Chris is really a driver. It's like we're all going down a freeway and he's got the steering wheel of a big sixteen-wheeler. I'm kind of trudging along in a little Volkswagen.

Cline

Right. Right. [Laughs]

Sunoo

I think it will be exciting to hear the other folks that you're dealing with.

Cline

If they agree to have their interviews posted online, then you'll be able to.

Sunoo

Who else is on your list? Oh, Johng Ho [Song].

Cline

Yes, he was my first interviewee, in fact. But we can talk about it maybe off-tape.

Sunoo

Yes. No, because I think he's a--

Cline

So, okay? Okay.

Sunoo

Okay with me. I'm in.

Cline

Thank you so much on behalf of UCLA and the Center for Oral History Research, and certainly me personally, who enjoyed this tremendously. Thank you very much. [End of interview]

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