

Oral History Interview Transcript

Course Title: Energy in World Civilizations

Institution: University of Chicago

Student Name: Dawei Huo

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Dawei Huo

Hi Linden. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview for my class “Energy in World History”. Just a brief overview of the project: it’s an oral history interview that students are conducting with someone who has life experience living in the second half of last century and see how energy changed in their life and its impact on their mode of living. Before we proceed, Linden do I have your consent to record and transcribe this interview? Yes. And I went ahead and sent you a printed consent form. Only after you sign it will I be authorized to use it for my assignment. Could you go ahead and introduce yourself?

Linden Brown

My name is Linden Brown. I am a 58-year-old librarian, and I live in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Dawei Huo

Thank you, Linden! Would you mind shedding some light on your childhood? Where did you grow up?

Linden Brown

I was born in San Diego, CA, and we moved to Woods Hole MA when I was 4. I lived there until I went to college when I was 17.

Dawei Huo

Got it. Which part of MA is it? Is it to the South East?

Linden Brown

It is Cape Cod, Woodshole, which is on Cape Cod.

Dawei Huo

I am curious about your early life. How many siblings do you have? Did you live under the same roof?

Linden Brown

I had my parents and one sister. My sister is 11 years older than me, and she went to boarding school and then another academic program. So she was out of the house during the school year for five years – she was in Switzerland, and she was just home in the summer and winter break.

Dawei Huo

What was a typical day like when you were young on the Cape?

Linden Brown

So Woodshole is a small village, home to the Woods Hole Oceanographic institute. There was a small elementary school, and it was kind of an everyone-knew-everyone type of situation. So I would walk to school when I was little – day school all day. Kids usually stayed in the playground after school and played. The town had a whistle that blew every day at 4:30, and the rule was when the whistle blew, you start walking home. All the kids had that rule. During the summer, I would go to summer camp, in a different part of the cape. That was my typical childhood. My family did have some hobbies, my father

liked to sail and fly small airplanes. So on the weekends, we often did one of those things. We traveled a bit during the summer as well.

Dawei Huo

That's fascinating stuff, Linden. Have you gone back to the Cape since? How have things changed?

Linden Brown

I get there every couple of years now. I do notice a lot more – hmm Woods Hole didn't change very much at all, they worked hard to make sure it didn't change. A lot of the same families lived there. But a few miles away in Falmouth where I went to middle and high school, there are a lot of tourist attractions that have gone up, it's a lot busier, a lot of small businesses. It's not as attractive, and much busier than before.

Dawei Huo

That makes sense. This will seem a bit too detailed, but it will make sense in a bit. When you are young, how did you guys procure groceries? How did you cook food? What kind of food did you eat?

Linden Brown

We had in wh a very small grocery store that often, whomever, my father would walk to work so maybe he would bring home some groceries if my mother had a particular request. Sometimes I picked up stuff when walking from school. That was daily groceries. But once a week we drive to Falmouth, the bigger town, and go to grocery stores there and buy food. When I was older my mother had a pretty good-sized vegetable garden in the house so we eat our fruit and vegetables from the garden. We had a regular indoor kitchen with a stove and a range and a fridge. So my father was most often the one to cook. As we grew up my sister and I learned to cook. Types of food: my family has traveled quite a lot and has been exposed to a variety of food. So as a child, it was notable that when my peers were more often eating typical American food, we might be eating like a stir-fry or something else that was unusual for the time and place. Sometimes my friends come over and ask "what is that". It was unusual for the time.

Dawei Huo

So, right now it feels easier to have exposure to different cuisines, you can buy stuff from Costco, from TJ. But when you were young, how did you or your parents source the raw materials used for non-American cuisine?

Linden Brown

I think we had to make do with what we had. What happened was my father would travel and think about how he could replicate the stuff he tried. Sometimes when we travel we bring something back, like a sauce or something. The thing I mentioned is that my father liked to fish as a hobby, so we keep the fish he catch nearby. We might eat that too. So our food was a little tough – the little grocery store really didn't have much. So lots of time it was my father approximating what he tasted somewhere else.

Dawei Huo

Got it. Wow, kudos to you for having this variety of exposure growing up in such a stereotypical American town on the Cape. So I know you traveled a lot when you were young. Super broad question so

take whichever direction you'd like. How did you feel when you first traveled? Say to Korea or Japan? What did you notice about the lifestyle of people there?

Linden Brown

I went to Japan when I was older. I was in college when I went to either one of those. When I was a child we traveled a lot more usually around Europe. And I would notice, as a young child, mostly about the food, or the kind of thing, say, if someone in Europe offered me a glass of milk, they would warm the milk, which seemed repulsive to me...

[interviewee lost connection]

2 minute silence

[connection back]

Linden brown

Ha I talked so long and realized you weren't there.

Dawei Huo

Sorry about that! We lost you when you mentioned when you were a child going to Europe, and people would heat up their milk which you found a little weird.

Linden Brown

So when I was a child I was interested only in snacks, toys, and things like that, and where I could play with other kids. When I moved to Japan and Korea as a young adult, it was more firstly tryna learn enough language to be able to communicate what I need and understand enough to get around. And then, working out the "social structure": what the expectations were of me, what was the same, what was different. Especially when I was working there, what it was like to work in Japan is fairly different from what it's like working in the States. Even when people spoke English to me, there are different ways of presenting the ideas: sometimes they'd say something, and I'd act on what I thought I understood, but actually they meant something quite different. Are you still there?

Dawei Huo

Yes, understood.

Linden Brown

So negotiating the "social traditions" and, you know, men's roles vs. women's roles, what did they look like in Japan vs in the US? That took me a while to sort out.

Dawei Huo

It's interesting 'cause in your childhood your father was the one who usually cooked. What was the domestic scene like in Japan?

Linden Brown

It was very much the women who did the domestic role. The men worked many many long hours. And I was surprised when I moved to Japan to find out how lonely some of the women were because they were

at home alone all day maybe with a baby. They didn't tend to go out in groups with their friends or have fun. They were just home and being supposedly dutiful and waiting for their husbands to come home late at night.

Dawei Huo

That must be a shock to you.

Linden Brown

Yeah, I was not maybe not shocked exactly, but it was a little surprising – I know there were more rigid gender roles in other places. Growing up in Woods Hole which is a place with looser gender roles say maybe in the Midwest in the States. Plenty of women who lived in Woods Hole were actually scientists either in the Oceanographic institute or Marine Biology Lab that were there. So it was kind of ahead of its time. So I understood my experience was less common. All rules in Japan were more rigid. Even if you were going to play tennis: in the States, I would just grab the racket with friends and we would hit the ball a little bit. But in Japan you never saw that: they were going to play an official game of tennis with real equipment, and they were dressed in tennis uniforms, and they would come back and be able to tell you the score. Everything was a little more formal in Japan, even right down to the way you talk about, say, the weather, was a little more formal in Japan – there was a correct way to say “ah, it's hot isn't it” [Japanese]. That's the only correct description of the hot day.

Dawei Huo

Thanks for the info, personally too, cause I will be going to Japan this march.

Linden Brown

There you go. Good for you! I haven't been there for a while.

Dawei Huo

Good to go back and visit. So you moved quite a bit after coming back from Asia as well, within the States. How would you characterize your new locations? How do they compare to your experience in childhood?

Linden Brown

For the last 27 years – hard for me to even believe – I've been living in Worcester, MA, in the center of MA, a little more than an hour away from the coast. I first came here because I was getting married – my boyfriend at the time lived here and traveled quite a bit for work, and Worcester was a good place because it is central in New England. When I first came here I didn't like it. For one thing, it was the most religious place I lived. I wasn't a religious person. I didn't like that. It felt uncomfortable. And also, it just had a very different history from the Cape, from Woods Hole. It wasn't a bad thing, it was just different - I just had to find my bearings. There also isn't a lot to recommend in the city of Worcester. However, it is near lots of things, you reach the beach in over an hour, and you can drive to ski in half an hour. It really is a good gateway to the rest of New England. You aren't too far from New York City, you can get to New Hampshire and Vermont. So over time, I've come to like it better. You know, the idea of coming to Worcester would have horrified me 25 years ago, but now that's okay. David, my partner, another transplant, he's from Michigan, and Worcester works well for us. There are lots of educational institutions

here, so I like that. So when I first came to Worcester, there were fewer opportunities to say have international food, even in a restaurant. But I noticed over the years, there are some really great restaurants that have started up. There are some good grocery stores that have international food. So that's kind of nice. There are some cultural opportunities, although you're still much more likely to have to go to Boston for a good cultural opportunity. We have an art museum. And a lot of, lot of history that took me a while to uncover. There's a lot of interesting history in Worcester around the civil rights movement and the abolitionist movement. Just less than a mile from where I am right now, there is a stop of the underground railroad, with tunnels underground and everything. Lots of early industrial developments. So, yeah, I am still learning my way around Worcester.

Dawei Huo

I'm glad you are liking it more as time goes on. It seems that a large part of why you moved to Worcester is because of its central location and it gets to places easier. Can you elaborate on this transportation aspect? How do you get to work? Go to buy groceries and stuff?

Linden Brown

For us, we do everything in our cars. Everything. Everyone who lives in the house has their own individual car. So when all the kids are here, between all of us, we got 5 cars that don't even fit in the driveway. Worcester does have a public transportation system, and right now it's free. But one it's not great, and two it's very centralized to the downtown area. There's no bus that comes to my house. Every once in a while when we go to Boston, we might choose to take the train. That doesn't happen terribly often, maybe every couple of years. We are going to Washington D.C. in a couple of weeks, so we decided to take the train down there, for fun, which we are quite excited about. There is an airport here in Worcester, Joshua and David have flown in and out of Worcester to go to various places. I never have though, even though the airport is only 2 miles from the house.

Dawei Huo

That makes a lot of sense. This car ownership situation, has it always been the case?

Linden Brown

In my family, it's always the case. I was given a car within four/five months of getting my license. Maybe even before that. I had a car before I could properly drive a standard car, 'cause I learned on an automatic car. When I went to college, that was about an hour away from my house. I lived on campus, but I drove back home when I went home. The only time when I used public transport was in Japan and Australia because they have excellent systems. In both of those places, I used the train, or sometimes the bus, to go to work every day. In Australia, I had a car, but I still use public transport most of the time, because it's fast and efficient. And I wouldn't have to worry about parking. But here, I have never wanted to use the public transport in Worcester. I'd be surprised if anyone I know has.

Dawei huo

Got it, Worcester is not known for having great public transport for sure.

Linden Brown

When I was a child, I had a bicycle. I used to ride all over the place. It was more for fun, but I do remember my friend and I taking ourselves to movies. I'd ride for like 8-9 miles even. On the weekend, sometimes, there was a ferry terminal to the two Elizabethan islands in the Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. We would ride to the ferry terminal. We just liked the ferry ride, not so much Martha's vineyard. Now even when I take the dog for a walk, our area here isn't great - I don't like walking the dog here in the neighborhood. We'd go in the car and drive to the wood to walk the dog, which I know it's a little silly, but that's what I do.

Dawei Huo

Got it. It doesn't feel like there are a lot of things within walking distance from where you are living now, at least compared to the Cape.

Linden Brown

Absolutely. We are now in a neighborhood, there's a busy street at the bottom of the neighborhood. Sometimes we walk to meetings right across from Bancroft school. Even though there is a fairly steep hill, we will walk there. We did it just recently, for a meeting there. But there is really nowhere else that we would walk to. The streets are fast and narrow and there are no sidewalks. That's why I don't like to walk. We often say that, in places where I lived [dog barking] sorry, Josh's coming home. In Australia, there are nice and wide sidewalks everywhere, there were parks and playgrounds all over. The idea is that they want every family – every child – living within walking distance from a playground. We just have no concept of that here. We Americans think “that's ridiculous, that's a waste”, but when I was living there it felt very nice.

Dawei Huo

Surely not everyone has to own a car there.

Linden Brown

There is absolutely nothing this city has done around here anyway to encourage people to walk or ride bikes. Sometimes I think maybe I will get a bike again, but then I realize I need to take that into my car to ride it in the woods. The streets are too narrow and cars drive too fast.

Dawei Huo

Got it. One final point: one thing when I first to the States, I noticed how huge the fridges are. Can you shed some light on food storage? Has it always been like this?

Linden Brown

We had pretty big fridges when I was young, too. When I moved to Japan, I had an apartment-sized fridge. I thought it was for a college dorm room, but a family would live in the apartment and use the tiny little fridge.

Dawei Huo

What was getting groceries like on the Cape?

Linden Brown

The small grocery store was just for when we run out of things over the week. People walked there and carried them home. It was a culture in the town of people walking because it was a tiny little town, and it was a nice walk. But we drive to Falmouth to get our weekly groceries and big items like dog food, diapers, and whatever the big items.

Dawei Huo

There was no Chewy.com back then, it seems.

Linden Brown

Hahaha, no. We have a local grocery store now that I sometimes go to, but not often at all. I go to the Asian grocery store much more often. I tend to go to several grocery stores because I want specific things: Trader Joe's, Sam's Club, and Costco every six weeks or so to load up on large items and bulk items. Sometimes I didn't go for the specific things I wanted to buy, but while at Costco, I'd just pick them up.

Dawei Huo

That makes a lot of sense. Just to wrap it up. Speaking of Chewy, I know you own a dog and a cat. Where would you go to buy their food as of right now?

Linden brown

That's the last thing I did before I called you. To buy their basic food, their canned food and dry food, I order online from Chewy.com, and that gets delivered every three months or every four months. Every time it is like a 50-pound bag. But also – today I went to two different places, to the butcher shop to buy some marrow bones for the dog, and I also stopped at a locally owned hardware store that has dog treats, so I got a different dog treat for him.

Dawei Huo

Got it. I appreciate you paying the high price to calm down the dog for this interview. I want to be respectful of your time, so I'll probably call it here. So many things covered so far. Thank you for your time to participate in this interview today.

Linden Brown

I will make sure to sign the form as well. Thank you! This has been very interesting.

Dawei Huo

I will stop recording right now.