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Interview by Kwok Suk Yee Kathy

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The Choice between Study and Work

Ma Me

She is now 53 years old, an Hong Kong Chinese. She is born in China, but lives in Hong Kong. With two sons and two daughters, she is now a housewife.

Primary 1&2: 'We study on the roof of a building with seven floors. The two extremes of the roof are classrooms, and the middle is the playground. We study there for the whole day, and we play at the middle playground.'

'We have to climb up seven floors, if we have to go to school. But, since we are too young, we don't even feel tired after climbing up the seven floors!'[she laughs delightfully]

She should treasure materials: 'However, studying at that time, we are not so lucky like you. You can buy any pencil with different styles, even though you don't really need it. We don't even have the chance. None! [she sighs] We use a pencil for a long period. We don't even dare to waste. If the pencil become shorter and shorter when one day we cannot hold it, what can we do? You know, we have a thick Chinese pen for writing Chinese calligraphy, we will use the sheath on that Chinese pen to put into the end of the shortened pencil. The sheath lengthens the pencil, so that we can hold it. We really insist on using that shortened pencil until we cannot use it to write. [she sighs] We are not like you. You will throw pencils away if you don't like them. It is such a waste!'

Knowledge in school: 'In the old day, there are not many things for us to learn in school. They are just the same words and the same books. But they do have their values and meanings. I do like that they teach you politeness. And I do most appreciate the subject 'Chinese composition', it stimulates your creativity. Your Ma Me, me, like composition very much because it allows me to create things.' [she laughs quietly]

Not easy to get a job: 'Other than those difficulties in study, there are also difficulties in work.'

'Do you think that if you want to get a job, you can get a job? It's not that easy at that time! No factory will post advertisement everywhere to employ worker. Everyone needs to depend on friends to tell which factory employs workers. It's a matter of chance because there are not many jobs at that time.'

Ironing clothes: ‘We do not have a job, then how can we earn a living? Your grandma [her mother] suggests us to help people ironing clothes. We cannot just wait for people to order our service. So, when after school, we go everywhere and say, “Do you have to iron clothes? We only charge a little! Only some money for a set! If you are busy, we can also offer delivery service free of charge. Our street stall is very close to your apartment!”

‘People don’t believe us at first! Maybe they see that we are there every day, so they trust us. In the old day, those irons are not electrical irons, they are heated up by coal. That’s why some people, who have to work and find ironing clothes troublesome, will order our service. Our service charges \$0.1 for each set of clothes. \$0.1 is only a little amount, but we think if we can get a few dollars a day, it is better than nothing.’

Child labor: ‘But only depends on ironing clothes is still not enough to support our living, so your grandma [her mother] later finds a job. However, I’m only ten years old at that time. I’m too young for employers to employ us. But child labor doesn’t violate the law at that time. If the boss employs you, it is OK.’

Printing dolls: ‘Your grandma [her mother] finally gets a job, so I follow her to her working place to see if there is a job that is suitable for me. However, the boss can only let me to paint those dolls’ mouths.

‘I think she hires me because I’m a student, she think that I’m accommodated with Chinese pen, it is better than employing a housewife who is generally lack of the skills in painting tiny little things.

‘She counts me \$1 for each basket and each basket is equal to 12 dozens! And the boss also orders me to buy a pen before starting the job, which costs \$5. \$5 is very expensive at that time. But I still think that it is better than no job.’

Primary 3: ‘During the period of painting dolls, I’ve got some time. And I’ve seen a child who is just next to my room can go to school, so I ask him which school he goes. It is a school called “Law Fu Kwok”. It is very near to our home. Therefore I decided to go to school at night. Then I submit the application form. Actually, I don’t know I’ve completed which Form. I’m quite confused at that time. Then, I apply for Form Three. My application is success after a test.’ [she laughs proudly]

Manufacturing metals: ‘So, I study and paint dolls at the same time. And then, someone tells me that there is a factory, which manufacturing metals, near our home. They can offer a better salary. So I try to apply this job. And I’ve success. Then I’ve work there for about one year. At the same time, I continue my study. I have to work and study at the same time because I have to pay the school fee.’

Producing electric torches: ‘After this year, another person tells me that there is a factory producing electric torches at To Kwa Wan. They can offer \$2 per day. Actually, this salary is quite high, so I do this job.

‘Since I’m not familiarized with the machines of that job, one of my finger nail is cut by the machine. I still insist on saying that I’m fine, but my colleague suggests that I should better go to the medical service center downstairs. Although I still think that I am all right, I go to the medical service center to have a check. When the nurse bundles my wound, I say, “Why do I feel so sleepy? Nurse? Why is there so dark?” And then I am unconscious.

‘After I wake up, the nurse suggests me to have one-day-sick-leave. I am so afraid that I’ll lose the job if I leave for that day.’

Cannot continue study: ‘Certainly I can continue this work, then I want to continue my study just like the previous year. I’ve already taken the application form from school, but my job is very busy in that period, we have to work over time at every night. Since it is not easy to get a job, and I’m afraid of losing the job, so I work every night. I have no time to hand in the application form. Until the deadline is past and the semester begins, [sign with disappointment] I give up study because I think work is more important.

‘If I have to choose between study and work, certainly I’ll choose work because getting a job is not easy in the old day. And I believe that I’m so lucky because at least I’ve studied for three years; perhaps, it’s enough. At least I can write my name, know how to calculate and read the name of streets, so I won’t be cheat by others. Although I’m not that good when compared with others who know English, but this level of education is enough for me, for a woman.’

Spinning and weaving: ‘After abandoning study, and after working for the electric torch factory for two years, there is a new job. Your elder aunt [her sister] knows the spinning and weaving factory employs workers. They offer \$5.5 per day, and we have to work for 8 hours a day. So I work there.

‘However, doing this job, we have to stand up for all the eight hours. Besides, the environment of the factory is very hot. In the factory, there is no air-conditioner. And you cannot either switch on a fan since it will damage the cotton thread in the factory. Working in this factory, it seems that I have jumped into water everyday, all clothes get wet.

‘As to lower the temperature, a thick layer of ice is placed in front of every machine. With the help of the ice, the temperature is much lower. But the factory is still hot, so we have to drink a lot of water. Although this job is very harsh, I will not give up because it has a higher salary.

‘And also, at that time, I’m only 13-15, but I pretend I’m 15-16. Because I am as tall as a 16 years old child, and no one will check your ID card in the old day.

‘Besides, since the factory is based on a shifting system, 7a.m.-3p.m., and 3p.m.-11p.m., I also have no time or no chance to study.’

Weaving wigs: ‘After working for few years in the spinning and weaving factory, this is the moment that we are very curious about weaving wigs. Someone says those hair on the wig is from dead people, [she laughs with embarrassment] but I doubt that. I guess those hair is cut off from people who have long hair. Anyway, we are extremely afraid of wigs. Therefore, no one is willing to weave wigs at first. But later, we know that the salary of this job is very high, \$40 per pieces, so I try. I cannot pick up so well at first, but I can still earn a hundred for half a month. And finally, I can earn about four hundreds every month.

‘After one or two years, no one afraid of wigs because they know that they can earn a lot through wig. There is a say, “if your wife weaves wigs, and your husband constructs buildings, it is better than working as a manager.”’