

CONNIE WIECK TRANSCRIPT

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Damian Macey Interviewer

Transcribed by Donna Duzan, May 2018. And

D: This is Damian Macey. As part of the Friends of the Library Oral Histories, I am privileged to have with me Connie Wieck and she is home from an unusual place called China. Connie is from here, she went to school here but she has taken off from here and has been living on the other side of the globe. So with that, I will introduce you to Connie.

C: Thank you, Damian. I was born in Terre Haute, Indiana. My parents were teachers at the Marshall High School and elementary school also. Their names are Bill and Priscilla Wieck. So I grew up in a teaching family. And am also a teacher although I didn't plan to be a teacher, I wanted to be an archeologist when I was growing up. I was going to dig up Roman ruins and all of those amazing things and I actually went to a gig in Tunisia after high school because that was what I was going to do. And I went on a dig for two weeks and dug in the dirt and learned that I don't want to do that!! So then I switched to teaching because I was good at English. And so I went to Eastern Illinois University where I got a BA in English with a certificate to teach in secondary education. And then I went to Japan with the United Methodist Church on a short term mission stint and it kinda went on from there.

D: Was there a teacher or someone who steered you towards going into archeology?

C: That's a good question, it was probably my interest in Latin. Which would have been to do with Kathryn McNary. She was the Latin teacher at that time and I believe that was the only language we had offered in our school at that time. I just got really drawn into the classics and just thought that Roman ruins were the coolest. All the people wearing togas and I just really enjoyed learning another language. And I wanted to be able to speak another language fluently but of course Latin is not a language you use much unless you are in a catholic church. So that is where I got the interest in archeology.

D: Did you ever go to Pompeii or anyplace like that?

C: The archeological dig was in Carthage. We dug around a race track there with a professor from Michigan. And he would take these three month digging expeditions in this particular place of Carthage. I loved the fact that I found things, I dug up a skeleton, I found a purse of Roman coins, I found some dice, it was exciting and then I found a very unique pottery-like piece that had the race track on it. And that was one of the "big finds" for the summer.

But it was Africa, and very hot, and we were filthy dirty, and our workers were in Ramadan festival/season so they weren't eating during the day and they were very tired and they would stay up all night eating because that was their custom and religion. Some of the archeologist were not happy about that and called then lazy but I did not feel that that was appropriate from a cultural standpoint.

I think when you are working in another country you have to be aware of their customs and their feelings too. So that instilled in me that when I go to a foreign country I need to be very aware of their customs and feelings.

D: Did the things that you found end up in a museum of some sort?

C: Yes, I guess they did, there was this little museum that our archeological guy founded and I believe it is still there. And he even told me several years later that my find was in a place of prominence there. But that race track that was huge has now been built over and all the items just got built over. It's a little sad but that is the way the world works, we build over where there was things in previous centuries. That is about the time that I thought I wanted to do something overseas but I wasn't sure what. People ask me what brought me to realize that I wanted to be a missionary and I tell them that I credit the people who raised me because they raised me to care about other people. And especially the United Methodist Church community. And service was instilled in me, that people need help and that is our job. There were people in Marshall that needed help but I didn't see much of that, it wasn't prominent. But I went to Washington DC on a youth trip and it was arranged through one of our Methodist church leaders, Noni Bollinger and her husband, and the trip was meant to introduce to us what the Methodist church is doing there. I had no idea churches were involved in legislation that we considered important. Like watching out for our environment, people were poor and without jobs, I had no idea the church was interested in these types of things. We went to soup kitchens and we were in charge of handing out food to people who were lined up all around the block.

D: Do you recall what year that was?

C: That was 1982. And we went to the Pentagon and met with some officials there and that was the time the nuclear war race was going on. And I remember sitting there with a General who was telling me that this is a good thing. He said that escalation to the nuclear weapons the US and Russia because it was deterring us from blowing each other up. And I was just appalled, to think that one country having better weapons than another, I was just appalled. And I thought then that there needs someone to say no to all this. And that was more to being a Christian than just going to church on Sunday. So that is when I looked into our United Methodist programs and learned that I can serve overseas. Not necessarily as a missionary but in the form of a teacher.

D: Sounds like you had an epiphany.

C: I did!! One of those big turning points in your life. So then I went to Japan and Taiwan as a teacher. And now I am in China as a United Methodist missionary although we aren't called missionaries in China. I work with the Chinese church just as a member of the church community, much like I would here. As far as bringing people to our faith (proselytize), we can't do that in China, that isn't allowed, it's against the law for a foreigner to do that. But it is not against the law for a Chinese person to proselytize to another Chinese person. So when students are curious about me going to church on Sunday, because I don't do outings with them on Sundays, I tell them Sundays are my free day and that I go to church and then they ask me what that is all about. And I invite them to come with me to a Chinese church and they are surprised that there are all these foreigners in church but it's

done in their language of Chinese. And they quickly see that Christianity is not just a foreigner's religion. And then I let my Chinese Christian friends take over from there. It's not about me bringing someone to my religion it's a community effort. It's the same thing in this country as well, you shouldn't take credit for bringing someone to your faith, it's a Christian community that comes together and welcomes new people and new insights.

D: What age are your students?

C: They are college age. I teach at the college level in China. I can teach here at the Junior high, high school and college level too because I have a master's degree. I don't need an certification to teach in China. If you are a foreigner and a native speaker then you can be hired.

D: Did you get your master's degree from EIU also?

C: No, from SIU. EIU didn't have the degree I needed.

D: What is the name of the city that you are in?

C: Lajos, on the Yangse River. So I still get my country feel because I live outside of the city, the city has 3.5 million people. It is the county seat so all of the government buildings are there. This is handy because we can apply for our Visas there instead of having to go to the capital.

D: Is there a lot of public transportation in your city?

C: Oh yes, we have taxis, buses and we also have a tiny little airport. It was the first airport that had a real runway that was made out of cement, rather than dirt. And it was built by the Flying Tigers that came over in 1937 when Japan was bombing the heck out of China. And I actually know the daughter of the engineer that built that airport and he is now 111 years old and lives in the state. His daughter is in her 90's. Many people died building that airport because everything was hand labor. They had to carry the rocks from the river and the rollers had to be pushed by hand and many people got underneath them and died. The Chinese that worked on this brought their families and lived in tents, there were thousands of tents and many thousands got sick and died during its building.

D: So you are saying basically that their method of transportation and construction was pickaxes and a wheelbarrow?

C: Just about!! According the Jean Woo, the daughter of the engineer, they made a line about half a mile long of people to pass along the rock that they took from the river. They made it with rock on the bottom and concrete on the top and that is the foundation of the airfield. And it has lasted for all these years.

D: There are commercial flights going in and out?

C: There are a few, it is a really tiny airport but we do have daily flights to the larger cities. I fly out of this little airport because it is easiest as far as transportation to the airports. Other airports are three and a half hours away and then I would have to take a taxi to the town and airport. There aren't many

people that have cars in the large cities. If you buy a car you have to buy a new car, they don't sell used cars in China.

D: What happens to all the used cars?

C: I have no idea, to be honest, this has happened in just the last ten years, that Chinese have had enough money to buy a car. They might pass a used car on to their kids, but it costs about \$800 to pay for driving lessons and it can take a long time to get a license and is very time consuming because so many are doing it now days. And the test is long and difficult but Chinese drivers are very good driving and good at parking. And you have to be eighteen to enroll. Before driving, you got around the streets with rickshaws but more and more people are getting licenses because it does open up many more jobs and opportunities for you.

D: There must be substantial revenue if so many people can begin driving and buying cars.

C: Yes, there is. Salaries are going up and when they have more money, they love to spend it on cars and new apartments. But then we have the very very poor people who are farmers. Many work in factories to make money to pay for college for their kids who go get degrees in many things but then you have to find a job and there aren't many jobs many times after you get out of college. It only takes two years of college to get a teaching job in China but the different levels that you can teach vary a lot by your education and if you can pass a test that is given for the really good teaching jobs.

D: There is so much discussion over education these days, funding, government mandates, regulations go on forever, is it a better education in China?

C: I think the states cater to the needs of every student and I think that is very important. Some people say we cater too much to students with different needs. In China everyone is taught as if they are the same. And that is a problem for students who come to my little three year school because they don't test well at all. Our school cost the parents about \$800 a year which is quite a bit of money. Many of our students didn't do well in high school, were considered lazy and called stupid by the high school teachers. This happened to a boy that I have been mentoring since he was thirteen years old and he just took his college entrance exam which is a standardized test, a 2 day test, all students take this, and if you do really well you go to a fantastic university and if you do poorly you go to a school like mine. But he did very poorly, but he worked so hard. His math and science scores were very low even though he did very well in the English part. So his parents told him that he has to retake his fourth year of high school so that he can take this test again. I feel so bad for him, his parents have told him he's stupid and he just hates his life now. If that had been in the states he would have been accepted somewhere and he would have done well in college. He wants to be a TV or radio announcer and use his English that way.

D: Does China have the same school grades like elementary, high school, etc.

C: Elementary is like K through 6th grade, 7-9th is junior high and 10-12 is high school. They have the same subjects as we do and English is required beginning in junior high.

D: Is there anything like scholarships in China?

C: They have government scholarships for the very very poor, but they don't pay a whole lot. Our school is like from \$800 to \$1000 a year and if they have a scholarship it might pay \$200. And the poor scrimp and save from the day a child is born or borrow from family and that sees them through the first year and then they worry about second year later. And our school is really cheap, other schools are very pricey.

D: Are there corporations and businesses that will give scholarships?

C: Not that I am aware of. We do have non-government organizations that give scholarships for people who need them. And they might be a food program not a money donation. Like the organization I work for, Amity, has a lunch program for the kids from the farming community and the sponsor pay a certain amount of money and that will assure that your student has a lunch of rice, vegetable and meat. Which they will not get at home because their parents cannot afford a meal like that. And I think that program is amazing. The cost is \$125 for a semester of meals. And also the Amity Foundation has a scholarship program for college students.

D: Is there criteria for that? Like income and ability to pay?

C: Yes, it depends on your family, how well they can afford college. The money goes to the school, of course, not to the student. I really appreciate that this country sees that all kids have the chances, in China if you are disabled, you just don't go to school. And in China if a person is disfigured, they feel that that will detract from the other students being able of concentrate. So they just don't get to go to school. When you apply to school, you have to send a picture so they know if something is a little off about you. But I am so glad that my school is coming around on this, we do have some students who have dwarfism and a couple who are albinos which is quite different to the Chinese people. We had one little girl who had very bad facial disfiguring and she was missed her nose and I was so proud that our school did not discriminate against her and keep her out.

D: When they finish at your school, what happens to students like that?

C: They have to pass the test and go on a path just like all the other students. She had a real fight on her hands to be accepted and find a job. I'm sure she had already had a fight to find her place in Chinese society.

D: How many students do you have in your school?

C: We have 8000 however we want to reach 12,000. We don't actually have enough dormitories for 12,000 so our campus is moving. It is moving outside of the city with lots of room to build on to. This has been an ongoing project for ten years. The school is sponsored by the provincial government, by the city of Lajos and then by the school itself. The building process is handled by the government and the city so it is taking a long time because they keep running out of funds and then building has to stop until more money comes in. Where we are now is prime real estate right on the river so the government want our school off that property so that they can build new apartments.

D: You mentioned dormitories, do most of your students live in the dormitory?

C: We have very few that live in the city of Lajos, everyone is assigned a dormitory room, it is included in your \$800 and you get to stay there for the whole year, not for just the school year. The dormitories and eight people to a room and they all have bunk beds and they share bathrooms.

D: What about the balance of male and female students?

C: In the English department, most of them are women, I have 270 women students and 12 boys. But it depends on what their major study is, PE will be mostly boys. Art is about equal, math and science, all guys. And business management, mostly men. Hotel management is all girls because they are the ones who welcome you to hotels, and work at the front desk.

D: Do most of the students finish the three years with you and then go on to a university?

C: Yes, it's a two year time to get a bachelor degree and now we also have correspondence classes.

D: Are the classes like you are in, taught in English?

C: My class is in English. They don't even realize that I can speak Chinese.

D: Are there other American teachers in the school?

C: We have two Peace Corp members. Peace Corp left China 13 years ago because of SARS, the bird flu disease, they were evacuated out within 24 hours. Our part of the country was not infected but they were evacuated anyway. And they did not return for ten years. And they came back to our school five years ago and we have four of them now. And we are getting two more this summer. The Peace Corp used to concentrate in Environmental issues but that is not what China wanted. China wanted teachers so eventually the government figured out that they needed to change their focus but it took them a long time to do that.

D: And apparently you will stay in that position of a teacher.

C: I believe so, working with the United Methodist Church we have three year contracts and I am the only United Methodist missionary in China. We have like 300 overseas missionaries but I am the only one in China. So I have a feeling that I will always stay there.

D: That is a very unique and elite situation.

C: It is and it will be interesting to see in the future how accepting China will be with religion. Because right now in the cultural revolution everything was shut down and in 1980 they began opening catholic churches and protestant churches and Christianity began to be not so much of a suspicious religion. However, it's more open, there is more freedom but there are still many constraints and problem with the weekers, they are the terrorist organization, they are way up in another province. The majority are Muslims, some are Buddhists, they are a lot of young people who have been misrepresented in their communities. The Hahn Chinese have come into their area and kicked them

out, like we did the Indians, took their jobs away, changed their language. So they are not happy and they will lash out and kill people.

D: Is the attendance at church free and open?

C: At my church it is. I go to a protestant church and our church has a good relationship with Lajos because in 1907 Canadian protestant's came and set up hospitals, medical centers, opened up schools and did a lot of wonderful things for the city of Lajos. So Christianity in our area has had a very positive effect on everyone and this is why we have such a good relationship. However in other places in China they think that Christianity is strange and different then we do some clashes. And that is what you will hear about on the news, not the positive relationships and cooperation.

D: Well you have been there quite a while and you're speaking of the Chinese helps but have you ever felt threatened or uneasy?

C: Never in China. Sometimes in my own country!! My mom and I went to Chicago and we finished with the theater play and we were coming out of the theater and it was about ten at night and mom asked if I thought we should take a taxi back the three blocks to the hotel, and I said no, let's just walk, there were people around everywhere but I thought if I had been alone I might not have done that. But in China I am out walking at all hours and I am never afraid.

D: Is it true that in China when a person gets elderly and can't stay by themselves that their family takes them in and care for them?

C: Yeah but we are moving a little more towards nursing homes than in the past. And housing facilities because a lot of these young people who are doing very well, they don't want to take care of mom and dad in their old age. But most of my students do take care of grandma and grandpa and they love them. Usually what happens, in the country anyway, when you have a child, you give them to the grandparents to care for and then you go to work, this is until the child is school age. And these grandparents may be across the country, not close by, and they will stay with grandma and grandpa until they reach the age of six when they will go back with the parents and attend school. So it's the grandparents taking care of the young kids so that the parents can work to have money to send the child to school. It's hard for the kids when they return because a lot of the time they don't know their parents very well. And they will cry and scream and carry on because they have to go back with their parents. They understand later on why this was done, but it's hard on the young ones. You used to hear a lot about the abandonment of children particularly with the little girls, boys are preferred because they can help on the farm. In Chinese culture, when you get married, you live with the male's parents and take care of them. The female's parents are left to do whatever they want. The girl child abandonment does not happen so much anymore. I think the government has explained the importance of girls.

D: Wasn't there a limit on the number of children couples can have?

C: There is a limit, one child per family. There are a lot of different rules. If you belong to a

minority, there are 56 minority tribes in China, they are allowed to have more than one child because it is part of their culture. If you have a child that dies, you can have another child. If you have a handicapped child, you can have another child. Another rule is if both people in the couple are only children, you can have two children. Because that will allow the mothers parents to also be taken care of. So the government is trying to take care of the problem of not having any place for elderly people to stay. And when we had the earthquake in 2008, so many parents lost their only child and those people were allow to put in their application to have another child.

D: You talked about the number of cars, are any of them American cars?

C: Mostly European cars, many Mercedes Benz, I don't know how they afford them, and they have a lot of Chinese brands now but they aren't very well liked. Toyota, Hyundai are popular, because they are little cars. Allot of little mopeds, not a lot of American cars. And they like big Jeeps and big vans.

D: Do you know what the gasoline price is?

C: It's about the same as here, the governments controls that so it does not fluctuate much. They only have full service there, they take your keys and fill it for you and there is always a long line.

D: Did you have trouble adjusting to Chinese food?

C: I did when I first got to China, that was like twenty three years ago, because the food was not very sanitary and I had stomach problems for the first year. And then I learned that if I cooked for myself, I didn't have the problems. But 23 years ago you just had the vegetables that were sold in the market and now in China everything is packaged, and there are lots of choices for frozen foods and the meat is inspected, how well I don't know. We have Lays potato chips, Oreo cookies, candy bars, and lots of International packaged foods. We have Pizza Huts, Burger King, McDonalds.

D: I was wondering about restaurants, like the fast food places, I have heard that they have just exploded in China.

C: And they even have Chinese fast food places which are very popular because they are a little cheaper than the American fast food places. But they love McDonalds's ice cream cones, all the kids want to go get ice cream cones.

D: Is there anything as far as living conditions that is superior in China as opposed to American?

C: I would say among the wealthy it would be superior. You can buy some very very nice apartments, apartments cost as much as a house. Apartments would sell for \$50,000 to \$100,000 for a nice one. I am sometimes appalled at the price that the Chinese pay for an apartment but it is theirs for life. They get loans for twenty years, same as with our houses here.

D: Can that then be passed on to an heir?

C: Yes, the parents buy the apartment with the assumption that the children will come and take care of them when they are elderly.

D: I know you have an affection for dogs, tell me about your pooch.

C: Okay, well, I got a Chihuahua, in China, Little Flower, about ten years ago. And then after having a wonderful time with her, she died. So then I got another one. But the one that is the luckiest little dog is the one that we have here in Marshall, names LauLau, Little Old Old, and I found that dog in the city streets of JungDu it was right after the earthquake. JungDu did not experience too much of the damage like other towns, but when the earthquake hit, everyone ran out of their homes when the earthquake hit and their animals ran with them. So a lot of those animals ran away so a lot of people lost their pets. The next day no one wanted to go back in their homes because of the aftershocks so everyone was living in the streets. We just pulled out our bedding and camped out for about a month and the aftershocks were scary. I don't know if this little dog ran away because of the earthquake or what but I saw this little dog on the street and he was trying to eat off the street but he didn't have any teeth. So I couldn't leave him there so I scooped him up and brought him to my home and got him healthy but nobody wanted him because he was going to need some special care and the Chinese just didn't want to bother with him so I brought him home to Marshall and he has a wonderful life here.

D: Did you have any difficulties getting him into this country?

C: I had to research how to get a dog from one country to another and the first thing is that if you are from a country that has rabies, you have to quarantine them but if both countries have rabies, then you don't have to quarantine. But coming out of China the dog has to be microchipped, have all their shots, a lot of paperwork has to be done. You can do this process if you know where to go and take the dog but I didn't know all to do so I went through a private pet place that does all this for you. The dog can ride under your seat if it is small enough and has a special carrier.

D: Do you have a dog in China now?

C: Yes, I have MayMay, and she is also a Chihuahua. You have to keep your eye on your dog in China because the dog nappers will scoop a dog up and sell her. I have neighbors that have had that happen.

D: So do you have a dog sitter when you come to the states?

C: I have a couple dog sitters who watch her.

D: You have given us a delightful look into what it is like to live in China, is there one person in your life that you feel has really influenced you in your life?

C: I think that would be my mother. I'm a lot like her, she listens to all of my problems, and she gives me good advice and I think her bringing me up in the United Methodist Church has been very influential.

D: And has there been a world event or situation that has been really memorable to you.

C: I would say that would be the earthquake in China. We were two hours away from the epicenter. And I was on the first floor of the apartment building. I just heard this crash and I thought there had been an explosion from some demolition and then the building shook and I thought, wow, that was a big

explosion but the shaking just wouldn't stop. Then after about ten seconds of that I realized it was an earthquake. So I got under the table but it continued to get worse so then I got scared of the building collapsing on me. So I left the building and outside everything was just chaos. This earthquake changed the way Chinese people viewed one another ... they began to have a more Christian understanding of how to love one another and reach out to those in trouble. Before, all they cared about was their immediate family. After the earthquake everyone started to realize that there were people worse off than they were and we must help them. The whole country changed overnight and realized they need to be of service to others. For the first time ever, the government had a time of silence to remember the dead and it was a time of silence for three minutes. We held each other's hands, some cried, we remembered those people who had died. And sent survivors good wishes. I considered that to be a real Christian moment. It touched many lives.

D: We have all got so many modern conveniences around us, is there one convenience that you feel you just could not do without?

C: I don't think so, if you want to mention food, really nothing I can think of. Now in China we have conveniences that weren't there 23 years ago.

D: You live in a foreign country, but if you were in another country what would you say to tell about your hometown of Marshall?

C: When people ask me where I live I tell them I live in a small town, it's like a village and we all know each other, I tell them about our summer band concerts, I would love for my Chinese friends to visit and I have a good friend who is studying at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and I am hoping he can come. First thing people would ask about is "where are the people".

D: Thank you so much Connie for this wonderful interview.

C: Thank you Damian, I had a good time.