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Eunho Interview Transcript

Chris: Hi, my name is Chris Athanasia. Today is April 5, 2023, and I'm interviewing Eunho Lee, and we are currently meeting in the library study room. Let's get to it—first question: Where do you live currently when you're not at Colby?

Eunho: I live in Western Massachusetts, it's a town near Boston. About 30 minutes out.

Chris: Do you have an occupation when you're home for summer jobs?

Eunho: Last summer, and probably every summer from now on, I'll be just working in some kind of job. While I'm in college, maybe an internship. But this summer, I don't have anything planned, but I will have a job this summer.

Chris: So, then siblings? Do you have any, and what's your family structure like?

Eunho: Yeah, I have two sisters. They're older, twins. Both two years older than me. Heather and Joanne, they go to BC (Boston College). I have a mom and a dad. And, that makes up my family. Anything else you need to know or...?

Chris: That should cover that section. What is your general background with Korean history?

Eunho: My grandparents and my parents have told me just in conversation a lot about Korean history. That's probably where the bulk of my knowledge comes from. I also went to Korean school up until sixth or seventh grade, which a lot of Korean Americans go to. It's just to make sure your kids still know Korean. And you still get Korean history a basic curriculum. So that's where I got some of my knowledge, but it's mostly from my parents.

Chris: So obviously, Korean heritage and history is important to your parents. Has some of that importance carried down to you? And if so, what do you find most important about that history?

Eunho: Yeah, I think, especially when I was younger, I often hated going to Korean school, I just felt like it was a waste of time. But as I've gotten older, I definitely appreciate it a lot more that my parents made me go, because it helped me retain my Korean. As I got older, I felt more

of a sense that I wanted to get closer to my heritage and my culture, because I feel like when you're younger you don't really think about culture, heritage, those are kind of concepts that are a bit too nuanced for a younger kid. But I feel like as I've gotten older, the importance of heritage has become clear to me. Now, I try to speak Korean as much as possible with my parents, or my grandparents, just to make sure that my Korean is good. And I'm taking this class, so obviously, I enjoy learning about Korean history.

Chris: Getting more into the historical aspect of this: Obviously, we've talked about US-Korean relations a lot in this class. How do you feel, personally, about US-Korea relations? More in the historical aspect? Not really nowadays, but we'll get into that a little.

Eunho: I think this class certainly changed my perspective. Before, I was just talking to my mom. She clearly sees US intervention in the Korean War and [elsewhere], she sees US intervention as more of like a savior, or [in] a thankful manner, or that America saved Korea. But how I feel is, I've done the readings in class. I know what we learned in class, and it's obviously changed my view. But—obviously, it's a lot of bad and America has done a lot of bad—but in a weird way, I still feel some...not thankfulness, but gladness. I don't know if that's just because I grew up here and maybe I've been, psychologically conditioned to think these things, but in general, I still believe that the US, or the ideology you have what the USA is about—individual freedoms, all that kind of stuff—I still feel like that's a positive thing. If you look at North Korea today and South Korea today, I think, although it wasn't the fact that America—America did a lot of harm to Korea—but I still think that you can see the ideals of democracy and all that kind of stuff, how it's deeply rooted in South Korea and it's not in North Korea. So obviously, Americans did a lot of bad things, and a lot of bad things happened. But in a weird way, I still feel a little, like a sense of glad that it turned out this way, because if you look at South Korea versus North Korea now the development is clear to see.

Chris: Has your mother said anything specifically about that that would give you that sort of interpretation of thankfulness?

Eunho: Yeah, I remember, I don't know when, but talking to my mom I remember [her] specifically telling me [that] the reason why we have to be so thankful is because no one had heard of Korea, or no one really knew what Korea was at that time. It was just a small country in Asia, unknown to the Western world. Then these soldiers came and fought for people that they've never met, so we should be thankful. But I think that she kind of... Yeah, that is a true statement. But there's a lot of details and specifics—that intel that they came over for, and did a lot of not good things.

Chris: How did you personally respond to what some of our readings about, like the No Gun Ri¹ incident? How did you view that? And did that really affect your view of the US having grown up here?

Eunho: Yeah, I think it definitely changed my view. Because, when I was younger, too, I think it's just kind of naturally how it works. I was a lot more pro-American, pro-government. Then when you get older, you learn more things. And you're like, "Okay, maybe we shouldn't trust the government this blindly." Personally, hearing things about that, it's definitely dampening my view on whether foreign intervention is a positive thing. Because I mean, like the Nogunri thing—that's obviously a terrible massacre, and just hearing all these stories like that has definitely changed my view on foreign interventionism.

Chris: What are your thoughts on the occupation [of South Korea] following the Korean War by America, specifically the mistreatment of Korean citizens by US servicemen that were meant to be protecting them?

Eunho: All that kind of stuff I learned for the first time in our class. Yeah, I just had no idea that...and it's weird that I would have no idea, because I've heard so many stories of American interventionism in other places like Vietnam, where the treatment of the local people has been horrible. But it's also even more surprising that I've just never heard of any of these things. So clearly, there was a clear agenda to—not rewrite history—but hide certain aspects that might shed a negative light on US interventionism. But yeah, learning about all the military governments that they set up, again, it just completely redefines how I think about American influence on Korea, because it's no longer there. I feel like for me, it removes all, not all, but some sense of: Did America help Korea because it's the right thing to do? Or did they help Korea because it was advantageous for them? That kind of shifted on how I see the intentions behind America's actions.

Chris: How do you think being a Korean American growing up in America, how did that change your shape and your perspectives on some of these historical events?

Eunho: How did me being a Korean American influence my view?

Chris: Yeah, yeah.

Eunho: I guess it just felt a lot more personal. Because events that we're reading about—members of my family lived through it. I think there's a clear... This is the first Korean history class besides Korean school that I've ever taken, and in high school and learning about Vietnam or learning about any of the world wars or the civil war, any of those wars, you hear about atrocities and you hear about mistakes made. And it

¹ Occurred on July 26–29, 1950 in which American servicemen opened fire on South Korean refugees fearing North Korean infiltration near a village "Negeun-Ri" South of Seoul

just doesn't ring as true. When you know that, you have a personal connection to it. A lot of the readings were honestly hard to read, because I know that my grandparents, my great-grandparents, probably lived through this. They could have been one of those victims. So as a Korean American, it just hits a lot harder.

Chris: Yeah. Asking more specifically about the Korean school, was there... When they discussed history, Korean history, in general... It was a school about Korean culture, [so] what exactly did they go over in those history lessons? Was it very specific? What did they talk about?

Eunho: In Korean School, I distinctly remember, all the history that we learned was ancient history, it was a lot I think I didn't notice at the time. But looking back on it, you can see that we just never covered that topic [of modern history]. Maybe a teacher talked about it once or twice. But generally, the curriculum, it was a lot of what we learned on the first day of school or second day of class about ancient history, the Three Kingdoms², that kind of stuff. And there's a lot more focus on that. The story about the tiger and bear like eating garlic and the turning into people, like that story³. We learned that every single year. In Korea during my dad's generation, when he was growing up in school, there was also an effort to only show aspects of Korean history that are positive. From my experience, they just never taught it to me.

Chris: In your personal opinion, do you think that was more helpful or harmful to your experience?

Eunho: I think it was more harmful than good. I don't think it's good to shelter or to hide information just because it makes you feel bad. And Korean culture in general, too, is a bit... Korean people are prideful people, and they don't really like talking about those parts of history because it was pretty... it wasn't humiliating, but that's how a lot of Koreans see it. Obviously, we got invaded, that's not a humiliating thing. That's just a bad act from Japan, an evil act from Japan. But a lot of Koreans view that as a humiliating part of history. But just to hide—it doesn't change the fact that it happened, and trying to rewrite history is never good. We need to learn from past mistakes.

Chris: Going more into Korean [foreign] relations itself, how do you think ethnic relations have affected Korea as a whole? We can start with Japanese-Korean [relations]? Because, yeah, Japan's invasion, obviously.

Eunho: Yeah. There is still so much tension. I know there was a... What's it called? That cheap Japanese clothing store? I forget, there was a Japanese clothing store. I forget the name. But they opened a branch in Korea, and it went bankrupt. Because no Korean is going to try to buy Japanese goods. And that tension—obviously, me growing up in America, I feel less of it. But even when I was younger, I remember having anti-Japanese⁴

² Three Kingdoms of Korea—Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla a period between 57 BC to 668 AD

³ A historical Korean myth describing a tiger going through obstacles and finding the meaning of life, turning its fur white and becoming a spirit

⁴ A boycott of a Japanese commercial business named Uniqlo within Seoul

sentiments and not even knowing exactly why. Which is really strange, but just from being around Korean people, whenever I talk about history with my parents, there is an anti-Japanese sentiment that I still feel. I think it's pretty deep rooted in Korea, because it happened so recently, too.

Chris: Do you think South Korea or North Korean, do you think there's a view of different ethnicities because of the history of conflict between those two nations, or do you see it more on the reunification side that we've been talking about a lot in class.

Eunho: I think, for me personally, I'm still a big... if you were to ask me what I want, I want reunification. I feel that's what I've just been taught by my dad growing up. I've always been taught, that's the dream. That's what we all want. But I know recently in Korea, especially in the younger generation, there has been a shift towards, "Well, it's just been too long. We're too economically advanced or too developed compared to them, if we rejoined, we're going to have to help them develop and we're going to suffer ourselves. We don't want to eat that cost." There's a lot of that kind of sentiment in the younger generation. Maybe if I grew up in Korea I would also have those sentiments, but because I grew up here away from that and therefore my only influence is really the current people around me, which is my dad and stuff, they kind of instilled in me, reunification is still what we want and just thinking about objectively now, like even thinking about my biases, I think that's what I would still advocate for.

Chris: Shifting to the US once again, what do you think about Korean relations with Korean immigrants to the US, contrary to people actually growing up in Korea?

Eunho: Like Korean Koreans versus Korean Americans?

Chris: Yes, that's a good way to phrase it. I'm sorry about that.

Eunho: No, that's good. I think, to be honest, I would need to see some more perspectives from people who grew up in Korea. But just from, the readings, I know that there was a kind of resentment towards, obviously, the women who married to go to America and stuff. In general, throughout Korea's history, there have been a lot of anti-American movements and sentiments for various reasons. But honestly, I don't know if I have a good view on that. I don't really know how a Korean Korean would view me. But I know that, for me, I don't view Korean Koreans with any kind of negative feeling or anything like that.

Chris: Moving on a little bit to South Korea as a country: How do you view the militarism that was really present in South Korea? First up, to start with the end of the Korean

War? The truce, because it is still going on? As well as how do you think it serves in the modern era? So, comparing those two eras

Eunho: Well, actually, I almost had to go to the military. I was born in Korea, and I had to, I almost missed the deadline to terminate my citizenship. And I almost had to enlist. But so it's obviously still a significant thing today. But, Korean, back then, like, we had just come out of a war. And, obviously we were ruled by military dictatorships. And back then it was just, we were a developing country. I feel like the society wasn't in a place where we could speak out against these kinds of things. Right. Like, it was authoritarian, but, even in the readings, the farmers, or, the factory workers that we were reading about, they themselves believe that there were less because they weren't educated. So, I think that's the kind of the reason why it was so effective. And it took and kind of defined our society because,, we came out of a war, it was, a state of chaos and what rose out of that, a strong military dictatorship. So I think that in terms of obviously, it's changed nowadays, it's no longer like a militaristic, my dad used to have to do military drills in elementary school, because that's just kind of how, everything was structured the, the entire society was kind of built to build good soldiers, good workers, obedient, youth. But now, I mean, there's a stark difference, the education, you know, all that military stuff is out of education. And society just isn't built around, just making good soldiers. However, there is still that, ultra competitive, we have to be the best, kind of toxic, energy surrounding education in Korea. And I think that probably stems from the militaristic way that the country was run. I know my dad, this actually comes up in my interview, but my dad said that when he was younger, and his friend was ranked first in the school, and he was ranked second, he went home, told his mom about how proud he was of his friend, and he got in trouble, because he was happy that someone else was first placed on him. And that kind of culture kind of still exists in Korea. And I feel like you could definitely make connections to the military, militaristic society that it used to be.

Chris: Do you think that sort of heavy emphasis on being the best that comes from that military background? How do you think that changes the majority of the population? Like, do you think it's more for the good or negative?

Eunho: I think it's awful. To be honest, I think that, and maybe that's because my dad thinks it's awful. I feel like you're seeing a pattern that I am heavily influenced by my parents, but it's just, Korea has the highest suicide rate for students in the worlds. Korean mental health is essentially not a thing in Korea. And my dad, the reason why my family moved was because he hated the education system so much, and believe that I don't want to raise a family where everything is about competition, and there's no room for creativity or, choosing your own dreams or goals. I think Korean culture, in that aspect, and education is quite behind America, in that sense, or just like what it should be.

Chris: About that military service, do you think with the rampant focus on voluntary military service is causing more issues with North Korea because they see it as a sort of escalation and weaponizing their entire population against North Korea?

Eunho: I would granted, I'm not an expert on these kinds of things. But from my view, I would say no, because I know in North Korea, so mandatory conscription in Korea, South Korea is like two years or so. In North Korea, it's 10 I think. So every man has to serve 10 years in the military. And I think the way North Korea is structured and the way that they've developed they're already also everyone has to serve their militaristic country and I think that is not dependent on the Korean situation. I actually think it might be more dependent on America, and how the relationship between North Korea and America has developed, like, post Korean War.

Chris: How has the Korean culture you've gotten from it sounds like you've been influenced a lot by both your parents. So how has that changed your life and your identity and how you sort of view your own world? I guess?

Eunho: Yeah, I think that my, I've always thought of my Koreanness as, you know, a big part of who I am obviously, I suppose. I was born in Korea, although I moved here quite early. I still speak Korean. I speak with my parents. I've got a lot of Korean friends. I think for me, it's definitely been a defining part of who I am for sure. Especially learning about Korea is also very nationalistic. You know, we have a lot of pride. And I definitely feel those sentiments and I am definitely like a proud Korean, for sure.

Chris: So have your parents brought over any cultural practices or traditions from Korea from their lives there?

Eunho: I mean, in terms of, I mean food and stuff. Obviously, we still eat a lot of Korean food. In terms of like, we celebrate Korean holidays. Honestly, I don't know if we have, exact. things or mannerisms or things we do in our lives that are like, strictly from Korean. I don't, I don't really know. Nothing really comes to mind, which probably means there's nothing there. So I wouldn't say it. But, just speaking Korean in the house, eating Korean food. That's kind of the way that we practice our Koreanness,

Chris; Do you think the change from your father and you being native Korean to now immigrant Korean in America, how do you think that has impacted you in your life?

Eunho: You can definitely see, if you look at my father and myself, you can definitely see a lot of cultural differences. I look and act more American than he does. In Korea. If I grew up in Korea, I'm sure that I would be, you know, grinding away at some college because, you know, the

education system is terrible. But, I think or not terrible. It's just structured poorly. But I think that, like being here, as an American I am, I feel that I'm Korean. But I'm also very much American. I grew up here since I was three. And you can, I think you can clearly see that in the differences between me and my father.

Chris: You find a lot of the Korean aspects of your life very important. Obviously, you speak Korean. Do you think when you grow up and go on to have your own family, if you choose to do that, do you think you're going to carry on that tradition and kind of teach, this is your history and where you come from?

Eunho: I hope so. I hope I'm able to, but honestly, I think it's more dependent on who my wife is to be honest. Like, if she's not Korean. That's probably not gonna happen. But I want to. I certainly want to make sure that my kids understand the Korean side of them, and especially for Korean American or Koreans in general post colonialism and the war. That was such a significant and history changing time for Koreans, all Koreans. I think that every Korean should understand our history and the mistakes of the past. And what we came from to be here now. I definitely want to, you know, keep that going with my kids.

Chris: Now to change subject a little bit sorry, it's a bit of a sharp turn. So you mentioned previously, you still eat Korean food? Can you give a few examples of what you would commonly have at home?

Eunho: Yeah in Korea, or in Korean food, there's something called *banchan* (side dishes) you have like a main dish, but there's a ton of shared little dishes on the table that everyone takes from, like *Gimchi* (side dish) is a *banchan*. It's not like a food that you just eat by itself normally, but you know, it goes with the main meal. I love *Gimchi*. I love, Korea has a lot of good noodle dishes. A lot of good broths I'm actually coming to college, the thing I miss the most was Korean food out of anything. So yeah, I'd say there's, at home I eat Korean food pretty much every day. So it's definitely a big part of my life.

Chris: So do you think it's like a massive part of your identity? If that makes sense? I don't know if I'm phrasing that exactly right, but do you think without Korean food, you'd be missing some part of yourself?

Eunho: Oh, yeah. I think so. Because coming to college, it was the thing that I noticed the most that was missing from my life. And Korean food is quite unique. Eating other countries' foods It's not nothing like Korean food to me. Maybe that's just because I grew up eating it. So

But to me, Korean food it's definitely like Korean general like we're so big about food. It's definitely a defining factor. I couldn't really imagine life and never eating Korean food again. All my favorite foods are Korean.

Chris: So how do you think food, particularly what you've described has played a role in immigrant lives, so the lives of your parents for example?

Eunho: Yeah, I know a lot of Korean people, they find it hard to digest a lot of American food especially if it's greasy and stuff like that, it's kind of hard to digest. I know when my parents moved here we still ate Korean food all the time. It's definitely a way to still be connected to your culture and it's something familiar. It's like eating your moms cooking from your childhood. Especially moving to a new country you barely speak the language and don't know anyone there, but things that bring you comfort, familiar things are even more important at that point cause everything else is so foreign

Chris: So circling back to your father, again a bit of a hard segway, are there any stories your father or mother told you that were particularly impactful to how you view your Korean History?

Eunho: Yea, there's a couple. The first one that came to mind, I just remember my dad telling me about how he went to a church, my entire family is christian, but his church, you could literally see from when he was younger to when he was a young adult about 3 people in his church owned a car, like a personal car, and within fifteen years everyone had a car. And so he said you could literally see the development like buildings popping up and all that stuff, in his life. The reason it was so impactful I just realized that I've never known poverty, I've never known what it's like to not have food or not have access to education or grow up in a country that just went through a war, a civil war. And yet just two generations up my grandparents lived through that and through their hard work they gave my parents the opportunities that they got and they worked their asses off to get me here, so just hearing, the fact that when my dad was a kid there was a military coup, in the government and all these terrible things happened, the fact that I don't have to live through that is a testament to how hard my parents have worked and how hard their parents have worked to make sure that I don't have that kind of life

Chris: Talking about that heavy development following that very large period of development, how do you think that has shaped modern Korean society?

Eunho: Well it's definitely defined our economy, I'm not too knowledgeable about economics but I am pretty sure it did. And also I think the thing that comes to mind is, I know that period in history is a very controversial period, because a lot of Koreans believe that Chungsu (Korean: Park Chung-Hee) was a good president because he brought about that time of prosperity, but if you look at the way he did it, a lot of people suffered and that's still a debate that's going on

today and it still defines what kind of leaders they want and how they want the country to be run. I know my grandparents are very republican and they believe that *Chungsu* (Park Chung-Hee) was a great leader or a necessary leader is probably a better word and they hate the current president that's a democrat. My parents are more sympathetic towards the democratic president and they hate Park Chung-Hee. So even today that period of industrialization is still a topic of was it good was it bad? Is it a good model to go off or is it bad? So it still impacts society today.

Chris: A lot of what we've covered is the necessary evils that are common throughout South Korean history, so how do you think the US involvement played a role in the brutalization for the goal of development?

Eunho: I think from America's point of view, I think the sentiment was a lot more Korea is advantageous for the Cold War. We should develop a democratic nation allied with us under our control near controls like China and the Soviet Union, so I view America's intervention as more evil I guess? But it is undeniable that it has led to Korea going from a third world country to the fifteenth richest country in the span of a couple decades, and without American intervention there's a good chance that wouldn't have happened. So it's kind of a gray area, it's hard to tell. You can say something is objectively evil but its still important for the path of history, so I'm not too sure, I would say that even though, some people say the ends justify the means, which is true to a certain extent but when I think of the horrors that happened with Korea, I am grateful that Korea is well off today, but I still don't view a lot of the things that happened as, they were evil but they were necessary. A lot of it was pointless, a lot of the massacres, I'm kinda going in circles because I know what I wanna say but I can't really say it in words, America's involvement did lead to a prosperous country. The way it happened, doesn't mean that was our only path forward, so that's why you hesitate to justify it, and yet there's still a feeling of, i'm still glad the way it ended out. It's like a paradox, it's just a very complicated topic cause there's a lot of positive and negative things that happened during that time from American interventionism, so I guess the answer is I'm not too sure but it's definitely a topic of contention

Chris: I think that's all the questions I really had so if you feel there is anything else you'd like to share either regarding your personal experiences, your parents anything like that?

Eunho: Not too much, the one thing I will say is I think that, this is just my feeling, but in the future Korea is gonna have to I guess they've already started but we're gonna have to look back at our path honestly and rethink about the role of American interventionism and even facing the atrocities that Koreans caused in Vietnam, for example, and the atrocities that Koreans caused to other Koreans I feel like Korea has just such a, we are just too prideful to admit our faults sometimes, and I think that it's just kinda holding us back, that's all I'll say.

Chris: Then going off that because now I'm curious, do you think that now South Korea is on the path to getting to that self-realization or do you think they're still kind of stuck in that pride?

Eunho: The older generation is definitely that way. See, Korean culture and society is based on an age hierarchy and therefore it's just inherently hard to disagree with your elders or your superiors. And, this is a story my dad told me there was a lot of plane crashes in Korea, because the junior pilot was too afraid to say something to the senior pilot when they were making a mistake and that's ridiculous but that's kinda just how it's always been and that's probably one of the main issues with Korean society, there's just such a strong traditional culture, like strong age hierarchy system that it's just so hard, as a youth it's just so hard to make change. And a lot of time progressive movements are led by the youth, Korea's age hierarchy system directly impedes that so it's just kinda hard sometimes to voice your opinions when you're expected not to your expected to listen to people that are older than you, your elders so, Korea needs to change

Chris: Do you ever think there's going to be an era where the young people can finally get through to that older generation and actually have, you know that drive to go against that cultural norm or do you think it's more going to be waiting for the older generation to get out of the spotlight.

Eunho: I can't say definitively but from my experience, I go to a Korean church there are elders there, interacting with them, I find it very hard to believe that their minds can be changed, to be honest I just don't feel like, a lot of older Korean like the older Korean generation that's all they've grown up with, to them a junior talking back at them is the ultimate sign of disrespect and if we want to have a democratic society if you want to have a society where everyone's voice is heard then this is just an inherently backwards and flawed system, an age hierarchy makes no sense, age has no bearing on if you know any better, well a little bit but not always. And I think that as time goes on as the current generation gets older and becomes more the center heart of Korean society I think that's when a lot more change is going to happen because just talking about Korean elders in my church they are so stubborn, and they will not listen to you, they will ask you for your opinion and then they'll just do everything that they want to do. And I think we need to wait a bit

Chris: Alright, anything else?

Eunho: I'm all set

Chris: Well thank you very much