

Interview Transcript:

Claire Meng: My name is Claire Meng, and I'm a current freshman at Colby College. Today is March 16, 2023, and I'm interviewing my classmate for The Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Yubin Moon: Yes.

Claire Meng: So, I'm very lucky to have you with me today. How are you feeling?

Yubin Moon: I'm doing well, thanks for asking.

Claire Meng: That's great to hear. Could you share a bit about yourself, like your name, where you're from, and some general background information?

Yubin Moon: My name is Yubin Moon, and I currently live in Ohio. I was born in Canada, as explained before.

Claire Meng: Do you like your major at Colby?

Yubin Moon: Well, I'm currently a freshman, and I haven't really decided what I want to do yet. I'm planning on doing computer science and possibly math, but that's a decision for later. I'm from Solon, Ohio, a small town.

Claire Meng: That's perfect. I'm just curious, is there a Korean population in your town?

Yubin Moon: There are some Korean people, but it's not a very large population. There's a Korean church in the nearby town.

Claire Meng: How did your family decide on the specific town you live in? Who's there?

Yubin Moon: I think one of the reasons was because I was two years old and starting to get into school. It was a good place to have a kid, I guess. Also, it's close to where my dad works, so that was also convenient.

Claire Meng: So, I think today we're really going to talk about how you, as a second-generation Korean immigrant growing up in the U.S., have shaped your sense of identity. Have you ever felt like you had to choose one over the other?

Yubin Moon: When I was in elementary school, I didn't really want to be super Korean. I just wanted to fit in with other people my age because there weren't a lot of Korean people in my school, which was predominantly white. There was a time when I always wanted to get food that other people were eating instead of Korean food. But later on, I realized that I like Korean food more than Western food, so I started to eat more Korean food and pack it for my lunch. As I grew up, I definitely embraced more of my Korean heritage, but I also feel like I'm American because of the environment I grew up in.

Claire Meng: So, it's just a co-existence of both parts of you?

Yubin Moon: Yes, exactly.

Claire Meng: In what ways have you integrated aspects of both Korean and American cultures into your daily life? You've mentioned food, but are there any other aspects?

Yubin Moon: The friends I've made in school are usually not Korean because that's where I live. I also have friends in the Korean church that I grew up being a part of. It's a Korean-centered group where people from different nearby cities come together to attend the same church.

Claire Meng: Is that church located in your town?

Yubin Moon: No, it's a couple of towns away, about a 20- to 30-minute drive.

Claire Meng: That's pretty close. So the third question may be relevant to your situation. Have you ever faced any kind of prejudice, discrimination, or misunderstanding due to your identities? If so, how did you deal with them?

Yubin Moon: Well, fortunately, I haven't faced many such situations. I have been lucky growing up. Although, I do know people who have been through such experiences. There was a time in elementary school when I was bullied for having what they called "small eyes," and I told the teacher because I knew it wasn't right. The teacher agreed and dealt with it, so it ended well for me. But I don't know how it could have escalated if I hadn't told the teacher. I have been lucky to avoid such situations, but they do occur, and I've just been fortunate.

Claire Meng: I'm sorry to hear about your experience in elementary school. Do you have a religion, since you attend the Korean church? Can you tell me about your experience at the Korean church?

Yubin Moon: Sure. I was introduced to Christianity when I came here at the age of four, so my family started attending the Korean church. I did make friends at the church, but we were not

very close. We still consider each other acquaintances. It was more of a personal choice for me, and I did not have any close friends there. But I was definitely part of the church.

Claire Meng: How often do you attend church?

Yubin Moon: My parents are both bible study teachers, so I usually attend every week unless I'm sick or have some other important commitment. But I usually attend.

Claire Meng: I see. Can you tell me more about your parents' religious background and their experience in finding a community in the U.S.?

Yubin Moon: My dad has been Christian since he was a child, and my mom decided to become Christian in college in Korea. Since then, they have been going to church. When they came to the U.S., they found another community where they belonged. We first lived in Canada for a while and found a community there. After we moved to Ohio, they started searching for a community, and we have been going to the same church ever since. So finding a group of people with the same religion was helpful when we moved to a new place.

Claire Meng: That's great. Have you noticed any differences between Korean churches and non-Korean churches in terms of their community functions and social support?

Yubin Moon: I have been to American churches for volunteering events. The American church I visited had thousands of people attending, while the Korean church I attend has around 300-400 people. The Korean church's community is more tight-knit, with people who know each other well, while the American church's community is more individualistic.

Claire Meng: That's interesting. Can you tell me about your experience growing up as a Korean-English bilingual in the United States? How has your family influenced your ability and motivation to maintain your Korean language?

Yubin Moon: Sure. Since my parents spoke Korean more than English, my first language was Korean, and I had to learn English when we moved to Ohio. However, my parents still speak Korean at home, so I can maintain my Korean language skills.

Claire Meng: Have you ever used Korean language classes or resources in the community?

Yubin Moon: Yes, when I was younger, I attended a Korean school that was held at my church for about three years. The school was usually held during the summer, and we had classes on Saturdays or Fridays.

Claire Meng: Hi, you mentioned how you came back to Korea during the summer every four years, so it seems like you can speak Korean fluently. Is that right?

Yubin Moon: Yes, I do speak Korean. I use it to communicate with my parents, other relatives, and family friends because they don't speak English very well.

Claire Meng: When you were growing up as a second-generation Korean American, how did it influence your career aspirations? You mentioned that you wanted to pursue computer science. Did your parents' expectations, culture, and values impact your career choices?

Yubin Moon: To be honest, I don't know. My dad is a computer engineer, and being exposed to computer science in high school made me interested in it. I thought it was cool, so I decided to continue studying it. My parents didn't tell me to choose a specific career path. When I was younger, I wanted to become a doctor because I found the human body fascinating. My parents bought me an anatomy book, but after seeing a video of blood, I realized it wasn't for me. My parents didn't push me to pursue any specific career, but they did support me when I showed an interest in playing the piano.

Claire Meng: Is there anything that your parents wouldn't want you to do, like pursuing a career in art?

Yubin Moon: I think my parents would prefer if I didn't pursue a career in art or social media because they believe that those fields don't have as much earning potential as others. But if I insisted on pursuing those fields, I think they would still support me to the best of their ability. However, I haven't really considered those fields because I have always been interested in STEM subjects.

Claire Meng: Moving on to Korean food, could you share your experience with it, especially during your time in the US?

Yubin Moon: Sure, when I was growing up in Canada, there was a large Korean population, so finding Korean food was easy. My grandparents who live in Canada are from Korea and know how to cook authentic Korean food, so I was able to enjoy it at home as well. However, when I moved to Ohio, which is not as diverse, it was harder to find Korean food. My mom is a good cook and would often make Korean food at home. As for Korean restaurants in the US, the taste can be different from authentic Korean food. For example, the soup can be very salty.

Claire Meng: I agree that the taste of Chinese-American food can also be different from authentic Chinese food. The soup is incredibly salty, and some dishes like fried rice and General Tso's chicken were completely new to me when I first came to the U.S. Even the egg was prepared differently, and some dishes seemed to be invented here.

Claire Meng: In general, are there any Korean dishes that meant a lot to you?

Yubin Moon: I want to say ramen. Well, it's one thing. It's not just because it's fast food and we eat it all the time, but also because it's something we usually have when everyone's too tired to cook. We all gather around and make it together, adding random stuff to the soup to make it more flavorful. It's like a bonding experience and a community thing. We boil all the ramen together in one pot and everyone eats from it. It's a lot of fun.

Claire Meng: That sounds like a great way to bond with friends and family over food. What Korean food would you bring to school or pack for lunch?

Yubin Moon: *Gimbap* (김밥), which are rolls made of seaweed, rice, and various ingredients like carrots, cucumbers, bacon, spam, and other things. However, there are some Korean foods that I wouldn't bring, especially *Mandu* (만두), which can have a strong smell that's not suitable for enclosed spaces like classrooms.

Claire Meng: That makes sense to me, too.

Claire Meng: It seems like food is an important part of your culture and a way to connect with others. Can you share more about that?

Yubin Moon: Sure, please. Actually, in college, in my dorm, there were two other Korean people that I got along with. We literally just give each other food and run away. I think there's this gift-giving culture in Korean people, and it's not super strong among Korean Americans. You give gifts and you kind of just say, "Don't take anything back," because if someone gives you a gift, then you have to give them a gift. And that was exactly what we did. We only had Korean food that much, but we'd do it with ramen and seaweed.

Claire Meng: So you just give each other ramen and run away?

Yubin Moon: Not to run away. But whenever we're having a conversation and we're all interested in talking, we'll just have ramen. And if there's someone who wouldn't have an iron pot, then we'd say, "Here you go," and that looks like you don't have to buy one, and then some give you one too. So it's like everyone will have food in the end. And then there are people who aren't Korean, who are interested in having ramen. We say, "Here you go, here is ramen. Take it." It's a part of your culture. There are all those stories about how Koreans in U.S. colleges just share ramen and give it to people.

Yubin Moon: It's just so easy to make, and it's really good. It's bad for you, but it's really good. You obviously don't eat it every day, but it's really good just in small portions. All I know is that I definitely want to eat it every day. It's not good for you, which is too bad.

Claire Meng: Whoa, very interesting, I guess our conversation today is not very focused on one topic, it's all over the place.

Claire Meng: So, very successful we got. And thank you so much for not taking your time.

Yubin Moon: Honestly, I have fun. I guess I just like to talk some.