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HI244
Professor Diederich
30 April 2023

From La Mirada, CA to Seoul, South Korea – Transcript –
Cole Tully & Caleb Jung

Cole:

Hello. My name is Cole Tully. Today is March 30, 2023, and I am interviewing through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Caleb, do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Caleb:

Yes, I do.

Cole:

Let's go. All right, so to start off this interview, we're just going to hit you with a couple of startup questions before we dive into any historical topics. How has your senior year at Colby been thus far?

Caleb:

It's been pretty good. Fall semester kind of flew by, and then JanPlan, I spent it in Korea doing a study abroad program. So that was honestly, probably one of the best experiences of my life. Just because, as an athlete, it's not frowned upon to go abroad, but you want to commit as much time as possible (to practicing your sport). I feel like JanPlan is kind of the best time to go abroad. I spent a little over a month there: I went early before the program, because I have some family there, and then spent some time after and came back in the spring. So, yeah, now I'm taking three courses, just getting ready for graduation, just trying to enjoy the last semester before getting into the real world. But, yeah, it's been pretty good. College in general just kind of flew by, but now we're here in the spring semester.

Cole:

Speaking of college flying by in the spring semester, we got another question about your postgraduate plans and what they are and how excited you are to enter this new phase of your life?

Caleb:

I'm from La Mirada, California, which is a suburb of L.A. I think, postgrad I'm going to probably go back to California and live at home for the first twelve to eighteen months. I want to work in sports after, just waiting on some job confirmation stuff to work in sports, because that's what I'm passionate about. Probably sports marketing and event operations. But it's been a great four years being in the East Coast, out in Maine. I hadn't been before I started college, so it's been a great experience just meeting great people. Obviously, Cole, but also other teammates from the East Coast in places like Mass, New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. I've been able to experience a lot of good things but yeah, I'm excited to graduate and eventually get back to Southern California.

Cole:

That sounds great. So now that we've covered a couple light topics, featuring more personal questions, we're going to get into the questions that made you such a great candidate for this interview and the stuff that we're really looking to dive into with this project, which I know we're both pretty excited about. You talked about California and your childhood experiences and growing up there as a Korean American. How do you feel your family's background has affected your perspectives of both the United States and Korea?

Caleb:

Both my parents were actually born in Korea, and my dad immigrated in, I believe, his early-20s for business purposes. Then my mother, she actually was born in Korea, but immigrated to South America before coming to the US, just because it was easier coming from Korea to South America then to the US, rather than straight from Korea to the US. I feel like they bring unique perspectives. As for my dad, I mean, both of my parents are full Korean, they're both Korean American now, but my dad has kind of retained more of his Korean roots just because both of his parents were in Korea basically their whole lives. They visit the US here and there, when time and finances permit it. But both of my mom's parents, when my mom immigrated, they lived in Chicago, they lived in South Bend, Indiana, they lived in Bourbon, California. Now they're staying in Santa Ana and La Mirada in Southern California. I would say it definitely shaped my experience a lot, being not just Asian American, but Korean American. Fortunately, in Southern California, at least where I'm at,

there's a good amount of Korean American people. Whether that's baseball or church community, that's a big one, there's a lot of Christian community in not just Southern California, but in the Korean community as well. I feel like that was one big part of my childhood identity and experience growing up. Going to church, you find a lot of your friends, your family, and then you just spend so much time around that religious culture and that definitely shaped my experience personally. I was going to church every Sunday, and on Fridays, other Korean families would come to our houses for a worship or Bible study. That was a huge part of it, if that answers your question.

Cole:

Yeah, definitely, that was great, especially how you sort of touched on your religious experiences and also how those experiences are not super unique to your family, but some broader experiences had in the Korean community both inside and outside of California. So that's definitely something that I hope that we can talk about a little bit down the road and more depth down this interview. But staying on the topic of South Korea, you mentioned about spending JanPlan in 2023 in South Korea. During that stay, did you get a sense of South Koreans' perspectives of Americans? Or oppositely, has your life in America taught you about anything about Americans' perspectives of Korea and its citizens?

Caleb:

Yeah, I think while spending time with my family. My dad, he's the oldest of four children, and his younger brother, my uncle, is who I stayed with the most. They live in Seoul, which is the capital of Korea. Two of his younger sisters, they live out in the countryside, basically. Fortunately for me, I had two cousins, the children of my uncle, one's like one- year older than me, about 22-years-old, and one's a sophomore in high school, he's like 16-years-old. I would say I kind of got that cultural difference and culture shock when I was hanging out with my cousin and his friends and the first thing that my cousin gave them was like "Hey, this is my cousin, he's a senior, and he's studying abroad soon at Yonsei University," which is a top three university in Korea. They were asking me questions about the US and from their knowledge, one thing that sticks out to me is one of the friends who had the most cultural knowledge about the US. It's just funny the initial questions they ask because they don't know a lot of the niche things, but they know a lot of the popular things in culture and what they hear on media or what they see on social media. I remember some of the questions. They knew about Miami, they knew about

New York, they knew about Texas and L.A. And some of the first questions they ask is like, “Oh, what's weed like?” Or “Do a lot of people in the US consume marijuana?” Another one was like, “In Texas, do they just shoot guns all the time and stuff? And is that what California is like?” I told them those are stereotypical differences and things they're curious about, just because in Korea access to guns is not as prominent as in the US, in places like Texas or the south. Smoking weed is obviously very illegal in Korea, as it is in many East Asian countries. But yeah, I think as I experienced more of Korea and going to school there and some of even the minor cultural differences in regular life. That experience made me realize, “Oh, these are the differences in each, respectively, Korea and the United States.” I think a big difference was, being a Korean American in the US, obviously it's going to be different, but being in Korea, one thing I noticed is just being around people who are where the majority looks like me, and they speak the language. My first language was Korean, and just hearing Korean everywhere… It's basically become like my second language now just because I grew up in the US and went to school where English was taught and spoken as the dominant language. I think that was the biggest cultural difference. Even minor stuff, when you go to a restaurant, the service is different in Korean. In Korean restaurants tipping isn't a thing. I remember going to a bar, and the service is great, and I wanted to tip, and I asked them, “Hey, can I leave a tip?” And they're like, “No, don't worry about it. If anything, just buy more drinks.” Or you go to a coffee shop, and you don't order with a cashier, you just press something on a big iPad-like kiosk, and they call your number. You pick up your drink and you just sit down. Stuff like that and other things like public transportation; it was so easy to get around and stuff.

Cole:

Wow. Yes. That is crazy.

Caleb:

Yeah, so those are just some of the differences that I initially noticed.

Cole:

Just when I thought that you couldn't give a better answer to that question, you lead us right at the end toward language and you talked about Korean almost becoming your second language and the differences you felt with being in a setting that everyone around you looked like you. Obviously, this isn't always the case in the United States, and especially is not the case at

somewhere like Colby College or some of the baseball environments that we've both been in. Obviously, you know best that isn't always how things were, so my second question was staying on the topic of that recent visit. Do you feel like you fit in as a Korean American? And did you feel like any language or other barriers were present that separated you as a Korean American from other citizens in South Korea that were really just Korean and didn't have that American background also?

Caleb:

Yeah. I think I remember asking my cousin and his friends “Hey, if you didn't know me, and if you didn't know the context of why I'm here, and if you didn't know my cousin, would you know that I'm not just Korean, but Korean American?” And my cousin gave a pretty interesting answer. I think he could tell because he was seeing the differences in Western diet, and he gave me the breakdown. Basically, Korean diets have less protein and [are] more soup-based, a lot of rice. Obviously, that's a big part of just the meal. I guess the environmental and physical factors that contribute to the differences between different countries. Obviously, I'm eating Korean food, too, at home, just because my mom and my grandparents, they cook that. But that was the initial difference. I would say, language-wise, I am a little behind in Korean. I can get by, I can order in a restaurant, I can hold very basic conversations, but I think my American accent when I do speak in Korean to native Korean people, is a dead giveaway.

Cole:

Yeah, that’s kind of what I was wondering about.

Caleb:

I don't speak it as much as I would like to. I mean, my parents speak it at home, but there's a huge difference between occasional conversation with family versus speaking it to service people, speaking it to professors, speaking in a professional setting versus casual and even an academic setting. I don't think if I were to be in a business setting that I would be able to fly as a professional operating Korean American.

Cole:

Right. It's such an interesting response, too, because when drafting that question, I kind of had the mindset that unlike a lot of other Korean Americans who might have one Korean parent and one parent of sort of like a different ethnicity, ethnic background, obviously you said you have both parents from Korea. So even if there's not a distinct physical difference that's visible when talking to you or when conversing with you, there's other things, like the American accent or different Western-influenced dialogue that you talked about. It is so great that you mentioned these things because, especially with someone like myself, I haven't been to East Asia or to Asia at all. And also, before coming to Colby, I had some classmates, some friends of different Asian descents, but I never really would have known the difference between how English, when spoken from someone in Korea, would sound, versus the kind of accent that develops and the way the dialogue changes from living in a country where that's really the predominant language, like America. And that is just such a great answer, because although some might already know those things, I think it's important for maybe those that don't know that to hear and understand that, even if there isn't a whole bunch of visible or physical differences present, there still can be many things that make your experience in somewhere like South Korea either different or unique or provide some challenges for you, or maybe even not challenges, but some benefits, especially once you overcome those challenges. I thought that was a super great response.

Cole:
The next question is more about the United States, kind of back to what we had talked about a little bit earlier in California. Many Americans suggest that California is an immensely progressive place with a strong Asian American population also. So as a Korean American, did you feel supported in your racial or cultural identity on the West Coast, or did you also experience some exclusion on the basis of your race or culture? I know that I kind of fumbled that question. A little bit, but hopefully I got the message through there. I could read it again if you need me to.

Caleb:

Would you say this is strictly about my experience in the West Coast?

Cole:

Yeah. Strictly in the west coast.

Caleb:

Growing up in California my whole life, and living there until college, that is where I basically spent all my time. I would say, looking back at it now, I wouldn't say that I've received too much racial discrimination or exclusion where I felt like, 'hey, I'm the only person of my skin color or my ethnicity or being from having Korean parents.' In elementary, middle, or high school, I would say La Mirada where I was raised and I went to school my whole life until college, and there were a handful of Asian American people, and there was always a Korean community that I could find. I remember in elementary, middle, and high school, within my friends, there was always a handful of Korean people. And it's not like these were just Korean people who happen to go to my school, but these were Korean friends and good people that I was close with. And they went through the same struggles, and they went through the same schooling type thing and same experiences. A lot of them happened to also go to church, if not all of them. And our parents knew each other just because it's like, hey, you go to this elementary school and its parent teacher night or something, and you just gravitate towards other Korean parents who are of the same age, same experiences. They probably have mutual friends through Korean church. So yeah, I would say, I haven't honestly experienced any major or severe discrimination just because of my "Koreanness."

Cole:

Yeah, okay. So now that we kind of covered a lot of that stuff, mostly regarding your Korean American identity, your experiences on the West Coast, and obviously the last question that we kind of just discussed was about whether or not you experience exclusion once in America. But something that we see nowadays, especially with debates about immigration and stuff like that, is the topic of some people excluding people from ever even entering America in the first place, which kind of leads into our next question and makes me think of your family's process and history with immigration. Do you know your family's story concerning how and why they immigrated from South Korea to America? I know you mentioned earlier about your father having some business interests, but is there anything you want to elaborate on that further? And would you say the US has lived up to your family's expectations or is there some shortcomings in the United States?

Caleb:

Yes, so on my mother's side, I remember talking to my mom about this and basically asking why my grandparents wanted to move to the US, and plain and simple, they felt the US was a place where they would have a better opportunity to raise their children and give them a better future pursuing what they wanted to. And my grandpa on my mom's side, he kind of found work through Taekwondo. That was his passion, and that eventually transitioned into something he made a full-time career out of. He's a 9th degree black belt who traveled a lot, and I think he eventually got his first visa in the US by judging international competition. [1] So that was something that's a huge part of Korean culture, Taekwondo, that's the main form of martial arts, if I'm not wrong, for South Korea, and that's how my grandpa kind of broke into immigration stuff. Getting a visa and hearing "hey, you're going to judge in Chicago," and then he liked Chicago, so he decided, 'after South America, this is where I want to start my life in the US.' Then went to Indiana and eventually to Southern California. But with my dad on his side, he ran a jewelry business with a partner, and that's how he kind of got his foot in the door with immigration and stuff. But I don't know the current state of immigration exactly and how it compares to back then, but I know it's still a struggle for a lot of Korean American people, or just Korean people trying to immigrate to the US. For getting all the paperwork, just off the top of my head I can think of two people I know that are Koreans, and not necessarily Korean Americans, but to me they're Korean Americans because I grew up with them, they pay taxes, they live here, they work a job and have no criminal record of any sort. I think it just kind of points out the struggle of immigration and how tough of a process it is. I feel like in California, when people think of immigrants, they immediately just think of what's convenient. It's people coming from the southern border. But I think that's not always the case, that's just a hasty generalization that people like to make and a stereotype. But I know a handful of my friends that I went to high school and grew up with, and they are technically illegal immigrants just because they've been fighting and trying to complete the paperwork. It's a hassle, and a year on year, even a decade long process. Someone I grew up playing baseball with, who I met through a Korean baseball team, he went to high school here and he goes to junior college here, but he's still fighting with immigration to get cleared, and it's like an ongoing hassle for him. It's not just a mental process.

Cole:

Yeah man that must be so difficult.

[1] A ninth-degree black belt is the highest belt-level that can be attained and is referred to as a "Grand Master."

Caleb:

Yeah, a lot through high school, just because it hits every aspect of your life like, “hey, am I going to be able to stay in this country? I'm working, my parents are working, they're paying taxes, I'm going to school here, but am I going to get deported back to Korea?” So that was something that definitely impacted his mental state academically in high school. He was a very smart kid, but he was just kind of wrapped up and not in school because he had to work to pay lawyer fees to get this immigration stuff settled. Fortunately, I think my family's experiences went relatively smoothly compared to a couple of people I know who are still struggling with immigration things to this day.

Cole:

Yeah, it's impossible to imagine. With those very real and substantial concerns that your friend has, it is impossible to expect someone to put academics or something like that as their main priority when they're dealing with, like you said, trying to get lawyers and trying to make money to support that immigration process and take the steps necessary to make sure that you won't just get sent back at any time. I can never even imagine how much stress and pressure that would cause, especially just from lingering in the back of your mind and not being able to kind of put that anxiety away for, like you said, a decade or even more. Man, what a long process that can be. One element of your answer that I found super interesting was, I recently did a big project about Japan and the United States and kind of the bridge that baseball has become between those two countries. And a lot of it focused on a whole bunch of different people that baseball allowed to get citizenship or to even just be able to have a job in the United States; knowing they could go there with a job, baseball allowed a lot of players that luxury. And it kind of just reminded me of when you talked about how taekwondo, the way that that served as a bridge between Korea and America, is definitely just another thing that really highlights how impactful sports can be and how oftentimes it can be bigger than just a game that people are playing, but something that can open up so many opportunities and that can serve to connect people between different countries or different societies or whatever it may be. That's something that's been on my mind a lot and your story there about taekwondo definitely sort of exemplifies how powerful sports have been in coming to the United States or going from the United States to another country or whatever it may be, and how intertwined that can be with the immigration process. But our next question is sort of about the timetable of your parents’ immigration process, and most specifically arriving decades apart from one another, do you feel they have differing perspectives of the US?

Caleb:

Yeah, so I think, I guess spending time talking to my parents about this and obviously knowing the two differences between my parents. My dad, he basically was born and raised and went to college in Seoul in Korea. My mom, where only a small portion of her childhood was not only spent in Korea and South America, but a big majority of it was in the United States.
And I think you can tell those differences because my dad, he mainly speaks Korean still in the house. And it's not that he's neglected English, he's gotten by, and he can fully understand English, but speaking it back is a little broken. But my mom, she's fluent in both and she's more in touch with American culture and she knows more of the cultural norms, and I guess like the current state of the US. Wait, what was the other part of the question?

Cole:

It was kind of mostly just with your parents driving decades apart from one another. Do you feel they have different perspectives of the US?

Caleb:

Oh yeah. Yeah, I would say they definitely do, especially within Korean American community. I can't really speak on East Asian countries as a whole, but I would say from my experience, a lot of Korean American people, especially like my parents' generation, I'm not too politically involved, but I guess off my observation, a lot of the Korean American community is pretty conservative. And that was one thing that I found interesting as I got older and as I started cultivating a more adult-like relationship with my parents. I started talking to my dad, because he loves reading, he loves philosophy, and I think one of the questions I asked him eventually was during COVID and we were just driving around, and it was like "hey, why did we stop going to this church?" And his answer was basically the leaders and the leadership in that church, the adults obviously, I'm not talking about youth pastors and people who are leading the youth ministry, but he was basically saying it got way too political, and he didn't like the way they were kind of pushing a conservative agenda into religion and I guess, the church curriculum. And that was an interesting learning moment for me where I got some insight on my dad and his opinions on media, religion, politics, even stuff like gay rights, abortion rights and that stuff, which is kind of a controversial topic, especially when it's intertwined with church and religion. Because, growing up as a Christian and someone who

was born in the church, I guess this is my personal interpretation, but I thought it was like, “Yo you're supposed to love everybody regardless of their beliefs or sexual orientation or race, color or basically if they're sinners or not, which I guess is subjective, whether what sin is. And within this conversation, I got a great insight into my dad about his insight and his own experiences as a Korean American person who grew up in Korea, who immigrated to the US. He basically began to form his own opinion and his own philosophy on how people should be treated. And that's definitely carried over into my life. I had this conversation with him two or three years ago and really kind of got a grasp of what it means to kind of be American and what it means to be Korean as well. Because realistically a lot of people in church, I hate to say it, but they're pretty bigoted. And they don't support gay rights, they don't support abortion. To each their own, but to me, I just found it hypocritical that people who are promoting church and religion and faith and love can turn around and basically hate on people who don't believe in what they promote. And that was something my dad kind of opened my eyes to and I realized ‘hey, church isn't everything. There's more to church than believing whatever is said in the Bible.’ I guess I'm kind of veering off that question, but that was my dad's experience. And I guess my mom, she's more in touch with recent culture. Yeah, I would say it's a mix, both of their experiences. Even though my dad came from a more conservative background, as in Christian parents going to church all the time, that doesn't necessarily influence his opinion of the US and how it kind of dictates his lifestyle and his own beliefs. And I think he's passing that on to his children, as in me and my siblings.

Cole:
Yeah, definitely. It seems like there is definitely some differing perspectives based on the timelines of your parents’ immigration processes, but also some similarities. And more importantly, or I guess different than similarities, but it seems like there's a lot of perspectives that kind of, regardless of your parents’ own perspectives or the church's own perspectives or whatever other perspectives are out there, it seems like you've definitely locked in on formulating your own interpretations and perspectives of things based off of your experiences too. Which obviously, especially with something like religion, is so essential like you talked about with not just sort of blindly following whatever is said in the Bible or whatever is told to you by the leaders at your local church or something like that, but also maybe believing and valuing a lot of those things that you are told and that you learn and that are said in the Bible, but also using your own rationality and interpretation and choosing to either leave some stuff out or decide kind of what you make of it. You know what I mean? With not just blindly following it,

but pretty much creating a mixture of what is still true and valuable today and maybe what is a little bit outdated or something like that in some of the Bible teachings.

Cole:
Anyway, so our next question is going to be sort of, almost a foreign policy or history related question. For some background, South Koreans have made enormous and thankless sacrifices for the United States, and most notably in this sense, Korea sent over 350,000 troops to Vietnam, where many Korean and Korean American soldiers died. In this historically considered, fairly senseless war, do you feel like this is properly acknowledged, recognized, or celebrated in historical US narratives? Should the South Korean government's role in America's census war be praised or condemned, or maybe is it more complicated than that?

Caleb:

I guess from an American high school student standpoint, which is the last time I've taken probably something in that time period, personally, I don't remember it being spoken much, whether that's just acknowledgment of any other country helping the US, because I feel like a lot of it was just about the war and not necessarily the groups who are fighting in it.

Cole:

Right.

Caleb:

But I guess from a personal standpoint, I remember my dad when he was a college student. This was a time in Korea where many college students, I guess my grandparents, when they would speak about it and like, when my mom would tell me about it, my dad was that college student who was protesting antiwar sentiment and stuff, I guess. I don't know the exact details, but those type of college students were kind of had a bad rep in Korean society and in culture. I'm sure your Korean professor would definitely be more knowledgeable on this, but they were getting arrested and stuff. I don't know if my dad necessarily got arrested, but it was kind of looked down upon as like, “yo, what are you doing as a college student? You should be studying, and you're putting yourself out there having antigovernment sentiments and stuff and basically protesting stuff like that.” I'm sure my dad has a better perspective on just Korean involvement and stuff. And when I talked to my uncle, my uncle was more of, I guess he

would play around and stuff, but my dad was focused on studies, and in his free time, he chose to protest against the Korean government and what he viewed as corruption in Korean government. I thought that was kind of interesting.

Cole:

Definitely.

Caleb:

Especially when you brought up Korean wars and whether it's propaganda or getting involved in foreign affairs yeah, that's just one perspective that I can provide. I can't provide my own perspective because I haven't looked too much into it. But right when you brought that up and you kind of spoke on Korean involvement, I thought of my dad and him getting involved in that stuff when he was our age.

Cole:

Yeah. Even if you don't really have your own passionate perspective on that, it's still very valuable thing for you to share, especially with regards to this interview, because those protests and that whole period is something that we learned a lot about in class, especially in this particular class in this semester. And so that fact that you have a personal story to that made you a perfect fit for this interview. And as you continue to lead us perfectly into each next question, you discussed your dad and how what he chose to do with some of his time was to stay up to date on South Korean government and South Korean politics and really speak his mind. Our next question is, with having family and friends in South Korea, you stay up to date on South Korea's political climate? And if so, how do you feel about the US South Korean relationship today?

Caleb:

Yeah, I would say a lot of it is like when I talk to my dad or my parents about what's going on in Korean politics. I think in the past decade, there was a decent amount of corruption in Korean government. I think a president got impeached just because of their relations to a shaman or

a cult group.[2] So besides that, I'm not too in touch with political relations between Korea and the US, but especially South Korea and their political atmosphere right now.

Cole:

You stay up to or I guess your parents probably stay up to date a little bit more on the important topics, and maybe as a result, like a trickle-down effect, you end up hearing about some of those super important impeachment-like topics as well.

Caleb:

Yeah, that and I think in the past, I guess the last year, my dad was just talking about how with the South Korean presidential election and with their new president, Korea was pretty divided. But besides that, not too much. But I think definitely after this interview and just talking about some of the history, I'm definitely more inclined to learn about more Korean history and politics. It also makes me wish I took more Korean history. Not that there's too much offered here, but I know there's a handful that have been offered in my time here and definitely should have taken those.

Cole:

Pretty similar to the previous question, but there is some debate in Korea and the Korean diaspora about whether the role of the US in South Korean history has been positive or negative. Would you feel comfortable sharing your opinion on the US's role in Korea and whether it's been overall good or bad? And if you have an opinion kind of telling us what informs that opinion, maybe parents or friends could be media.

Caleb:

Yeah, well, I feel like from what I experienced in Korea, Korean sentiments, and Korean natives, they love the US. And most people I talked to, I don't know if this has to do much with political atmosphere and each other's countries involvement with each other, but a lot of them were fascinated by the US, maybe it's because it's a place that they've never visited, and they've never truly experienced that and it's the tourist effect, but a lot of them wanted to be

[2] Here, Caleb is referring to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye

immersed in the culture, or at least visit. I don't know if that necessarily speaks on involvement with each other.

Cole:

No, I think it definitely does because I think it definitely does. That could be a result of the US making big efforts to positively portray themselves in a place like Korea. I'm sure that many Koreans have been told great things about the US, and seeing great advertisements or something like that, because that's been a very prominent thing, the US has definitely tried to extend their influence in South Korea. I think that's definitely relevant because even if it's not political role, like something with a war, it's still sort of a societal or a cultural role. Definitely a great answer and super interesting how you talked about how much of that could be affected by the fact that they've never been to or never lived in the United States. So I'm sure, like we have today when you haven't been somewhere and we kind of only heard some things or you kind of have a fantasy or something like that about a place that makes it seem so great or so perfect and then it's not that it's not great, but the more time you spend there and the experiences you have, maybe you start to realize it wasn't as perfect as you anticipated. And maybe nothing is that perfect.

Caleb:

Yeah, for sure. I think it's to me, I definitely had that tourist effect when I stayed there for a month, and I was an abroad college student. My family was taking care of me. I was taking one class. I was visiting all the tourist spots. I was having a blast going out in the nightlife districts in Korea. I do have dual citizenship, but one requirement, and some people view it as a downside, which a lot of people do, including my cousins and his friends, is mandatory military service for the men. And when I talked to my cousin's friends, they're like, “I just wasted a year and a half of my life. I don't remember anything from 21 to 22 and this is like a peak time of my life.” And when I kind of thought of that, it just kind of brings up the point that you brought up, about how the grass is always greener on the other side. Yes, I would love to have an extended stay in Korea, but then I would have to do the mandatory military service, which to me, personally, I don't know if that's necessarily worth the stay in Korea.

Cole:

I would think not (laughter)

Caleb:
Yeah, I'm sure that's why a lot of people want to go to the US or want to embrace it, because we obviously don't have that year and a half mandatory military time that every man has to serve.

Cole:

Again, that's another thing that somebody like myself and other people hearing this interview might not be aware of, specifically the military requirement and other elements of South Korean society and life there that make that decision a little bit more complicated to make.

Cole:
So that's great that you brought that up and kind of another element of South Korean society that's not really intertwined with military or something like that, but that definitely kind of overlaps with the United States is: Anti-Asian racism sparked during and after the COVID pandemic in America, and that became pretty known and pretty statistically, factually backed. But there were some instances or incidents in South Korea, especially one that I kind of read about in researching and preparing for this interview, that featured rises in hateful rhetoric and actions toward Chinese citizens, both perspectives of those living in China and blaming them for the pandemic or Chinese people in Korea at the time facing harsh treatment. Does this surprise you or does this reflect anything about either South Korea or the United States and their reactions to the pandemic? Or do you think it's too unique to something like the pandemic, that it's maybe not reflective historically?

Caleb:

I think it definitely does probably reflect not as a whole country for either the United States or Korea, but I think it only just took a life-changing incident to really kind of highlight that and kind of reignite it. I guess historically, Korea has had tension and obviously very inhumane things. Not that, only China. US, or Korea does, I feel every country has their wrongdoings and inhumane acts against humanity. But I think it only took that to have an excuse or a reason to reignite that hate and bring those sentiments back. I think for me, I didn't grow up in a time where those were happening in my life, but for grandparents especially, and great grandparents, people of those generations, not justifying their racism at all, but I think if I were to put myself in their shoes or in that time period, I can see why people have those sentiments.
But at the end of the day, I just think people will always find an excuse to hate. And if this is the thing that sparks it, then I think that hatred and that racism and those sentiments were…

Cole:
They were already there before.

Caleb:
Exactly, and they just needed something to expose them or let it out.

Cole:

Yeah, definitely. Our one last question related to your stay in South Korea and your knowledge of South Korean society is going to kind of get shifted a little bit more toward North Korea. Because we talked about the South Koreans' perspectives and such of the United States, but did you get a feel for maybe some South Koreans' perspectives of North Korea and any tensions that exist between the nations today? And maybe did that disprove any previous perceptions that you had of the relationship between north and South Korea, or did it confirm some of your perceptions?

Caleb:

I would say during my time there, I wasn't able to visit the DMZ or anything. But there were times where I got very close to North Korea. And it's not anything like a crazy story or a wild occurrence that changed any perspective. Because if anything, I just feel like I got closer to the source because I was in Korea and my uncle and their family, they would talk about North Korea and it's like, oh, I remember asking. We went out to eat eel, which is a delicacy in Korea, and we kind of had to go probably an hour out, so I asked, "hey, where are we? What is this place?" And we were in a place called Paju, and my uncle was like, "oh, we're actually really near North Korea." I wasn't mind blown by that, but I was like, 'oh, wow, I'm closer than I thought,' and this isn't a place where, I don't know, when I think of it, I guess it just kind of brought me down on earth. And it's just like, oh, it's North Korea, this isn't what they make it out to be in the media. Obviously, I don't know what's going on in North Korea itself, but I guess the fact that I was able to eat near North Korea just kind of made things more realistic.
And it's not something just blown up in the media or in pop culture and stuff where people ask, oh, are you North Korean or South Korean? There's been countless times where I've heard that. But it's just, I don't know, it's very normal to me.

Cole:

Yeah, definitely. It's something that, especially in the United States, gets talked about in the media as if it's the center of the earth, or the most foreign, unknown, terrifying place ever. But it's still a country, it's still a place that, in many ways, I'm sure is much more similar to our everyday life and stuff like that than we would be led to believe. But that's very interesting, I didn't realize that you really entered that kind of proximity to North Korea.

Cole:

Our next topic is one of the bigger themes of this interview, but especially because it really combines, I think, personal stories and personal experiences with history and the history of Korean culture, and specifically South Korean culture. But I know personally, food has been an enormous part of my family experiences and heritage, with many of these recipes being passed down from generation to generation. Has South Korean food played the same or similar role in your family history or your own experiences?

Caleb:

Oh yeah, I would say, I didn't realize it until I got older, but I would say Korean food is definitely my favorite cuisine. And I think when I don't have it for a while and I go back home, that's when I realize that it plays a very important role in my life. But just, traditionally, there's Korean traditions like on your birthday you eat seaweed soup and on New Year's you eat a different type of soup and there's different meanings associated with certain foods. It's like, "hey, when you're sick, eat this, avoid this." Or I think of herbal medicine, and this isn't just a Korean thing, but maybe an East Asian thing, when you're sick or when your body's feeling weak, you'll go to someone who has expertise in herbal medicine, and they will basically diagnose you and check your symptoms by feeling pressure points. I don't know the exact details because I'm not an expert, but that's just something that shapes your view on health, on other cultures, and on your own culture. I feel like, yeah, it's definitely had a big role in my life. And I would say I've had a positive experience. I've read countless stories, it's almost a meme at this point. When you bring in your food, your cultural food in elementary school, and this is a classic Korean American experience, oh, I bring the *kimchi* **(**traditional vegetable dish**)**, and everyone is staring at me because it stinks. But that's honestly not an experience I had. Maybe it's because I grew up in a pretty culturally diverse place, but I remember when my mom would pack *gimbap*, which is rice and some vegetables,

and a meat rolled in seaweed. I think maybe in elementary school I was ashamed because I knew it was different. But honestly, the response that I received growing up was never like, “ew” or “oh, that's disgusting.” I was never bullied or made fun of because my food which is definitely a fortunate experience, so I would say I've had a positive experience. And as I got older, I think as, I guess Korean culture became more influential in US pop culture with K-pop idols and Korean movies, and stuff like that, I've only seen more of it becoming more accepted and yeah, viewed as cool. Yeah, I think that's pretty cool to see just as a young adult, seeing where things have come, not just with Asian people, but Korean culture in general in the US.

Cole:

Right. And you mentioned a couple specific foods that your mom would pack for you and that you would bring to school, which kind of leads into, maybe you already answered this, but the next question. Are there any Korean foods or maybe one Korean food that is particularly special to you? And if so, can you kind of describe the food and what or why that special meaning exists?

Caleb:

Yeah, that's a great question. I'm going to have to think about this a little. I feel like there's obviously the traditional foods that you eat on certain dates, but I think maybe something my mom or grandma would make that. Yeah, I would probably say something called *Juk*, which is like rice porridge. And that's one of those foods where, ‘oh, if you're sick, eat this,’ or if you break a bone or something or get injured. I remember being sick when I was a kid and my mom would be like, “hey, I made this *Juk* (rice porridge), eat it.” I think that holds significance to me just because in Korean culture or in Korean cuisine, that's a designated “sick” food. But for other ones, I think of street food in Korea when I was in Korea, like this past December and January, or just simple stuff where everything holds a meaning to it. Not everything, but there's foods that you eat when you go out and when you're drunk and you're trying to sober up. There are certain restaurants and foods associated to that or many street foods in the street markets in Korea that they're famous for selling. I'd say for me personally, it's like that rice porridge. But there's so many other foods intertwined with Korean society and South Korea especially.

Cole:

Yeah, they have their own meanings too. Now a little bit more going off that food topic, but really kind of combining that with some historical stuff. The Korean War, there was egregious food that the US Military gave Korean citizens during this war. It wasn't a lot of money or appropriate amount of money and thought was not put into the rations provided. And with this food given, it produced some Koreans' negative associations with American food and stomach troubles. Particularly, something we've studied a lot was powdered milk, which was pretty dodgy. Similarly, many Koreans that immigrated to the US struggled to stomach the greasy and processed foods that are so common and commonly produced in America. Did you ever maybe hear about this in your family specifically, if your ancestors struggled to adapt to the foods in the new nation? Or did they have positive experiences with American food?

Caleb:

I don't know if I've ever spoke to my family about that specifically, but when you kind of brought up food struggles, I kind of think of a Korean classic. This is another food that has a meaning, it's called *Sujebi*, and it basically is for poor people to eat because it was made out of flour, and, I think it was made out of flour, rather than wheat. But yeah, that was a struggle food that people ate and people still eat it to this day. Not because of that reason, but just to kind of remember the significance in this day. Basically, there's *tteokguk* (rice cake soup), which is a variation, but it doesn't use flour. It uses dough, I think.

Cole:

Okay, that makes sense.

Caleb:

Yeah. I don't know necessarily about stomaching foods and whether their palates were adjusted, or it took a hard time to eat American cuisine, but, yeah, that just kind of made me thought of what were delicacies and what was expensive back then in Korea and what isn't in the US. Back then, my mom would speak on bananas: they were really expensive, and that was the treat. But here, it's like, dude, we eat bananas every day. Obviously, it's different times, but those are the mundane things that maybe people in the US back then viewed as, 'oh, it's a banana,' but that was a luxury in Korea.

Cole:

Yeah, no, that's very interesting. And I understand it's impossible to expect you to have answers to all of these questions, especially when some of which kind of ask multiple questions within one. But even though you said you didn't hear about that in your family, that's definitely some super valuable and relevant information that there were certain struggle foods that you become aware of and other elements of South Korean culture like that. But something that I anticipate you will know the answer to based on your recent stay is have American chain restaurants or fast food made their way to South Korea. And, if so, do you think this is mostly good or bad?

Caleb:

Off the top of my head, I can think of, well, I remember seeing a McDonald's at Taco Bell, Starbucks, and obviously Korea has their own franchises and chains of what's popular there. But I would say, yeah, a lot of it does influence what people want, because I feel like in Korea, a lot of what is popular is what's happening in the US, what food is popular there, or what's trendy there. And I think I see exchange from both sides where the US wants to do what other countries are doing, but also other countries, as in Korea, they want to do what's popular in the US. And I think of something called in my cousin's neighborhood, there was a place called Cryburger, and it's just a burger place, but it reminded me of In-N-Out. Being from California, that's one of the biggest burger chains. And I remember looking it up because I looked at the burger and the fries, and just the restaurant setup, and I was like, this reminds me of In-N-Out. So, I ended up looking up, is Cryburger like a dupe of In-N-Out? Or I typed in "Cryburger versus In-N-Out." And one of the articles was like, "Korea's dupe of In-N-Out. Check out the new hottest trend: Cryburger." [3] And I was like, it's just weird for me to experience as a Korean American to see in and out being replicated or imitated in Korea. I think it's a good thing just because I guess it's Korea's rendition of American food and American culture. And I also see it back in Southern California, with one of my friends, the same kid who was going through immigration stuff. He's working and he's been helping someone out with a small business, and it's a Korean donut shop where basically, I guess it's a style of donuts that's very popular in Korea right now. And this is a family-owned mom and pop shop, and they recently opened up. And in this mall, basically, there's another donut shop that opened up, but rather than a mom and pop, it's a franchise in Korea, and they brought their team over to open up that same shop, but in the US, and in Southern California. I think that just is another example of wanting to bring something over to the US, because American people know what's trending and they want a piece of that. And I guess in that mall,

[3] Cry Cheeseburger is a critically acclaimed fast-food chain that originated in Seoul, South Korea.

there happens to also be a shop that only sells K-Pop merchandise, posters, a bunch of plushies that are popular in Korea. There's definitely a good exchange of both, not even just in food, but in media, music, culture, and clothing.

Cole:

No doubt, that's very interesting. And I kind of anticipated that some of those chain restaurants, or those modeled after them, had made their way to South Korea, especially considering the relationship and the many connections between the two nations. But it's great that you confirm that in your own experience and can kind of offer some insight about your feelings upon seeing those sorts of establishments in South Korea. Our next topic is some stuff that we previously touched on a little bit, but with myself growing up in Massachusetts, which is great curriculum for public school and stuff, but my curriculum and education featured little, if any, elements of Korean history, including either the nation's divide or the impacts of the US occupation on the region or anything like that. As a California citizen, did you learn about Korean history in school, or did much of your knowledge come from the personal research and family experience that we've talked about?

Caleb:

Yeah, a lot of it was definitely personal research. If anything, there was the same amount, or less, in the history courses I took in high school, and that would be the extent of it, because we didn't go over it in, obviously, elementary and middle school. But yeah, a lot of it was just personal research and my family's perspectives and my grandparents. My grandpa, on my mom's side, he served in the Korean War, and I didn't learn much history from him, but it's just family personal stuff and wanting to know more about what their lives were like. But nothing necessarily in the school curriculum.

Cole:

Okay, that's interesting. Kind of a subset question to that is: did you learn about the history between the US and South Korea from any of your family members or friends in South Korea? And I had a part to this question that said, how did this contrast from what you were and were not taught in the US Curriculum? Which I know can be kind of hard to answer because of the things that we both just talked about. But mostly, is the history between the two nations, is that something that gets discussed in sort of South Korean or Korean American

circles? Or is that like many other elements of history that is maybe viewed as boring or just something that doesn't really get spoken about a lot?

Caleb:

Yeah, I just don't think it gets spoken a lot about just because I think a lot of people both ways think it's insignificant or not significant enough to speak about. Nothing major or devastating, fortunately, has happened between the two countries that I know of or that a lot of people speak about. I think it's just not spoken much about.

Cole:

How do you think accurate or substantial historical narratives in curriculum would affect that, or things between the nations, during your stay or from those people? Does the South Korean curriculum discuss the US a lot? And if so, do they do so in a generally positive or negative light, or does it kind of just fly under the radar in both countries in your experience?

Caleb:

I wouldn't know exactly on the South Korean student experience, but I would say as an American student, probably just flies under the radar. And a lot of it in Korean history is, I feel like this is just maybe a common theme in history in general, but one side can write it this way, and it's completely different whether you're the victim of something or not. But I feel like just in history in general, a lot of it is just overlooked, and a lot of stuff just gets swept under the rug. And if you want to know truly more about history, you got to do your own research and really look into what happened, just because I feel like governments and stuff can completely make an initiative to sweep things under the rug. And sure, this happened in various countries, not just Korea.

Cole:

Yeah, certainly. And it's interesting to hear that both of those, well, sort of the political history really flies under the radar. Something that also has flown under the radar is, well I never learned or knew anything about Korean holidays, and mostly I never learned or knew anything really about non-Christian holidays that weren't heavily celebrated in the United States, but specifically Korean holidays. And with the US school systems not recognizing them or many others, East

Asian holidays always flew under the radar. Do you celebrate Korean holidays? And if so, are there any particular foods associated with such holidays, kind of like you discussed earlier?

Caleb:

Yeah, I would say not really, because a lot of it is celebrated in Korea. But there are certain events when you're 100 days old as a baby, that's not necessarily a holiday, but I guess a personal milestone, like a "100 days old birthday." I don't remember exactly what I ate, but that's a holiday that a lot of the traditional Korean families celebrate. Another one is the seaweed soup on the birthday. But other than that, I can't really think of anything else that my family, as in my direct family in the US, really celebrates or eats on those specific days. I think on New Year's, we eat *tteokguk*, which is like rice cake soup.

Cole:

I like soup, so that sounds like something I would be all in for. Kind of our last main topic is about something that's very I know you hold close to you that we've discussed earlier. Something in my research that I discovered was that religion is heavily intertwined with South Korean culture, and like you said, Korean American culture. And it is my understanding that you're highly committed to your faith. Does religion play a significant role in your family identity and history, or is your religious affiliation more something that you encountered personally or independently?

Caleb:

Yeah, I would say both. Just because my grandparents on both sides, they are Christians, and they were Christians. When I think of my aunt uncle, which on my dad's side and my mom's side, all of their siblings were Christians and went to church. I grew up in the church and was born into the church. Obviously, it wasn't my choice, I can't choose to go to church and I'm one years old. But yeah, up until junior year, I went to church basically every Sunday but got busy with baseball, just like being a high school baseball player and stuff, playing on Saturdays and Sundays. When I got to college [I practiced] independently, but you can't be forced to go to church. And at a certain point, my parents basically understood that if I wanted to go to church, I could. And I feel like that's when I encountered religion independently, when I kind of made the choice. There was a time where I strayed away from it just because things got in the way and life just took its course, but I feel like I also chose to continue to practice it. But

also, I also did some reflection after talking to my dad and just kind of living things out. And I realized, ‘hey, religion isn't everything.’ It is a huge part of my life, and I think it is one of the most important things but yeah, it just took its own course. And I realized you can't let that dictate everything. You still got to be a good person. Just because you practice religion, regardless of what it is, doesn't make you a good person. You still got to live out a good life and be a nice person. You can't do heinous things just because you practice religion and I think that's one thing I really experience in Korean church. It's like, hey, some of the worst people I know are people who go to church. And that's not to generalize that Christians are perfect or Korean American people who go to church are perfect. I also realized, hey, some of the best people I know don't go to church. They just happen to not practice religion. And that's when I started doing some soul searching and kind of found myself back in religion. But I think, yeah.

Cole:

You got a remarkable balance with those things, for sure.

Caleb:

Yeah.

Cole:

Finding what comforts, and what pleases you. Also, as some fail to do nowadays, as we've discussed, you really avoid sort of shaming or judging those who make their own personal decisions to maybe not go to a church or follow the Christian faith or something like that.

Caleb:

Exactly. I can't speak on other ethnicities, but a lot of Korean people do think, ‘oh, church is the end all, be all. If I go to church, I'm chilling, I can be a terrible person, but hey, I go to church, right?’

Cole:

For sure. And we see that in America, too, with a lot of people that misbehave and sin at a crazy rate six days a week and think it's okay because they go to church on Sunday.

Cole:

Our next, sort of, question, you already elaborate on this a little bit, but do you know specifically when your family's religion began and if it originated during a time in America or in South Korea?

Caleb:

Yes, I would say I can't pinpoint exactly when, but I know my mom has been going to church ever since she was a kid. A lot of the people you meet are through church. My parents didn't happen to meet that way, but yeah, I don't know exactly when, but I would assume it's the same situation as me. They kind of just grew up in the church, continued to go, and then college they went and, a lot of Korean people, they want to marry Korean people who are also Christian. So just kind of cycles in and Christian people breed Christian people until it continues or until it stops.

Cole:

Right. We see that with other ethnicities and religions, too, all around the world and in America, people seeking to kind of keep that line going and marry into families or marry individuals that kind of hold the same beliefs and practice the same faiths as they do. We talked about food kind of in our previous questions a lot, and we haven't brought it up with regards to religion yet, but obviously food is very intertwined with the history and culture of nations and religions, specifically with different faiths excluding and celebrating certain foods. Are there any Korean or American foods that hold the religious significance to you? I know that might be kind of a confusing question.

Caleb:

Honestly, not really.

Cole:

Not really? Yeah.

Caleb:

Yeah. A lot of Korean Christian churches, I can't speak on it because I don't practice Catholicism, but I think they don't eat meat on Fridays and stuff.

Cole:

Right.

Caleb:

But no, in Korean Christian church.

Cole:

Sorry, I did not just mean Catholicism. I didn't mean to narrow that down.

Caleb:

Oh no, no worries. But in a religious context, nothing I could think of that is avoided or sacred.

Cole:

Okay. Yeah. So now that we kind of talked about religious foods and other elements of Christianity, another in studying and doing some background research, I looked at, and kind of took an extensive look at religions in South Korea, and Christianity is prominent indeed, but Buddhism is as well. And I know obviously with you coming from Christian background and Christian family, do any of your relatives or family or friends that you recently were with in South Korea practice Buddhism, or is Christianity really all that has centered or been centered central to your religious experience?

Caleb:

Yeah, I would say it's my personal experiences and my direct family, it's only been Christianity, but I know people in South Korea do practice Buddhism.

Cole:

But do you see Buddhist temples there or anything like that? That might not be the right word.

Caleb:

Yeah, I saw a couple, but me personally, like in Southern California, Korean community, it's pretty dominantly, all Christian.

Cole:
Yeah, honestly, I hope that's the right word. I think it's Buddhist temple.

Caleb:
Yeah, I think it is too.

Cole:
Yeah, that's pretty interesting. Although it's fairly prominent in South Korea, in studying it in my own experience, because I've studied its deep connections to Japan and stuff like that. But although people in the US commonly kind of group a lot of Asian countries together, of course there's big differences between the countries, and there's also big differences between citizens of different countries and folks of different ethnicities. Even within those groups, there's big differences. There's sections or places and groups of people that are Christian and other places where Buddhism is more prominent. It's interesting to hear that mostly your experience has only really concerned Christianity. But based on the things we talked about, with how many of your friends that you made and your experiences that you had, and time spent growing up, all centered around the church and stuff like that, so it makes perfect sense. That would be mostly kind of what your experience has been and what you've seen. And I know personally, I'm a Protestant, and I have, especially with my family, some of my family not so religious, other family members religious. But I remember growing up and stuff like learning about other religions, especially when I was super young, I did not know that there was really more than one religion, you know what I mean? At a time where I was young and sheltered and like you talked about, when you're at that age, you don't get to really decide whether or not you go to church and it's just something that you do because your family does or is kind of the

cultural norm. And it's not until you get older, and like what happened with you, that some people take that next step of choosing to or to not continue to practice their faith independently. Because once you reach that age, you can make that decision to sort of maybe back out of it or just not place it as high on your priority list as some other things. But of course, you have stayed committed to it, in such a modern and rational sense, which I think is extremely admirable and something that especially nowadays with a lot of stuff going on, I think that sort of, extreme Christian perspectives are entering into US politics or entering into all elements of society. And those voices are getting louder and that kind of distracts from the fact that I don't believe most Christians and most people really feel like that. Sometimes the extreme voices seem to make other people think that those are reflective of all those people, but there's more people like you and me that you just don't hear about as much anymore. And people want you to think things are so polarized and divided in terms of religion, but there's a lot of people that practice their faith because of how it makes them feel and because of maybe family or personal reasons, but they have no intent of invading on other people's lives or doing anything like that that sometimes we see happening on the higher levels. You know what I mean? It's a very important conversation to have, and I hope that the listeners of this interview have taken away a lot from both the historical elements of our conversation, the personal elements and the religious elements and kind of every single thing that we've touched on, and maybe bridging a gap between the United States and Korea through your personal experiences and stories.

Cole:

I can't thank you enough for doing this interview with me and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. And if there's any final things that you want to say, then I would love to hear them.

Caleb:

I appreciate it. I feel like you asked some good questions and just kind of gave me the time to go over with my family, as I had to do some research as well. Not just like historical stuff, but I don't want to give you wrong information, as in when my mom immigrated and stuff, right? I had to take the time to just talk to my parents about that.

Cole:
I appreciate that.

Caleb:

Nah, I appreciate you asking me. Because I feel like it just gave me a better insight, just more interest into some of the historical context of both countries.

Cole:

Yeah, definitely. All right, Caleb.

Caleb:

All right, bro.

Cole:

See you.

Caleb:

See you.