Transcript

Note: **Most verbal filler words are omitted without indication for clarity, but some are kept for authenticity.**

[] used to cut out repetitive phrases; most verbal filler words are omitted for clarity; [sic] for clarification or to show interruption; - indicates change in trajectory/restart sentence; … indicates an idea trail off.

Tegh: My name is Tegh Khosla. Today is March 23rd, 2023. And I'm interviewing Chris Choi through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Chris, do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Chris: Yes.

Tegh: Great. All right, Chris, let's get started. So how are you feeling about this interview?

Chris: I'm feeling pretty good. You know, gonna have fun with it, tell parts of the- parts of my story. So yeah, I hope I can educate with this.

Tegh: That's great. Let's get started then. Can you tell me about where you were born and the places you lived in your life and for how long?

Chris: Let's see. So, I was born in Lake Forest, Chicago, 2001. I moved out when I was around literally a year- or a year-and-a-half-old. I think we moved to California, and I lived there up until, I gotta say, 2012, 2013. I gotta double check that, actually. Yeah, I lived there until 2013 and from there I moved to Texas. And the move to Texas, each move had a different reason. But yeah, the move to Texas was mostly based on my father's occupation as a pastor, his calling as a pastor, but that also constituted [caused] a lot of moves within California as well. And so, yeah, the three main regions, I gotta say were Chicago, California, and Texas. And I moved back to Chicago when I was like four years old because my mom was going back to school there. So yeah, that's pretty much it.

Tegh: Okay, great. The first topic I want to talk about with you today is immigration. Your parents immigrated to the US—can you tell me the story, and can you start by telling me about where they're from and their class background?

Chris: Yeah, absolutely. So, oh, I've gotta say, I'm iffy about where my mom is from, but my dad for sure is from Seoul. And you know what, my mom might be from the same place too, actually. Yeah, yeah, that's probably correct. And (laugh) my dad came to the US in 1993, I believe in September. And he lived in Darien, Illinois. He attended the College of DuPage and Roosevelt University, and I think he was studying graphic design, if I'm correct. And my mom came later on in 1995 to study theology at North Park University. Yes, I believe that's right. And they moved around within that—within Illinois a lot too, to Chicago and stuff. My dad went to Colum—yeah. My dad went to—let me double check that, actually, it's an art school. Yeah. My

dad went to Columbia Art College in Chicago after DuPage and Roosevelt because he wanted to pursue his undergrad in—what's it called?—in graphic design. But before he took ESL classes and just the basics to get through that. But yeah, and I believe they got married in 1999 and I was born in 2001.

Tegh: You just told me that you were born in 2001 and they got married in 1999?

Chris: Yeah.

Tegh: When did your parents meet and why did they come to the US? You just told me that they came for college, but was that the primary reason? Can you go more into that for me?

Chris: Yeah, I think that's pretty much the main reason. It was right after my dad was straight out of the military, their mandatory conscription service, and his family was pretty okay off, you know, like pretty well off. My grandfather had a little construction sediment company, so my dad had his study visa processed and everything and I think my mom came down as part of a scholarship to study theology from Korea. So, she was also working out her visa arrangements a little later. But yeah, I think [the] primary reasons were definitely school. It's weird though because my mom was studying theology [and] my dad was studying graphic design, but now my dad's a pastor and my mom went back to school for social work and now she's a licensed social worker and a therapist. So, it's little—a lot of career changes.

Tegh: The next question would be since your parents definitely came—well, they did college in the US. Did they also go to college in Korea, or no?

Chris: No, I don't think so, actually. Yeah, they had their first experience in the US, and they had to get through—at least my dad, I think, had to get through community college and stuff for the basics to get his English out of the way. He had to get better at it. He was living with my aunt who was already in Tenn—in Chicago. She lives in Tennessee now. But yeah, my dad was living with my aunt and my uncle, which is my mom—my aunt's brother. And my mom was living with my grandparents.

Tegh: And they—and so where did they meet?

Chris: That's the fun part, I think. I forgot what city they met in, but the story goes that, so my aunt—on my dad's side, my dad's sister had two kids, which are my cousins, Christine and Ethan. And there weren't a lot of Koreans on the block where they lived, but there was this one older Korean lady that lived across the street. And since my aunt worked so much and my dad was going to college, and my uncle also worked a lot, she asked the old lady, the Korean lady across the street, “Hey, can you babysit my kids?” So that old lady was my mom's mom, my grandma. So, she babysat my cousins on my dad’s side and stuff. And eventually I think the families got more accustomed with each other, then they realized—they talked a little more. They said, “Our family's like here too [in Chicago].” And so, my grandma introduced my mom to my aunt's brother, my dad. And yeah, I think that's pretty much how they got started and it took a year or less for them to get engaged.

Tegh: Oh wow. Cool.

Chris: Yeah.

Tegh: From the way you describe it, it seems that your parents really got adjusted to the US pretty quickly. Can you tell me from your own experience how you would assess how they adapted? And are there things that they struggle with now that you find come quickly to you?

Chris: Hmm. That's a good question. I think what helped was [that] Chicago's a pretty established city. There's a Chinatown, there's a Koreatown, so there were outlets and places to connect with. And for both sides of my family particularly, that outlet has been the Korean church. That's a lot. That's a big hub. I think [the church] is more or less about culture than faith because I think [that] simply because there's so many Korean churches in the US, a lot of Korean immigrants congregate there. And so that's been like a consistent outlet where I think they found community, whereas I could find community anywhere else because, you know, I'm a native, I'm an English speaker, you know? I have friends at school and stuff. They had to find it within their own family and in the church. So, for a while my dad, as a side gig, actually worked as a TV anchorman for a Korean news channel in Chicago. So that's another way he was connected to the community.

Tegh: That's awesome. So, I guess we can just go into the next section, which is about the Korean American church. So that actually goes in really perfectly. So, I know your dad is a pastor, as you mentioned, and can you tell me about your experience growing up with the church?

Chris: Yeah, whew. That's a- that's a broad- that's a lot of ground to cover. Okay. So, Hmm. My dad started- became a pastor. I think, God, I'm gonna get these numbers wrong, but if I'm correct, around the 2008 to 2010-ish range. I think that's when he finished his seminary and everything. And yeah, the first place he started off as a pastor was at a place in Downey, California. He started up as a[n] associate pastor. But yeah, before that I've been connected to the Korean church pretty much since I was born. That was the norm for me. One being religious and Christian, like Presbyterian Christian faith, but two, going to Korean Presbyterian churches. And yeah, there were a lot of churches I cycled through while I lived in California. If I'm counting, there's around four. I think permanent residence wise, long term/staying wise- I cycled through like four churches in California in my lifetime and two in Texas in my lifetime. So yeah, it's just pretty much a big common denominator in my life. And in both… it brought… there's positive aspects of it, positive and negative aspects. I think a lot of the negative aspects just come with being part of a community, right? [In] community there is bound to be some—What's the word?— Like, conflict, some skirmishes between [or within] the churches, right? But I think it's also one of the reasons why I am connected to the Korean community today, as is. A lot of my memories of food and the people I remember, childhood friends, the family friends (that are also Korean), that I've associated with Korean culture are one way or another connected to the church.

Tegh: You mentioned conflict just briefly. [Chris: Yeah]. So, can you tell me more about what kind? Can you define those conflicts for me? Can you elaborate more on what conflict is in the Korean church from your perspective?

Chris: Oh yeah, sorry, you cut out. So, elaborate on the conflicts and stuff?

Tegh: Yes.

Chris: Yeah. Well, I think sometimes- let's see… how do I describe this? So, I believe it's like every church has- every community has some form of hierarchy, right? And of course, [in] churches, it's the most predominantly like, oh, you got the senior pastor, associate pastors, youth pastors, whatever, right? Pastors are basically the head. And you got your elders as well too. But I think a lot of the conflict arose from (and I can't attribute it to a single reason) but I gotta say a lot of my skewed visions or negative conceptions of the church have presided [came] from church leadership particularly. Because a lot of times these people get caught up with other- how do I say this? They get distracted by things that don't matter or shouldn't matter. They get consumed by them, whether it's family drama, whether it's financial reasons like money, [or] whether it's literal faith [] differences within the church itself. There is bound to be, I guess arguments, conflict within the hierarchy, within [among] the pastors. So, I don't know, my perception of [] my family has always been, they- they like to avoid the conflict. Engaging in that has always been, taboo, fighting back and stuff. Especially because, we always had the mentality [that] it's not worth the time according to what our faith [and] practice preaches. You don't want to [] add fuel to the fire, you know, turn the other cheek, right? So that constitutes [contributes] to a lot of reasons why we moved around so much, it was to avoid conflict from escalating. But the fact that [of] the matter is [that] conflict happens (to begin with) a lot at these churches. And I'm sure it's like that with many other churches. Like my dad reassured me- [] I've always had this perception when I was a kid, like: "Oh my God, why do Korean churches have so much drama? Why do Korean churches have… why are people so cutthroat? Why are they so judgmental?" And I guess I saw the most ugliest [ugly] parts. [I saw the] ugliest parts because my family did serve more than the casual churchgoer, like my dad is a pastor and everything. So, I got up close and personal with the ugly stuff. [] I listened to a lot of the drama and what was happening. So, I always had this perception of like- after moving through so many Korean churches, I got this conception that: "Oh, Korean churches are kind of problematic." But my dad would reassure me this is a human problem. Like white Baptist churches, like black churches, [] they'll all have their issues. Korean churches are just another one in the equation, right?

Tegh: So, you talked about how you were up close and personal with many of the activities of the church because of your father's role as a pastor.

Chris: Yeah, yeah.

Tegh: As you experienced many positive and also negative things growing up, how has this shaped your faith—your personal faith?

Chris: Hmm. Yeah, let's see. You know, so there was a downside to I think why… so going back addressing the previous question, another reason why we moved so much is because [] my

dad right now is a senior pastor at the church we currently serve. And churches, I think, if I'm correct, Korean churches traditionally in [on] the Presbyterian side have this consensus rule that every six years they re-elect leadership to see if they stay or not. And I think there's also [a] retirement age for Korean pastors, but I forget what age that is. But [] because he's never served on the top as a senior pastor, it's always usually been [as a] youth pastor, associate pastor. It was also out of respect to move so much in case there was conflict [between the leadership]. And there's also this tradition as well where in a peaceful transition between a senior pastor's retiring and a new person's taking over, the associate pastors would usually leave as well outta [out of] respect for former management. But… sorry, I was just elaborating on the previous question, but in terms of the present question, I actually had a conversation about this recently and how my relationship to the church has been shifting a lot, I would say- pretty much because- I wouldn't attribute all the negative experiences to my faith, it's just simply a symptom of belonging to a community and people just being problematic. Like that's bound to happen. But I've never experienced the separation of my faith from culture. They've always gone together. So as of late, I've been exploring more, you know? I'm 21. I'm still trying to figure my stuff out. But recently I'm trying to see if- I'm trying to uncover and see what my personal relationship to faith in God is, rather than in the setting of a larger Korean community. I went to an- this is a throwback, but this past winter, I went to a little Korean retreat, [I] followed my friend along to Austin, Texas. And this wasn't your Korean- typical Korean church setting, right? It was mostly youth, like kids my age and college kids attending and stuff. But even then, Korean culture, the language, the traditions, it was so ingrained into it [the event]. And I thought my perceptions would change a little bit as I grew older, but I just- I had- I did process a lot of these older negative emotions again that I had as a kid going to these Korean churches. So- and- I wasn't going to segregate myself from my faith either, right? So right now, I think I'm trying to figure out what my personal relationship to my faith is without the larger context of the Korean community.

Tegh: Great, awesome. So, I guess we could go the next topic. There was one more question I was gonna ask you about this, but it's good, we can just go onto the next one, I think. So, I guess like Korean American identity- because you just talked- I think going off of what you just said about how you went on this, what a retreat with I guess some friends or was it cousins?

Chris: Yeah, yeah. A church friend.

Tegh: Church friend. Okay. Got it.

Chris: A church friend who also has other Korean friends. Yeah.

Tegh: Oh, okay. Got it. So, you were fully immersed with their trip. So-

Chris: Yeah, pretty much.

Tegh: In that regard, can you just tell me how the Korean church shaped your identity? I think going off of what you said before, how you felt that you were processing some of your negative emotions. But how has your Koreanness emerged from this—from your involvement in the church? Because you talk about how faith and culture were kind of together. So, I just want to know how your Koreanness has come from your church experience.

Chris: Yeah, see, it's interesting because I think it's tethered me to my Koreanness, like my culture, [and] most of my early life. But as I've gotten older, it's what's [what has] pushed me away from it as well. Going to school—there aren't a lot of Korean people as concentrated in one place as [they] are in California—but even then, there weren't too many Korean people spread out either, so church was my outlet for talking [speaking in] Korean and English with fellow kids. They [churchgoers] were eating different Korean dishes or going out to different Korean outings with other families as part of church events. So, for me it was like I had two parts of my life. I got the Korean side, which is automatically associated with my faith, and I got my more American side, where I go to school, I have friends, [and] I can be more casual and stuff. So, I don't know, I always associated formality with church [and] my Koreanness because it's like [it involved] my family, my parents, my faith and the surrounding culture around me. And there's also a lot of discourse between families. It usually goes, "Oh, how is your kid doing in school?" or "How is your family doing?" But with discourse, there's also judgment. So, I always associated [] formality and- what's the word? Like criticism with each other. So, in California I always accepted that as a norm and I was like: "You know what? There's nothing wrong with this." I was still pretty wide-eyed, eager to experience the rest of the world. But coming down to Texas, there was more of an opportunity for me to separate from that [Korean heritage]. Especially because one, there was less of a Korean community that surrounded me in general. Sure, there was one at church, but in general, Asians were even more of a minority there. I live in south Texas now when I'm not going to school, [in] McAllen, which is like 30 minutes of [from] the Mexican border. And literally the only reason why there are a few Korean families- there are Korean populations there is because one, there's an LG factory in Reynosa, Mexico, so a lot of Korean immigrants go there, and they need a church. So, they go up to the nearest American town, McAllen. And two, there is a pretty big university here, the University of Rio Grande Valley, it's a South Texas university and there's a lot of professors from Korea or different parts of the US that are Korean. But apart from that, I went to a school where I was like one of the only two Asians in my middle school. There were a couple more Asians in my high school, but just being Korean in general was so rare in a context outside of church. And there was a positive to that too. I could escape the drama of church or the prejudice around church, the uptightness of church, (if I can say that informally) [] through my friends at school and stuff, right? So yeah, God, I'm rambling right now, so sorry. But that's pretty much I think attributed [contributed] to my metamorphosis of [a] little bit realizing that [] I can separate my lives. I don't have to force them to mix, and it's caused me to lose touch with my culture a little bit too. I find it a little hard sometimes to associate or get along or talk with more Koreanized people—people who are straight from Korea or at least have a foot still in their Korean communities. I don't speak *Hangeul*[1] as well [] as I used to, but there was that yearning for diaspora, like yearning for, "Oh man, I wish I was more in touch with my culture." But I think that choice that I was offered, coming down to Texas and seeing [that], "Oh yeah, I can separate these two aspects of my life," was essential to who I am today.

Tegh: Yeah. Awesome.

[1] Throughout the interview, Chris uses "*Hangeul*," which means the Korean alphabet in standard Korean, interchangeably with "*Hangukmal*," which means the Korean language.

Chris: Sorry, I'm having trouble, like wording…

Tegh: Oh no, that was great. So, actually that also ties into my next question really well, because you speak Korean, but you can't read and write, right?

Chris: Yeah, I'm very rusty with that.

Tegh: There's nothing to be ashamed of for that. So, one of the papers I read actually mentioned that among individuals of Korean ethnicity in the US, those that identify as Korean speak Korean the strongest, whereas Korean Americans, or rather those who identify as Korean Americans, tend to say their English skills are stronger. What are your thoughts on this statement?

Chris: I think that's definitely true because you're surrounded by all the technical aspects or the academic aspects [of language] in America, unless you're living in K-town or something, right? All the aspects [of American society] are in English, so serviceably, you have to [] adapt to using English if you're gonna accommodate for a professional setting, like a job or a technical setting, like reading store signs or something, right? Or a book, you're gonna learn English, but I guess socially, [] what tethers you [to language] is your family, if not friends. And even then, friends can be from church or the neighborhood block. So, capacity-wise you start to separate these two. Like, "Oh yeah, I gotta prioritize my English a little more because that is what matters." Or at least in the grander scheme of the American life, the American dream. My parents moved down here for a better life so I can get a job here and I can have an opportunity here. So, at the end of the day, I need to prioritize my English. I can speak Korean with my family, but I'm not gonna be using it in a professional way frequently- not in an "Oh, you gotta improve your linguistic skills" type of way, you know?

Tegh: Right.

Chris: I definitely agree with that. That's an interesting fact. I definitely agree with that.

Tegh: Also, on that same note, because you were prioritizing English over your Korean, do you feel that language has created boundaries for you? And do you remember any times when this was the case?

Chris: Hmm, I definitely think so. Because I speak a decent amount [of Korean], but [] when there's new slang or when there's advanced vocabulary, it's harder for me to catch on a little more. So, it's hard. It's been hard I guess to communicate to my fullest capacity with my grandparents on both sides. It's weird because, I don't know, maybe it was my own personal choice to separate a little more from church, but people who have less negative experiences, or at least have closer relationships inside of the church, they might have a greater obligation to keep up with their Korean, linguistics or their social habits. So, you know, it's been a little difficult for me [to] relate consistently with other Korean people at church, or at least [with] people my age, in the community []. And also talking with people in my family who haven't [aren't] fully accustomed [to] or learned English fully yet. And I try my best. But I think it's interesting because during high school and middle school, I think I got worse and worse in my Korean and it was just a decline. But something that's reinvigorated my interest [in] relearning *Hangeul*

[Korean][2] and stuff has been through my college education, watching more Korean media, consuming more pieces of Korean media, like music or movies, especially being [as I am] a cinema studies minor, right? Being exposed to a lot of iconic, Korean New Wave films has encouraged me more to get back in touch with that because- I don't know, maybe this is a common experience. I hear this as [is] a common experience with second-generation immigrant people, but as I'm getting into my twenties, I'm trying to see who I really am, what my identity is. And undoubtedly a part of that is definitely being Korean. I was raised to do that much. I can't fully shut it out. I mean, sure I can separate how I socialize with different aspects of it, but it's without a doubt a part of my identity. So, I'm- I'm yearning to kind of reconnect a little more.

Tegh: So now as you're reconnecting with your Korean [identity], right? I think this kind of ties back to when you were younger, like with internalized racial dialogue, right? So that kind of affects the way that we connect to our own heritage and also our mainstream society. Do you know about times, like even in elementary school or like middle school or high school of your- your experiences in school in particular, and how has that like shaped you towards accepting American things versus accepting Korean things or rejecting one or the other?

Chris: Yeah, so like I said, [] there weren't too many, but there were a couple of other Korean people when I did go to elementary school. Sorry, there's dust on my computer. There were other Korean people at my elementary school. And this is a pretty common thing, maybe even less common to have less Korean people. But it's southern California. There is a big Asian population there. I was close to LA so there's a lot of Asian people there. And that's definitely gonna include Koreans. And I went to a Christian elementary school actually, take [from] that what you will, but they accepted a lot of international students. And I don't know if this was to encourage processing the English language better, but for some reason, they wouldn't allow us to speak Korean. They wouldn't allow us to speak our native language with each other. They [school administrators and faculty] would say, "Hey, speak English." [] Maybe it was to encourage the international students to learn English better. But I think about it now and I [think], "That was kind of a messed-up rule, you know, I'm trying to connect better with my Korean peers here." So, I say [said] casual things like: *"Jigeum jomsimeuro mwo gajyeowanni?"* [Meaning,] "What'd you bring for lunch?" You know, shit like that, right? So, there was that aspect where I guess it was another thing that encouraged me to separate my Koreanness from my Americanness because [I thought], "Oh, these aren't my Korean peers. These are just my English-speaking fellow peers now since I can't speak anything other than." But I guess this is also a universal experience with most second-generation Asian kids—bringing food. It was kind of a traumatic experience bringing native foods. Because even though there were other Chinese and Taiwanese and different East Asian ethnic groups at my school because they accepted all international kids, [] there would still be comments saying, "Ew, what is that? [] What'd you bring? [] That smells!" So that was a little traumatizing. And I guess people aren't as established [familiar] with Korean food compared to other Asian dishes. I guess a lot of [Asian food in the United States] has been Americanized. [] You associate sushi and ramen, different things like that, with Japanese food from a basic American standpoint. You associate pot stickers and different things with Mandarin food, right? Like Chinese food. But Korean food, I guess you gotta go to a Korean restaurant to understand better that "Oh, this is Korean food." So, they are [my classmates] seeing this stuff for the first time and it's a little bit of a "culture" shock. They see my *kimchi* [and] they see my

[2] See footnote 1.

glass noodles and they're like. “Ew, what is that?” So, I remember most of my food that I brought to school was [were] leftovers. So, I would have a mix of Korean food and canned chili, right? And just to prevent the comments from progressing, I would drown and hide my Korean food under the bottom of my beef chili in my thermos bowl. I would suffocate my food so people wouldn't see that I had Korean food, and I would just eat that all together. And I think about it now and I'm thinking, “That was also kind of messed up, right?” But that was my experience with that. This was actually interesting though, because one thing I do remember—I don't know if this is relevant or not—but one thing I do remember is [that] I had a loophole for speaking Korean within my elementary school because there was a Korean exchange student and he barely spoke any English, so they allowed me to translate most things for him. And that was my loophole [for] speaking Korean more often at school. I always thought of speaking Korean in church as a common thing or with my parents was a common thing. But being able to speak my native language freely under the pretense [of] an academic setting, I felt pretty proud to be Korean in that moment as a kid.

Tegh: So, in Texas, right, since you were obviously not surrounded by other Asian people …

Chris: It's a greater Hispanic demographic and the one Asian demographic that's common there is mostly Filipino people. Yeah.

Tegh: So how has the way you looked affected you throughout your school days?

Chris: Like I said, in middle school I was [] like one of two Asian people. And [] like a lot of the other Asian demographics in south Texas, I would say at least- It's progressing a lot. It's growing at a fast rate, like SpaceX is moving in and stuff, but most of the demographics were [] Asian kids who had parents working in the healthcare industry. And if you look at the demographics too, I saw mostly Filipino and Indian families. I guess it's a pale complexion thing too, but I also have apparent East Asian features. I definitely got called names like “chink” and stuff, just things like that. Just ugly stuff. [] I always thought that was just a thing that happened in the movies, but I didn't know it would get that bad. I would get into fights too, because [] as middle school progressed, I just wouldn't let that slide and I would start fights that I couldn't finish because people would call me slurs and shit. So yeah, middle school was pretty hard. It was kind of messed up and it got a little better in high school because the high school that I went to was a magnet school. So, it had a broader range of kids who came from different areas around Texas, in the South Texas area. It wasn't as concentrated [isolated] as in the area I was going to in middle school. So, I saw more East Asians there and there were not as many comments like that, but you would get the occasional: “Hey, hey, what's up K-pop?” or like “What's up, Gangnam Style?” or “Hey, Jackie Chan,” shit like that. It's hurtful, but now [looking back] it was just so childish.

Tegh: Yeah. And, going back to this whole Korean American identity thing, do you feel like those comments that you received actually distanced you away from your Koreanness?

Chris: Yeah, during middle school I remember telling my parents I'm ashamed to be a Korean and I don't wanna be Korean. Why? [] Maybe that was just me being adolescent or whatever, but I was ashamed to embrace any part of that. I wanted to learn Spanish better. I wanted to just be

normal, treated as a normal kid instead of my whole personality being: “Oh, he's the Asian kid.” That was a problem I dealt with in middle school. I feel it's funny because I kind of leaned into that and compensated for my insecurities by delving into them. I tried to excel the most in middle school. I tried to be the best and shit by fully embracing academics and stuff just because that's like: “Okay, this is who you think I am, this is who I'll be.” But yeah, there was a time where I was ashamed and disgusted by my heritage simply because [] I was conditioned to. The area I was in conditioned me to think: “Oh, he's an outsider, he looks different.” You know, things like that. Not a warm welcome. And I think that racism, discrimination, or that internalized racism comes from a place of ignorance more than actual bigotry. Sure. There's racism within different minority communities too, right? [] East Asian communities have colorism and racism engrained within their culture as well, unfortunately. But I mean, one, these are [were] a bunch of middle schoolers too. To be fair, there weren't a lot of people in the lighter, pale complexion, like East Asians in that area. And I think a lot of what they said just came from the media they consumed and also just ignorance. But you know, it is what it is.

Tegh: I see. This is gonna be a loaded question a little bit. [Okay]. So, we've been going on and off about identity. [Yeah]. So basically, can you tell me a little bit how you find some of your values clashing with people who are older [] or first generation Koreans, perhaps even.

Chris: Yeah~ You'd be surprised. Well see, I think I was more surprised. So, when I came to Colby College, my first (freshman) year, I worked as a- what's it called? A campaign surveyor, was that what it's called? It’s someone like a political surveyor, right? [] I worked for the Sara Gideon campaign [] who was running for a seat as a Maine Senator. And I would go door to door and ask: “Are you voting for Trump or Biden this year?” [] Just like loose questions based to survey what the turnout would be like. And I was surprised. I was kind of expecting mostly older people in Waterville[3] to be leaning towards Republican, like conservative, but there was a decent amount of people who were mixed, like progressive-leaning, older white people, you know? So that was interesting, right? Because I just conditioned myself to think: “Oh, if you're in an older generation, at least in my community with other Koreans, most of them are conservative Christians and not as progressive.” Especially if they're first generation. Even millennials and boomers, some of them who have been raised so deeply within the Korean community—the church community—lean more towards there [that way; conservatism]. But things are changing, which is good. I mean, people are being more open-minded and stuff. But I guess in terms of values I disagree with or clash with, it's straightforward basic things. Like people have to be a little more tolerant and accepting. Especially as Christians. There are definitely anti-gay sentiments within the Korean church as well, or just in the older generation in general. There are a lot of times [that you encounter] a lot of loose fitted [] racism that people just casually accept. Mainly because [the church] is such a homogenous community. So, people don't see or point out an issue in a lot of these things. But the fact of the matter is you gotta be thoughtful, you gotta be a little more tolerant than that. Just be decent and nice, you know? But it's hard for older generations to process and adapt to that. So, I hear things in the church casually where the older people talk [in ways] that I disagree with, but you can't catch me saying anything because, one, it's hard to argue with these people. And two, I wouldn't know how to relay those words because my *Hangeul* [Korean language][4] is rusty. I would probably just end up saying: “Don't say that;

[3] A city in upstate Maine where Colby College is located.
[4] See footnote 1.

no, that's messed up." But it's just the general problems you see with the older immigrant mentality. It's just the way they were conditioned and grown [raised]. Like oldheads, you know what I mean?

Tegh: Yeah. I guess we could also go on to the next topic then. That was great. So, this topic is gonna be more focused on food. You brought up food a few times already, talking about school and how that affected your identity. And ethnic food is basically one of our closest links we have to our own culture. And growing up eating it shapes our intimacy. Broadly speaking, you can go on any tangent you want here, but how has Korean food shaped your cultural identity?

Chris: Hmm. You know, it's been literally a breaking bread thing where every time there's a new Korean family in town that visits our church or there's a Korean family or a Korean friend, [] or people I want to introduce and accustom more to my Korean culture. Food has always been a breaking bread type of thing. And just in the bare basics too, it's something that I eat almost every night with my family. So, it's not only a cultural link, a familial link, but it's also [] a [] sociocultural link where if I wanna relate more to a Korean person, I say: "Hey, what's your favorite Korean dish? Do you wanna get some sometime?" You know, things like that. You feel? And I have a lot of specific memories associated with a lot of different dishes. I think right off the top of my head, the most impactful one has been *Cheongguk-jang* (soybean paste) and *Kimchi jjigae* (kimchi stew), similar but different because *Cheongguk-jang* is like fermented bean paste stew. It's very heavy. It's almost like a gumbo-type soup. And *Kimchi jjigae* is like a little more light [lighter], but there's a variant called "army stew" where you can mess around with the ingredients, you put in it. It was coined by a lot of conscripted military soldiers in Korea. They would put sausage, cheese, and dumplings into the [] kimchi soup and stuff. I lived with my dad for a year or so while my mom was studying in Chicago. So, this was in California when I was like five. And because my dad doesn't have the diverse culinary knowledge that my mom does, he knew what he knew [and] he made what he knew best, which was, either *Cheongguk-jang* or *Kimchi jjigae*, stuff like that he grew up making in the army all the time. So that's what I grew up on a lot. And it was mostly that or casual American food, like McDonalds or Olive Garden or stuff like that. But I knew that stuff [food] was made out of love. And that was my bonding thing with my dad, right? Like, "Oh, what are we having tonight?" "Oh, the usual." And I was a kid so I would love that shit. I guess as I grew older, I became an angsty teenager. I had a lot of moments where I was like: "Fuck, we're eating Korean food again?" Or like: "Damn, *Jokbal* (pig trotters) again? Pork belly again?" [] I would complain, I would take it for granted, but I always come back to it. I think partly because I go to school at Colby now and there are zero, like there's not a lot of Asian restaurants much less Korean restaurants in general. And in Maine in general, Maine just does not have that presence. So, I found myself ordering literally box loads of Korean food, instant Korean food from the Ottogi company in New York. That's the closest I could get to making Korean food. And I tell my parents that and my parents say, "See, you'll always come back to it. See that's how you know you're a real Korean person. You got the taste, you'll come back to it." You can complain all you want, but it's true. Right? So yeah… trying to remember other food memories. I always associate stingray- yeah, stingray skate, skate meat. I'm trying to remember what it's called. *Hong-eo*. Yeah. *Hong-eo* (skate), raw skate meat with my dad's side of the family. Because my grandpa in Korea, on my dad's side, he grew up in Gampo, which is in the coastal area, it's a small coastal town. He grew up eating a lot of seaweed and *Hong-eo* and different types of fish. When I visited in 2010, I believe when I was

like eight or something, my grandpa brought home a fresh, stinky box full of *Hong-eo*. Usually, kids hate this stuff bexause it literally [] reeks of urine and dead animal. It's raw fish. It's not like sushi; you have to let it sit a bit. You have to let it ferment a bit. That's why we eat it. But it smells a lot. You can't bring it on [in] airports because people think you're carrying a dead body or something. But I ate that a lot [during] my visit there and my grandparents were so surprised because they saw this eight-year-old munching down on this really pungent raw skate. When my grandpa died a couple of years after that, at the funeral home—because they do the funeral within the hospital—that's all they served. They served skate dipped in *Gochujang* (red pepper paste), kimchi sauce, and chili paste and stuff. That's all I ate for the whole weekend of the funeral. So, I always [felt an association with] that and it's a question I'm ashamed of, but I come down home for break and I always ask my mom: "Hey, is there a possible way you can ship down *Hong-eo*, like skate from Austin or something?" And it comes! They actually deliver sometimes, and it smells terrible, but it tastes amazing. So yeah. What else? I guess one thing I can associate with Chicago in general, like my time in Chicago with my mom, when I was living there when I was four or so, [or] just [in] general that side of the family was *Sundae* (blood sausage) and *Miyeok-guk* (seaweed soup), seaweed soup and a blood sausage. One, because my mom was going to school and working, so she didn't have much time to cook. Seaweed was a pretty easy thing to make and it's very easily transportable, just get Tupperware. My grandma would make loads of it and just give it to us. So that's something my mom made at home for me all the time while she was studying. And [I also feel an association with] *Sundae* because there was this one blood sausage restaurant in the area that I would always go to. Those two dishes have [been] cemented [in] my brain and [] I associate that with that area and that side of my family. So [I have] a lot of different food memories.

Tegh: So, this is another tricky question: With all of your experiences with Korean food, how would you say that they are influenced by region, social class, and your personal taste?

Chris: Hmm. Region, social class, and personal taste…

Tegh: We talked about the skates, right? That was regional, right? But broadly any region—US, Korea, anything.

Chris: I gotta say the region definitely limits or expands your ability to make Korean food. There's literally like one or two Korean supermarkets in my part of border Texas. [] There are bigger chains in the bigger cities. You got H Mart [and] a bunch of small pop-up places in bigger cities like Chicago, Boston, New York, [and in] California cities like LA. But in South Texas, where I live, there are two family-owned Asian and Korean places. Before, there used to be only one. We had to get a lot of ingredients from a Japanese strip mall store []. So, we were pretty limited [in] what we were able to make. We had to improvise a lot. If I wanted to eat oxtail soup, *Kkori gomtang* (oxtail soup), we would have to get oxtail meat from a Mexican butcher store. There were a lot of loopholes we had to go through to eat the same way we used to do in California. But that also [] exposed us more to the local food, the local culture of food. Like TexMex, which I absolutely adore. Barbacoa is amazing. A lot of Korean immigrants have just really been accustomed to bringing their culture down here and their food down here. I don't have too much of an insight into what foods indicate the type of social class you belong to. But you know, I think I was pretty well off in terms of the menu because my grandparents or my

parents, who I was in frequent [contact] with, wouldtry to make some food for me that I was really yearning for, right? If I wanted *Seolleong-tang* (ox-bone soup) or *Cheonggukjang* (fermented bean paste), or if I wanted a dish [that was difficult to make, they would]. My theory is that it was their way of showing love and trying to tether me back to the Korean culture, saying it's a special thing for this second-generation American kid to want to go out of his way and ask for this Korean food. Let's make it for him. [] I associate a lot of that with familial love and I guess that also went into a lot of my personal taste and why [] I put these foods in such high regard, especially like *Hong-eo* (skate) which is not your conventional first-time Korean American food. It's an accustomed [acquired] taste, but sandwich [in] *Cheonggukjang* too. It smells very strong. It's a very pungent fermented bean smell. But it's just things that I like because I associated it with family and the love I was receiving.

Tegh: Okay. Awesome.

Chris: It's kind of funny. Yeah, literally all the meat we got—because in California there are Korean butcher shops, Korean meat shops, there are Chinese meat shops [that sell] similar cuts—but it was really hard to get that down here [in Texas]. So, we would always go to the Mexican butcher shop, which had not too different stuff. They had some similar things too, like spare ribs for *LA-galbi* (LA-style short-ribs) like LA spare ribs and like oxtail soup. Improvisation, I think, was a big thing [part] of adapting.

Tegh: So, your parents would just go to different grocery stores and mix whatever they could find really, and they would make [Korean dishes]?

Chris: Houston Texas is five hours away from us, and we would make these occasional pilgrimages to Houston to go to the bigger H Mart there and bring literally a trunk load of groceries to last us for the next month or so. That was what my earlier years in Texas were like. But a lot more Koreans have moved in since, so there's quite a [number] of Korean restaurants there in the area.

Tegh: We can go onto the next section because food was great. This is a good one—another loaded question: How have you navigated cultural differences between yourself, your parents, family members, or your community?

Chris: Hmm. How have I navigated it? In what context? Like socializing or trying to conform to tradition?

Tegh: Any of it. What first comes to your mind when you think of navigating through any sort of conflict or even just cultural differences, what strategies did you [use] to fit in?

Chris: I think code switching automatically has been pretty ingrained because [when I am around] Korean people, even people closer to my age, I immediately find myself reverting to my church self. It's an automatic instinct now. And that involves *jondaenmal* (Formal speech) like saying "Yes, please"—like the "*yo*" at the end of every sentence—bowing when you say hello or goodbye, you know?[5] My [background] of being so exposed to and associating Korean culture

[5] The Korean language has levels of honorifics indicated by word choice and sentence-endings.

with the church has led me to associate polite manners—or at least the formal manners—with other Korean people that I see now too. It's funny because they're like [sentiment], "why you…" like people laugh, right? Like *hyeong-a* (older brothers) and *nuna* (older sisters) right? [] People that are like slightly older than me, like in their older twenties. I don't know how to approach it [I would not know how to communicate with them]. [] Do I use the formal tense? Do I say "*yo*," [or] do I bow to them [] when I leave them? What do I do? So, I just revert to that, and they laugh and I'm like: "Oh, can I just be casual with them?" So, I think that code switching has kind of been ingrained in my mind. For the most part, I guess before I used to learn, I used to speak very eloquently, very fluently, but I just learned to not express myself too much in the [presence] of other Korean people. Especially because I was taught [not to] at home all the time. [] I think my parents found a way to communicate this to me best, [by] saying to me, "These Korean people talk a lot, there's a lot of gossip and stuff. So just keep family stuff- keep private stuff to yourself." I was always raised that way when I went to church. I think it's kind of ingrained in my [habit of] oversharing or sharing [regular things] as well with my American friends or my more Americanized heterogeneous friends. I would share what's going on in my life, right? I would say what's going on, like updates, like if I'm going through a tough time, I would tell them that, but [] with church friends or people at church or Korean people in general, I've just associated that the two [go] hand in hand [they are separate]. [I]t's been harder for me to [] share overtly what's going on in my life just because there's been a lot of gossip and prejudice within the community, and maybe it was just a product of being part of a pastor's family because as a pastor, you're the talk of the church, right? Do one wrong thing and they're [everyone] is like: "Oh, that kid's a bad kid" [or] "He is not fit to be a pastor because his kid's bad" or something. Because of that mentality or sentiment, I always learned to not overshare and stuff. Keep to myself, be quiet. But with that being said, as I grow older, I have a better sense of what I can share and what I can't share. I'm an introvert, but I like talking to people that I'm close with and I would like to think that I'm close with some of my family. But there's always that barrier [of], "Do I say this or not?" But I guess as I'm growing older, my yearning to reconnect [with] my culture [has grown], there's also this yearning to connect with my family more. So, I try to call my grandma more frequently, my grandparents more frequently [to] try to communicate what's going on in my life more: "Hey, this is what I'm majoring in, this is what I'm working on," or "Do you like this new song I made?" Stuff like that. I think it's a big thing. [The] big part [of navigating] has been what I can or can't share, how reserved I was in the Korean community versus just a social, academic, or American setting, you know?

Tegh: Yeah. That makes sense. To elaborate more on that, now that you're older, how has your perspective toward these past differences changed?

Chris: Past differences with like…

Tegh: Community or culture. In other words, how do you see yourself reclaiming your memories?

Chris: Oh yeah, that's a good question. I think a lot of times I have generational trauma and religious trauma from the negative experiences that encompassed the Korean church or the Korean community [that went] that was hand-in-hand with the church. But to reclaim it, because I do now have a yearning [] to be more in touch with my Korean [side] and sense of diaspora. I

think I gotta understand or embrace more that these [Korean community vs Korean identity] are just two parts of me that I gotta go hand-in-hand [with]. [] Sure, they conflict with each other, but I can't pit them against each other. They will be in conflict sometimes, but I can't pit them against each other. So, for example, I should fully claim that I am both a Korean American and I am also the son of first-generation Korean parents. Oftentimes when I visited Korea, I was that Korean American relative. [Family members would say], "He doesn't speak *Hangeul* [Korean][6] that well. He probably doesn't know what that dish is. He doesn't know what we're talking about because we're using advanced vocabulary or grammar." But I gotta embrace that now. I gotta be like: "Yeah, I'm from America. Like, you know, that's where I'm born, but I'm still Korean at heart." I didn't go through all these struggles growing up for nothing because I'm not Korean. I still am at the end of the day. So, I guess instead of being resentful towards these memories or these experiences, I gotta take into account that it's just part of the experience. And sure [], these two sides of myself may be in conflict with each other, but I gotta take both of them with grace and say: "You know, this is just both parts of what I am." I think this is just a problem that a lot of people have. People like to separate their work from their family, right? [] They don't want business and family to mix. Same thing with me. I can't imagine fully mixing my family with my social life, but they're just two parts of myself that I gotta deal with equally.

Tegh: Overall, what lessons have you learned from your parents' cultural experiences and how have you incorporated these into your own life?

Chris: This kind of speaks to why my parents came to the US in the first place, but they placed such a big emphasis on academics. I guess [] that's kind of like the tiger mom, where at least the Asian excellence mentality [is prevalent]. Sometimes it's toxic—sometimes it's very toxic. Where it's like: "Academics is everything, you gotta put everything on the line, you fail at life if you don't do this." I grew up hearing these things so much that it's gotten pretty toxic. But I guess for one reason [] you gotta live studiously and busily. It's hard for me to incorporate leisure and rest into my life. But I think [seeing] how hard my parents worked has inspired me to also be continuously hardworking. One thing that I am deviating from, though, is I—like a lot of other Asian kids—grew up hearing the typical: "You gotta grow up to be a doctor. You gotta grow up to be a lawyer. You gotta grow up to do this and that." And for a long time, I thought I was gonna do medicine or something in biology. But right now, I'm an English major doing cinema studies as my minor. I'm trying to do entertainment one day, like film and music. There are murmurs in my family saying, "What if he doesn't make it? That's so fucking risky." I think it's been a learning process between my parents and me. One, for me to take these complaints or criticisms with grace and say, "What, no! I still gotta pursue what I want to pursue." If my parents work this hard to get me here, then it has to be for something, right? Which is: I gotta do what I wanna do later down in life. I can't conform to just the typical, "You gotta be a lawyer, you gotta be a doctor." Nothing wrong with that, but it's just not who I am. But also, for my parents, it's been a learning experience too. Like, "Oh yeah, we did work this hard so that our son can have some level of agency or freedom, so we gotta accept that and support him." It's been pretty positive in that light.

[6] See footnote 1.

Tegh: In terms of what things you wanted to do with your life, were there times when it was difficult for you to communicate with your family?

Chris: For 14 or 15 years of my life, I played the violin. For seven years of my life, five or seven years, I played the piano. That was not a great experience in general because that was just my parents saying, “Of course you have free choice: piano or violin?” So, that's one example of my priorities conflicting with theirs. It was just a matter of recognizing leisure as hobbies versus studious hobbies. For them, it was me choosing between these two classical instruments and that stressed me out a lot as a kid. That was one example.

That was a first step in terms of me fighting back and telling them this is not who I am. At first, I swallowed my pride, and I was like: you know what, fine! I'll do whatever you tell me to do well. So, I played violin for 14, 15 years. It wasn't my thing, but I still did it. Eventually, I had other ideas—even when I wanted to do STEM [because] for a long time I wanted to be a marine biologist—even then, they had criticisms where [they felt]: “Oh, you're not gonna earn any money as a biologist or whatever.” “Why don't you do medicine? Doctors are guaranteed to get bank and stuff.” So, even then, it was baby-step deviations. I think [] a big part of conveying that to my parents was showing them how passionate and how hardworking I was in the things that I did want to do []. I had this great passion for making my own short films during high school, working on film, editing and stuff. And they realized that, “Okay, if you're gonna take this seriously [], since clearly you are taking it seriously now, then I guess we'll let you do that.” So, it was a matter of one, baby-steps between: “I don't wanna play the violin the same way I don’t want to chase medicine, but I'll do whatever else I wanna do with just as much effort.” Making them believe that. I think that's a universal parental expectation. For their kids to excel and do great and succeed in whatever they do. Now they support me. They'll probably support me more flexibly [with] other changes I wanna make. But, yeah, it was conveying that I was passionate about the things I was [passionate about] for a reason.

Tegh: On that same note, would you say that that's also them embracing their Korean American identity as well? Like understanding this freedom to choose or do whatever you wanna do? Can you speak to that a little bit?

Chris: It was easier for my family because my dad did come to the states. He took that risk, that jump, to pursue the arts to begin with as well. He did graphic design as well. So, it was easier for them to understand in that light as well. But I guess it was also a matter of them deviating from the Korean community, because at first it was like: “You know, don't say what you wanna do. Like if people ask you what you wanna do, just say like: ‘oh yeah, I'm doing science stuff.’” Or like, “Keep quiet, don't talk about your life. These people are gossipy.” But now, it's like: “Fuck the noise. Who cares what they think? You're an adult now. Do what you wanna do. It's your choice now.” I really appreciate [] that sentiment [and] that acceptance of me having more agency but also not wanting to conform to the traditional [forms of] being involved in the community. Because of the negative experiences and the trauma that I still harbor, it's been hard for me to be as involved in the church or the Korean community or at least fully embrace, in a larger social setting, being a Korean American citizen. But my parents don't resent me for that too much. Sometimes I'm ashamed. I'm like: “I should be doing more, I should be helping out more, I should [enjoy] being more involved. I should be more involved.” But I think they

understand that [] I got my life now []. I got my own set of experiences which has shaped me into who I am, which is being a Korean American. They can't expect me to fully harbor [] all the baggage of the national identity with me. I mean, after all, we went to the embassy, took the five-hour drive to Houston, to the Korean office and signed away my dual citizenship so I didn't have to serve conscription service. [] Just small or big things like that, I think. I don't have a thesis for this stuff, but those are just thoughts that contributed [to my mindset], I think.

Tegh: That's good. I think that's all I have for you.

Chris: Word.

Tegh: Okay.

Chris: Do you think you can use…

Tegh: Oh yeah, totally. This is great. Thank you so much for your time and I will keep in touch regarding the post-interview process, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your break.