

At Home in Food Abroad

Interviewer

I am a student at Colby College and I am here today with my interviewee for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project here in 2023. Let's get started – what are you studying right now?

Speaker

I'm a government major and I'm also minoring in East Asian studies.

Interviewer

Let's start with where are you from?

Speaker

I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, but my family moved up to Virginia. I technically lived in Richmond, Virginia, up until I was 11, and then we moved up to Northern Virginia, but ever since—that's where my family resides and that's what I call home.

Interviewer

How many family members do you have?

Speaker

My dad, my mom and my older brother and me.

Interviewer

Who are the people in your family?

Speaker

As in just their names?

Interviewer

Names, maybe older brother, or what age range?

Speaker

My father, my mother, and then I have an older brother who is turning 24, 25 actually this year—that's weird.

Interviewer

Is he also studying?

Speaker

No, he's just chilling at home. I think he wants to enlist into the Air Force. But honestly, we don't really know.

Interviewer

Let's start with your father, anything about him? What does he do for work?

Speaker

Both him and my mom immigrated to the States in 2000. Right before I was born, they immigrated to the States, and they've been here ever since. He works multiple jobs. Right now, primarily he does a lot of Uber. But he also helps with tour groups, and he has clients from South

Korea. He'll take them up to Niagara Falls and stuff. But that's been kind of on hold, because of the pandemic.

Interviewer

Does he generally work with a lot of traveling Koreans? Is that his specific job?

Speaker

Yeah, for sure. So, also in the DC area, he'll get calls from different groups, whether it's delegations or tour groups from South Korea who are coming to DC for whatever reasons. He helps with driving them around or being a very informal interpreter, trying to help with the logistics of bringing these groups around the area.

Interviewer

What can you tell me about your mother [and] her job as well?

Speaker

My mother, she's been a homemaker. Back in Korea, she used to work at a travel agency. She worked something related to travel while she was at a travel agency. She helped clients book flight tickets and whatnot. But when she and my dad immigrated to the States, then she gave birth to me. She's been a homemaker ever since.

Interviewer

Both of your parents are from Korea?

Speaker

Yes.

Interviewer

When did you say they had moved?

Speaker

They moved in 2000. It was maybe six months before I was born. My brother was born in South Korea, so I'm technically the only one in my family born in the United States.

Interviewer

If you're comfortable, do you know why they moved?

Speaker

There were some personal family reasons, I think. My grandfather, in particular, he wanted to move to the States, I think likely because of financial reasons. There [was something] called the IMF financial crisis in 1988, or 1998 - 1999. Around that time, there's a really big economic shock in South Korea. so I think around that time a lot of people emigrated to other countries. Actually, my father—he's the eldest son out of his siblings, so he has a younger brother and younger sister—but being the eldest son, he had that familial responsibility to follow my grandfather to the states and make sure that [my grandparents were] doing okay and keep an eye on them. So, he ended up bringing my mother and my brother along as well. They all emigrated and, also, because my father told me and my brother later on that they wanted us to grow up in a freer environment, because they knew that South Korean society can be very competitive and very harsh, especially in terms of education. They just wanted us to have more options and have more freedoms as well.

Interviewer

Your grandfather had moved to America before your father did?

Speaker

Yeah, I think so. But then my father followed shortly after.

Interviewer

You mentioned your mother's a homemaker, so she does a lot of cooking, yeah?

Speaker

She does love it. Yeah, I'd say so. But I do feel like there's this weird cultural thing where she feels like, "Oh, because my role is to be a good housewife and good mom, cooking is my responsibility." So yes, she puts a lot of pride and effort into it, for sure.

Interviewer

Do you know who she learned to cook from? Her mother, her family?

Speaker

That's a good question. Actually, it was interesting when I studied abroad in South Korea and I got to meet my aunt and my other relatives. They all told me stories about my parents, which I didn't know beforehand. Something that I learned from my aunt was actually that my mom hated cooking for most of her early-20s. She was known as like, they give her a nickname of "*hwacho*"—in Korean it's called "*hwacho*" (flowering plant). I think it's like flower, flower in a vase or something like that. So, basically, she would just sit there and act pretty, but she wouldn't actually get any work done. My aunt was the one who had to do all the house chores. My mother hated cooking for a long time, but I think it's when she married my dad, that's when she started to actually learn how to cook. I was kind of surprised to hear that. So, I guess my mom had to grow into it over time.

Interviewer

Has she taught you how to cook yet?

Speaker

Honestly, not really. She's taught me a couple of recipes, but I think growing up as well, like in high school, she would always tell me to focus on my responsibilities as a student, so I guess she didn't feel the need to teach me how to cook. Because she thought, "Oh, [my daughter] is busy with academics and she should just focus on [that]. I don't want to distract her with anything." There are times when I would want to try to cook and come into the kitchen, and she would just swap me away. It's usually like, "Don't help, it's okay." So actually, she hasn't really taught me to cook that much.

Interviewer

What are some typical things that your mother does cook?

Speaker

I think, obviously, *kimchi* is always a staple. She has her monthly routine. Where she gets out all the cabbages and whatnot. Yeah, *kimchi*. I mean, we have Korean food almost every day. She always makes the *banchan*, like all the side dishes. *Jjigae* (stew), like the soup, the rice, and then a main dish of like *bulgogi*, which is like marinated beef, or some sort of meat or some sort of fish. She cooks a really wide variety of Korean dishes.

Interviewer

What might be a dish you'd have on a special occasion?

Speaker

For example, for birthdays and stuff, she always makes *miyeokguk*, which is a seaweed soup. And it's actually not that difficult or labor intensive to make. But I think it's just a very cultural and symbolic dish to have seaweed soup on people's birthdays. She always makes sure to do that for us during our birthdays, and then also for new Lunar New Year, we always have *tteokguk*, which is rice cake soup. And that's also a very Korean thing as well to always have rice cakes soup for Lunar New Year. So yeah, she definitely pays attention to those types of details.

Interviewer

You mentioned she typically makes Korean dishes. Does she ever make any other types of dishes? Or is it always Korean?

Speaker

She does try to make more, I guess, Western style or American style dishes, sometimes out of my own request growing up. For example, there was this one time where I went to someone's house and we had meatloaf and I really liked the meatloaf, so I asked my mom, "Oh, hey, can you try making meatloaf as well, because it's really good," and she actually did her own research and she tried to make it and ever since then, she does occasionally make meatloaf and it is part of her recipe. So yeah, she's always open to suggestions. And she's always, she always wants to make things that me and my brother like.

Interviewer

I'm going to move on to when you studied abroad. In general, would you be able to tell me what that experience was like?

Speaker

Yeah, it's very hard to put into words because there's a lot of sentiments. But overall, if I were to describe how the experience was, for me, it was definitely very affirming, in terms of helping me to learn more about my background and identity as a Korean American. I came out of the whole study abroad experience feeling a lot more comfortable and a lot more confident in embracing my identity as a Korean American. I think it helped me to learn more Korean, learn more about Korean culture, feel more comfortable with my "Korean side," and also helped me to reconnect with a lot of relatives who I didn't necessarily have a chance to see growing up. But you know, being in Korea for a full year gave me a lot more time to really get to know them and communicate with them and learn more about my family history. Just in general, as well, living in a city where there are so many possibilities every day for new adventures. Just having a sense of independence was also very transformative for me. So yeah, overall, it was a very positive experience. And I learned a lot from it.

Interviewer

Your relatives, were they close by? Did you spend a lot of time with them?

Speaker

Actually, I wouldn't necessarily say so. Because my closest relatives, they live at least an hour away from me, so no one actually lived in the city. They were all on the outskirts or in neighboring provinces. But I did try to see them either on a bi-weekly basis, or a monthly basis.

Interviewer

How much had you talked to or known about them before you went to Korea?

Speaker

Not that often. Because growing up, I never really had a chance to visit Korea. It wasn't until after I graduated high school that I was finally able to go to Korea. For my relatives, as well, they did visit us in the States maybe once or twice throughout my childhood, but other than that we've hardly ever seen each other face-to-face. I would only get the occasional Christmas card or whatever, but it's not like I was in close contact with them. So [I] didn't really know them that much growing up

Interviewer

While studying, what would you typically eat? Was there a cafeteria on campus?

Speaker

I guess it depended on which semester, because for the fall semester I did live in a university dorm so I did have access to their cafeteria and I would go there pretty often. But in my spring semester, I was living off campus and I was living in a busier area with a lot more restaurants and food options. But typically, I would just go eat out at a restaurant because food is pretty cheap

overall in Korea. I don't think I ever cooked for myself because groceries are expensive and I would just rather go to a restaurant because it was tasty, cheap, and easy.

Interviewer

Do you remember what types of food were in the cafeteria?

Speaker

Yeah, I think the cafeteria food—I just remember it was very, holistic and healthy. You have the rice, you have the *banchan*—the side dishes—and the soup. Some vegetables as well. It was very healthy food. *Kimchi* was always a staple. Then the main, the meat, would differ from day-to-day, depending on the menu.

Interviewer

How would you compare it to some of Colby's options?

Speaker

It was a lot better. I mean, I am biased because my palate is more towards Korean food and Korean flavors. But it was a lot better, in my opinion, than Colby dining hall food because I think, if I had that type of food in America like I wouldn't even think that it's "cafeteria food." It just seems like normal restaurant or normal Korean food to me, so overall the quality was a lot higher. It was just nice to have rice on a daily basis just because I'm really used to eating rice. So yeah, I preferred it a lot more than the food here at Colby.

Interviewer

Did you eat out a lot during fall semester, too, or just mostly this spring semester?

Speaker

I would still say in fall semester I did eat out a lot. Just because I would go to the cafeteria for lunchtime maybe because I'm still on campus and I still have classes. But then, on one side, head out in the evening, I would just eat out at restaurants in whatever area I'm at for that evening.

Interviewer

Did you have a go-to meal?

Speaker

One thing – one meal that comes to mind where if it's on a menu I usually would go for it is *kimchi* stew, *kimchi jjigae*, just because it's one of my favorites and it's a pretty common dish in Korea, too.

Interviewer

Would you say there were a lot of major day-to-day differences in what was being offered?

Speaker

I didn't have to think about this. I don't think there were crazy variations. But I did go to some non-Korean restaurants. And I had different cuisines; on some days I went for Japanese food. I guess you could say Korean-style Japanese food or Korean-style Indian food. So, I guess there was some variation, but it wasn't crazy. At the same time, just depending on what restaurant I went to that day.

Interviewer

Did you often eat with other Korean students?

Speaker

Yeah, so this is also dependent. I wouldn't say often, necessarily, just because my friend group or my social circle varied a lot, so I did hang out with international students and then I had a few Korean friends. But I wouldn't say that I spent the majority of my meals with Korean students.

Interviewer

Just from those limited experiences, would you typically go to restaurants with them, if you were with other Korean students?

Speaker

Yeah, we would go to restaurants. Yes.

Interviewer

And with other international students, would you say you spent more time with them or with other Korean students? Or do you still think it was pretty equal?

Speaker

I think still, I did spend the majority of my time with the international students. Yeah, because I did have some Korean friends, but at the same time I think because they either didn't live in the same dorm building or didn't live in the same area they weren't as accessible, or I just didn't see them as often compared to my exchange friends.

Interviewer

Did they have different experiences with the food that you know of as in types of food that they maybe would often try and find?

Speaker

In terms of the Korean students? Or exchange students?

Interviewer

We can do either, or start with Korean, maybe?

Speaker

Yeah, I think they had more knowledge about what type of restaurants are more popular. For example, if I'd hang out with a Korean friend, they tend to know a certain place and then we just go there. Or they would be able to quickly find and search up a restaurant that's trending or that they think will be good, so I tended to follow their recommendation. But then for my exchange standard friends, I imagine they had a different experience from me, because unless they're Korean American or they grew up eating Korean food, I'm sure a lot of the cuisine was fairly new for them. And also, I'm sure their palates might have been different to [Korean tastes]. For example, I think Korean people typically can handle spice pretty well, like *kimchi* and whatnot, but I think for some of my foreign friends or exchange student friends had to get adjusted to it over time.

Interviewer

Most of the food in the cafeteria and most of the restaurants were specifically Korean or a mix of Japanese [and] Korean food?

Speaker

It was pretty Korean, I'd say, but then at the same time you'd find something and you'd be like, "Oh, this seems like a Korean rendition of a Western dish." I don't know if anything comes to mind in particular, but they had like *tonkatsu/donkkaseu* (breaded pork cutlets), for example, which is, technically a Japanese dish but then Koreans kind of put their own spin on it. So yeah, sometimes there'll be fusion dishes, and sometimes I would find Korean-Chinese fusion food as well. But overall, it was typically Korean food.

Interviewer

Were you surprised by any foods that you had that were different from what you'd experienced at home?

Speaker

I think overall, nothing was too much of a surprise. Just because I grew up eating Korean food at home. But I do distinctly remember coming across one dish. And I think it was only that dish where I've never seen that before and I was shocked to see that it was a Korean dish. I was really puzzled by this. It was some sort of meat dish. I was really surprised to see it in the cafeteria that day, like on the menu, so I actually did my research and I tried searching it up to find out what it was. I learned that apparently, it's from a certain province in Korea called Gangwon-do, which is in the east, which is known for being very mountainous and very rural. It has, in the past, it's connected to North Korea, or a part of North Korea. Apparently [the dish in question] was a very regional dish and my parents are not from there. My family's not from that region. So that was something that I was kind of surprised to see. That was the one and only dish I recall from my study abroad where I saw something new for the first time. But other than that, I was pretty unfazed by all the Korean food.

Interviewer

Did you have any expectations about there being differences?

Speaker

Not necessarily. I guess maybe the ingredients might have been slightly different, or if for some reason, I think it's because my mom told me about this, but the restaurant food was overall very tasty. But then I think it kind of felt a bit—I guess healthier than the food that I had at home, for example, which makes sense. Home cooked meals versus restaurant food that's served to lots of people, I think, can definitely differ in terms of quality. I think at some point in time, my mom once told me that the restaurant food is not going to be that healthy, so she wanted me to cook for myself more.

Interviewer

When you visited family, did you eat with them, first off?

Speaker

Yeah, for sure. They fed me a lot.

Interviewer

Obviously, we're getting at the home cooked meals. Was it similar to what you'd have at home?
Like the types of meals?

Speaker

Yeah, thinking back on it? Yeah, I'd say it's pretty similar. Of course, the tastes might have been a bit different. But overall, the types of dishes are things that I was used to seeing back at home as well.

Interviewer

Did you share much of this experience with your family when you came back?

Speaker

As in telling them about my food adventures in Korea?

Interviewer

Food adventures [and] just in general? If you felt anything specific about interacting with other Korean students, if you talked about that with your family at all?

Speaker

I think I did tell them about some of the friends that I made in Korea, and, just overall, how well they treated me and all the nice memories we made and whatnot. I also distinctly remember I went over to my aunt's place for the mid-autumn festival—in English and in Korean is *Chuseok*; it's basically like Korean Thanksgiving—and she prepared so many side dishes and the table was just full of food and I remember taking a picture and sending it to my parents and just being like, “Oh, wow, she made so much food and I'm so happy and stuff.” I definitely told them about how well fed and how well taken care of I always felt when visiting my relatives.

Interviewer

Did they have any thoughts prior to going on this experience, like your mom was telling you about the restaurants or anything else like that?

Speaker

In regards to food in particular?

Interviewer

In particular food, but anything in general as well.

Speaker

My mom, obviously, you know, being the worrisome mom that she is, she definitely told me to be careful when walking around on the streets and just to be mindful of my surroundings. Because I was going to this big city and I was going to be there by myself. But I think, overall, they were pretty relaxed or excited for me just because I think they were happy that I was going to go to Korea of all places for study abroad. I think they would have been a lot more concerned if I went off to a completely different country where I'm not familiar with the culture or I don't speak the language. But I think because of the fact that I already was familiar with Korea and I had my relatives as well, definitely made them feel a lot more relieved. So, they were pretty excited for me, I'd say.

Interviewer

Did you spend much time outside of the city?

Speaker

Yeah, for sure. I definitely tried to go on weekend trips to other provinces or other regions. So yeah, definitely I'd say I got to experience a lot of cities outside of Seoul.

Interviewer

Did you notice some major differences between Seoul and some of the smaller cities that you visited?

Speaker

I think it's pretty clear in Korea that there's a huge disparity in terms of like development between Seoul or the mega-cities like Seoul and Busan, which is near the south and then the other tiny towns and cities. For example, every time I leave Seoul, I would be surprised at the lack of young people. A lot of these smaller towns have mostly elderly citizens, and a lot of the young people leave for Seoul in order to get their higher education or find job opportunities. So, a lot of the towns I visited, they felt kind of vacant, because there just weren't a lot of people around, it wasn't nearly as lively as Seoul. But I also kind of liked the quieter atmosphere as well. There's definitely a huge gap in terms of activity and population in Seoul versus the rest of the country. Also, people dress a lot more colorfully in other parts of the country, whereas in Seoul, everyone's very serious. Their fashion is nice, but it's all just black, white and gray. Young people don't wear color, for some reason. They just don't like standing out. Whereas in the countryside, or just outside of Seoul, in general, people wear whatever they want. I thought that was interesting.

Interviewer

Do you remember any differences between some of the food options when you were in the smaller areas?

Speaker

I think some towns had their own regional dishes or certain cuisines that were well known for being a specialty in that town. For example, when I'd go to more coastal cities or towns, I'd get the seafood. Technically, you could get the seafood dishes in Seoul as well, but it wouldn't be nearly as fresh or high quality. Because Seoul obviously, it's not on the coast, so the food is kind of different. I think overall, in the smaller towns or countryside the food just tasted a bit more – it felt a bit more homemade. Because it'd be prepared by like, this elderly grandma, who...you're in her restaurant, but also looks like her home, basically. Because it's very rural. So yeah, I think there was a slight difference.

Interviewer

Aside from some of the food-related things, were there any culture shocks that you experienced?

Speaker

I'm sure there were moments where I was like, “Oh, this is different,” but I don't think there are necessarily any major realizations or things that took me off guard. Because once again, I've grown up pretty accustomed to Korean culture, which I'm very thankful for. So yeah, I'd say it was – nothing was too surprising for me.

Interviewer

How did you feel when interacting with some of the other Korean students?

Speaker

I definitely noticed, of course – it was very clear that I was not, I didn't have the same lived experience, even though I am ethnically Korean. I think it's interesting because when I interacted with my foreigner friends or my exchange student friends, I was the “expert Korean,” or whatever, or I was the go-to person for things like, “Oh, what does this mean?” Or like, “What do people in Korea do in this type of situation?” I was the person who kind of had the authoritative answer on that. But then when I hung out with my Korean friends, I was definitely the American, or—there's a word for Korean Americans called *gyopo*, which is you're ethnically Korean but you didn't grow up in Korea, and so you kind of have a different perspective. You're

kind of different. I felt like I was seen as American in the eyes of my Korean friends. Which I thought makes sense, because I was born and raised in America.

Interviewer

Do you think there was a prevalence of American culture in Korea that you experienced while you're there?

Speaker

Yeah, no, for sure. For example, a lot of the music that was blasting on the streets is—of course, there's Kpop—but I happened to learn that they also love Ed Sheeran. There's this one song by this person named Anne Marie, which I don't think she's that popular in America, but Koreans love her for some reason. So yeah, so I heard a lot of American music for—well, Ed Sheeran's not American—but I heard a lot of Western music. And yeah, like movies, just cultural contents and whatnot. Koreans love Marvel—I saw like two Avengers movies in Korea because they're all trending and they're all topping the box office there too. Hip hop is really big. Yeah, I'd say there's a lot of American influence, for sure.

Interviewer

Did you see any American influence on the food or did most of it seem like a bunch of Korean restaurants? Maybe any fusion restaurants you noticed?

Speaker

I definitely noticed they have older, the classic fast food joints, like McDonald's and Burger King and whatnot, even though they had Korean-specific menu items as well, which I thought to be interesting. So, the menu was somewhat different from what we have here in America. I think what's interesting is that I don't think I saw any “authentic” American restaurants. But then there were a lot of “American” dishes that had a Korean twist on it. But in terms of finding actual food that tastes similar to what we have here in America, I couldn't really find any of that. Which I think also makes sense because things are adjusted to fit the Korean palate. For example, my friend really wanted to get Tex-Mex, but you can't really find that in Korea.

Interviewer

How do you feel this compares to your experiences with Korean culture in America? The reverse?

Speaker

I guess it is different because I feel like the Korean food that served in America, Korean restaurants, for example, I'd say they're pretty similar to what is in South Korea. I wouldn't say that Korean food in America is dramatically changed to match for American palates, per se. I think it's pretty true to the original flavors and the original recipe from South Korea. Whereas in South Korea, if you want to get "American" food, it's kind of hard to find that, and if you do it's going to be changed to match the local palate, so I think there is kind of a difference there. One dish that's kind of an exception is tofu soup, or *sundubu*. I feel like the *sundubu* or tofu soup in America and the Korean restaurants in America, I couldn't really find that in South Korea for some reason, so I think that particular recipe was actually introduced by or created by Korean Americans in America which is why you can't really find it in South Korea. But other than that, I think the Korean food in America was pretty authentic.

Interviewer

Do you think the experiences of your grandparents and even your parents might be different from yours when traveling to and from Korea?

Speaker

Yeah, for sure. I guess you can say that they are probably less inclined to seek out Western-style foods and they probably just want to stick to what they're familiar with in terms of traditional Korean foods. I think they wouldn't be open to trying fusion Korean-American food or Korean-Japanese food. I think they're more used to the traditional recipes which differs for me, where South Korea is very globalized and there's a lot of different types of fusion foods and I've also been exposed to more Western foods growing up in America, so I do feel like our experiences are pretty different.

Interviewer

Do you have some ideas what they might think of Seoul, food in Seoul in general, compared to some of their home cooked meals?

Speaker

Probably not too different. But once again, like my mom said, she has this perception that food served in restaurants is not that healthy. So yeah, home cooked meals is a lot healthier, uses fresher ingredients, does not have MSG, and just things like that. But in terms of type of foods, I don't think there's that much variation.