

## Interview Transcript

[00:00] **Yumi:** Hello, my name is Yumi Kang. Today is March 31, 2023, and I'm interviewing Ms. Song through FaceTime only leaving an audio recording for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you Ms. Younglang Song, agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

[00:20] **Younglang:** Yes.

[00:23] **Yumi:** Thank you. Before we begin, I want to remind you that you're not obligated to answer any questions or speak on anything that you are uncomfortable with. Ms. Song, it's my great pleasure to be able to interview you today, and I thank you for agreeing to share your story for this interview today. Starting off, would you be able to tell me a bit about yourself: your name, age, where you were born, and anything else you'd like to share?

[00:53] **Younglang:** My name is Younglang Song. I was born in Korea. I have one older brother and one younger brother. I was raised in Korea until second grade, and when I was in second grade, my parents moved to Saudi Arabia where I lived for about five years. After five years in Saudi Arabia, my family moved to [the] United States where I attended junior high, high school, and college. After I graduated from college, I went back to Korea and got married and lived there for a little bit over ten years. Then we came back to [the] United States — I came back to United States with my husband and three kids after getting married.

[02:14] **Yumi:** I see. So, starting off, Ms. Song, what would you consider to be the most significant marker of your identity? For example, what experience made you the person you are today?

[02:29] **Younglang:** Well, I'm not sure about the most significant experience, but I think it['s] just [the] overall experience of my life: Saudi Arabia for five years, and then I came to the United States, went to junior high, high school, college, and then went back to the States — went back to Korea — and lived there for another ten years and then came back to the States and lived here ever since. So it's not just one significant experience, but my experience living in different countries.

[03:20] **Yumi:** You mentioned that you were born in Korea. Do you happen to remember your time there?

[03:30] **Younglang:** So, when I was in Korea, until second grade, I remember moving around a lot — actually, rather than moving around a lot, [I] remember moving around frequently. I was told that our family moved around frequently because my dad was in the army. He was in the Air Force, and because he was in the Air Force he moved frequently from one base to another — I think every two years. So, we moved around quite frequently. I remember hearing stories about moving and living on different bases. But I do not really have memory of how things were in my childhood.

[04:31] **Yumi:** I see. So, after spending your birth and childhood in Korea, you mentioned that you immigrated to Saudi Arabia. Would you be able to speak on when and why you first immigrated to Saudi Arabia?

[04:43] **Younglang:** During that time, I think it was in '80s that my parents moved to Saudi Arabia, and during that time a lot of as Korean people went overseas for [the] opportunity to earn dollars and bring them back. And my father, who was in the Air Force, he was discharged [and sought] opportunity to work abroad, which was in Saudi Arabia. So, my dad first left, and he

went to Saudi Arabia. After about a year, he was able to invite his whole family, so my mom and [the] three of us went to join my dad and live there for the next five years or so.

[05:50] **Yumi:** You were also very young when you immigrated to Saudi Arabia. So, do you happen to have any specific memories of your time there?

[06:02] **Younglang:** Yes. When we went to Saudi Arabia — my mom's a very business-oriented and outgoing person — so, even though my dad had a job, my mom wanted to find some other way(s) to earn more money. So, what she did was she started to raise Korean vegetables. During that time, [in] Saudi Arabia, there were a lot of foreign companies that were in Saudi Arabia, like building, doing construction, road construction, doing all sorts of work. So, there were some Korean companies. However, there weren't Korean vegetables—so in other words, Korean cabbage, to make *kimchi* (spicy fermented cabbage). What my mom did was, my mom started to raise Korean cabbage, Napa, and start[ed] to sell those vegetables to those companies, so they can make *kimchi* and provide Korean food to Korean workers.

[07:24] **Yumi:** I see.

[07:25] **Younglang:** So that's what she did. So, the memory would be [that] we would help — I would help — my mom with farming, or planting, water[ing] and different things.

[07:40] **Yumi:** If you were helping your mother farm and plant, how integrated would you say you were into Saudi Arabia and society? Or separated?

[07:55] **Younglang:** I mean, Saudi Arabian culture is very different. It was very [pro-]male—a [male] dominant culture. The ladies—the females, the girls—they were not really out to play that much, either. Also due to [the] language barrier, I wouldn't say that we were integrated with[in] their culture. But a lot of times the foreigners [living in Saudi Arabia] were foreigners [who

were] there to earn money. So, we were just there. We were there, you know, and we were there. But in terms of integration, I'm not sure.

[08:48] **Yumi:** How would you say you adjusted to life in Saudi Arabia? Were there any cultural differences that you were able to overcome? Or were the [cultural] barriers constant throughout your time there?

[09:06] **Younglang:** I think that [when you think of] how immigrants come to the United States, they go to school, they get a job, and they have to, in a sense, somewhat assimilate in order to establish their base and route in the United States. But in Saudi Arabia, I think it was very different for our family because we didn't go there as immigrant[s] to live. We were there for only a few years. Like people on contract. We weren't there to settle down and then permanently live there. So, it was a little different in terms of assimilation. Also, because I didn't go to school, I didn't have cultural clash[es]. It was kind of like living in [a] Korean bubble in a different city, different place.

[10:10] **Yumi:** Was that Korean bubble limited to your family? Or — was there, even if not majority, distinct Korean community — were there other Koreans that you frequently met and associated with?

[10:28] **Younglang:** I mean, there were other Korean families that lived around that area because there were other Koreans that worked with my father at his work. So, with those families, I remember meeting them together. In the beginning, we studied together as well. We studied together; we studied Korean language together. I'm not sure how often we met. However, in the beginning I know that Korean parents tried to kind of set up some sort of... not an education system, but they were trying to. Especially some routine where we could kind of study together to continue Korean education, in the beginning when we first got there. But then, like I said, my

mom started to raise Korean vegetables and do those things and it got too busy, [so] I think we stopped in terms of meeting on a regular basis to study, like (a) homeschool.

[11:41] **Yumi:** What exactly did your father do?

[11:46] **Younglang:** I'm not sure exactly what my father did, but I know that when he was in [his] air base that he did weather forecasts. So, I think when he went to Saudi Arabia he did something that related to that.

[12:10] **Yumi:** While in Saudi Arabia, did going back to Korea ever cross your mind? Or did the desire to go back to Korea ever emerge?

[12:26] **Younglang:** I'm pretty sure that I wanted to go back, but we did go back to visit.

[12:38] **Yumi:** Following Saudi Arabia, where did you go?

[12:42] **Younglang:** So, after living in Saudi Arabia for five years, our family came back to Korea all together, and stayed in Korea for—I don't know how long I stayed—six months, maybe. Then we all immigrated to the United States.

[13:05] **Yumi:** What prompted this immigration?

[13:10] **Younglang:** A lot of times, people who lived abroad and worked in Saudi Arabia, a lot of people, after they finish working abroad, instead of coming back to Korea, a lot of people decided to go live somewhere else. During that time, living abroad—coming out of Korea and immigrating to the United States—was not a very accessible opportunity for other people. But since it was available to us because we were living abroad, my mom decided that she wanted to leave Korea because she didn't like the political background and a lot of cultural things, cultural value: that cultural value of Korea. So, it was my mom wanting to come to the United States. So, we all immigrated together.

[14:18] **Yumi:** You mentioned that your mother was not fond of the political climate nor cultural values in place, in Korean society. Would you be able to expand on that a little bit? For example, what cultural values or what about the government?

[14:44] **Younglang:** My mom, let's see, she did not like the climate, like political climate of Korea, where it was very more based. The Korean leaders were from military background[s], so she didn't like that too much. She didn't like the fact that people [and] the value[s] were so based on success and education. So, she didn't like a lot of things. So, yeah, that's what she said.

[15:49] **Yumi:** Would you also agree with your mother? As in, did you hold the same view that the government was very authoritarian and that people seemed very materialistic in society?

[16:10] **Younglang:** Back then, I don't think I had the same value[s] as my mom. I don't think I was that interested in political climate. To answer the question, probably not, no.

[16:32] **Yumi:** So how long were you in the States, initially?

[16:40] **Younglang:** So, after Saudi Arabia, my mom went back to Korea. She had the option of staying in Korea or immigrating to the States and chose to immigrate to the States. So, we came out [of Saudi Arabia] and I attended junior high, high school, college [in the States]. So, I think it was '84 that we went to the States. It was '94. I'd say '94 — '94, '95. After graduating from college, I came out to Korea because, during that time, my parents were back in Korea. So, I think I lived in the States for 10 years, and then came up to Korea, met my husband, got married, and lived in Korea for another 10 years. Then [my husband] came out on sabbatical to the States in 2007, and [we] have been living here since then, so that would be like 15 years.

[18:01] **Yumi:** Many Koreans placed very high value in education and becoming educated, achieving higher institution education, and etc. Would you say that you also felt the burden and pressure to succeed academically?

[18:28] **Younglang:** Yes. I don't think my mom ever, like, I don't think my mom and dad put that much emphasis on education, going to a good college and etc. My mom never really put that much emphasis on those things. However, I'm not sure why, but I felt the importance of going to a good college and being successful.

[19:10] **Yumi:** Where exactly in the States did you live?

[19:14] **Younglang:** We first came to Southern California, and I lived in an area called Oxnard. And there my parents had a flower farm. So that's where around [I was] in junior high and high school, in an area called Oxnard.

[19:36] **Yumi:** Was there a strong Korean community there?

[19:41] **Younglang:** [In] Southern California, there's a lot of Koreans, but Oxnard was like about an hour and a half or an hour away from Southern California towards up north, and there weren't that many Korean communities there. Koreans usually aggregated around districts that had good education, but that area [Oxnard] was not good for education; it didn't have a good [school] district.

[20:18] **Yumi:** How was adjusting to life in the United States? Was there any specific cultural difference that you noticed?

[20:36] **Younglang:** I mean, the cultural difference, language barrier, everything [was] different. So, the language barrier was the biggest thing.

[20:50] **Yumi:** Do you recall your experience learning English? Was it difficult? How did you come to fluency? Etc.

[21:03] **Younglang:** Actually, I don't recall, but I know [that] it was very difficult. Language acquisition is something that takes place over time. So, it was, through, from my junior all the

way to high school, that slowly but gradually, the language [English] became more easier and [I became more] fluent.

[21:31] **Yumi:** How would you say your experiences as an immigrant affect — not your experiences — your identity as an immigrant, affected the relationships you made with people in California? Did you feel disconnect, discrimination, etc.?

[21:54] **Younglang:** So, in terms of discrimination, I think the difference is that, [as] I told you, Oxnard, the school that I went to [was] not a very good district. There were a lot of — it was not white dominant district. There were a lot of Hispanics because it was [a] farming area, there was a lot of Filipinos, Americans because it was near [the] Air Force, like the base. And I would say whites were a minority there, and because of that, I think, in terms of, like, a discrimination due to race, not so much, because it was just different race[s] altogether. After that, when I went to college, it was very, there were a lot of still Asians. So, in terms of like, everyday discrimination, not really.

[23:06] **Yumi:** While in America, did you ever want to go back to Saudi Arabia or Korea? And if so, can you explain why?

[23:16] **Younglang:** In America, yes, I did want to go back to Saudi Arabia, just to visit, more than anything. I wanted to go back and see what it was like: to go back and visit the places that I lived [in] before. And then, [I] guess [the reason I wanted to go to] Korea would be just [to] go back to visit.

[23:47] **Yumi:** And then after graduating, you mentioned that you went back to Korea to live with your parents. How long did you live in Korea? And what do you remember about your time there?

[24:01] **Younglang:** So, after graduating from college, I went back to Korea because, during that time, my parents were living in Korea. So, I went back. And while I was living there, I worked as an English teacher at a Christian elementary school. And one of my friend[s] from college who was also working there as an English teacher -- and actually I got to work there because she went there first, and she introduced me to that place. While I was just living in Korea, kind of deciding what I wanted to do, I decided to work there. And it was through that school that my husband and I [met and] got married.

[24:47] **Yumi:** When you came back to Korea, did it feel like you're returning home or did Korea feel foreign to you?

[24:55] **Younglang:** Excuse me, can you repeat that one more time, please?

[24:47] **Yumi:** When you came back to Korea, did it feel like you were returning to your motherland, to your home? Or did Korea feel foreign, even though you're born there?

[25:11] **Younglang:** I mean, Korea has changed a lot. But, because I went to the States when I was older and came back to [Korea to] visit when I was in college, [and] also, during [the] summer of (my) college, I went back to visit, it was not like something foreign or new, at all. But it was just visiting [my] old home.

[25:39] **Yumi:** How had Korea changed since you left it, if you recall?

[25:45] **Younglang:** I mean, Korea in terms of matter[s] like the tremendous economic growth and [when I] go there, in Korea, there's so [many] more building[s], so [many] shops, so many foreigners coming to visit. It just seems a lot more lively and energetic.

[26:07] **Yumi:** So, after meeting your husband, why did you choose to immigrate to the United States instead of staying in Korea to raise your family?

[26:17] **Younglang:** Well, we did not come here to immigrate per se. My husband is in ministry, and after seven year[s] they give [pastors] sabbatical. And at that time, my parents were actually not in Korea, but they were living in the United States. So, my husband decided that, you know, for [his] sabbatical, we [would] go to the States so that I [would] have some time to spend time with my family – because both [of] my brothers were all living in the States, and my parents as well. I was the only one living in Korea, so we decided to come here and spend the sabbatical [in the States] and spend some time with the family.

[27:03] **Yumi:** When you came to the United States, what made you want to stay?

[27:11] **Younglang:** I think, more than anything, we came here [to the States], and my husband is in the ministry, and he was studying, but [the] opportunity for ministry was presented in New York. So, we decided to take that opportunity.

[27:33] **Yumi:** Looking back, would you have chosen differently if you had the chance to raise your kids in Korea over the United States?

[27:11] **Younglang:** No, I think I would not want to raise my kid in Korea just because education competition is so fierce [to the point] that the kids cannot really grow up being kids and being able to enjoy and do different things. So definitely, no.

[28:10] **Yumi:** When you came back to the United States for the second time, how was it adjusting back to the US society? And how was it for your family, your husband specifically, to adapt to American culture and society?

[28:33] **Younglang:** I think one thing is that, now that I'm here, and because of my husband's limited English, that I am the person who has to handle all issue[s] outside of family. So that would be something different from how things were back in Korea. Because back in Korea, my

husband took care of everything. But now that we're here and due to [the] language barrier, I'm the one who's doing everything. So that [was], in a sense, I guess, some sort of cultural shock.

[29:13] **Yumi:** Did you and your husband never consider returning to Korea?

[29:20] **Younglang:** I think now that all the kids are back in college, we do talk about, you know, returning to Korea.

[29:30] **Yumi:** Were there, was there no discussion about returning to Korea before, like earlier on during your time in America: for example, when your children were still in elementary school, middle school, high school?

[29:50] **Younglang:** No.

[29:52] **Yumi:** Why were you guys so sure that you did not want to go back to Korea?

[30:00] **Younglang:** I mean, we just live[d]. I mean, I think we were living here, and the kids were at school, so I guess there was no reason to really consider going back to Korea.

[30:26] **Yumi:** Looking back, in retrospect, after everything that you experienced and all that you know, would you have immigrated to Saudi Arabia, the first time if you had the choice? Or the United States following that?

[30:56] **Younglang:** Actually, I'm not sure.

[31:03] **Yumi:** How do you think that immigrating during your formative youth years influenced your identity, and I guess, for some people, your struggle with grasping who you are?

[31:16] **Younglang:** I think everyone is a little different, but I think identity comes from your family relationships. And for me, [regardless of whether I was in] Saudi Arabia, [or]the United States, my identity always laid with my family. So, in a sense, like, in a Korean American [case], [my] Korean ethnicity, always stay[ed] with me. And I think unlike some people who wish[ed] they were white or different, like they [the people that] talk[ed] about how they wish[ed] they

were white, you know. [But] living in the United States, it never really occurred to me. It's, I guess in a sense fortunate that you [I] don't [didn't] have [an] identity conflict.

[32:07] **Yumi:** On a lighter note, talking about Korean food, (would you have,) do you have a favorite Korean dish, and if so, can you describe it?

[31:20] **Younglang:** My favorite Korean dish is *bibimbap* (mixed-rice bowl). I like *bibimbap* a lot. *Bibimbap* is where a lot of different types of vegetable[s] are mixed together with egg[s] and beef, and Korean traditional spicy red pepper paste, and mix[ed] all together.

[32:47] **Yumi:** Are there any specific or special memories that you have with *bibimbap*?

[32:54] **Younglang:** I don't have [any] special memory with *bibimbap*. I just like it because it's tasty and healthy.

[33:07] **Yumi:** Were there any moments when you didn't have access to the ingredients needed to make Korean dishes, such as *bibimbap* while you were in Saudi Arabia or the States?

[33:16] **Younglang:** In the States, we had access to everything. In Saudi Arabia, it's a different story. I don't really remember having access to different ingredients. But, you know, if you don't have access to one ingredient, then it will probably be substituted with another, and [you] just make [dishes] with whatever is available.

[32:48] **Yumi:** What advice would you give to someone who is considering immigrating, to the, to a new country.

[34:01] **Younglang:** I mean, I think, as long as you have a tight family, then it doesn't really matter where you go because that's where you start. It doesn't really matter whether the States, Korea, or a whole new country, you just go there and you start. And as long as you have a tight [group of] people that you can always depend on, for support, [then it] should be okay.

[34:31] **Yumi:** Who were the tight people for you? Those, the people that kept you grounded while you were abroad.

[34:38] **Younglang:** When I was young, it was my family: my parents and my brothers. After I got married, it was my husband and kids.

[34:51] **Yumi:** Speaking about your kids, would you say that, in their education, the Korean value of academic success was emphasized as they were growing up?

[35:07] **Younglang:** Yeah, I think so. But more than going to the most prestigious, good school, I think I emphasized doing your best.

[35:22] **Yumi:** And finally, looking back at your life so far, is there any advice that you would've given to your younger self?

[35:31] **Younglang:** My younger self... let's see...

[35:44] **Yumi:** Or if it's easier, is there any advice that you would've given to your children, who are also first-generation immigrants, as yourself?

[36:06] **Younglang:** I think, because I am a Christian who believes in God, if anyone asks for advice, especially for my children, I would say [to] keep close to your [their] heart the Bible and your [their] relationship with God. That would be the most [best] advice that I would have. Then all things will fall in place.

[36:37] **Yumi:** Would you say your, it was your faith, in addition to all these people that you have around you, that helped you adapt to the constantly changing circumstances that you were in?

[36:58] **Younglang:** I mean, my faith grew, I would say, a lot more after I got married. But I think that adapt[ing] had to do with more like my personality as well.

[37:24] **Yumi:** Before we end this interview, would you be able to speak on who you are and what kind of person you are — like what personality traits allowed you to quickly assimilate into, no not assimilate, I guess, acculturate into the Saudi American, American, Korean societies?

[37:49] **Younglang:** I think I'm pretty flexible. I'm kind of relaxed, easygoing, and I think that has a lot to do with assimilating into new culture[s]. When you're [a] very sensitive person, I think that makes it difficult to adapt to new culture[s].

[38:11] **Yumi:** (I'm trying to figure out how to say this...) Rather than you having always been an un-sensitive, or not extra sensitive person, would it be fair to, or have you ever thought of yourself as having been desensitized to what's happening because of the fact that you were in rapidly changing environment ever since you were a child?

[38:43] **Younglang:** I guess, I guess, you could say that too. I'm not sure.

[38:55] **Yumi:** Okay, well thank you for taking time out of your day to do this interview, and I really appreciate all the meaningful and significant discussions that we have had for the past 40 minutes. Thank you.