Cameron Ripley

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Professor Diederich

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Transcript

Cameron Ripley: My name is Cameron Ripley. Today is March 28, 2023, and I'm interviewing Julie Min Chayet through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Julie Min Chayet: Yes.

CR: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?

JC: I am the youngest child of three kids and my parents emigrated to the United States in the 1960s. I actually was born here in America, but my two older brothers were born in Korea. My mother's originally from North Korea, what is now known as North Korea, and my father is from Seoul.

CR: Where specifically in North Korea and South Korea are your parents from?

JC: My mother lived in the capital city [of North Korea], which is now known as Pyongyang. My father grew up in Seoul, which is the heart of South, what's now known as South Korea, and they met together after the war. My mother was about 13-years-old, and she literally walked from North to South Korea. Then they were in the southern part called Busan, where she ended up with my grandfather, her father, and mother and her aunt or uncle, and some cousins. Then they eventually migrated north and my mother went to medical school, where in Seoul or she met my father, who was in medical school at the time as well.

CR: Is there a specific reason as to why your mother moved south?

Julie Min Chayet: Well, it was the war, which technically has never ended between North and South Korea, and it was really getting quite violent. In the middle of the night, my grandfather, i.e., my mother's father, was a doctor as well. In the middle of the night, the local military (my grandfather ran a hospital) basically approached my mother's family and said, "It's not safe, you have to leave." The story is, that first night that they came, my grandfather said, "No, I have too much work to be done. I have to help the community." And they said, "Okay, but be ready." Then the next night, they came in the middle of the night, they basically decided amongst the family who would leave and what to take, and they got a ride with a military truck. The story is my mother's grandmother stayed behind [with] a cousin and an uncle to care for my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and then everybody else in the family basically left in the middle of the night because of the bombing and the military insurgents. They took what they could carry, which was my grandfather’s medical bag and some jewelry.

CR: Did the people who stayed behind, did they end up coming over as well, or did they end up stuck in North Korea?

JC: Stuck in North Korea, no contact. I mean, even though they say there's limited contact between the countries. That wasn't until recently, maybe in the 1990s, late-80s. The assumption is that they perished. There's lack of communication between any of those relatives, and anybody who came south. My uncles were born later, 15 years younger, 15 and 18 years younger than my mother, so they were born technically in South Korea. That's where they live now.

CR: Once your parents got married, was there any differing of opinions in how the North and South reviewed, just because of where they're from, or was it more uniform?

JC: Even today, the accents are slightly different, dialects even in South Korea and Pusan. It's like living in America, where if you grew up in Massachusetts and you met someone from Florida or Georgia, they have an accent. There's, in terms of that, between North and South, there's a distinction. Also, some of the food that they share is different. My mom will say that she eats these mung bean pancakes, and that's North Korean, or she needs a cold noodle dish, and that's very North Korean. Those things have been adopted by the South Koreans, but it's a generation thing because my age we still know what was regarded as food from the North, but your age and my kids, they just think it's Korean food. It's little things like that. My mother skipped two grades because the “old” North Korean school system was quite advanced. It's not what you think of today with North Korea. In terms of education, my mother's education was actually better in what we call middle school and junior high school. When she actually ended up

in upper middle school, I guess it's the equivalent of freshman year, ninth grade, tenth grade—she skipped two grades completely. So, even though she's younger than my dad, she graduated medical school the same year. That was interesting. Comparing the capital of North Korea versus the capital of South Korea—there weren't marked differences in terms of economic scale or education. Even if you were not part of the upper middle class in North Korea, you still received all the benefits that you would have received in South Korea. But now the disparity is almost so dramatic that you can't even measure the differences between the two.

CR: When you were growing up, would you say that your perspective on North and South Korea was different than other Koreans? Maybe because of your parents' background?

JC: Definitely. Well, first of all, even the '60s and '70s, the American military's been in Korea, since my parents were my age, younger than me, right? I would say there was always this threat of North Korean insurgency and doing something, and my brothers were born in Korea. There is a military requirement of all young men, and so I remember being… I must have been in sixth or seventh grade, and there was an official notice that came in the mail [that] had my brother's Korean names on it at our house in New York. It was the government asking for documentation to prove that they didn't have to serve their required military time. They're a year apart. My older brother got one, and then the second brother. I guess what happened was with my older brother, they found the New York address and so they needed proof of US citizenship and that they actually relinquished any Korean nationality and that they didn't have to do the required military time. That was a little strange. Then just watching KBS News (Korean Broadcasting System), and we went to a Korean church growing up, and we had my parents' inner circle of friends.

There was definitely an opinion, or should I say there was a consensus, that North Korea and military rule was oppressive. But I think the North Korea that has evolved, as we know in the Western states, is very different from the North Korea that my mother remembered as a child growing up, which was lush, and wealthy, and—I don't want to say democratic—but it was a free state, essentially, versus this oppressive, militant, completely different society. There's always this distinction in the way my parents and her friends from North Korea talk about then versus now. It's very interesting, because South Korea was always the more lush, the more westernized, the more economically stable, the more cutting edge, in electronics, and travel and tourism, and aligned with the Western countries. It was definitely interesting, and that's just a generation thing that'll die out, basically. My mom will be 85 in April. My father just turned 86 last week, and those are the stories that I have growing up but your generation studying in a Korea University, you'll never really understand completely the social impact between what was regarded as one country and now is clearly two very, very different countries.

CR: Going off that, do you think now or in the future that there is a possibility for North Korean and South Korean unification or that it should even be attempted?

JC: When I was a senior in college, I wrote my thesis at Haverford College on Korean reunification, and that was in May 1991. You can read it if you want. It's online. It's called, “The Korean Question.” At that point, my hypothesis was that eventually the two would reunite and become one, because there was such a disparity in wealth and the economic situation was such that there was no way that North Korea could sustain itself, and that, essentially, they were starving except if you were affiliated with the military. Their technology was less advanced and

that there was a generation that would not know any way of life but basically not be able to sustain itself. Well, for more than 30 years and, amazingly, we've seen the Olympics take place. The Winter Olympics was in Korea, and representatives from the North came. We've seen nuclear military advancements that far exceed anyone's expectation. I personally think that it will come to a point where if North Korea doesn't get the support from countries like China and Russia they will eventually need to merge with South Korea because they have a generation of people who are dying, and at a certain point their leadership will be so isolating to other countries like the US, Russia, China, the big ones, that they'll have no other alternative but to merge and become one. People used to talk about reunification as more of a social goal, but now I think it's just far beyond that. I think in terms of population and just generations, I think there's no way they can survive one more generation of this type of militant rule. Because the advancements that they say that they're making are still not and won't be enough to sustain their survival.

CR: Circling back to more of your childhood and growing up, do you feel your relationship with your Korean heritage changed from when you're in elementary school, through college up until you were an adult?

JC: Definitely. When I was younger, we went to a Korean church on Sundays. All three of the kids in my family played an instrument in the youth orchestra. Then on Saturdays, we went to Korean school, from nine to five. So we were exposed [to Korean culture], and most of those families and children who went [to Korean school] were also in the same church with us on Sundays, but it was a lot of homework and a lot of work growing up. Every weekend, we spent

doing our regular homework, and then we had Korean school homework, and then there were all sorts of other tutoring elements. It was an interesting way of growing up. I knew no other way. Eventually, we went to public schools growing up, elementary, junior high, and high school – my brothers were older. Then they went off to college, and we grew up in a town where there were no Asian people. There was one other family who was Chinese American. So other than Korean school and church, we didn't have any Asian people in our high school growing up. My brothers each had about 750 students, [and] I had 600 students in my high school. Even through high school, there was maybe one younger family that moved in who were Chinese American, Chinese-Chinese, they owned the local Chinese restaurant actually. It was a very strange environment to be in when you're one of many and everybody knows you in town and you can't go anywhere without anybody knowing where you live or what you're doing. You really couldn't do anything bad because people would tell on you and would call your parents quite easily. Then I went to a small liberal arts college, Haverford. My older brother actually went to Haverford five years ahead of me and our [other] brother went to Penn, which was a large university. Our brother at Penn was very active in the Asian students association, in university. But then my brother [at Haverford] started meeting some Asian students in college and sort of told me about it. By the time I got to college, I had never been with so many Asian people in my class, and we had 313 incoming freshmen. I would say there were about six or seven Asian-American students in my college class, and then multiply that times three more, because every year ahead of me had Asian students, and then every year behind me did so. For me, it was interesting, and I became very involved in college with the Korean students association and the Asian American Association. I learned very quickly that not all Asian people have similar experiences growing up, and they don't all enjoy the same food, and they didn't all go to Korean school on Saturdays.

So it was kind of interesting, but I definitely knew there was a progression to it and it was a learning experience.

CR: Regarding your brothers, would you say you had a different experience growing up in America than them, perhaps because they were born in Korea, and you weren't?
JC: Yes, absolutely. When they came to America, they came to Chicago, because that's where my parents got their first jobs. The government basically sponsored [them] through the Johnson immigration changes in the law, the President was looking for foreign medical school graduates, I think I described it earlier. My father came first and then my mother came with my brothers. They were little – she literally carried them. English was not the first language for anyone in my family, except for me, because I was born here, and at that point, they had been living here for seven, eight years. So everybody [eventually] spoke English. Obviously, my parents were practicing medicine so they spoke enough English that they were communicating with people living outside of the family.

My parents and my brothers are naturalized citizens. So they are US citizens, but they had Korean names growing up. Coincidentally, Julie, you could spell it phonetically and Korean characters, but I have a Korean name also. But my brothers were known in lower school by their Korean names. I remember being in Brooklyn at the immigration office for the naturalization ceremony, and I remember standing underneath the counter, so I must have been six or seven. I remember the immigration person saying to my parents, "You might want to consider adopting some American, English Anglican names for yourself, your wife, and your children," especially because it might be difficult for them growing up in the 1970s. It was a spur-of-the-moment (inaudible) my parents had thought about that, but they didn't have a name chosen. They had a

couple of names so at that moment, my father said, "Okay, well, my wife and I will not adopt American names, but we'll name my older son William, and we'll name my second son Robert." And she said, "Okay, let's write that down." To me, that's pretty amazing, right? They said, "Oh, well, Julie, we'll just keep Julie because we could write it in Korean and it has some Korean meaning. So for the first eight to ten years of their lives and even including [at] school they have their Korean names, and then the next day [they] become American citizens and then they're known as Billy and Bobby. It was this kind of bizarre circumstance. They don't really talk about it, but we all kind of laugh about it a little bit.

I would say and as I said, we were the only Asian family in town. So for them, they lived in Chicago when they were really little then they moved to Michigan when they were still really little, and then they moved to New York, where I was born. Things like food and access to Asian markets and food was different earlier because there was no Korean food anywhere. My mother talked about having to go grocery shopping at the one Chinese market where all of their friends would go and eat long-grain rice, not medium-grain rice. Once a week, the ship would come with certain types of spices, and they would all sort of share it. There was a lot more communal eating amongst my parents and their inner circle – there were 10 [Korean] families that came to America together – they had to essentially ration the familiar foods and they only knew each other. It was a time when my brothers really grew up, day to day, with an inner circle of other Korean immigrants and that's how they kept their culture alive.

There were only three families that came to New York, but we would get together once a month. Then you sort of do the same thing all weekend, sleepovers and communal dinners. Those families are closer to me than some of my cousins, my real cousins, my blood relatives, because I essentially grew up with them. Some of them had slightly older siblings, too. My

brothers are very close to them in a different way because they remember being really little [and growing up] with that. Whereas I was younger so I don't remember that in the same way as my first memories. So it's very different. Even food is different for us, and then clothing was different for us because my parents used to get clothes sent from Korea, Western clothes. It was also the 70s so it was different. Whereas my parents obviously started shopping more at American stores when I was growing up, and I was allowed to watch American TV, and my brothers really weren't allowed to. They could, but they didn't really grow up watching the Brady Bunch and Gilligan's Island. So for them, that social experience was very different.

CR: Did you also watch Korean TV when you were growing up or did that start later in life?

JC: That started later. There used to be a time where you got videotapes of shows, before YouTube, before Netflix. So at the Korean market, they [my parents] would actually get videotapes of Korean dramas, which now are super popular. I know tons of people who are not Korean who watch K-drama. We would borrow tapes – my parents didn't borrow them as much, but they would watch them on occasion. We did get KBS or the Korean broadcasting news, or my dad could find it on the radio, or he would actually subscribe to the Korean newspaper. That's what they really did most of the time, i.e., they read the Korean local newspaper all the time. Even though we went to Korean school, some of the Korean papers you can't read because they use Mandarin, in the middle of the sentence. That's the way we sort of grew up. Then, K-dramas became really popular, I would say that my brothers have never watched a Korean drama, but I started watching them maybe in law school, maybe 10-15 years ago, not even in law school so more recent, maybe ten years ago. Now, occasionally, I'll just watch them on Netflix. I do have to

watch it with subtitles because I don't understand all the words that they use, just because I haven't lived with my parents for 30 years.

CR: With Korean school, you mentioned that there wasn't a big Korean, like sort of population where you grew up, so for Korean school, was it drawn on, like Koreans from like all over the area, like the wider area and sort of how big were [Korean] schools?

JC: It went from kindergarten through twelfth grade. We rented all the rooms at the church because they had a nursery school in the building so every classroom had it. People would drive like an hour and a half to two hours to come on Saturdays. The parents would be hanging out all day. Either the parents would be teaching the classes, or a lot of the moms would be making lunch, and then making snacks and making dinner. People drove from really far away, it was on Long Island, but people would come from Brooklyn, Queens, New York City, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. They were coming [for Korean school] and they would basically stay over because then they would go to church the next day. Now you see a lot more Korean schools locally, sometimes you'll actually see them still through churches. My children went [to Korean school] in Connecticut for about four years as well. Then I ended up just having them be tutored at home instead. People would come from really, really far away now that I think about it.

CR: You just mentioned that your children went to Korean school. Is that something that was important to you, for them growing up to keep them in tune with their Korean history?

JC: Absolutely. They didn't love going to Korean school on Saturday mornings. They started when they were about five and four, it was before kindergarten. Then they went through maybe third and fourth grade or fourth and fifth grade even. [However], my husband's Jewish so we agreed as a family that they would not go to Korean school and Hebrew school [at the same time] because that might be too much. I didn't think it was too much, but we agreed it might be too much. That's when I had the Korean school teacher actually come to the house and do the language work. At that point to my kids, Korean school also had culture [incorporated] with it. There was Korean dancing or taekwondo or music. At that point, my son and daughter had started taekwondo outside of the home in an after-school program. [So] I knew they were already going to that three days a week. Then, of course, I had to start piano lessons [for them]. So I had the Korean school teacher come to the house and do the language. I knew they were doing Taekwondo outside of the house, which was culturally important for me. Then her husband taught them piano lessons, so they had their own Korean school in the house. They had piano lessons each for half an hour and their Korean school for an hour and a half, after school, once a week. It was really important for them. I thought it was important for them to see other Asian children growing up because they grew up in Connecticut, and we live in a very small town, [with a] population of about 10,000 and there were many more Asian people than I grew up [with] and coincidentally a lot of half Asian families in our town. So they grew up knowing other Asian friends but also knowing other half-Asian friends who looked like them. To me, that was really important for them to be exposed to that because that's not how I grew up and I always felt a little bit isolated, but I would say my children, they don't feel that way at all.

CR: Did you cook Korean food for them growing up a lot? Was that something that was very important as well?

JC: When I grew up, we had rice and every single meal. It didn't matter even what you were eating, [if] my mom was going to make spaghetti or something with red sauce we still had a pot of rice. It was just this ritual she would come home from work, get off the train, change her clothes, come downstairs, and just automatically start rinsing the rice and pressing the button and having the rice cooker going, always, because sometimes she would actually eat the rice in the morning if you didn't eat for dinner. I didn't go to that extreme of it although I do love white rice so if I could I would actually have rice at every meal. I definitely made a point of integrating food into our home. My husband's not Korean but he loves Korean food so we would have Korean food at least two or three times a week. I would either make it or we have many more Korean groceries now closer to us so I could pick stuff up. We have one Korean restaurant in town that's quite good so we always had the Korean food in our house. It's when the kids come home from college they want Korean food as their first meal, when they come home from school, and I love that. When they were little we used to have like international day or things like that at their school so my kids would always ask me to make Korean food. The teachers would love it and they would tell the kids and then I would end up sending extra Korean food. But they also wanted to have [Jewish food] – my husband's Jewish – so they'd also volunteer me to make, latkes for Hanukkah too. It was like the international house at my house depending on what I was cooking, but it's very communal oriented, it's all like open platter food so now their friends also want to come over and eat Korean food. Even now, when they come home from college and grad school it sort of becomes like our “friendsgiving” to them the day after Thanksgiving. To know

that day that their friends come over on the Friday [after Thanksgiving], and I make Korean food for them, which is fun.

CR: Is that any in any way similar or different to the experience you had growing up? Did your friends want to come over and have Korean food or were they like, no, I don't want any of it?
JC: It's a good question if they were a little bit more apprehensive because remember, when I grew up, people didn't eat sushi. Now everybody eats sushi. I remember when I was in sixth grade, we had an international day in my sixth grade class, and my mom made a cooked sushi, which is called gimbap. It's seaweed on the outside with rice on the inside and then there's ground beef, cooked carrots, daikon, which is like yellow radish, and you can put crab meat in there too. So it's completely cooked, but it's wrapped [and] the outside is seaweed. I remember you make it in a roll and you slice it up into little circles. I remember my mom coming home from work and making this. It's not a small task to make it, it takes a couple of hours. Nobody ate it because I remember them saying "Oh, ew, seaweed" except for me and my one friend Barbara. We sat there together and my best friend Barbara and [I], we just ate them all. She actually really loved them, but she said, "Oh my God, you can't bring this plate home because your mom will be upset." So she and I just sat there we ate all the gimbap which was hilarious when we think about it now. I'm still friends with her and we still talk about it. But my friend Stacy and my friend Todd, so there were actually four of us, and we just all ate we just sat there eating that gimbap. Versus sixth grade, as I said, I'm sending bulgogi beef marinated beef to my kids' school and I get notes home from parents of their friends saying “Could you send me the recipe?” and teachers saying, "Oh my god, this is so delicious" and the kids’ orthodontist saying "Oh, I love Korean food, I love kimchi," and me like basically feeding the whole town. Completely different,

extremes because now everybody eats sushi and it's raw sushi, versus cooked. I also remember in high school, we had [an] international day and some of the same people from sixth grade who I know refused to eat the Sushi said, "Oh, I remember when we're in, Mrs. Blum's class you brought in that sushi, it was so cool." I remember thinking, no, you were not sitting on the steps of the school with me and Barbara, Todd, Tommy, and Stacy stuffing our faces with gimbap. But, that's six years later, and the way that other people think about that was quite different than what really happened and clearly different from how my kids experienced Korean food. Korean food is pretty common, there are food trucks, you can go anywhere and you find a Korean food truck. So it's a totally different experience.

CR: We're going to move to some more like, major events. You were either in college or just out of college in 1992 when the Rodney King uprisings happened in LA, which led to the major destruction of Korea Town there. I was wondering in any way, if that had any impact on you, or the Korean friends at the time.

JC: Absolutely. Even when I was in college, there was a time when there were some street signs in Philadelphia that were put into Korean characters. I remember there was a huge uprising between the local Korean store owners and the predominantly black population in Philadelphia, in those neighborhoods. I remember the riots and I remember watching them on the news, it was a year out of college, and I remember being really scared, quite honestly because of just the sheer violence. I was living in New York City at the time, and our local deli downstairs from my apartment building [and] my dry cleaner, they were all Koreans and these are Koreans, who, in addition to my immediate family, were people who I [basically] saw every day. I absolutely

remember having conversations especially with the store owners about how nervous they were and if they were worried about staying open too late, locking up, [or] being attacked. I remember talking to the dry cleaners specifically and she said, "Well, I have a lot of loyal customers." It was on the Upper West Side so it was a fairly busy neighborhood, but I remember her saying how she was afraid to lock up by herself. There were conversations that I had with her where she should be a little more cautious, and opening up the store early and closing late and she was nervous about it, and it was a pretty scary time. So I definitely remember it.

CR: That relates to [the] more contemporary COVID-19 issue with the increase in Asian-related hate crimes. Did you feel you saw an increase in Korean [related] hate crimes during that time?

JC: Absolutely. My parents, as I said, are in their 80s and they live in Manhattan. My parents used to take the subway all the time when they first moved into the city six years ago. They've never had COVID, which is amazing, because we were all so extremely diligent about wearing masks and their exposure. The three of us, three adult children, told our parents who were not really leaving their apartment, [that] when they did to go get their groceries and their supplies, I said, if you could walk one block, you have to walk in the daylight only because they [other Americans] were victimizing elderly, Asian people. I mean who in their right mind would even think that's a population that you should target? Right? We were insistent that we would drive them everywhere [like] to their doctor's appointments. I would come in from Connecticut, or they were just not allowed [to go]. We said you cannot take the subway, people are getting pushed downstairs, people are getting hammered in their heads. Really just sick crimes. We were quite nervous about that. My niece lived in Manhattan at the time, my one of my best friends

who is Korean American lives in the city. They were telling us stories about walking on the streets wearing sunglasses and having the mask and the sunglasses and a hat, just to cover up the color of their hair, the shape of their face, the shape of their eyes. The mask obviously covered up the lower half. It was a really, really frightening time, and it still is I have to say. I work in New York City and I still am very careful about wearing a mask outside, [on] public transportation always, but even walking in my building and then in my office. If there are more than five people immediately surrounding me, I do wear a mask, because I don't want to get sick. I absolutely notice on the streets of New York City today, that when I see other people who are wearing their masks, I would say 9 out of 10 of them are also Asian. There is this sort of unspoken visual contact that I made with those Asians on the street three years ago, and also today. When I ride the New York City Subway, I am very aware of my surroundings. I don't stand near the platform because I don't want to get pushed. I always stand next to either the wall or a barrier. I wait til the last possible minute until the train pulls up and I look to see who's boarding the train to my left and my right. I do not look down at my phone for the entire time that I'm on that train because I am very aware of who's watching, who's looking, [and] any slight unexpected moves because I am [Asian]. I used to be a good public transportation person anyway when I was younger and riding it, but since the hate crimes, I absolutely have changed all of my behavior as my parents have as well.

CR: So it's not something that you've been doing for your whole life? Has this been very recent as well?

JC: Absolutely. When the nation's president at the time was calling it the China flu, and there was just so much anti-Asian sentiment. It completely changed my entire mindset. By the way, I've conveyed that to my children as well. They grew up in Connecticut, so they're not as street-smart, but my daughter goes to school outside Philadelphia, and her college was on strike for two years because there were incidents in Philadelphia. They are much more aware and that happened two years ago, not 10 years ago, not 20 years ago. So definitely aware, it's heightened everyone's awareness.

CR: Continuing on this idea of race and just being Korean in life in general. Are there like any incidents or instances where you felt like your race was being used against you whether that was for a job application, or getting into some place?

JC: I would say it's hard because I'm Korean and I'm a woman. We don't have to go into the whole college admissions, or law school admissions, or grad school admissions, with numbers, but I would say, I've never hidden behind my race to get to some advantage. In fact, in every application for every job, any tests that I've ever taken any opportunity to check the box that says "Asian," I've checked that box. Every opportunity in an interview, if there's been a question that could be answered in a way where I've been able to integrate my heritage into the answer, I've been very deliberate about doing that. I've never hidden behind the fact that I'm Asian, but I've also said, not only am I qualified for the position, but my ethics, my work ethic, [and] my view from a global standpoint or a multicultural standpoint is only been an enhancement to anything that I can offer to you as a student, a grad student, a volunteer, a board member, a business executive. To be able to integrate diversity and my race as an immigrant, I've made it work to my

advantage, not to my disadvantage, and I've also not hidden behind that fact. My children also, I remember, started taking the PSAT, or one of those first standardized tests, and he called me during the middle of the day, which never happens, you don't call your mom middle of the day. [I said], "What's going on?" I remember my son saying, "Oh, I have to fill out all of the demographic information on this PSAT. Can I check two boxes?" I said, "What two boxes?" and he said, "Well, there's white Caucasian, and there's Asian, and I have to ask the teacher but I think I'm allowed to check both it says check all that apply," or maybe it didn't say check all that apply and that's why he was calling me to say "Do you think of I check two boxes, that they're not going to take my test scores," or something like that? And I said, "Yeah, check two boxes" and he did and we talked about it at dinner. I know that both of my children on their college test entrance exams, [and] their college applications, checked all the boxes. Maybe that's because of the way that I've sort of projected myself. If anything, I've integrated it and try to make other people understand that it's actually a good thing and not a bad thing. I don't think I've ever been discriminated against in terms of getting in somewhere, [whether it is] a country club or college or university because of that. It's also because maybe I have been qualified. So if there's a choice between me and somebody else who on paper looks just like me, maybe I've been able to enhance the story about why it actually is more advantageous for that company or board or nonprofit, to have me be a part of the whole story.

CR: Going back to what you mentioned about your children and the checking of the boxes? Do you think that's something that happens too much in American society where they try and make you feel like you only fit one box as an Asian American and someone who can be multiple?

JC: I think that it's sort of a good visual, right, in the phone call and talking to me about that. My husband had a different opinion. He said, “Well, maybe they shouldn't check so many boxes.” When my son applied to college, that was the year that Harvard [had] the whole controversy. Was it not advantageous to be Asian? That's why there are all these lawsuits about. I think there is a little bit of pressure for not just my children, but others of mixed race to either check all the boxes. I think it's good to feel different, there's like two extremes. When Haverford College had its student strike, it was very offensive, in many respects, because I know my daughter and some of her classmates, were trying to participate in some active dialogue with students who were a little bit more extreme about their opinions. As a parent, as an alum, I was very offended, because there were some sentiments that were expressed, that said that my daughter and some of her friends and certain groups, were not the right color, and [that] they couldn't participate in the conversations. I thought, gosh, how can people of color become too woke about who can contribute to a conversation, and actually, that was a more insular, and closed-minded approach than allowing the dialogue to be bigger, broader, and probably more controversial if they were able to introduce the entire rainbow into the conversation. I don't know if that answered your question, but it's definitely something that my family talks about. Is it good to be different? Do you feel it's right? What my husband and I decided, was that it was their decision and we made it very clear to them, that if you feel you're identifying with one, that's fine, then you check that box. If you feel like your heritage, like the way you've grown up, and that you are aligned with more than one, then check more than one. We didn't ask them even after they did that, what they did until after they got into college or whatever. My husband at dinner once said, “What boxes did you guys check?” It really was their decision to do that. It'll be different for their kids I'm sure.

CR: I know you said it was their choice, but was part of you hoping that they would sort of check?

JC: Of course, not that it was the competition between me and my husband. I remember the conversation with Max. He said, "Well, I can check some boxes." And I said, "What, what are the, one of the choices? Like which boxes can you check?" So I did feel good about that. By the way, neither kid thinks that having checked the box for being part Asian gave them an advantage in the application pool. In fact, I said to them very clearly it's actually not going to be an advantage in many respects for you to check that box that you're Asian. If you're applying to a school in California, any of the UC schools, its dominant student population is of Asian heritage. So we did have that conversation. They clearly checked the box not to get an advantage, but just more to identify their dual heritage.

CR: That's about all. Did you enjoy the interview?

JC: I did. So I thought you were going to ask more about food, though.

JC: I will say the one thing that's central in Korean culture, is that dinner, which also becomes leftovers for breakfast. Mealtime is where people talk about each other, and not about work. Do you understand the difference? It's more like a whole ritual. How was school? What did you study? What kind of homework did you have? It was much more about the individual child and is very focused, they're very focused on families. So dinner time was the way that you talked

about your schoolwork, and your homework obligations, and also like, your ambitions, and where you would end up. I was talking about college [at a young age], I did my college tours in sixth grade, mostly because I went with my brothers. From the day you're born, dinner conversations revolved around that, and everybody sits down at the dinner table. Nobody uses electronics, and you don't answer the phone. When you're served, this is very cultural, if it's a traditional, mom, dad, and the children, the husband gets served first, and then it's age order. Then my brother with my mother would hand me the plate, and I'd serve my dad, then she'd hand me a plate and I'd hand it to my oldest brother. Then it'd be my second brother. Then my mother would say, “Oh, this is your plate” and I was like, “Mommy this is for you” and I put my plate down. By the time my mother actually sat down, somebody would want seconds. So my mother would get up and I would get up and we would give my father seconds or my brother. It's this whole cultural phenomenon. Then I was describing how the families would get together. The wives are always and the moms and the daughters were always in the kitchen, at the kitchen table. The men are in the dining room table playing poker, drinking, and eating. That was at dinner time. Then at midnight, there'd be a whole other late-night snacking thing, and then the kids would be we'd be like running around.

Meals are very important and I did emphasize that with my own children. During the pandemic, especially, I cooked for 110 weeks straight, [for] every meal, we had no takeout. [My husband did all the grocery store shopping, but I cooked every meal and we share dinner every single night from March 13th until my daughter left for her school on August 28th. Every night we had dinner together as a family. Little stories like that are definitely true to form that food is the center of deciding where you're going to go to college!