Interview Transcript: Sarah Kim

Anna Staton: Hello. My name is Anna Staton. Today is March 28, 2023, and I am interviewing Sarah Kim 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?

Sarah Kim: I do.

AS: Okay, first off, how are you doing today?

SK: I'm doing good.

AS: Good, and can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

SK: I was born in New Zealand in 2000, and I was born in Christchurch which is in the South Island, but then my family moved to Auckland when I was around 3-years-old. I lived there ever since, from then until I was 15-years-old. That's when I immigrated to the US.

AS: Can you tell me a little bit about where you are now, what you do?

SK: Right now my family and I live in Virginia, and I go to school in Maine. I'm going to be graduating this May, and I plan on attending dental school in Virginia.

AS: Tell me a little bit more about growing up in New Zealand and how that shaped your life.

SK: I'm really glad that I grew up in New Zealand. I feel like it's a very different dynamic to the US, and I feel like safety was never a huge concern I had. Ever since I was young, we lived in a really safe neighborhood. It would be fine for me to walk to school, but my parents wanted to be a little more extra safe, so they would drive me. It was a very nice environment, I feel like, for a kid to grow up. It wasn't too strict in terms of academics, which, I know if I were to grow up in South Korea, then that would have definitely been a part of my life. And there was always a lot of opportunities to explore different career paths or different hobbies. In middle school, in intermediate school in New Zealand, there were like, oh I forgot what the word is. But an extra class you could take, like a language class or a cooking class. And it was mandatory for us to go through each rotation, so everyone gets to be exposed to different areas, so we can learn about if it fits well with us.

AS: You mentioned that safety was never a big concern in New Zealand, do you experience that differently in America? Is safety a concern for you here?

SK: Well, it's definitely a bit of a concern. Because of the Second Amendment, guns are more prevalent in the US. In New Zealand, I feel like it's not very common. I think mostly it's law enforcement, or farmers. Stuff like that. But, I mean, here everyone–even young people–can get it. It's really scary to think about that. School shootings are very common. We recently had a case like that at our school. So, I just remember thinking, like in high school, there was a school shooting threat, it never happened, but that was very eye-opening for me. I just feel like it's something I feel like people get very desensitized to. Like the first time I had ever heard of a school shooting in the US, I was very scared to go to school, even though I lived in a really safe neighborhood in high school in the US, in Georgia. But the more and more I hear about it in the news, the less and less I get more concerned. So, I can't help but think what it would've been like if I had grown up in the US when I was very little, and how much it kind of just becomes part of the daily life to hear about really scary things like that. And it seems like not much is really being done to fix that.

AS: I want to backtrack toward your fifteen years growing up in New Zealand. Obviously your parents immigrated there from South Korea–was there a Korean community there you identified with or was it just within your family?

SK: I lived in Auckland, which is the biggest city in New Zealand. So, where I grew up, there were a lot of Korean people. It was a very diverse community with a lot of other people of color. So, yeah there was a pretty big Korean community. There were lots of shops that were all in Korean and a lot of Korean centers, so I didn't feel very different about my race. There would always be a handful of Korean students in my class. In all my classes. And every so often more people from Korea would be immigrating.

AS: You mentioned growing up in these diverse communities. How has that shaped you as a person and your values and how you see the world?

SK: I feel like, because from a very young age I was always exposed to people of different races, it was very alienating for me to first come to Colby because Colby is a very white institution. And I would hear some students say, "This is the most diverse place I've ever been!" And that was really shocking for me. It was the first time I became more aware of my racial and ethnic identity, just because there's not a lot of people like me. I feel like because in my childhood I was always in diverse communities, I never felt different or out of place.

AS: Going back to what you said about your racial and ethnic identities, and your national identities as well, a lot of different aspects of your life that make you who you are. I'm curious, you mentioned that coming to Colby was a culture shock because it's obviously not a very diverse campus, and you're the co-founder and co-president of the Colby Korean Club and

you're also in the Asian Student Association. How has your involvement in these groups impacted your time at Colby, and why are they important to you?

SK: I first joined the Asian Student Association my freshman year, and that was really nice because that's when I got to know upperclassmen who were also Asian, and that made me feel more comfortable. Overall, it was really nice to be in places where I felt more welcomed, rather than feeling like I stuck out like a sore thumb. I felt really compelled to create Colby Korean Club because within the Asian Student Association, I did notice that there was a lot of emphasis on culturally Chinese events. So even though I felt very comfortable in ASA, there was still that little aspect of difference and things I can't really relate to. Talking to upperclassmen, it seemed like the Colby [Korean] student body was growing year-by-year, so my friend and I ended up creating Colby Korean Club hoping that we could create a safe space for other Korean students. And obviously there's the big Korean wave coming, so people are becoming more interested in Korea and K-Pop and things like that, so we also wanted to create a space where people could learn more about Korean culture without feeling judged or things like that.

AS: You also told me that you speak Korean with your family and took the Test of Proficiency in Korean, why was that important to you?

SK: To be very honest, I took the TOPIK, the Test of Proficiency in Korean, because Colby has the language requirement, and I did not feel like taking three semesters in French. So that's why I took the TOPIK, so I could test out of the language requirement. Otherwise, I feel like I would not have taken the TOPIK. It seemed like a very intimidating test. I had heard of other people taking it. The sample questions I saw, I thought it was very difficult. But once I figured out I had to take it, it felt kind of… Because Korean was not something that was taught to me per say, I kind of learned it by myself. I obviously spoke Korean with my parents, and I knew how to understand and speak it, but the written aspect, I didn't really go to a Hangul school where they teach you how to read and write Korean. My mom just taught me the basic alphabet, and then from there I would try and watch TV shows with the English subtitles. So the subtitles would translate what the written Korean was saying. And from then on, I first started that when I was around thirteen, and then after that I kept on practicing and trying to read small passages in Korean. So, my main goal ever since I first decided to learn how to read and write Korean was to be able to read a book, which I was able to do my freshman or sophomore year of college. And right now, I'm a senior. So taking the TOPIK was also just a way to kind of see how I compare on an actual scale that other people get tested on. So, yeah, that was really nice.

AS: You said that you learned Korean on your own. Are your parents proud of you? How do they feel about you doing that?

SK: I guess my parents… I'm not going to lie, my dad takes a lot of credit for it. I think they're happy for me. It's a lot easier for them as well because they used to only text me and my sister in English because we couldn't read Korean back then, but now we can read Korean so it's easier for them to communicate with us.

AS: While we're on the topic of your parents, they moved to New Zealand from South Korea in 1998. Do you know what the reasoning for that was?

SK: Yeah, so I know that my dad… Ever since he was young, he always wanted to live in the US. He had, I feel like, a very typical American dream. And he never really got the opportunity to do that. There was a chance where his family could have moved, but also due to unfortunate timing, they were scammed from a lot of money. I feel like that was very common back in the day. They couldn't afford to emigrate anymore. My dad knew that when he has kids, he wanted his kids to be able to grow up in an English-speaking country. And, back then, he said that New Zealand was very popular, a lot of people were starting to immigrate there, so after my parents got married, they decided to move to New Zealand, kind of to live out that dream. But also, there are a lot more opportunities in New Zealand compared to Korea for the language aspect.

AS: Your parents were born and raised in Korea, and you were raised outside of the country, but still influenced by your parents' culture. Does being Korean and having that background have different meaning between you and your parents?

SK: I guess it does, because for my parents, I mean, they lived in New Zealand. I mean, sorry, they grew up in Korea and lived there until I want to say their 20s or 30s. So when they emigrated to a different country where being Korean isn't the norm, I feel like it's a lot different compared to being born and raised in a place like that. I feel like that's kind of a different experience. Like, for me… This is a difficult question for me. I feel like, for me, it's kind of like being Korean is half of my identity, for instance, or like one aspect of my identity, especially since I am fluent in English and I don't have an accent or anything. I guess it's easier to believe that I don't really have as much Korean or Asian influence. Whereas my parents, since they didn't learn English at a young age, they have a pretty strong accent, like Korean accent, when they speak English, so I feel like it's harder for them to not be associated with Korea. [I'm] not saying that it's a bad thing, but they're always going to be labeled as an immigrant, because it's very obvious. Whereas for me, it's more like, "Oh, she's a second-gen or third-gen." Stuff like that.

AS: Do you think that is a little more freeing for you? Or is it kind of weird to put this label on you as second-gen or third-gen?

SK: The label itself, “second-gen,” is kind of confusing for me, because in New Zealand I’m a second-gen. But technically in America, I’m a first-gen because I immigrated to the US, but I identify more with second gen Koreans’ experiences. I feel like I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily more freeing. Because for me being Korean is still a pretty big part of my identity. I don’t really want to forget about that aspect. Even though I didn’t grow up in Korea, I still feel like it’s still a part of my identity.

AS: Have you traveled to South Korea?

SK: Yeah, I first went when I was five or six. I don’t really remember much then. But since then, I’ve gone a couple more times when I was around thirteen. And then the most recent was when I was 19 years old.

AS: How was that experience for you? What was it like, kind of going back to where your parents grew up?

SK: It was very weird because I remember when I was around thirteen, when I went to Korea, everything was written in Korean and at the time, I hadn’t fully learned how to read Korean, so everything was just like different characters that I couldn't read. And so that was very weird for me. It was the first time I met a lot of my extended family, and that was something I always noticed I was missing, compared to my peers, was that all my cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents were all in Korea, with the exception of my dad's brother and his family, they’re in Canada. But yeah, meeting my grandparents was really nice. It was something I always wanted. I wanted to have a close relationship with my extended family, but it was something I never really got to have just because we live so far away from each other.

AS: Do you still keep in touch with your extended family? Has that made things a little easier having met them?

SK: I don’t really keep in touch with them that much. I talk to my grandparents every now and then when my parents are calling them. But I don’t really talk to my aunt and uncles or my cousins very much.

AS: Earlier you mentioned this Korean wave happening. I’m curious how your parents interact with Korean culture and how you interact with Korean culture and if there’s any interests you share, or some disconnect there?

SK: Interests in Korea for my parents–I feel like it's less entertainment and more political. I know my dad is more interested in the political aspects. And I think my mom is a bit more interested in the entertainment aspect. I think at first, the biggest thing that happened for the

Korean Wave that reached us was when I was still in New Zealand when “Gangnam Style” came out by PSY. I remember my parents being like, “That's so weird. Like, why is it so popular?” And I remember they felt a sense of pride in that, because usually my dad kind of thought whenever something that's related to Korea reaches New Zealand, like a global scale, it's usually some sort of negative event. For example, there was the Sewol Ferry incident where a lot of people died while the ferry was sinking.[1] A lot of it was to do with just poor management and corrupt individuals. So that makes Korea look bad, in my dad's opinion, so he was happier that there's more positive things that are reaching the international stage. For me, I'm really into K-Pop, and Korean dramas and things like that. That is something I can relate more with my mom. For example, she really likes BTS–it’s really cute. She's always telling me, if I'm going to listen to their songs on YouTube, I should listen to the original video that the entertainment company released rather than those other separate videos where there's separate lyrics that show. So yeah, my mom is more into that. I think, because she knows that my sister and I are into K-Pop. And she also likes BTS. There was a time when I would be at home for break. I wasn't doing so well mentally. But she would just turn on BTS while we're having breakfast. So that's something we relate to.

AS: Yeah, that's awesome. I'd like to talk a little bit more about your personal experience moving from New Zealand to America, because you were 15 and that's a hard time in your life to move from one country to another all the way across the world. So I'm curious how that impacted you and how you dealt with that change?

SK: Yeah, in my mind, with immigration, I always associated the hardest thing being the language barrier. But since I wouldn't have that, I thought that the immigration process would be very smooth and easy. And settling down in a new country would be easier. Prior to my move to the US, I have no real memory of having to move to a different city or things like that, or even move schools. I did move when I was around three, but I was too young to remember that, so I was really excited, I remember, to move to a different place. I had always wanted to move houses, or schools or something like that. But I had always grown up in the same house with the same people. So yeah, I was really excited. Coming to the US though, it was very weird, because I had always grown up in the same place for as long as I can remember, the concept of not being able to know my way to the grocery store or to school or back home. That was really weird for me. We always had to use navigation, which is kind of obvious that you would have to but, I don't know why, for me, that really struck me as weird. I felt kind of uncomfortable about that. There was also a bit of culture shock, where, again, I didn't expect there to be a culture shock. But I was pretty shocked about how bipolar the US can be in terms of politics, it's pretty obvious that there's two different sides and people are very open to talk about it. There's also how patriotic the US is, in terms of veterans, which I think is very cool. I didn't really see that in New

[1] On April 16, 2014 the Sewol ferry sank off of the southwestern coast of South Korea. More than 300 people died, including around 250 students from Danwon High School.

Zealand. But, there's the Pledge of Allegiance that we always say in high school. That was really weird. I really thought they were trying to brainwash us. That was really weird. But other than that, I did feel kind of homesick. That was a weird concept, because I knew that this is my home now. But I still ended up feeling homesick, so it took me a while to kind of adjust to that. I also moved when I was in the middle of freshman year to the US, so everyone had already kind of settled down to their friend groups, and I kind of felt like I couldn't fit in anywhere. I didn't really settle down until, a year, or half-a-year into moving to the US.

AS: Earlier, you said your dad had always wanted to move to the US, since he was younger, and you just talked about things that are kind of weird about the US. So, I'm curious, was he happy with his decision to move to the US and how it shaped you and your family?

SK: For my dad, his dream was to move to the US, and be this fluent English speaker, get married in the US, that kind of thing. So, moving to the US when he's in his 40s or 50s has definitely been, I feel like, a bit disappointing for him. But he was very happy to see a lot of the US and like things I mentioned like the Pledge of Allegiance and that type of stuff. He's very embracing of that type of stuff. He loves how patriotic the US can be. But I feel like a part of him also kind of misses New Zealand, because that's where he did live for a lot of his life, especially with where me and my sister grew up. I feel like he associates New Zealand as a place where there's less worries, because we were still pretty young back then.

AS: Why do you think America was the dream for your dad? You talked about being a fluent English speaker. Why was that so important to him, do you think?

SK: I think he, well, he listened to a lot of American songs. There was that aspect. I think he really just admired people who could speak English very fluently in the US. In college, there would be some Korean American students who go on an exchange program or study abroad in Korea, and so meeting those students who fully grew up in the US but could still speak Korean–I feel like that was something that he really wanted. Yeah, I'm not exactly sure specifically why the US, but I think he always had this image of the US being very advanced and something he kind of looked up to.

AS: I'm also curious how your parents' experiences with education are different or similar to your own, because you went to high school in the US in college in the US, whereas they had their education in South Korea.

SK: My parents both went to school in Korea, since they were young all the way into high school. After graduating high school, my dad went to Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea, and he graduated with a bachelor's. My mom was the youngest of three, and her family at the time was not very financially stable, so she wasn't able to afford to go to college. She graduated high

school and then I think she just started working. But in New Zealand, she did get an associate's degree in cooking. So yeah, my dad got all of his education in Korea, but my mom got an associate's degree in New Zealand.

AS: What are some of the core values that your parents have taught you?

SK: I feel like most of them are very common among immigrants. One of them is to work hard. So, always be studying, always put in a lot of effort, and get a job that's going to give you a stable future. Be financially stable in life. For them, that was being a doctor or lawyer. My dad also likes to say, in Korean you would say, *"Akkyeoya jalsalji,"* which if you translate it, it means, "You need to save money to live a good life." So, they're very thrifty, they don't like to spend money very much. I think those were the big ones my parents, especially my dad, passed on to me. My mom is more, like, "Treat people with respect," or "Treat everyone fairly," and not to judge people based on what they look like or how they act.

AS: You mentioned one of these values being to work hard and be successful. Has this put any pressure on you?

SK: For sure. For sure. My parents, ever since I was young, put a lot of pressure on me and my sister. My sister is two years older than me. I remember, even in primary school, like elementary school, my dad would teach us the multiplication table, like years in advance compared to what my school would teach us. He would make sure I knew all of them very well. Whenever there was some sort of test, like in my primary school we had this basic math test where there's one-hundred questions and there's five different sections, so there's adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, and then the last section is a mixture of all four, my dad would make his own copies and give them to me and my sister so we could practice. [My parents] would always be very involved in my academic life, like buy a lot of workbooks to study. My mom kind of backed off after, I want to say, middle school. I've noticed she's not as involved anymore. But my dad is still really involved, and all the way through high school, even in college, he would like to ask, what grade do I think I'm going to get in the class or what my classes are going to be next semester, things like that.

AS: Now you're a senior, you're almost done with college and you're going to dental school next year. Do you think that your parents are proud of you and they're happy with the hard work that you've put in?

SK: Yeah, I think for sure my dad is very happy. I mean, both my parents are very happy. It's not like, when my parents said they wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer, they really wanted us to have a licensed job that would not easily be replaceable, like an office worker for example. They view it as a very replaceable job. So, being a dentist, they think that has a prestige to it in their

opinion and it's also something that they think will give me a lot of financial stability when I'm older. So yeah, they're very happy about that.

AS: Has your decision to go into dentistry been influenced by their values, or is it just something you enjoy?

SK: Coming into Colby, into college, my dad was very emphasizing to be a pre-med, to be a doctor. I always knew I didn't want to be, and by chance I was able to shadow a dentist, even though it was during COVID. Through that experience I learned that dentistry is something that I find really interesting. So, for me, it was a win-win situation where I get to do something I know I'll enjoy, and also do something my parents will approve of.

AS: Now I want to transition to, obviously the theme of this project is "Food For Thought," so let's talk about food for a little bit. First off, how has cooking and consuming food been a part of your life?

SK: I remember, ever since I was young, I liked to watch my mom cook. My parents are both very good cooks, but my mom does most of the cooking. So, I always liked to watch her cook. I think I wasn't too obsessed with food when I was young. I kind of just ate enough until I was full and that was it. I didn't particularly crave any food or anything like that. It wasn't until really college, where, since I can't have it anymore, I find myself craving it more. My mom has a lot of really good recipes that I'd be wanting to learn. I still haven't learned how to cook them yet, but learning to cook Korean food is definitely something I'd like to do.

AS: How did your parents introduce you to food? Have they introduced you to foods they ate in Korea or anything like that?

SK: I think their introduction to food for me was very similar to anybody. Except the foods they introduced to me were Korean foods. We primarily ate Korean food at home, so there would always be a bowl of rice, a lot of side dishes, and sometimes a big dish for us to share. Or a soup or stew for us to share. What was the next part of the question?

AS: You pretty much touched on it.

SK: Oh, okay. Cool.

AS: Do you have any meaningful memories associated with food that kind of jump out at you?

SK: There's a lot of foods that my parents would tell me stories about. Like, there's a food called *Sujebi*, (hand-pulled dough soup), which, I don't know the translation. But, it's basically just like

a normal broth soup but you add small, thin layers of dough in it. It's something that's very affordable, that doesn't take a lot of ingredients, and nothing that you put in there is expensive. I remember my parents would tell me that they would eat this nonstop when they first moved to New Zealand because they wanted to save up on money and they didn't want to use a lot of money on food. There are also other ones where they would talk about the historical meaning behind it. In class, I remember we talked about the army base stew, so they would explain to me that army base stew was something that you can just put any ingredients together, and it would be something that people would eat a lot back in the day. There's also, it's called *Samgyetang*, (ginseng chicken soup), which is I guess a chicken soup. I guess. It's a very hot dish, but apparently back in the day they would eat it on the hottest day of the year. I'm not quite sure why. But yeah, because it's a hot soup, so I never understood why. But yeah, a lot of the foods where they talk about the meaning behind it. Things like that were really intriguing for me.

AS: Do you think it was important for your parents that you know the background of these Korean dishes?

SK: That's a really good point. I feel like it probably was. Seeing that you're having a very different upbringing compared to them. It's something that they value a lot. I also think another aspect is just that they like to tell stories about Korean history and their relationship to certain foods.

AS: Obviously we're talking about Korean food, but you were raised in New Zealand and America, so I'm curious how your move from New Zealand to America changed your relationship with food and how food was different for you?

SK: I feel like in the US, pizza seems to be very… like a baseline food. There's always pizza at certain events. Or the school lunch menu always has pizza. I feel like in New Zealand it wasn't that big of a deal. But there are certain foods from New Zealand that you can't find here. Like fish and chips. And even just stuff from the grocery store is very different. So, I feel like… I don't know. In high school, when I moved to the US, I was mostly eating school lunch and obviously whatever my parents made at home, so I really only ate whatever the school cafeteria was serving, like pizza or chicken nuggets or something like that. I feel like coming to Colby, the college, was more eye-opening about American food because I'm having to eat it all the time. So, I can't really experience any other type of food that I'm used to.

AS: You're in the Colby Korean Club. Do you guys do any cooking there? Because there's obviously Korean Table, but that's just at the dining hall I imagine, right?

SK: Yeah, so we do *Gimbap* (rice roll) events. *Gimbap* is similar to sushi, but different ingredients. That's kind of the most we do for cooking. We'll prepare all the ingredients, we'll

cook all the rice, all the eggs and carrots and meat and stuff like that, and we'll just invite our club members to come and we'll all just make our own *Gimbap* and eat that. We wanted to do other cooking events but I feel like, for how young and small our club is right now, it's a bit too ambitious to do those events.

AS: Wrapping up, is there anything that I'm missing or anything you'd like to add? Anything that popped up that we didn't touch on?

SK: No, I think I'm good.