

Transcript:

Sophie: My name is Sophie Nacht. Today is March 31st, 2023, and I am interviewing Karen Shi in person at Colby College 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?

Karen: Yes.

Sophie: Maybe we could just start by you introducing yourself for the listener.

Karen: Hi, I'm Karen. I'm a sophomore in Colby College. I double major in Global Studies and History, and I minor in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. That's my background [in terms of] academics. I was born in Garden Grove, California, but I moved back to China 30-days after that and grew up in China until around 13, 14. Then I came back to California for middle school, high school, and now I'm in Maine for college.

Sophie: Thanks. We've talked about how in your middle school you had a lot of Korean food and there were like a lot of Korean students. Did you notice any Korean influences in your city when you were growing up? In the food or anything like that?

Karen: In my sixth grade and seventh grade of middle school, I attended an international school in my hometown. Because Qingdao, which is my hometown, is very coastal and it's only an hour away from Korea by flight, so it's also a very international city and we had a lot of Korean population diaspora in the area. I feel like growing up I've always realized that because we had a lot of Korean food and you could see Korean signs sometimes around the city. But I think my first like real exposure to what Koreanness is, or what Korean food really means to me, was

definitely when I attended international school and they had the option of Korean food on the menu, and that's when I really had a full picture of, "Oh, this is what it really is."

Sophie: What was one of the first foods you tried in your school?

Karen: I don't necessarily think I remember, but I was definitely very intrigued by *kimchi*, because it is just not the way Chinese people cook cabbage. When I was first introduced that it was like cabbage, I thought it was so weird because it was red and it [was] not very good looking, I'd say. So, definitely *kimchi* was one of the first things I was like, "Oh, this is a little weird and this is a little different," but I would say, overall, a lot of like Korean food for me, [the] taste is very similar to Chinese food. One of my favorite Korean foods is obviously *Jjajangmyeon* (Bean sauce noodles). We also have the same dish in Chinese, also called *Jjajangmyeon*, but it's cooked a little different [and] I just prefer the Korean style of doing it. They also have like, *Jjajang* (Black bean sauce) with rice and I just love it so much that I would like have the noodle and then for the leftover I get more rice and then mix it and then eat it. So definitely a lot of life memories from middle school of Korean dishes. We also had fish cake—like Fishcake soup. It was also really good because I was like, "Oh, I thought that was tofu," but then it wasn't tofu because I don't like tofu, but the fishcake actually tastes like a lot more like seafood and I really like seafood. Overall, I feel like my impression of Korean food was really, really good.

Sophie: What's the difference between making *Jjajangmyeon* in the Chinese-style versus Korean style?

Karen: I think in the Chinese-style we have a lot more vegetables. We have cucumber, we have sliced carrot and, and also the sauce is a little different. The sauce is lighter and more liquid-ish. For Korean, the soup, the sauce is...saucy, in a sense. It is not that liquidy and they also have less vegetables. It's just onions and I think potatoes sometimes.

Sophie: That sounds really good.

Karen: I miss it.

Sophie: Have you been able to find any good Korean food around Waterville?

Karen: No, I haven't even tried, because I feel like I have such a beautiful impression of it. The look of *Jjajangmyeon*, the taste of *Jjajangmyeon* [is] ingrained in my head [so] I almost don't want to ruin it. Also, when they say you've realized how cherished it is when you don't have it that often. So, I just say that whenever I go back to China or California, I'll be like, "Oh, I have to have *Jjajangmyeon*." Then it makes me miss it more and then it has more value. But I just think here, having it, it's almost like sacrilegious

Sophie: That makes sense. That's how I feel about—I mean, I still eat it all the time because everyone makes pizza—but I'm from New York and New York Pizza... yeah. Every time I have it somewhere else, I'm like, "Not good."

Karen: Yeah.

Sophie: How have your understandings of South Korea been shaped throughout your life?

Karen: I think it definitely began with a lot of cultural influence of South Korea like K-Pop, probably K-Drama. I definitely remember being exposed to boy groups and girl groups when I was younger. I was a huge fan of EXO. Never liked BTS. I loved Girls' Generation. All these girl groups I was just so obsessed with, and that I also started watching K-Dramas. I was in love with all the actors and actresses and that was definitely one of, I feel like, the key parts of my [exposure to] South Koreanness. But I do remember things taking a turn. I don't know exactly when, but maybe the 2010s when America placed this missile system in Korea. It was an anti-missile system, so it was to block missiles and because Korea is so close to China there were a lot of protests from the Chinese government. That's when the relationship between the countries took a turn. I remember that Korean artists stopped coming to China for concerts and a lot of the information was banned. I remember I was watching a show at the time, and they had Korean boy groups like iKon and VIXX and they were removed from the show because you couldn't talk about Korean artists, you couldn't talk about Korean culture in China because of the diplomatic problems. But coming to America definitely... It started again when I first came to America. No one liked K-Pop. No one was talking about it. It was only me and some of my Asian friends that were like, "Oh yeah, you heard about this group too? Oh yeah." I'm a huge fan, but I feel like in recent years you definitely see the popularization of like K-pop across the world.

Sophie: That's so interesting. Do you think that when the diplomatic relationships got worse, was there also influence on things you saw in your city, like food or anything like that? Or was it more in terms of media?

Karen: I think it was the media that took a bigger hit. I don't necessarily remember if anything changed for food, but I definitely remember an overall disdain and hostility towards Koreans and Korean culture in general.

Sophie: Did you learn about Korean history in school? In international school, before international school, or both?

Karen: I never really learned Korean history in international school. Funny enough, we talked more about American history. We didn't even talk about Chinese history in [an] international [context]. But the part of history that I know more is definitely the Korean War, because China was helping North Korea and I actually didn't know very much about South Korean history at all. It was more like you would see on Memorial Day documentaries be played on television being like, "This is how many Chinese people died from the war," and what [China] did to help the North Korean people and how North Korea helped [the] Chinese Revolution. I'd say if anything [was] relating to South Korea, it was about "comfort women," because there's also a huge issue in China and the relationship between China and Japan. I think regarding that issue, Chinese and Koreans were sort of standing on the same side and asking for justice and asking for apology and reparation.

Sophie: Did you learn about Korean history when you came to the US in high school?

Karen: No. Not at all.

Sophie: Yeah, me neither in any of my school.

Karen: Mm-hmm.

Sophie: Were there differences in the way that you had learned about—and you said you didn't necessarily like learn that much—in the way that you had learned about either South Korea or North Korea [in school] and the way that your friends spoke about growing up there in South Korea?

Karen: Yeah. I think in middle school everyone's so young, and I don't think any of my friends really had an idea about [the] historical significance of certain topics.

And also, because we were kids, no one was gonna [be] like, “Let's hang out and talk about history.” But if anything, coming to America, one of the differences between my exposure in China and in America is definitely the issue of US participation in the area. Especially in recent years, being Chinese is very difficult in America because of the hostility towards China and the anti-China sentiment.

That's not something I felt in China. And just thinking about US imperialism in East Asia, it was never something I learned in school or never heard anyone discuss it. Even with the heightened discussion on Chinese history or some of the Chinese human rights issues people were talking about, it seems like no one was willing to talk about the “Comfort Women” in China or you know, World War II in China.

And so, I think that's definitely something that's very different in terms of like perspectives and narratives.

Sophie: That makes sense. Did any of your Korean friends talk about ever feeling hostility in China when relations were worse?

Karen: We never spoke about it, but I would say a hundred percent they felt like something was different.

But also, the kind of racism you experience in Asia is very different than [in the] United States because a lot of times you can't tell people apart. Just judging by their facial features, you can't just make an assumption that they're Korean and Chinese a lot of times, but [in] America it's so obvious that we're not white.

I would definitely say they probably saw hate speech online and probably faced some hostility in [their] everyday lives as well.

Sophie: This is kind of taking a different direction. Do you think that having access to Korean food and music and TV shows, et cetera, has shaped your understanding of Korean culture?

Karen: Yeah, for sure. [Food and media played a role in] not just shaping [my understanding], but also the process of constructing Korean identity, because I didn't have any idea of what [Korean identity] really was until I started going to international schools and hanging out with Korean friends and [was] exposed to Korean food and Korean culture.

It was definitely a lot: from zero to something. The entertainment side of it, in a way, dominated my life [more] than other factors. Just because of how much I love music and how obsessed I was with EXO. I've always loved Korean, food culture, anything.

Sophie: Do you associate different Korean foods with different moments in your life or different places?

Karen: Yes. I think coming to America, one of the more defining Korean foods would be Korean barbecue. It's so huge in America in a way it always becomes synonymous [with] Korean food, which I don't think it's true.

I personally don't think that Korean barbecue is Korean food. But I think it also gets twisted [in] that a lot of Americans say that they love Korean food, but all they have tried is Korean barbecue, which is similar to grilling. In a way, I don't think that's real exposure to the history and culture, but the way people describe is like, "Oh, I love Korean food because I had Korean barbecue." It's definitely the style of it: [it's] all you can eat, and then you just go in and order all those meats.

I love *Bulgogi* (grilled meat). Coming to America, [Korean barbecue] was that hangout time with friends ... grilling meat together and just having so much fun. And they always have really cute waiters at Korean barbecue places. And so, I'd say that's definitely my experience, [my] American experience of Korean food.

Also adding on to that, H Mart is a very American experience of Korean food because in China, you can always find Korean snacks anywhere. You don't have to go to a Korean store to find Korean snacks because they were so popular, and you could always buy them online. And they're also in random supermarkets. But in California, which is a very diverse state to begin with, if you want authentic Korean food or authentic Korean ingredients, the go-to is H Mart. And I just absolutely, I'm in love with H Mart. I just love shopping there.

I think it's also because high school is so stressful that you need ways to decompress [like] going to H Mart and then buying all the snacks and just seeing the shelves. And also, I really love

different kinds of drinks. So just staring at the shelf and being like, “Oh, I haven't tried this before,” or, “This is really good.”

I loved the idea of having a snack shelf and Korean snacks were really my taste. So, I just had snack shelves for Korean food and Korean snacks and Korean drinks. And I always remember one really happy moment would be [when] I finished everything because I know that I can go back again.

Sophie: Nice. There's an H Mart on my block at home and it's huge.

Karen: It's so awesome.

Sophie: There was also a Korean grocery store at my bus stop growing up, and we would always go there for snacks every day, in middle school, after school.

I know you talked about a lot of your friends, bringing lunch from home. Was there a difference between what people brought versus the school's version of Korean food?

Karen: Yeah. I was so shocked by the fact that people were bringing food from their own house, [that] their mom made in the morning. Because before international school, I was in a Chinese private school and the typical experience is you go to the cafeteria and then you eat and then you come back.

So, I didn't even know that was possible. But I have this picture vividly in my head that we're in the cafeteria and they pass out these tickets to get food for the day. And -- I'm currently seeing this in my head -- my Korean friend, her name's Esther, she will always have food from home.

And she'd have this very pretty lunch bag and she would take it out and she'd have five, six little containers with just the side dishes, like homemade kimchi, and then radish and all different kinds of things. And then it changes from day to day.

And then she will have *Gimbap* (rice roll) maybe or sometimes other kinds of rice or whatever her mom made. And I was so jealous of her, like, "How come my mom never brings food from home?" And then Esther will always have really, really good food and some of my other friends too, even if [they're] not bringing an entree, it will always be bringing some kinds of side dishes. And eating side dishes is not a habit of Chinese eating culture. And so, I think that too was very different from my understanding of Korean food culture.

Sophie: Would you say that in Chinese food culture, [there's]... one main dish or [it's] less about side dishes?

Karen: Well, we have appetizers, but I don't think it's the same as side dishes because an appetizer is a real dish. For side dishes, they're like so small in terms of serving size, it's crazy. And also, we don't have appetizers every day, but I feel like Korean people have a side dish at every meal.

Sophie: Can you describe what lunchtime looked like at your international school?

Karen: Every Friday we would get a sheet. It's always pink or blue or yellow. It's always something colored. And you would see the menu for next week. So Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.

And they would have options and then it would show each day the kind of food they have. And we would have Western food. Normally it's pizza, or a hamburger or sandwich, something like that. And we have Korean food. And we also have a salad section.

And obviously the menu varies every day. And then you look at the menu and then you choose what you want for that day, and then you pre-select what you want to eat for the next week. And during lunchtime, which is about like normally 11:30 or 12, we get to the cafeteria and then we, or our teacher, will pass out the tickets and be like, "Oh, you ordered this, you ordered that. I'm giving you the ticket." ... And then you would go get your food and then you come back and eat.

Sophie: Do you think that food played a role in creating community in your school?

Yeah, for sure. Personally for me it was an eye-opening experience because I've never been exposed to those things. But it was also, there were little moments: a friend always is in line with you always getting the same food the [same] day and you're like, "Oh, you like this too?" And they're like, "Oh yeah." I love talking about it. Like, "Are you kidding me? I love this so much." And it's just those kind of little coincidences or you know, after we select our menu for next week, we check with other people. Like, "Oh, what are you eating that day?" Or like, "Oh, what did you pick for Thursday lunch?"

And then I'd be like, "Oh my gosh. We chose the same meal every single day for next week." Like, "Oh, what a friend, what a friendship." I feel like little moments like that create community because you share a similar taste in food.

Sophie: Do you think that eating Korean food created community in the US in a different way?

Karen: Yeah. I think Korean food in US has an interesting place. Like I said, I'm not the biggest fan of Korean barbecue because in general, I don't like grilled things that much. I also don't like doing the grilling, and so for me, back in China, I would rarely have Korean barbecue.

It would be once in every two months, three months. And then my dad really likes it. And so, he'd be like, "Oh, let's like go to the restaurant and get barbecue" and I'd be like, "Okay, yeah." But then I always go in and get the mashed potato instead of actually liking the food, the grilled meat. That's not really my favorite part of it, but I think it's so crazy when I got to the US and then I was looking on Yelp, I'd be like, "Oh, Korean food, I want Korean food in terms of like the soup. I want... the seafood pancake or the *kimchi* pancake."

But a lot of people don't like them here. And that's why I was very shocked. I remember going on Yelp and being like, "Oh, Korean food." And then everything's Korean barbecue. And I think in a way, it defines it too narrowly.

I don't know whose interest is it is. I don't know if American people like Korean barbecue. I don't know if it's the Korean diaspora or the Asian community in general that really, really prefers Korean barbecue over all the other Korean foods. But I definitely think that it has like a lot more variation than just the grilling itself.

Sophie: Mm-hmm. That makes sense. That's interesting. I also ate a good amount of Korean barbecue growing up. And I never honestly really ate Korean food, I mean, other than Korean barbecue.

Karen: I also really love the red bean and the pumpkin porridge (or soup), and they will make little rice balls and then they put it in. But they just never have it at the restaurants my friends and I go to.

Sophie: Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?

Karen: No, I think we covered most of it. I think it's so interesting, the role Korean culture as a whole plays on at least my city in China and also me personally. And I think it's so amazing that it has shaped my taste buds in a way. And also just the way I associate different things with the Korean dramas I watch, the songs I listened to, or the food I had, or the snacks I really like.

Sophie: When you were growing up, were a lot of your friends also into Korean dramas and music and stuff like that?

Karen: Yeah, for sure. It was crazy. I didn't hang out with people that didn't like K-pop. My mom was into it as well. I introduced her to stuff and she's like, "Oh yeah, this is funny." Yeah. If anything, it's sort of the evolution of my Koreanness, in a way, that ... began with music videos of a boy group I really like.

And then it was watching shows. *Running Man* is a classic. My favorite's *Infinite Challenge*, but it's no longer available. And I started watching these very sort of niche Korean shows. There's one that's on [the] criminal history of Korea.

And I was talking about the cults. I love cults. And so, there's also a Netflix documentary on Korean cults. And I was listening to a podcast of Moonies. Yeah. And I'm fully into Korean hip hop and K-R&B right now. I was in California over last summer and we went to Head in the

Clouds [Festival], which is 88 Rising, this Asian music label. And Jay Park was there and along with CK and pH-1, and then I just went crazy and Bébe was there as well. And so, fully involved. I know more about Korean music than Chinese music. Definitely know a lot more about [it].

If anything, the sad part is that I don't speak Korean. Which, it's my goal to learn Korean. And I know it's not the most difficult in terms of pronunciations and stuff, and I've been complimented by Koreans saying, "Oh yeah, you just, you sound just like Korean."

I didn't watch those dramas and music. Listen to the music for nothing. You know, I definitely know so much about it, but I don't speak Korean, which I find ironic, but that's a goal on my list.

Sophie: It's such a barrier, the language barrier, because I guess you watch all of them with subtitles and stuff.

Karen: Yeah. You know, with the songs I know the lyrics, but I don't know what they mean.

Sophie: So you're saying how with Korean barbecue it's kind of an American version of Korean food -- do you think any of the Korean restaurants in your city are a Chinese version of Korean food?

Karen: Well, if anything, sometimes I think it's the opposite. That it's Korean versions of Chinese food rather than Chinese versions of Korean food. Cause it was so funny that *Jjamppong* (spicy seafood noodle soup), which is a type of noodle and *Jjajangmyeo* is always considered Chinese food.

When I order takeout, I will have to call a Chinese restaurant to order those things. But that's not Chinese food. We make it differently. And so, I think that's one of the things that is interesting. That's not the way we do it, but apparently, it's seen as Chinese food in Korea.

Sophie: Thank you so, so much.