

TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer's name highlighted in blue, Interviewee's name highlighted in yellow

Johann: My name is Johann Zimerle. Today is October 26, 2023 and I'm interviewing Sunmin Lee 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?

Sunmin: Yes.

Johann: All right. How are you feeling about this interview?

Sunmin: I feel good, expectant.

Johann: Is there anything that you're worried about or feeling that might trouble you during this interview?

Sunmin: I'll just stay honest and just share as much as I know. I don't know a lot. I left Korea in 1991. I'll try my best.

Johann: Tell me a little bit about yourself and how you're connected to Korea.

Sunmin: I was born in South Korea. And I grew up mostly in Seoul, Korea. My parents are 100% Korean and so am I. We decided to immigrate into the United States when I was in high school. My motherland is Korea, my native tongue is Korean, and all my childhood memories mostly are from Korea.

Johann: Expanding on these childhood memories, what was the earliest memory you have of Korea?

Sunmin: I think the earliest was when I was, American age, about two [Note: Until 2023, South Korean age started at age one at birth, then increased by one every January 1, regardless of birthdate]. I was 24-months-old at that time; I got lost. My parents went to this Bible study at another person's house, and I fell asleep. Instead of carrying me home, they decided to leave me there. And they're like, "We'll pick her up tomorrow," because a lot of Koreans, the deacons and the elders, are pretty close to my parents. And then apparently, I woke up in the middle of the night and decided to walk home. I have that memory of me walking back home, I think, because it was such a traumatic story. I woke up and I was not in my house and I walked home. And somebody found me when I was close to home, the lady was opening a storefront. And mom's shocked that I still remember this because I was really little – like, about 24-months-[old].

Johann: In Korea, you were living during the later years of the Park regime [Note: Park Chung-Hee governed South Korea from 1961-1979]. And as you were older, it was another dictatorship, this time under Chun [Note: Chun Doo-Hwan succeeded Park and governed from 1979-1987]. How do you think the authoritarian government kind of shaped your childhood? Were you really aware of the political situation? Or did you sense any of the concerns held by adults at the time?

Sunmin: Yes, I sensed it, I remember it. I do think that I remember a lot more than my younger siblings, but I remember college students protesting. They'll throw this makeshift bomb out of a beer bottle. They'll throw that to the police force and the police will throw pepper spray. And pepper spray will affect everybody who's there. We couldn't breathe, we'd cough, sneeze. I have all that in my memory.

And my mom was pretty progressive, politically. And she still sort of is, even in the United States, and she'll share with me about the dictatorship, even though they call themselves "democracy." She shared about President Park a lot with me and President Chun, because you cannot find these in a lot of newspapers. It's by word of mouth and different underground newspapers.

Johann: Outside of the political situation, obviously your childhood would have been influenced a lot by school and your friends, and how just games and activities you would play, at home or at school. I was wondering, what did you do in your free time in Korea when you were younger?

Sunmin: We played a lot of card games and some board games. I remember things like Monopoly, even in Korea. And with my peers, I'll play a little more aggressively. It's kind of like a jump rope kind of thing in the playground, we'd do that. And sometimes we'd do this human fence [Note: In Korea, it's called *multtakbakgi* or 말뚝박기]. It's kind of like tag, but you get on top of the people's back. [Laughter] It's complicated. I taught it to Americans here and then we played it here. And they loved it because it's so aggressive. [There's] a lot of hitting games in Korea.

We sit around and then we try to do memory games. And then if you get caught, if you fail, then you have to be beaten by the group. We'll pat their back or something. But then once you go to college, that all becomes, "You got to drink the shots," and you get wasted. But in middle school, we'll just beat each other as a punishment for losing the game. And I teach that to my kids. We sit around waiting for food to come at an American restaurant, and then we play just a number game with our fingers. Then whenever somebody loses, we'll hit each other's forearm like that [She then demonstrates by slapping her forearm]. Sometimes we get bruised. I don't know why we have so many hitting games.

Johann: Related to your family, I know you have three siblings – you're the eldest in your family. How can you describe your relationship with them?

Sunmin: We got really close because we immigrated. Since we came to the United States, me and my younger sister were teenagers, and then the other two were in elementary [school] and none of us could speak English. We really bonded well during that time. Back in Korea, a lot of times the younger three would play together and I mostly played with the peers. And then the hierarchy, I should say, with my parents, but

traditional Korean culture is kind of like that. When I grew up in the '80s, we were a bit traditional, maybe more so than other families might be because it's such a big family, so they gave me a lot of responsibility as the oldest. And then younger siblings had to follow what I say, so there was a lot of authority that was given to the oldest. If we do play together, it'll be "I'm on one team," and then three of them will be the opposing team or something like that. It was pretty distinctive; like, "You're the eldest!"

Johann: Are there some specific examples where your responsibility as the eldest sister was really highlighted? Like it was very important that you listened to your parents and did exactly what they told in order to keep the rest of the family safe.

Sunmin: In Korea, even when I was in elementary school, I was in charge of babysitting all of them, so they'll [Sunmin's parents] go to all these functions outside and they never hired a babysitter. I was in charge and if anything happened to them, it's my fault. And I was in third grade, fourth grade.

Johann: Do you think when you moved to the United States, did that role change in any way? Did your responsibilities grow? Or was it less so now that you were less familiar with the new country?

Sunmin: It stayed the same. If anything, it got stronger because I was put in with an English tutor when I was a teenager so I learned the culture a little bit faster than my parents. A lot of the parents' responsibility fell on me. My dad's a pastor, and sometimes I'll act like the acting secretary or assistant, even for the church. If he has to write a head letter to different people or a company, I'll just write it for him. It got bigger, up until Dad got sick.

Johann: And your parents, how would you describe your relationship with them when you were younger?

Sunmin: Traditional Korea. Dad is the head of the household. I would say he grew up chauvinistic in a chauvinistic household, so he is. And mom kind of expected that out of a guy, so mom did all the cooking. Dad never cooked. She mostly obeyed him. And sometimes he'd scream and yell and sometimes mom just has to put up with it. Sometimes they'll fight.

Most of my siblings will say Dad was more of a strong person, sometimes intimidating. However, he was pretty solid. Confident, solid, we could trust him that he would take care of the family; we didn't have a doubt about that faith. Mom, on the other hand, was the Mother Bear. She's the gentle, nice one, she was more of a service-oriented person. A lot of the siblings would go to mom if they needed something. They rarely went to dad. I always had a close relationship with dad, but that was exceptional. My siblings felt like mom was easier to talk to.

Johann: When your family finally moved to the US, for a brief period of time before the move, your father was living in the US while you, your siblings and your mother were staying in Korea. [The following sentence was rerecorded because the question was unintelligible during the actual interview] How do you think the relationship within your family had changed? Was it different or more of the same?

Sunmin: I want to say Dad was always the traditional father figure, like he was not at home helping with the house chores or homework or anything. He'd just meet with people, did his work outside, so we rarely got to see him anyways, even when he was in Korea. It didn't make a huge dent when he was away from the country. Another thing is when I was in fourth grade, for about a year or two, he was in United States as a graduate student. We got used to not having dad around all the time. It was kind of like that. A lot of day-to-day things, we just solved it with mom. Maybe that's why the younger siblings are not that close to dad, maybe because there were some gaps there, retrospectively thinking, but at the time, we didn't feel his absence that much.

Johann: Building on this idea of your father being absent, when you guys did move to the US you were reunited, there were probably a lot of ideas and expectations you and your family would have about the US. When you finally moved, were they met? What were your first impressions?

Sunmin: He picked us up at the Detroit International Airport. Then we drove whatever car that he brought all the way to Lima, Ohio. That was our first meeting with Dad after he lived away. I think he did visit us like once a year. Not just Dad, but everything was new. Like we never had a car before and then, here, Dad was driving. In Korea, we usually go to rural areas, and then we take the train. But then we were driving on this thing called freeway, and the same scenery, the corn and beans, for three hours. Korea is 80% mountainous, and this is a flat prairie ground. Everything was so new.

Regarding impressions of that, I don't remember thinking about that too much, because the whole country was so shocking. He was very glad to see us, but we were pretty tight with mom and four children, so I don't know if we were glad to see him or anything like that. But he did tell us when he was living by himself for two-years, because he's a guy who doesn't express his emotions or feelings that much. He never said "I love you" until he was in his 70s or something. Sometimes he'd miss us so much in his large house in Ohio, he'd just call our name as if we're in the house. He'd say "Sunmin!" like he's calling me from upstairs. For an instant he feels like I'm there and that I'm going to answer him. I kind of felt like, "Aww, I guess you did miss us a lot."

Johann: About the house, was it a lot different? I'm assuming it was a lot different than what you guys lived in, in Korea during that time. Can you describe some of these differences between your school and your home, the car? What else was there that seemed a lot different in Ohio compared to Korea?

Sunmin: School was very different. House was different, because we lived in Seoul. If you live in a rural area in Korea, you do have a yard and things like that, but not in Seoul. You'd have to be middle upper class for you to have a yard. When we came

here, we had a really large lawn, green grass. In Korea, we have grass here and there, but a lot of times there's a sign that says "do not step on grass." You're not permitted to walk in or walk on it or lay on it. That was kind of new.

House was a lot larger. I guess Korea house is kind of like the house in New York City. Seoul is kind of like New York City where all the apartments are pretty small. We had one bathroom. The six of us used one bathroom. Here we had two and a half or something like that. And the school.... A lot more freedom for students. The rules are not as strict.

In Korea, when you see a teacher you have to bow down and say hello. You cannot chew gum in the class. You cannot put your feet up on another chair or on another desk. It was kind of shocking to see these students who put their feet up on the desk [She again demonstrates this by putting her feet up on the table] and ask questions to teachers. Like "really?"

Johann: There was also a new language you had to learn. You were a little bit familiar with English at the time because Korean schools introduced English in middle school. What were some other steps that you took in order to learn English?

Sunmin: When I was in Korea, we knew we were going to immigrate for about two years. So we took extra English classes, kind of like Kaplan [An international education services company] here or something like that. After school, I'd go to this academy and take extra English classes. Regarding English, I was the best in my class because I did all this extra work. Coming here, I could write a little bit, however, it was so hard. Even reading a page in a biology book took me, in the beginning, an hour, because there's all this vocabulary that was too difficult. And then I had to look up a lot. I'd have a textbook and a dictionary, and then I'd look up all these words that I don't know.

The verbal was really difficult, because obviously, in Korea, there's not a lot of foreign teachers so there's not a lot of conversation partners. Somehow Dad found a literacy council here, which teaches foreigners how to learn English. So they offer private tutor

or maybe ESL classes – and I think it still exists, sometimes I'll see that sign “Literacy Council.” Dad found this one tutor who was a really nice lady. He asked her if she could just tutor me privately, just one-to-one.

At first, we were in the same class; all six of us and her were in one class. She was trying to teach us at a literacy council building and Dad realized that Sunmin needs to go to college in three years, and she needs to learn a lot more advanced English than the rest of us. She taught me a lot, even to the extent that even when I was in college, I'd send her my essay, and she'd edit it for me. We kept our relationship for a long time. In college, I remember one Thanksgiving, the family was so far, I ended up spending Thanksgiving at the tutor's family place. We became more like friends later on.

She was a very good writer. This literacy council lady, she was a librarian, but she was such a good writer. I think she would have been great as a writer, but that's the dream that she gave up. She just worked at a library.

Johann: When living in the United States, can you just describe why your family moved to the United States in the first place?

Sunmin: Yes, a Christian pastor has no reason to move to the United States [laughter] because he's not going to be a missionary here. In Korea, it's hard to get into a good college. It's harder in South Korea than here – I think it's the same way in Japan too. But we call it “exam hell.” All these high school kids study so much for this college entrance exam. They'll go to school all day long until like five o'clock and then when you're sophomore, junior, you'll stay at school until 10 [p.m.] and take extra classes. Then you come home at 10:30, then you study and do homework and you go to bed at midnight. You're pretty much studying from dawn to dusk and beyond to midnight. Even then, it's so competitive because all those students study. If half of the students didn't study, it wouldn't be so competitive. And parents wanted us to go to a really good college and have a really good profession. And he thought the chances were slimmer in

Korea, so they decided to bring us all to here [the USA] so we can have our professional careers.

Johann: Would you consider yourself grateful with your current profession and status in the United States? Do you think that would have been different if you did stay in Korea?

Sunmin: I am grateful. Yes, I do have a professional career. I do get a lot of vacation hours unlike Koreans who have professional jobs. I can argue with my boss and I don't have to worry about losing my job. The whole hierarchy with the management [phone buzzes] versus the clinicians is not as stark as in Korea.

Another thing is this whole seniority; the older docs versus younger docs. There's a lot of hierarchy, a lot of authoritativeness. You have to play a lot of politics to stay in the hospital. Here, there is politics if you want to get promoted, and then become a CEO of the hospital. But if you just want to do clinical stuff, nobody touches you. I like that freedom, I like that liberty, and the individualism – like your life is your life, my life is my life, so they don't touch me too much [phone buzzes].

I also appreciate the fact that women have a little more equality here. Probably the income gap between female and male is probably bigger in Korea, for sure. When I was in college, I considered doing an internship in Korea. I was a chemistry major. And some of my Korean undergrad friends would go to Korea and spend a summer or semester there. I'm like, "Oh, should I do that too?" And they're like, "Sunmin, you're not gonna last in Korea because the professors are gonna ask you to make him a cup of coffee and you're gonna be throwing a fit!" [laughs] Which I probably will. Yes, I think their culture is a little more traditional.

Korea since has changed a lot, but even then, about seven years ago or something, when I went to Korea and met all my middle school friends. We're all in our 30s at the time. I've never met any of their husbands, so that's the thing. All these visits, and I only see the wives – I went to an all-girls school.

And then, just by chance, we run into one of the friend's husband. We were all in a van together, sitting in a van together traveling. We saw him walking on a sidewalk. We stopped the van and then we opened the van door and we were saying hi to him. I'm saying hi to him from the van, while all the other women went outside the van to say hi to him. I don't know. To me, that was a little bit of a cultural thing. Oh, really? I have to stand up to say hi to a guy? He probably thought I was this spoiled American woman who wouldn't get out of the van. [laughter]

Johann: You've visited Korea a lot over the last decade or so. Have there been times that you visited Korea for more personal reasons rather than more business-related reasons? I do know when your mother, my grandmother, was sick you did visit her back in Korea. Besides that, were there times that you visited Korea and got to enjoy yourself rather than spend time or focus on another person?

Sunmin: Yes, one trip. [laughter] All the other trips were because of family business, but this very last one I went there just for pleasure. And I went by myself; it was a solo trip. I went there and I didn't consult with anybody on the whole itinerary or agenda. I spent time with my middle school friends and just did whatever I wanted to do.

Johann: Did you go and do any sightseeing or just relax?

Sunmin: I did sightseeing here and there. I went to these tourist trap streets or shops or plazas, but I've never gone to pagodas or castles, palaces. I've never done that kind of sightseeing. But I'll tell my friends I need to buy gifts for people in America and they'll take me to a street or district where all the foreigners go and buy gifts. Is that sightseeing? But I did grow up there until high school, so we did do field trips to all these historical places. I've been to those places.

Johann: As you live your adult life, one aspect you enjoyed when you were younger were board games. How have board games played this important role in your family

when you were younger and how have they continued to play an important role now with your own kids?

Sunmin: Growing up in a very strict family who's into education, we were not allowed to watch a lot of TV. I think we were allowed to watch TV for one hour per day. And our first computer was not until I was in high school here, so we didn't have any computer games or anything. We did have places where we can go and play, like arcades, but that was not allowed that often either, so we were left with things like board games or card games. I think it was a good bonding time.

After we came to the United States, one of the fond memories with dad, a rare one because he rarely played with us – he'd play board games sometimes. We were playing Pictionary in high school. And Pictionary was a game that was recommended by parents because you get to learn English vocabulary. They'd play together with us. Now you fast forward twenty years, when our extended family all get together, we'll play board games. I think that's a lot more productive bonding time than watching a movie together in silence.

Johann: As we've learned through this interview, when you were younger, a lot of your activities were related to card games, board games, fun recess activities you did with friends at school. A lot of physical violence. Well, not really physical violence, but a lot of physical contact. Today, the image of Korea in this modern world, to the rest of the world. It's a lot different. Would you agree with that statement? That it's a lot different.

Sunmin: Yes, I think so.

Johann: With these webtoons and K-drama and K-pop. Do you enjoy listening and reading Korean pop culture today?

Sunmin: I do. As a Korean, we always had these. Growing up, I loved reading comic books. I'd read a lot of comic books. We had a comic book store where you can pay and

read. You'd pay a quarter and then get to read two books. And sometimes you can rent at home, kind of like a library. We did have Korean singers growing up, and I had my favorite singer. We had all these things, however, it was not visible to the rest of the world. Korean drama, it has evolved a lot. It was not that great growing up, but now it's much better. I think Korean cinema just has grown like leaps and bounds. Now they're winning Academy Awards. I think that area really changed a lot.

Johann: What has been your reaction to their growing global popularity [known as *Hallyu* (한류) or the Korean wave]? Would you say it's a positive development?

Sunmin: I think so. I think it's a positive development. I mean, I wish it was in the form of a Nobel Prize, or some kind of findings in physics and chemistry. However, I do give a lot of credit to art too. I don't want to be like those typical Tiger parents that only science and math matters. No, I think the field of art, music, movies, those all matter and it forms the people's worldview. It forms the bulk of our culture. I think it's very significant. I am proud of all these Koreans who have advanced in these fields and made our country known.

Johann: In addition, with this popularity, there's now a lot more people that are familiar with these things. Would you say you found a new community? Have you made new friends because of this Korean pop culture? Or have any friendships deepened because of it?

Sunmin: Because the webtoon has been made a lot more accessible. If you want to draw comics or if you wanna read comics, the accessibility is a lot better than it was before. Like to become a comic artist, you have to go to school before, but now you can just draw at home on your digital device, and you can upload it and see if people read it. It's because of that I decided to draw. I went to this little Comic Expo that happened to be in my city. And I ran into some comic artists from Cleveland, Ohio, a different city. And them and I have never met before, and they're not Korean, however, now we keep in touch. They draw their stuff and I draw mine and then we critique and encourage

each other. I don't think I would have ever attempted to draw comics if it wasn't for this huge grown culture on webtoon. It has led me to some friendships, yes.

Johann: In America, when you first moved, you lived in Ohio, and after a few years of that you ended up moving to California. Over the course of a few years, you moved multiple times across the entire United States. Was that difficult? Was there a sense of, "Wow! Do I have to redo everything I've learned?" How different was each city for you?

Sunmin: I think it was difficult, but I was a child so I didn't process it. I didn't process it as difficult. But looking back, it was difficult. In middle school I never transferred. In elementary school, I went to six different elementary schools. High school, I went to three different high schools. But in middle school, I only went to one school. That was seventh, eighth and ninth grade. Mom realized that I was an extrovert. She never knew I was an extrovert until I went to middle school. Seventh grade, I think I was pretty quiet and eighth grade I was a class president. Ninth grade I was voted as a class president but decided to not take it, but I had all these friends and mom's like, "Whoa, my oldest daughter is extroverted!"

I think it's because I transferred so much. I think I closed out, I became a lot shyer. Maybe I hesitated to build friendship, because I knew that I had to say goodbye. I think still to this day, it has affected my personality. I do take my time to build friendships. Even in seventh grade, I was still quiet. It wasn't until eighth grade that I decided to come out. I don't tend to move much as an adult. I don't tend to change my job that much and I think it's the upbringing. My current job, I've been there for 13 years. I'm one of the oldest who stayed there. After about four or five years, I started making friends at my job, but it took me like four or five years to make friends because I think my childhood affected me.

Johann: On that note, I have no more questions to ask of you. I'm very thankful for you for doing this. I know you have a really busy schedule. Thank you so much.

Sunmin: Well, thanks for asking me and listening to the stories.