

Interview Transcript

Declan: Today is October 27 2023, and I'm interviewing Eunho Lee in person 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?

Eunho: Yes

Declan: Just to start things off, what does your family structure look like?

Eunho: So I have two sisters, both older, they're twins. They go to BC (Boston College). Their names are Heather and Joanne, and both my parents are dentists. They were both born in Korea in '74. They moved to the states in 2007.

Declan: How did this family structure—having two older sisters right? Did that affect the way you were brought up at all?

Eunho: Yeah, I think so because, I think, traditionally in Korea, the eldest son kind of gets the most attention, but my parents didn't want to do it in a traditional way. And they definitely had a much more progressive approach, and my sisters were big role models for me growing up. I think my experience as a Korean eldest son is very different from a traditional Korean family like for my dad or mom for example.

Declan: So when you guys immigrated you came to Massachusetts, right?

Eunho: Yes

Declan: What town was that again?

Eunho: We moved to Brookline

Declan: Do you think going to a small town outside of Boston... Did that have any kind of effect on your perspective, or views regarding immigration? Or did you maybe meet anybody else of Korean heritage, in your town?

Eunho: Yeah, I think moving to a place like Brookline had a really big impact because I know a lot of, I know, I don't know if you guys did the same reading about that girl who moved to like, there was reading

last year (In HI244) about a girl moving to a town that was almost all white.(Note: The book he is referring to is Grace Cho's historical memoir *Tastes Like War: A Memoir* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2021) I had a ton of Korean people living around me. A lot of family friends that we met at the Korean church that we went to. Boston just has a lot of Korean people in general, as well; there's just a lot of immigrants there. So I think growing up in a place like that, as opposed to somewhere like if I grew up in like Maine or something, I definitely still had that Korean community and culture, that I could exist in, as opposed to someone like in the book, who really had no one to really go to except her mom.

Declan: Yeah, In terms of Korean history, were you exposed at all?

Eunho: Yeah my Dad is a very big history buff, he loves history. So, we talk about history, that's one of the main things we talk about when we talk. My dad always told me about the Korean War, kind of like recent history, and I could tell that my dad and my mom had different views because my mom was a lot more pro-America. And you can kind of see back then it wasn't as clear but after going through this course, the propaganda in the school and education system when my mom was growing up, I could see, looking back on it, "oh, that's why she was so pro America". My dad, especially after going into college and coming to America, he did a lot of reading himself and kind of understood that a lot of that was propaganda, like a lot of actual stuff that happened. So, I think growing up, I definitely was exposed to Korean history a lot through my parents, but kind of got different messages from both, but I definitely lean more with my dad's perspective on things.

Declan: What aspects or maybe culture were incorporated in your childhood? Obviously, you said your parents gave you a lot of historical background, but was there anything maybe just like culturally or traditionally that you did as a kid that kind of revolved around your Korean heritage?

Eunho: Yeah, I mean, basically the structure of my life was Monday to Friday, I went to public school with predominantly not my race or Korean. But actually, to be fair, in my town, Brookline, there were not a lot of Korean kids in my class, but still it was a very diverse area, and then Saturdays and Sundays I'd be at church. With Korean family, friends, and I'd go to Korean school. And so on the weekends, my life was very much Korean and the week was very much American. So on the weekends, I mean, I was eating

Korean food, we were speaking Korean, I would celebrate Korean holidays. Korean customs, I would say, was definitely still a very big aspect of my life.

Declan: And then kind of go off that I guess. Did attending Korean school like that impact your views?

You know, as much as maybe your parents' perspective did? I know you said you learned very basic (history), you didn't learn much modern history, right? At a Korean school.

Eunho: Yes. A lot of like, older stuff. Yeah.

Declan: What was your experience with a lot of that history you were learning? Was it new to you or did your parents also kind of talk about that?

Eunho: Um, Korean school is definitely a lot more of an educational... I feel like my dad kind of spoke about this stuff. He was passionate, we'd discuss a lot of things, but critically, you can't just go through the history and learn it, it was a lot more like older stuff like thousands of years ago. And that's probably because it's a very sensitive topic to talk about the Korean War like severe traumatic events. A lot of Korean—A lot of the teachers at my Korean school, their parents probably lived through that era, so they probably lived through the aftermath of that era, so it's a very sensitive topic, so I didn't really get that kind of information from Korean school. But I think that Korean school definitely played a very big role in my views about my Koreaness and about... I don't know. It's just a place where I was surrounded by a lot of Korean people. Like I was eating Korean food, speaking Korean... I feel like when you're all like in a setting where it's a very diverse setting, obviously there's a lot of benefits to that. But also when you enter a space where everyone... Like there's an underlying thing that you all relate to like Koreaness is all core aspects of our lives. I think that's a very valuable space that was in my life.

Declan: When did you start attending Korean school? When you got to the U.S.?

Eunho: Yeah, Korean school if you ask other Korean American kids they'll tell you Korean school is something that almost every Korean American goes to as a kid. We all hate... it's like the worst thing. But it's definitely very valuable. Looking back, it is very valuable. I can still speak Korean, it's probably from Korean school. But definitely Korean school was very—a little bit—traditional, especially the Korean school that I went to. I think looking back on it like, like you there's a very distinct aspect of Korean

culture very, like, you know, like the age hierarchy. Respect is like a very big part or important part of the culture. It's kind of very sexist too and like—I don't know—it's very conservative. That was definitely still a very noticeable aspect of my Korean school, but which clashed a lot with my dad's viewpoints, I guess, and the way he raised me

Declan: How long were you in Korean school?

Eunho: Kindergarten through 7th grade. Once I got to 7th grade I argued with my mom enough she let me quit.

Declan: And you said every weekend right? Even in the summers?

Eunho: No, it just corresponded with the school year, two semesters. yeah

Declan: And how close were you to your classmates and teachers?

Eunho: I knew a lot of them really well. I was close friends with a lot of my classmates, so my parents knew a lot of the teachers, and other families in that area with, there's a lot of like, interconnectedness; there's a student here you know Elliot dough.

Declan: Mhm.

Eunho: I'd never met him, he was like, “oh like are you going to Eunho Lee, my mom told me to look out for you” because, like, we have like a mutual friend somehow, that's through the Korean families and yeah definitely a very interconnected community.

Declan: Moving on, do you still have any family in Korea?

Eunho: Yeah I do, my grandparents, my aunt and my cousins live in Korea and all my second cousins, all my extended family. My dad and our family, I think we're the only ones who moved to the US. That's in our immediate, like certainly grandparents cousins aunts. I know second cousins here but...

Declan: Are you still in contact with them at all? Particularly, obviously through social media or technology?

Eunho: Yeah, I haven't been to Korea since fifth grade, but like first grade to fifth grade I went every year but then, we didn't go for a while. I was gonna go sophomore year and then COVID hit, and every year since then was kind of a force. But yeah, I still keep in contact with them. I call my parents and

grandparents every Korean holiday, birthdays, every once in a while just to catch up. Yeah, and it's good that we're able to connect because obviously now we can just call on Skype or something, back in the day like there's just no way.

Declan: And when you used to travel to Korea, you said you went first to fifth grade. Obviously you were young, But to go there, or travel there did it shift your perspective at all? or your understanding of immigration?

Eunho: I think growing up I never really thought about it, but looking back on my life definitely, it's like going from Korea to the US and back and forth. There's just a very distinct... I really felt like I didn't think about it like this at the time, but there's like two different sides of me. Like literally being in a Korean space or like an American space, I would just be like a different person. And I think that has a very significant impact on the person I am today, but obviously at the time I wasn't thinking about it like that, going to Korea and then coming back to the US like spending all summer there. I definitely... Like there was definitely a readjustment period where I would have to kind of come back to the customs and norms of each but I think that also made me a more adaptable, culturally aware person today, because obviously I have exposure and experience in two very different spaces.

Declan: In terms of your parents' lives, did they tell you anything before they immigrated about their lives?

Eunho: Yeah, I was definitely very interested in that growing up. My parents were born in '74, which was still under the dictatorship, like them growing up in elementary school and going into high school it was still like that kind of time, very like, militaristic culture, and very conservative, you know, economically growing, when they were born it was a very poor country, so like learning about their experience definitely makes me grateful for the upbringing and privileges I've grown up with

Declan: And going on the militaristic aspect, did either your parents serve? I know it's required.

Eunho: Yeah, my dad. He served for 39 months as an officer, he was a dentist in the military, actually. So yeah, he went through that. I actually, two months before coming to Colby, he was able to waive my citizenship, so I don't have to go to a military which is hype.

Declan: And why did your parents choose to immigrate?

Eunho: Yeah, the main reason, basically, like I alluded to before, is that My dad was a lot more like progressive in the way he thought basically in Korea. Like, I'm sure, there's probably like what you guys are going through right now but in the class, Korea was a very like militaristic culture that was trying to industrialize very quickly trying to grow economically very quickly. So it was very results oriented, very competitive, and my dad growing up, like in his education... He told me a story about how he was, I think he finished second. Basically in school, every grade is posted for the entire school and for the entire school year like ranking relative to everyone else. It's public, everyone sees it based on like, test scores, and he got, my dad got second, in his school, and his friend got first. And my mom or his mom, was really mad at him for being happy for his friend, being like, oh, "if you're not first then there's like more that you can be doing" and like that kind of culture was something that my dad just didn't agree with. My dad was very interested in literature, history, and physics, he has a wide range of things he wanted to study but he became a dentist because that was a safe option. My parents want to go into something medical so like, that was just kind of a path that he had to take because of the circumstances in the culture of his country, so he decided to immigrate, because he didn't want the same life for me as my sister's basically.

Declan: In what ways maybe did your father or mother's perspective on the US and Korea influence your perspective? I know they had different views but did one over the other kind of prevail in your mind at least where you kind of agreed more?

Eunho: Yeah, I feel like yeah, I feel like both my parents definitely influenced me a lot on that. Because they're both, I mean, I said earlier that my mom was kind of more pro-America but she still has...it's not that she's just accepting all these things. It's just, I feel like first that first person perspectives are a little different, but I think that my parents always encouraged me to think independently, just like don't just believe something because someone tells you to believe it. Like my dad always tells me, don't just adopt my views, if you disagree with me, like, i'm not telling you to believe these things. And that definitely is like I think a lot of people are very just pro U.S, pro their countries blindly. I feel like you can be very pro

your country and still understand the shortcomings and understand places that you can improve.

Understand, everyone, just can disagree with certain aspects of your culture, and I think that they like looking back at my identity as a Korean and American, I definitely adopt that like mindset and I understand that, you know, as a Korean and as an American there's a lot of history there and their viewpoints have led me to look at it a little more nuanced and not just except this view or that view.

Declan: I know you talked a lot about the immigration process, but did they tell you anything about how it was affected by the timeframe they came in the early 2000's. Did they ever consider migrating earlier?

Eunho: I know they were thinking about immigrating, and then 911 happened. That was kind of like the thing that put them off for a little bit, because I think they were gonna move earlier but that kind of stuff obviously was startling. So, and then also, the 2008 recession period, was also kind of concerning for my parents because I think my dad moved in 2007, and the rest of us moved in 2008. So it was kind of like they were having some concerns with that, but I think my dad especially was very set on moving to the USA.

Declan: I know you've talked a lot about your other family still in Korea. But did any of your other extended family also immigrate to the U.S?

Eunho: For us, I mean my great grandparents immigrated before us. They live in Canada, But other than that, no.

Declan: What was your family, your parents, grandparents' opinions on the US. I know you said a little bit about it, but maybe regarding unification?

Eunho: I know especially for my grandparents and parents generation, it's very much like a dream almost.. Everyone's like, "oh, like maybe one day, Korea becomes unified again", That's something that's always talked about with like parents or grandparents, I think, nowadays, I saw like a stat that every single year the people are like more and more against unification because at this point, like... we're just so much more... like the economic responsibilities that we'd have to take on to develop North Korea. I know there would be a lot so I know opinions on that are like getting more and more to the point of we don't want unification but growing up It was constantly said like, it's like a core thing about... it's almost like a core

belief. Like typically as a Korean, that's something that you think about whether that's like a dream, as a country or nation that we would aspire to. I know recently it's been going the other way, which is kinda sad.

Declan: Going off of that, I know you said your father was a history buff, did he tell you anything about US intervention or maybe they share any thoughts or opinions on just that period of time where the US had intervened?

Eunho: yeah my dad, He, like he was the first one to kind of tell me views that were kind of with the common narrative that like oh, like America, America, came in and saved like a lot of these eastern countries during that period. He, like throughout his life, has always been like that... I remember he told me one time he was getting interviewed for going to graduate school in the US and the interviewer asked him, "what are your thoughts on North Korea and the threat" she basically just had like a very long argument with him saying that like the only threat really to the Koreas right now is the US, and I think that his views on US intervention... but the thing is, he's not anti America or anything. It's more just understanding that a lot of fucked up shit happened during that time. A lot of bad things happened during that time. Just have this simple narrative of like, oh, like we love the U.S. like pro U.S. That's just kind of a very simpleton way of looking at it. Like obviously the US was helping out, but a lot of bad things happened, you still have to look back and honestly analyze the situations and be like the US did a lot of these atrocities. You just gotta keep that in mind.

Declan: yeah, and I guess you already touched on this, but were there any specific difficulties growing up for your parents, I know you talked a lot about the rigid militarism and of the dictatorship they were brought up under, but was there any specific personal things that really, really affected them growing up that maybe influenced the reason to leave Korea?

Eunho: Um, I don't know about wanting to leave Korea, but one big thing that happened to my dad's family, it was basically my grandfather had a business. It was doing really well, and then in the 80s, when there was a military coup, and there was a new military dictator. Basically, they seized a lot of the businesses which were run by people who were politically opposed to him. My grandfather was one of

those businesses so they like up until the age of like, six seven my dad... they had people like living in their house like doing their laundry for them like cooking for them and all that stuff. And then they suddenly went to like, broke. And I know that that definitely, really influenced my dad because my dad is also very critical of things like, looking at Korea, like there's a lot of corruption during that time. A lot of the bad stuff that happened in Korea in the 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's, like corruption, or poor leadership, so that probably really impacted his viewpoint growing up.

Declan: And then going off of that, did the location of your fathers upbringing, in Seoul? affect anything?

Eunho: I actually forget, I know they lived in Seoul later on. But I think in the beginning they were just outside of Seoul (서울)

Declan: What kind of work was he doing, maybe growing up or what education?

Eunho: yeah, so basically, with the work and education stuff, my dad, he was the first son in his family, so he kind of got the most attention and allocation of time, I guess. And in Korea, that's actually like a big, I don't know how much it is now, but back then, especially... my dad talks about how families really prioritized their kids their education and how they supported the family depending on age and gender. My dad had some female friends classes who would go to class, but then the after class they'd all work like eight hours a day and on top of that, because they had older brothers, and because they were daughters, they had to go for the education of their older brothers because that was like, most efficient, necessary, that's their first priority at the time. And my mom was the oldest of two girls, so she didn't really have that same gender dynamic, but definitely as the first son, my dad's education was very simple. If he wasn't doing well, that reflected on his family, his parents were really very hard on him obviously. Yeah, like that first son, his responsibilities was very different from let's say like, a last daughter or something

Declan: Did your father tell you anything about when he was being educated in school in Korea? Did they talk a lot about what was going on with the current events and maybe just the recent past with the US in Korea? Did he mention maybe there was any bias in the Korean education system when he was growing up?

Eunho: Yeah. So basically, when he was growing up, he says that he never really learned about it because it was a very recent thing and a very traumatic thing. And like, kind of a humiliating thing, right. Like we were, as a country... It was definitely a very difficult time. And as a result, they didn't really want to speak on those things. like my dad said that he didn't really get almost any education on things like the Korean War, or stuff like that. And all like the Korean history that they learned was, you know, like the 1000s of years ago, all that stuff. So and then also in his education, he said that there was a clear, like pro America, pro, South Korea, anti everything else. He told me one time that he once overheard his dad watching a North Korean TV program or something like that. And he was literally thinking himself like, "do I have to record do I have to go tell the the authorities", because at the time, that indoctrination of, super pro South Korea, like fuck everyone else, that was like a very ingrained part in his education so that is definitely very relevant, or it was, a very relevant part of his education.

Declan: And going back to you, I know you said you had a lot of Korean aspects of culture incorporated into your life. Was there any you felt like you had lost or missed out on?

Eunho: Honestly I think like the later half of my life, kind of like, seventh eighth grade onward. That's kind of when I really felt like oh, I kind of feel myself distancing a little bit from my Koreaness because, I mean, when I was younger, I went to Korean school, I spoke a lot of Korean had a lot of Korean friends, and I still did, but I didn't notice that as I was getting older, I was just spending way more time on like school, my social life and I just... I was kind of tapping a lot more into my American side. Like I used to watch a lot of Korean TV, I used to like you know... but then like nowadays, like if someone I'm talking to like other Korean Americans, they're referencing something that's happening within Korea or something relevant in Korea right now, I'll just have no idea. So I just don't really keep up with Korean things as much anymore. Um, and honestly though, I don't really feel like I've lost... I don't really view that as like me losing my Koreaness, like, I just think that right now it's high school, college, it's like a very focused time in life, I'm focused on my life here, my career, shit like that, i'm just getting busier and busier, not having as much time to, like, spend time with my Korean culture, sucks, but I still feel Korean. I still like to feel like the Korean side of me is still very much a part of me. And, you know, in the future,

I'll go back to Korea, you know, I feel like but in the past six years, yeah, I definitely feel like because of the busyness of my life, I've definitely not been into the Korean side of my life.

Declan: And then I guess going on into what was incorporated regarding aspects of play, which is a topic for discussion, I guess, was there any you know, traditions or customs for like kids? Obviously, there's different ones in the United States for kids. Were you involved or did you celebrate a lot of Korean holidays?

Eunho: yeah, with plays, like in Korea, I know, in Korean school, like the big, end of the year project every single year was a performance. We perform like stuff about ..., I don't know if you've talked about that story about the tiger and the bear like eating onions to become people, that's probably mentioned in class. Like that's just one of those, old stories that like, you know, in traditions that we would read or reenact that play. We would sing traditional Korean songs, we dressed in traditional Korean attire; hanbok, and did dances and stuff like that. So yeah, I think Korean plays and performances; those are definitely a big way that I would, like, interact with a lot of traditional Korean stuff I guess.

Declan: And we talked a little bit about this, but did your perspective change a lot through time I know you said as a kid, you had a little more naivete, but did that change as you got older, obviously you gained a lot more information and knowledge, did that sway your viewpoints at all and like very heavily or was it kind of just new information for you to process?

Eunho: Yeah, I think this specific class was very significant in the shift in my Outlook because I feel like before, I'd hear my dad talk about stuff, and it'd be like, Oh, that's interesting. But I never really just learned everything, in a class setting like that, and just like getting all that information. I think this class definitely, significantly shifts in my opinion because I think before my opinion was more along the lines of like, oh, like, I know like, it's not as simple as Oh, America just came in and did a lot of good. But then after like learning this, like learning the stuff about cost, I was like, oh, like there's actually a lot of like, political social things that like went into that like 40 years stretch from like, longer, like, ever since, Japan colonized Korea to like the end of like, the Cold War. Like, there's just so much stuff that happens. And I

think that like this class really opened my eyes to like, it's really not that simple. It's a lot more complicated than just like oh, America came in and saved Korea.

Declan: And I guess currently, what would you say your perspective is on relations between North and South Korea?

Eunho: Yeah, I don't. It's hard because obviously, we don't know anything about North Korea. But as far as a Korean person, it would be a really beautiful thing. If North and South Korea were able to improve their relations. So maybe one day or unify or at least you know, maybe like if anything that's better than what we have right now. Because, you know, families were separated like, like I didn't like those people in North Korea, like it's only North and South Koreans because of a political event that was outside like Korean people's control like, I feel like for me, like I still very much view North Koreans as like, you know, the same people as me. And I think that, you know, hopefully in the future, like things can improve, but I don't really know how likely that is considering the significant gap between like, how economically developed, the countries are ends, or this is more just political talk, but also with China growing as a regional hegemon like, North Korea. if North Korea were to reunite with South Korea that also just put a US ally on the border. like there's just a lot of things Now and like the like this political, like environment is just so like, surrounding all that it's just so complicated that I don't know if it's a realistic thing to hope for But you know, as, as a Korean person, I would obviously that's a great thing.

Declan: And I guess you touched on this, but is there any point where you feel like you maybe began to fully understand the importance, the significance of your heritage and culture, between like, obviously Korean school, you said you had a little you are the biggest fan of it as a kid. Was there a point maybe where you hit in high school or maybe coming to college where you began to understand?

Eunho: Definitely I think, yeah, I mean, as a kid, you just don't really think about these things as important. But I think understanding that like understanding your heritage, your culture, like especially like your parents, history like your grandparents, like all that stuff, just kind of the way I've used it's just like the path that the person I am now so like, understanding that these things have been my grandparents lived through time when they didn't have, you know, political freedom they couldn't... It was like they

were living under a military dictatorship. My parents grew up in poverty for a lot of their upbringing. Like a lot of these things, helps me better understand the path that and the thing... the sequence of events that led me to where I am now. So in like, not like for me, I grew up I moved to use when I was three. I lived in Brookline, which is like one of the richest towns in Massachusetts, and then I moved to Weston, the richest town in Massachusetts. And now I go to Colby College, a top institution in the US. Like, there's just a lot of privilege that I've been able to... that was a product of a lot of hardships from the pain from the generations that came before me. So I think understanding that is very important in the way that I approach my own life and the way that I move forward, like how can I like it's almost like a responsibility to like, because so much hardship went through, or there was so much hardship that happens, and yet I'm still here living this privileged life. There's kind of a responsibility to, like, honor that and like acknowledge that and be aware of that.

Declan: Going on top of that, were there any stories that you were told as a kid, maybe your parents, grandparents, great grandparents, that were kind of similar or connected to? Some of the things you've learned about class?

Eunho: Definitely now with my grandparents, like, I'm just not going to ask some questions about that. Like, that's just kind of, I feel like, but I mean, if you just my grandfather was born in 53 grandmother born in 55 On my dad's side, so like that was right after the war ended. So I mean, if I just connect the dots, I'm sure that they have a lot of stories like that, and I'm sure that they have experiences that would be very similar like that, connects a lot of stuff in class, but I never really asked them about it. They never really talked to me about it because I don't know, I feel like it's just a very touchy sensitive topic that I don't really want to ask about when I see my grandparents. I want to catch up on other things. But my parents definitely like my dad... my parents told me stories about, like, when they were like in elementary school, at their church with like, 800 people, three families had cars. In 10 years every single family had cars. That's like if you can see the economic growth and economic change, they were just living in a very dynamic time, I feel like and they have a lot of stories like that.

Declan: I know you've had a lot of sources of knowledge coming from a Korean background. Was there anything specifically that maybe proved as the most insightful source? I know, you said this class is very important. But maybe in terms of like, primary source knowledge, like interviewing your father last year for the same project? Was there anything that really really stood out in terms of being the most insightful or maybe just the most influential along the way?

Eunho: Yeah, I think definitely this class, just because like this class just compiles everything that you need, not everything you need to know but like, you know, you go through it. Like you can literally go through the timeline, just go through every development, every major development that happens. I think, seeing it laid out like that just kind of gives you a much better picture of life, the reasons why things happened, the reasons why things are today. But I think hearing stuff from my dad probably hits harder for me, obviously because it's my dad, hearing about his own personal experience definitely makes it feel closer. I can not relate to it more, but just feel more close to my own experience just because I think in terms of just knowledge and stuff like that, it's definitely the class, but in terms of like, what shapes more like my.... My dad's influence on me is almost like, more significant just because it's more like it's a personal tie.

Declan: Definitely

Declan: And I guess that's it, Thank you very much for your time.

Eunho: Yeah, thank you for this time.

Declan; it was very very good.