Christopher Adinaro: My name is Christopher Adinaro. Today is October 8, 2025, and I'm interviewing Eric Yook 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?

Eric Yook: Yes, I do.

CA: All right.

EY: Thanks for having me.

CA: Thank you for coming.

CA: Let's get started. Could you briefly describe where you were born, as well as your family's history?

EY: I was born in the city called Daejeon, which I recently found that it's the fifth biggest city in South Korea, and all my family are from there. The geography is quite literally in between Seoul, which is the capital of South Korea, and Busan, which is mostly the second well-known city in South Korea as well as the most southernmost and one of the biggest cities in Korea. It's a city known for its scientific development and it's almost considered as a transportation center as well because the major highway and the railroad all go through Daejeon. It has been known for those sort of unique characteristics for the history of Korea. My father's side has always been

there. They used to live near the Daejeon train station, and they had a small – not apartment, but one of those sort of traditional 80s Korean household types, where – I've been there few times when I was younger, but now the whole area has been renovated, so it's most likely gone. I'm not sure about my mom's family's history, but I do know that all my relatives in my mom's family are also currently residing within the city of Daejeon. We've been all pretty close with each other. I spent most of my – not even most of my life – all of my life there, before I moved to America. So, it's a very special place for me as well.

CA: I see and what are your earliest memories of coming to the US?

EY: I do actually quite remember how, when I first stepped my foot to American soil, I would say, it's a funny word. I came to JFK Airport 2013 to study abroad as a third grader. My grandparents had already immigrated to America by then, so they were living in Bergen County, New Jersey. It was a great opportunity for me to come to the US and study abroad. I got a visa, but it wasn't like I had to stay in someone else's apartment, or I almost have a foster care. No, I was lucky enough to just stay in my grandparents' house and commute from there to Catholic school in New Jersey. And that was 2013, I mean, everything felt quite… I think third grade is an age where you kind of know what things are about same time you don't really know what things are. I knew that this was America, and I knew that this would be one of those life changing moments when I first got to the airport and looked around, but at the same time, I didn't fully know what this was gonna do to my life. It was quite life changing, now that I think about it, but back then all I knew was just that, "Oh, this is another cool country. And it's a cool experience. I

flew 13 hours for this. And, yes, this is cool." That was just the mindset of a third grader when he first came to America. Everything was new and cool.

CA: Understandable. Going back for a second, you said your grandparents were already in the US. Could you tell me about your grandparents' and parents' experiences migrating from Korea to the US?

EY: I'm not fully aware of my grandparents' occupational history, but as far as I know, my grandfather has been in some sort of trading industry, and therefore he traveled around the world a lot. I have this memory of looking back through family photo albums, and I saw pictures of my grandfather taking a photo in front of the pyramids – or he's fluent in Japanese – and a bunch of other stuff. Those little bits show that he's been around the world, which is also quite uncommon, considering the standards of living in Korea during the '80s or '70s. My grandfather settled in America with my father when my father was around 11th grade or 10th grade, so probably 17 or 18 [years old]. Those two. They moved to America, New Jersey, around 1990s—early 1990s—and the migration was related to my grandfather's work and they had stayed in New Jersey, and after those two moved, the rest of the family, my—which is my grandmother and my father's younger brother, who is my uncle—the rest of the family also moved to New Jersey, so all four united and lived in New Jersey until my father turned around 20, 21 and came back to Korea while the rest of his family, my grandparents and my uncle, stayed in America and eventually got US citizenship. I'm not sure why he came back to Korea, now that I think about it. I never really asked him, but he did come back to Korea, served Korean military, kept his Korean citizenship, and then met my mother there, and then stayed in Korea. That's how it happened.

CA: Do you feel that your father's choice to stay in Korea affected your family compared to your relatives who decided to stay in the US?

EY: Affect my family? Growing up, I knew that I there was a part of my family living in America, you know? And it's a unique thing, because most Korean kids don't really have that sort of special connection to a foreign country. Most of the Korean relatives would be just living in the other side of – at a different part of South Korea. It's not like, "Oh, I have a family in US as well." That could become a bragging point as an elementary school kids' perspective, where, "Oh, my grandfather's American. You know, my grandfather speaks English. Your grandfather can't do that." It kind of becomes a cool thing about yourself. In terms of that, I always found it sort of—What [do you] you call it?—I found it cool that I had a family that's pretty globally expanded, I felt like that was a cool characteristic. Now that I also think about it, right now, because October, right now it's the season for *Chuseok* (Harvest Festival) in Korea, which is like Korean Thanksgiving, also regarded as the biggest Korean traditional celebration, in culture. It's a big thing. Traditionally, what you do in Korean Thanksgiving is that you visit your relatives, so it is common that all the traffic jams and highways, or all the booked flights, or train tickets are overloaded within Korea during the season. My family was always different. Because while all the other families were trying to get tickets to visit their relatives during the season, we didn't really have the obligation to do that because our relatives are quite literally overseas. I mean, we would visit them sometimes, but it's not an annual thing, so we had less stress due to that. There are some sort of those unique, cool characteristics about having a separated family within the country and outside the country. Now that I think about it, in my current perspective I think it's

better to be close to each other. So, like I mentioned, my father's family were all Americans, they were in New Jersey, but my mom's family - they were and they still live within the city of Daejeon, where my family lived, until we moved to America as well. Growing up, I was always close to my mom's family, rather than my father's family, just because of the… location-wise they were literally 20 minutes away by car. Because of that, I do have some sort of more – a soft spot for my mom's family and my mom's relatives as well. I guess there are some ups and downs about having a family apart from each other, but… Those were how I grew up thinking about my family.

CA: So, between *Chuseok*, sorry, if I said that wrong, and your family abroad, do you think that that helps shape your idea of family as an overall unit?

EY: Just because I didn't visit them, or my family didn't really visit them annually, whenever the time came to visit them, culturally, it wasn't like I don't consider them as part of the family, at least in my younger perspectives. They're still part of the family, regardless of visiting them or not, but it's just that I wasn't really as close as them, I guess. There's this joke that pops up into my mind where you talk about family gatherings, and there's always this one cool uncle you have. I had that cool uncle, and I have uncles on both sides of my family, both my father's and my mother's, and my cool uncle was my mother's. And now that I think about it, maybe I would have had a cool uncle if I got to visit my father's family more often as well, but I do think my cool uncle became my mother's side because I got to visit him way more often. Because we lived close each other I was able to feel his sort of influence, sort of his presence, more often and therefore be inspired, I guess. I mean, they're all family, and I would never disregard them as

family, regardless of where they live, but it is true that there are certain levels of familiarity within the family, and living far away would definitely affect that and make it more formal when you're meeting them. It's the same uncle, but one can be cool because you meet them more often, or one can be more formal because you don't really meet them often. In terms of that, there are differences.

CA: Did you ever find yourself wanting to switch locations, be more with your father's side, or vice versa? Feel that you want to stay more in Korea due to this?

EY: After I moved to – after I experienced America for the first time, after I moved when I was in third grade, and then eventually I came back to Korea after I finished fifth grade in America. I've been living back and forth. One thing about living back and forth is that if you're in the one place, you're gonna miss the other place, and if you're at the other place, you're gonna miss the one place, that's what I've noticed. It's just… inevitable, almost, I feel. This nostalgia you have, it's just inevitable if you're living in one side and not the other. Now I've been living in America for almost six years. Every day I still keep in touch with my Korean roots and references, and doing so just naturally connects me to my childhood memories or living experiences. It's just a natural thing for me to just go back to think about my past occupational histories and to reflect my life based upon those. I would say I'll be missing a place constantly, but it's a bit different from a traditional sense, because the way you grew up from all these different places, those experiences just become part of you. By reaching back to those experiences, you just naturally start missing them. It's not like you're so busy with current life, and all sudden you get a sense of past memory, and then all of a sudden you'll be nostalgic

and, “Oh, I forgot about this. Oh, you know, it was that was so memorable. How could I, you know, how could I forget about that?” No, it's not like that at all. It's quite the opposite. You constantly think about it and you recall back to it too. In terms of that, I constantly call myself back to what I did before, where I used to live before, how I grew up, things like that.

CA: Thank you. How did returning to Korea after living in New Jersey, your return back, affect your idea of what a home is to you, going from your father's side to your mother's?.

EY: I turned fifth grade. Now I'm back to Korea. I came back to the same elementary school that I left when I was in third grade, and when I left the elementary school in third grade, I thought I would never come back to this place. And the farewell was everything – it was very weird, but at same time quite emotional. All my classmates wrote me a letter, and then my teacher was having me in front of the class and say a speech, and blah, blah, blah, and I still remember that. All those things – I never thought I would return to this institution, until now. After two and a half years America, I came back to Korea to finish sixth grade. The Korean school system is different, the end of elementary school in Korea would be sixth grade. I came back to Korea, and I'm back to this institution, and I'm here to finish my last year as an elementary student in Korea. And all my classmates, all the returning faces, I see them again. And that was quite something. I'm quite bad with human interaction, especially sudden encounters, or encounters where you haven't seen each other in a while. Returning to that was so awkward and bizarre, because I know these faces, I know this exact institution. Because I've been there. I know these faces of my classmates, because I spent years with them before I moved to America. But just because of the fact that I

was gone for two years, it was so awkward, and it made me wonder what is this sensation? I know them and they know me, but at the same time, I just feel like a brand new person. And I feel like they're treating me like a brand new person as well. It's almost like I got a new persona just because I was gone for two and a half years. Eventually I got used to that sort of society quickly. It wasn't a hassle for me to reconnect with my peers. Just thinking about that first encounter still kind of scares me, because that sort of cold atmosphere when I first entered that room and that first day of school, it was quite surreal? And I think thinking about what home is, relates to that experience as well. I think when those type of moments stack up in your life, you start to think that you don't really have a traditional sense of home in your life. I've spent years thinking about that as well. Where's my home? Is it Jersey, is it Daejeon, or is it wherever else I will be? I've thought about it for a long time, but my version of the answer was that it's not like you're obligated to have a designated home, wherever you are – If you feel comfortable, then that will be the best place for me to stay and relax. And for me, that's the definition of what home is, so I try not to think about it too much. Moreover, if I don't have a definite answer, I personally believe there's nothing wrong with that. But if you ask me, where are the places that I feel comfortable then? As for now, it will be New Jersey or Palisades Park, New Jersey, where my brother and my father still live. But at the same time, Daejeon is still a very important place to me, and I do still think about it a lot. They're all home, I guess. Yes, they're all home. And wherever I will be – even Waterville. Recently, I've been starting to appreciate this place more. And I feel if this sort of appreciation keeps on going, I feel like this could be my new home as well. Places I've been with good memories, will all be important and comfortable, which I feel fits the definition of home.

CA: Going off your idea of home and comfortability, how do you feel that you fit in culturally with your identity?

EY: I feel this sort of home argument, as well as this cultural argument or identity argument. It's all in the same category. It just falls in the uncertainty because you've been around so many places too many times, and you don't have what others don't have in terms of characteristic or identity. What defines you? This is more of a recent, upbringing, I guess? It's a change of thought I had recently while I was taking classes here. I've noticed that people consider all those small details to define themselves, occupation or race or history or whatever people try to define themselves using those small details. But I feel like those small details are no way sufficient enough to truly define who they are and by saying who they are… I feel like the idea of who you are is… almost irrelevant. It's not as important as others think, who you are. It's not really a defining character or life changing character. It's just another way to use it as an excuse or support your argument or boast your position. It's useful in those type of things. But when you're truly living the life, I feel like who you are doesn't really matter as much as how you think to you. Once I noticed that, I stopped being concerned about who I am as a person. Obviously there are many keywords to define that, "Oh I'm Korean, or I'm American, or I'm Korean-American, or I'm an immigrant, or blah, blah, blah, more and more". But truth is, I'm not Korean, or I'm not even American, I don't consider myself as Korean-American as well. I'm just myself. Situationally, if I have to explain myself as one of those categories, then I will, but at the same time, those categories are not fully defining who I am as a person, and I think once you acknowledge that, that sort of frees your mindset, and furthermore, the concerns you might have

regarding those identity and characteristics, so that was my way of being free from those concerns, understanding the relative importance of those details and categories, which helped me a lot.

CA: Going outside of your identity or your freedom from it, what communities would you say, either in Korea or the US, do you feel most attached to, or that you feel are prominent?

EY: I jokingly say to my brother or my friends that I actually hate Korean-American society, the whole immigrant society. And furthermore, I jokingly say that I wish to not relate myself at all to to the immigrant society themselves. The reason why I say that is because I feel immigrants, have the tendency to bond even stronger just because they moved from from their original home country. And that just gives an obligation, or a good reason to just bond within themselves. And that just doesn't make sense, because half of the interactions, or not even half majority of the interactions coming from those reasons aren't really beneficial at all, in my opinion. It’s just hard to explain without really feeling the dilemmas of being an immigrant. I feel there are better ways to spend time than trying to limit yourself within the barrier that you created for yourself or within collectively. And I feel like immigrant society is a good example of just limiting yourself within the box and limiting your perspectives. I try to be free of those things and I try to free myself from those obligations or those categories. The fact that I came from Korea doesn't change. That's a fact. But at the same time, it's not like I will not let that fact be a guideline for my life, if that makes sense? It's a useful information, if you're considering my life, but it's not like it's a guideline on how I should live my life or how I should interact with others. To answer your question, I try to keep a comfortable distance within those communities, Korean

community, Korean-American community, American community, or even further more, like college students, or college students who are also immigrants, or college students who are Korean-Americans, or whatever. In a bunch of these small, big communities, I try to keep a comfortable distance where I can hear their updates, or hear what's going on from them, but at the same time not fully, or not too deeply influenced by them to the point where I'm almost possessed within their perspectives, set in those boundaries. I'm not trying to limit myself, and I just try to keep a comfortable distance. Might be a funny thing to say, but half of the events happening in Korean club in Colby, for example, I'm not fully interested because – just because I'm Korean doesn't mean I'm obligated to really think about what Korean club actually do and what they what they hold for events. I mean if I'm interested, I'll attend and I'll help. But people take it as almost like a mission of your life, being a Korean, to keep in touch with your roots and contribute to that. People always ask me, “Oh you’re like the most Korean dude in the school ever, and you're not in Korean club?” And I'm like there's something ironic about that, right? That's what I always say. That's just my idea. Just because you're something doesn't mean that something must define who you are. That's the sort of thing I always try to live by.

CA: Has this non conformist, almost, mindset ever led to feeling isolated in between these cultures?

EY: I would use that word to describe my current status, considering my relationships with a bunch of communities within the school or back home or wherever. I would say I'm a pretty isolated, independent figure currently, and I do enjoy that distance as of now. I feel like some of the negative words society considers it negative aren't really negative. Like isolated. People think

being isolated is a bad thing, but when I truly think about it, it's not even that big of a deal. Sometimes there could be a good thing about being isolated. I'm currently enjoying my space and distance relative to others. I would say, Yes, I'm isolated, but at the same time, quite not traditionally, I'm also enjoying to sort of isolate, the status of being isolated.

CA: Okay, so there's a lot to think on on that one. Has this level of isolation, self imposed or otherwise, ever had you feeling like you're kind of stuck in between two identities, or is it more of a merge of the two for you?

EY: Well, I think there are some bad sides of being isolated. I'm not here, praising that, “Oh, everybody should be isolated”. Or, “Isolating, isolated is the best thing ever, you know, it brings absolute peace of your mind”. No, being isolated do sometimes bring some sort of negative, aspect. Quite literally, isolated. Sometimes, it could translate to be helpless sometimes, or feeling alone sometimes. But I feel like this is more of a personal nature thing. But for me, I've enjoyed solidarity. Yeah, I've enjoyed solidarity, quite enjoyed. I think it gives some sort of freedom to reflect about my choices or my words or who I am. It just gives a lot of liberty for me to think about bunch of different things. I tend to think a lot, and quite enjoy the process of thinking a lot, And at the same time, finding balance with social aspects of your life is also important. But I feel like I found a good balance for myself by being isolated. I'm not too attached to certain category. But same time, it doesn't mean I'm fully apart from other categories. I still have the liberty to reach out back to them, and at the same time, when I do reach back to them, I also try to keep a good interaction and try to be nice, just so I can have that sort of breathing space for the next time I want to reach back again as well. I've been quite enjoying the process, and I've been

following this practice of isolation for quite a long time. I think when you're first sort of isolating yourself, it could kind of get weird, because you're not used to being independent. But I think once you're used to it. And I would consider myself very used to it. You don't really feel the negative things anymore, feeling alone or lonely, or felt like you were left apart or something like that. In fact, I do not consider myself left apart as well. I guess it's because you are isolated, but at the same time, that doesn't mean you fully given up of your contact to others. It's kind of a contradictory thing. But while you're alone, while you're apart from the other communities or other individuals, you're still reflecting about them in sort of your own sense of thought or words. Therefore you've not fully given up about that sort of group of people, or part of life or culture aspect. Maybe the terminology isolate is a bit different, misleading. Being alone, being apart, doesn't necessarily mean that I've given up. Once you know that, I think you could be confident enough to understand your stance as an independent individual, and you always have the breathing space, the freedom to go back to which part of community or identity you want to reach back to. It's almost like a weapon at that point. You could utilize it to your own advantage. And it becomes beneficial.

CA: Would you say that this idea stems from your moving back and forth between Korea and the US?

EY: I guess so. Now that I think about it, one thing about living in Korean-American community, or society is that there are lots of moments where you have to choose your persona. Some encounters will demand your full Korean ethnicity, while some other moments will require your Full American ethnicity, or aspects of that, or sometimes they would require both, being a

Korean-American, the whole immigrant experience. I feel if you spend plenty of time in Korean-American or even furthermore, any immigrant society, I feel like you sort of learn how to utilize those different personas of yourself to your advantage. I feel like it's just a natural thing, because there are many moments where things are complicated. It requires certain aspect of your Korean side, but at the same time requires certain aspect of your American side as well. Especially tasks regarding paperwork or government tasks or anything formal, legal. You're in American society, but you're dealing with Koreans, if that makes sense. You have to learn how to fuse both influences. And I feel like if your stance is clear about that, and if you understand your philosophy about it, your philosophy of mixing those influences, then I feel like you can make a great weapon. I want to use the word cocktail, in this case, but I don't know if that will be fine, but I feel like that could be a good sort of reference.

CA: Going back to the idea of immigrant community, would you say that the higher level of Korean communities, especially Korean immigrant communities in New Jersey, helped to create a cultural, kind of island of support?

EY: A cultural island of support, would you say…?

CA: Sorry, in terms of helping you with your identity, as opposed to…

EY: I'm actually very against – well, not against, against is a strong word. I'm not a fan of Korean-American society. I would say that. And if you're asking if Korean-American society helped me to develop my character, of who I am currently, of the character I am currently, of the

philosophy I'm currently with. Then I would say Korean-American society in New Jersey barely contributed to my current understandings and my current sort of conclusions. And even within that small contribution, the New Jersey. Korean-American society has in my philosophy, most of the experiences, they were learnings coming from bad experiences. Like you regret something, and you learn from that, or you make a mistake, and then you learn from that. It was those sort of things. It was not like a good educational, positive learning where a good example comes to you, or a good leader or a good motivator becomes your mentor, and you learn positively from that. It was much more rather seeing uncomfortable or bad interactions within that community. And you think to yourself, “Oh, this is not for me”, or “This is not what I should do anymore.” They were the majority of how my current philosophy is formed. Now that I have this sort of philosophy of mine, now that I'm pretty set with it, I would say I wouldn't really deeply connect myself to Korean-American community society, because I know that it's not really going to help me. I feel like Korean-American society is quite shallow in terms of its depth, both culturally and philosophically. And I feel like I pretty much got what I can get from within those boundaries. I always want to expand more and sort of reach for the deeper sort of meaning. It's not something that I really want to pursue.

CA: Some wrap up questions real quick as we're getting towards the end. What advice would you give to a young Korean student, either coming over to the US or moving back to Korea?

EY: This is a funny question. When I first came to America, I really didn't know anything, and even if someone told me what that could mean? Coming to America at that age could mean I would still never have fully understood its impact or, quite literally, what it could mean. I don't

know if I can say this, but my best advice would be, don't think about it at all. Just try to live through it, just try to go through it and experience it. Don't try to define and think about it, because you're at a blank state, you know? And for me, I feel like that's a great gift, almost. It's a very rare opportunity in your life to get a fully blank state and overwrite whatever you had and start a new idea or perspective in your life. I would say, enjoy that. And in terms of enjoying that, you just got to stop thinking you. I guess that also connects to what it means to learn I guess. Just try to fully absorb, regardless of idea or limits or boundaries, just try to fully absorb what you're going through. And you can process it later. I processed it later. I didn't process all these when I was in third grade or fourth grade. All these ideas are, are condensed later on. For now just collect all sort of evidence or information you could possibly do, you could possibly connect. Now that I think about it., I think that could be part of the reason why Korean-American society is so shallow in terms of its content, or depth, because they all just mingle around within themselves. They never really fully expanded on what's American? They're just constantly limiting themselves. They can't go outside of the box. If you're a blank slate it's such a great opportunity to exit the box. The box is barely there. Don't listen to the immigrants will be my advice. Don't be used to what you're used to already. Don't reach out to what you're comfortable with. Try to challenge yourself. Try to break the box. Break free and go outside the box and be familiar with the unfamiliarity, I think that will be the best. And then you'll be figuring out your own version of the answer of who you are or where your home is, or what you think about your life or all that, you'll just figure it out soon. But for now, if you're moving for the first time, then challenge yourself.

CA: After that advice, is there anything about your story that you wish others, either Korean, American, immigrant or other, would want to understand better?

EY: The fundamental idea of my whole entire story and my ideas comes from the fact that there's no right answer. It's not binary. It's not right or wrong. It's not like something is set fully and you have to go by that, whether that's the identity, or whether that's a home or anything. Nothing is fully set. If you limit yourself like that in the first place and try to understand my story or my life, I would rather tell them to just go back to what you were doing and just do that. Just ignore me, and I don't want to interact with them at all as well, because I feel like it's a waste of my time, and it's a waste of their time and their own idea. I want them to know that the fundamental idea is that there's no right or wrong and there's no set answer. And if you break free from that sort of limitation, then maybe you'll understand why I'm so against. Well, not against again, not a fan of Korean American society. or sort of negative things I have towards Koreans, or what I think about Koreans or the immigrant experience If you're if you're limited by that, some might say, "Oh, you're Korean. You're not supposed to say that," or like, "Oh, you're Korean. How come you hate your own country?" Or even worse, "How do you hate your own people?" What is my people? Why don't you ask yourself that first? Why don't you truly define what my people are?

Or, even worse, if that even exists. Think about that first. I wish whoever listens to this, or whoever will know about my life. I want them to have that sort of perspective first and then fully try to think about what I said. Yeah.

CA: All right, thank you for your time.

EY: All right, thank you very much. Thanks for having me. Yeah, that was great.