

Lethyce Gamiao (LG): My name is Lethyce. Today is October 5 2025, and I am interviewing 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?

Hannah Ko (HK): Yes

LG: Okay, so we can start. I have Hannah Ko in here as my interviewee. And to start our interview, we want to know more about you. So, can you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, and maybe the different places that you've lived while growing up?

HK: My name is Hannah Ko. I'm a Biology major at Colby. I was born in Los Angeles, California, and I was born there and lived there until I was seven, and then at seven, I moved to Korea with my parents. I lived there until I was, I think 19 or 18, and then I came to college in May.

LG: Okay, so do you have, one early memory you have from California and one from Seoul that really stands out to you during the time that you lived there.

HK: I think when I was in California, it was more when I was really little so I think one of the most strongest memories is... Do you mean in any context or a specific thing?

LG: Just any context, anything, that I guess stands out to you right now.

HK: I think looking back, I feel when we were in the US, I feel like there were a lot more struggles in the family. I still remember the fights that my parents had when I was little because my mom was kind of... It was just me and my mom a lot because my dad was kind of busy working. And then in Korea, I would say one thing that really stands out to me would be, I guess, I kind of think, when I first went to school in Korea where I was placed in a class with foreigners. I think that was a pretty special experience that I had.

LG: That's really interesting. You mentioned that you moved to Seoul, to Korea when you were seven. I wanted to ask: how did your parents talk to you about the move? Did they frame it as a temporary or permanent move?

HK: I think it was definitely framed as more of a permanent move, but also for me, it was a very short term notice. I remember maybe getting informed, like three days before we left. So, I thought, "Oh, school was just over so we're moving or something." But I remember, coming back from school and everything was mostly packed when I was already at school, and then it was more like, "Oh, we're moving to Korea." So, I didn't get a heads up, really, so it was only a few days before we actually left, so I didn't have a lot of time to process it with this.

LG: Yes, that's really surprising. Did you move during the school year in the US, like in the middle of the school year to Korea?

HK: I think... I'm feeling... I finished maybe second grade and then we moved to Korea, so I did have that weird kind of semester. Like a few month gap between starting school in Korea, because the academic year starts there in the winter rather than the summer.

LG: Oh really? You mentioned you were placed with other foreigners when you went to Korea, how was that experience? Were they also Koreans or, are they Koreans that moved from America, or are they actual foreigners that are not Koreans?

HK: I went to a school where... It was a partnered school with the university, like Seoul University in Korea. Their education department overlooked our school. They have a special program or a classroom for mostly Korean kids who had grown up in the US or any country, so that we can learn the language and get a little bit more specialized care before being joined into the regular class with just Koreans. So, most of us were like... up to all of us were Korean born? No, actually, our parents were Korean, but we had never lived in Korea, so there was about half of the kids were from the US, and then a lot of the kids were from Australia and Canada also.

LG: I'm not sure if you've mentioned it already, but, while you were in the US, did you have an exposure to Korea beforehand? Were you able to visit Korea when you were between one to seven years old so you had a little bit of an idea, what Korea was like compared to the US

HK: I'd only actually visited, around my first birthday. That was my only time. I had pictures in Korea. The first birthday is a big deal, and there's a certain celebration for the babies and everything. I have pictures of me doing that with my grandparents in Korea. And then, I think

most of the exposure to Korea was not through visits, but more through... My mom tried to teach me the language. I did worksheets and we watched media. I watched Korean kids shows. So I don't think I actually had a lot of physical exposure. Like being there in person when I was also in LA. I had a lot of in-person relationships with people who had just moved from Korea.

LG: When you lived in the US, compared to when you moved to Korea, did your parents use one language, for example English or Korean? How did this affect your transition coming from the US and then moving to a Korean school?

HK: At home, my parents were... We were a 100% Korean household, so I didn't speak any English to my parents. And my parents, especially my mom, really took the fact that I should learn Korean really seriously. So after school, I would do a lot of those Korean worksheets and stuff to try to get me to learn the language. And, yes she was, really serious about how that's a part of my culture. And I don't know if she did see the possibility of us moving from a young age, so I think that might have played a big part also. But I learned Korean and only speak Korean at home. I feel I was pretty confident in it, especially because, when you're little, you spend a lot of time at home, even though you speak English at school. I don't think I thought too much of my identity as a Korean when I was little. I did always say, "I am Korean" to my friends at summer school. And when we moved to Korea, English was really lost. I didn't use any English anymore, except for English class times at school. I think my Korean level was pretty high compared to other friends who had just moved because of practice that I already had. I think it was pretty easy for me to shift into the mindset that I can use Korean now.

LG: Aside from learning the language perspective. How was it to adjust to a new school environment after moving from LA to Korea? How long did it take when you were able to move to a class that's not for foreigners.

HK: My parents actually first tried to send me to public school by our house, and I only went to that school for two days, because I remember, my first day there my teacher was a woman and she physically scolded this boy by hitting him with a ruler in the hand. And then I was so shocked about that idea that after school, I just cried so much. It [was] really shocking to me, because I have not seen anything like that and the fact that you can get punished like that physically at school before, so that was a really big culture shock to me. So I cried for hours then I think my parents pulled me out of that school pretty quickly and then moved me into that new school where they had that foreign student system. And I think it only took me a semester, a little more than a semester before being put into the new school - the Korean student class. I joined the school during the second semester of second grade. And then I was put into the regular class in third grade.

HK: And then I think the difficulties were basically, mostly, the difference in the education system. I was really a high thriving, high reaching student in the US. So I was almost put... They tried to put me in third grade, when I was in first grade. And, it was difficult to adjust, not to the language itself, but the idea that I have to study in a certain way in this new language which was really hard for me. Most of my struggles came there and then a lot of the Korean education is memorizing and drilling things in formulas. And I remember, when I went to the school, they started throwing the multiplication song at me. I don't have it memorized. I had one week to be

able to spit out what's seven times six, what's eight times three, things like that. That was shocking to me.

HK: But, I think a good thing was we were in elementary school and then the Korean kids saw the idea that I came from a different country to be really cool back then. And, they saw me to be interesting because of that. But, getting along with people were a little easier because they came with a lot of interesting questions and like, “oh my gosh, she's from America.” That was kind of cool to kids in second grade. So that was pretty easy. And then, it was definitely helpful to have people around at your level. We just all got here. We don't speak great Korean. We're all getting used to this. That was pretty good.

HK: Another difficulty, I would say, is my school had a lot of rules because they were not private but not really public either. We had a uniform. We had to walk in a line in order in the hallways, [for example] on the right side. We had to have our hands together in a certain way when we're walking outside and there were stairs that only students could take and teachers could take with these certain stairways. Things like that were a culture shock to me. And the idea of having to adjust to this new way of talking formally.

LG: Aside from the challenges that you faced. What is one thing that you liked in the Korean educational system that was different from the US? Something that stood out to you in a positive way.

HK: Because the standard of education is really high, we receive a lot of care and attention in school. Because, I remember in the US, I don't think I received a lot of individual care and a lot of electives. In elementary school, it was basically the basics, all English reading, math and others. But in our school [in Korea], we have classes for things like culture, cultural development. We did things where we were learning a different language from second and third grade. And, we had Chinese classes. I think that was pretty good.

HK: Another good thing, I would say is since we're all one ethnicity, like a country, a lot of the experiences are shared between students. So there's less... Not that a bad thing in the US, but when I was coming back to the US, I had to learn that [inaudible] people are different in a lot of ways. And, I kind of have to be careful when I am making assumptions about what other's experiences would be. But since that one ethnicity thing was there, it was pretty nice to being a little more comfortable and sharing and learning things more closely related to me and my roots.

LG: Then when you moved back to the US for college, considering that you spent a long time in Korea, was there anything that surprised you? Or, anything challenging, one or two things when you returned to the US after so many years?

HK: The number one thing I remember is the first day. Where we're with our orientation groups, and we had to explain about... No, introduce ourselves. And I remember, my leader said 'say your name and then your pronouns.' And then, I didn't know what that meant, so I was like, what? And then I heard what other people were saying, and I had to kind of guess what that was. I think things like that. I feel Korea has kind of just opened up to differences... Accepting the

differences in sexuality or what people identify as. So that was very surprising that there was a country that already reached a level where it's comfortable enough, where people share this in the first meeting because I feel in Korea, even though, not now maybe, but still now, I feel there is a lot of criticism. Although there's a lot of criticism in the US also, people wouldn't say that they identify as something if it doesn't meet the majority. So that was surprising to me.

HK: And then challenging, education system wise, I learned that a lot of the classes were discussion based and sharing. A lot of personal writing was also involved. In Korea, that's not a thing because they value people getting the right answer, where there is a set answer that is more valued. So I was really shocked that I didn't know how to write when I was taking my W1 because I had never been asked to write about myself. That was really weird. And then, the fact that I felt like a discussion based class... I felt I was interrupting the professor, but being called out for not participating much was a surprising thing to me.

LG: Moving away from your experience between the education system right now in the US, how often do you get to go back to Korea? And is it something that you really look forward to when you go home? Are there any traditions that you do when you get back to Korea?

HK: I've been going approximately once a year in the summer for about an average of a month. I really look forward to it, because I feel since I spent my teenage years in Korea, I feel I do still identify as being more comfortable as a Korean because I know the culture better, and I feel sometimes, I don't have a problem communicating in the US because I am also an American, but I definitely am missing out. I don't know. [If you] ask me what this meme means, I will not

know in the US. So things like that, or even songs, I didn't grow up listening to pop songs. Sometimes people say, "You don't know this song?" And I say, "Yes, I don't." Sometimes I feel like "Will I eventually make it to this level of being like everyone else?" But when I go to Korea, that's not something I have to be concerned about. And I know how the social rules, or how things work. Slowly, that's definitely something I look forward to.

HK: For traditions, I would say, I'm not always there when there is a holiday like the Korean Thanksgiving or the Korean New Year celebration. I don't think there's a thing I particularly do, but I try to really meet up [with family members] so that they can see me. It's more meeting my family and just going there more to rest because I feel fully home. And, I don't have to be constantly alert to sometimes be one of everyone else.

LG: Being both Korean and American, are there times when you were in the country, are there times when you felt like an outsider in both places? And if there are times, would you be able to share an example?

HK: I felt like an outsider when I was in Korea, when I went to international middle and high school. When I would talk to my Korean friends who are going to Korean schools, I would not be in sync with them. [For example], the daily lives of crazy testing they go through. So it's like, I live here, I go to school here, but I'm not going through the same school system. And I feel like in your teenage years, school is mostly everything you got so I feel like that was where I felt like an outsider. In the US, I still feel like I'm always an outsider. I feel like I'm only American because I have my passport, I have my citizenship. But, other than that, when I think culturally,

one example would be in my W1 class, about how the education system makes us use mainstream English and, trying to... It takes away from the diversity in the classrooms and how that's a gatekeeping system in the society. I think, if you are born in the US, that's a pretty shared experience and you definitely do have experiences to that. But, since I grew up where everyone used the same language, I didn't really have an experience like that. So everytime I share something about the American system or the underlying powers, it takes me a while to think about it and experience things like that myself. Of course, now, I feel I can branch off of what I've experienced in these past few years. But back then, I thought, we all speak the same language. I don't really understand what that means. That was some times where I felt like an outsider.

LG: When you think of home, do you picture Korea or somewhere else as home? And why?

HK: I think my home would be Korea. Because, in the time I spent in each country about now, I've actually spent about half of my lifetime in the US, and then a half in Korea. [Also], I feel it's not about the time, but the quality of the relationships I made and also the culture I've picked up. Being home means where you're most comfortable. And, I think that comfort comes from not having to try that hard to know what's going on and adjust to the system. And I've lived in Korea enough and in my developing years to really understand the whole system and how the country works. And, even simple things like 'how do I sign up to vote?' In the US, I need to look it up or I need to asky my friends: 'how do I do that?' Also, the fact that my family is there is also a big factor. I rely a lot on my family... I went to a small school in middle and high school so I don't really open myself that much to anyone. So my family's who I rely on a lot. And, my family

being there also gives me the idea of home. This is where I have a set place to stay. So yes, I think I consider Korea as home.

LG: Then, you mentioned you had a lot of friends who also had a similar experience [to yours], who moved from another place to Korea. Are you in touch with them? And, did a lot of them also go to a college in a different country? And, do you think that this is a shared experience for a lot of the Korean Diaspora?

HK: Yes, I think a lot of them actually went. Well, there's two cases. I think half of the people, if you lived in a foreign country long enough, there's actually a Korean college system where it's easier to go to a better college in Korea because of how many years you've spent abroad, which may be weird, but it is a thing. So my friends who really like Korea and feel they don't want to be in the US anymore, just go to a good school in Korea through that way. And half of my friends actually, they also came to college in the US. Because there's still that idea that there's more opportunities in the US and for people like me, that's something that is special about us. Because, these days it's hard when people ask what's special about you? It's pretty hard, but we have this abroad, not too common... A lot of our parents really try to make us use that as a strength for us, and it's beneficial because it opens options. So a lot of my friends do share this experience. My friends who haven't spent their teenage... It depends where they spent their teenage years, a lot of my friends who have spent their teenage years in the US still feel more comfortable in the US. Then, people like me because we spent our teenage years in Korea, we just feel more comfortable in Korea.

LG: Then we're moving to a different set of questions. So the Colby arts and humanities have their theme for this year as islands. So I have a couple of questions that are more metaphorical. Also not technically about islands. But, my first question is, when you visit Korea or the US, do you ever feel you're stepping onto different islands where each has its own set of rules and culture and you have to act in a certain way?

HK: I do, in a sense, especially rule wise, there's a different social norm. I have to sometimes switch in the mindset of [for example] some things are appropriate to say in Korea and some things are not appropriate to say in the US. It's not because it's a bad thing to say, it's just culturally not respectful in a sense. What if I say some things in different settings? That's a big thing, trying to... My way of code switching.

LG: We're on our last questions. Sometimes people describe living between cultures as being on an island because you have two intersecting identities. I know you've answered it a while ago already, but have you ever...Are there times that you feel strongly this way? For example, when you mentioned the US, there's certain cultural aspects that surprise you. Are those during those times when you find surprising things that you're not accustomed to?

HK: I think I do feel this way. I feel most this way when I'm talking about the future with my friends. So when I'm talking with my friends in Korea [about] their goals after college. Some of them are thinking of doing an internship or a job somewhere. I can't really relate because I don't see myself having a career in Korea, although that is the system and the steps I'm comfortable in following, because of what I've picked up in the media or the news a lot. But, when I'm talking

about my future in America, I think I have that really big part of instability. For example, after college, if I do want to stay here, I have to fully sustain myself. I don't have a house like my friends to go back to after graduation to stay with their parents. I don't have that kind of connection where someone can guide me. Like 'Oh, my brother knows this [person]' or 'my parents already went through this, they know the social system,' things like that. 'I'll never be in the same state as everyone else. That's when I most feel I'm in the middle, especially at this stage of life.

LG: That's the end of our interview. Thank you so much, Hannah, for all of the stories that you shared, and we're really glad to have I'm really glad to be your interviewee. Thank you!