

Final Project Interview Transcript:

Note: Most verbal filler words are omitted without indication for clarity, but some are kept for authenticity.

Chloe: My name is Chloe Berk, and today is October 10th, 2025, and I'm interviewing Yeon Ji Oh through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Yeon Ji, do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yes!

Chloe Berk: Perfect, okay. Yay! I'm so excited to do this. I've heard so much about you and your high school that was so international, and when I signed up for this class and I read the assignment instructions were to interview someone who has any sort of connection to Korea... I said "Sophia I need your help," and she was like, "Yeon Ji!" And I was like, "Oh my God, perfect!" But yeah, thanks so much for being willing to be part of it. I really appreciate it, and I am really excited to learn about you and your life which sounds so amazing and awesome and your Korean identity all over the world. How are you doing today? Do you have any plans to do anything today? I know it is a Friday night! And where are you at the moment? You're in Geneva, correct?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah, I'm in Geneva. I didn't do that much today. I had to accompany my dad to the airport this morning, but besides that I didn't do much.

Chloe Berk: That's so cool.

Yeon Ji Oh: It is 8 AM there, right?

Chloe Berk: Yeah, it's 8 AM. I got up 30 minutes ago. You look so fancy. I'm wearing a sweater. That sounds really cool. And then you study in Geneva at the moment, right? At the University of Geneva?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah.

Chloe Berk: And you study international relations there? Oh, that's awesome. How close was that to your high school?

Yeon Ji Oh: How close?

Chloe Berk: Was it next to your high school?

Yeon Ji Oh: It's a bit further away, because I used to live right next to my high school, but now it takes me around 30 minutes by tram to get to my Uni [university].

Chloe Berk: That's cool. Do a lot of people from your high school go to University of Geneva?

Yeon Ji Oh: Most people go abroad, but I've seen a few people in my faculty, but I think if they go to University of Geneva, some go into medicine, but not that many in IR [international relations].

Chloe Berk: I love that. I mean, it's also perfect for your background. I guess we can start off. So, I know you mentioned this to me before, but I wanted to know where you were born and why. And where have you lived all throughout your life?

Yeon Ji Oh: So, I was born in Seoul because that's where my parents were, and I've lived in Algeria, New Zealand, France, and Switzerland.

Chloe Berk: Okay, that's so cool. And what were your parents doing in Seoul when you were born there?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think my dad was preparing for the exam to become a diplomat.

Chloe Berk: Okay, that's so cool. Are both your parents from Seoul?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah.

Chloe Berk: Okay, alright. And when you've moved to all those different countries in your life, was it related to your dad's work or any other reasons, or your parents wanted to move to New Zealand, etc.?

Yeon Ji Oh: For Algeria, it was because of my dad's posting as a diplomat. And then New Zealand as well. Then when we went to France, it was more because my dad wanted to study there. He studied at the ENNA which stands for École Nationale d'Administration, so it is to train officials. So, he studied there for 2 years, so we were there for 2 years. And then after an amount of time you have to go back to Korea, so we went back to Korea. And then we came to Geneva for his posting again.

Chloe Berk: Alright. And you've lived in Geneva for 5ish years?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah, I came in 2020, so it's been around 5 years.

Chloe Berk: You came in during the height of COVID?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah!

Chloe Berk: How was that? Did Switzerland have really strict laws? In the US, we had those laws. But you guys were so much more organized than us.

Yeon Ji Oh: When COVID really started, I was in Korea. I think it was much stricter in Korea. Everyone would wear masks and you'd have curfews, you couldn't eat in a group of more than 4. If your family is more than 4 people, you'd have to split into groups. When I came here, it was a bit looser in a sense that maybe it was because it wasn't right at the beginning of COVID, you could go outside, you didn't have to wear your mask outside. Children didn't have to wear masks. I thought it was much looser here.

Chloe Berk: That is a crazy time to be moving somewhere! At least the laws in South Korea were stricter than the ones in Switzerland, so you weren't moving to an environment that was even more locked down! You mentioned your dad is a diplomat, what does your mom do?

Yeon Ji Oh: She doesn't have a job.

Chloe Berk: She's your caretaker of your family – watches after you and your siblings. You mentioned you have more than 4 people in your family. Tell me about your siblings!

Yeon Ji Oh: We're 4 people, so I have a younger sister.

Chloe Berk: What's their name, and where were they born? And what do they do at the moment?

Yeon Ji Oh: Her name is Ye Dam, and she was born in Auckland. She's also at Ecolint¹, our high school right now. [Referencing the high school she went to with my Colby friend.]

Chloe Berk: So she's 16?

Yeon Ji Oh: 14.

Chloe Berk: Sorry, my brain can't do math. I'm a History and Global Studies major, so any numbers (thumbs down). So your father is a diplomat, what does he specifically do? If that makes sense. I know that question is a loaded question and kind of complicated!

¹ Ecolint: International School of Geneva.

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah, I remember I knew he was a diplomat, but there was this one time where I asked him what he did concretely or where he worked. I actually realized I didn't really know that much in detail what he concretely did. But in Korea, he was in this team called Rapid Response Team. So basically he would get dispatched into places where Korean nationals would be when they get into accidents. For example, he would get dispatched to that place to provide supplies or to help them evacuate and all that stuff.

Chloe Berk: Has he, or do you remember any specific places he has gone and when to help with stuff like that?

Yeon Ji Oh: I remember he tells me technically he's not meant to share this information.

Chloe Berk: Oh, sorry! Sorry! I'm so sorry! Also if you don't feel like it, I forgot to say this at the beginning of the interview, but if you don't feel like sharing any information don't even worry at all. Just let me know!

Yeon Ji Oh: No worries.

Chloe Berk: Alright. My job is to pry and learn as much as I can about you, but sometimes it can definitely be an invasion of privacy.

Yeon Ji Oh: It's ok!

Chloe Berk: What are some of your earliest memories or share some of your earliest memories of moving between Korea and other countries as a diplomat's child?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think Algeria was pretty particular in a sense that there weren't that many Koreans I think. And I used to be in an English school, so it was the British system, so the courses and the classes were in English. We had also had Arabic class. But then my parents wanted me to transfer to the French system schools so I could learn French, and in the English school I think there were still a bit more international students but then in the French school there were really mainly people either from Algeria or people who came from countries near Algeria. So I was really the only "foreigner." I think that was a big change in my life and where I actually really learned French because half of the day all the courses would be in French and then the other half would normally be in Arabic. I couldn't really follow classes in Arabic, so I would go to the year below and take the courses in French.

Chloe Berk: So how many languages do you know then?

Yeon Ji Oh: I speak English, French, and Korean.

Chloe Berk: That is crazy! I'm so impressed. I'm struggling with Spanish, and I'm literally from San Diego, which is a city that is right next to Mexico on the border, and of course, I've lived there my whole life and don't know Spanish well at all. The beginner level, yes, but you guys amaze me. When Sophia whips out the phone and speaks French, I'm like, why does this feel like a hidden talent?! And you've mastered three! Korean is very difficult from what I hear from my teacher and classmates. That's awesome. Okay, so when you move to all these different places, do you live with other diplomatic families, or do you not live with any other diplomatic families? And if so, if you live with these families? How do you interact with them, and if you don't live with them, how does society treat you guys, if that makes sense?

Yeon Ji Oh: Live, you mean in the same community?

Chloe Berk: Yes.

Yeon Ji Oh: I think the government funds for housing, but you can just get whatever place you want. And so, the Korean community that we talked to and interacted with are all Koreans who either work in international organizations or who are also diplomats. But I think we don't necessarily interact... Well, I don't interact with them as much. I think my parents a bit more.

Chloe Berk: Okay, so your high school was the UN high school, correct? Or was it UN founded or something²? I could be totally making that up.

Yeon Ji Oh: I'm not sure.

Chloe Berk: Ok, I'd have to ask Sophia because I knew it had some relation to that [the UN].

Yeon Ji Oh: I think you could say that they built it right after World War II or something.

Chloe Berk: Ok, yeah. It's so awesome. She said a lot of people were there just because you're located in Geneva for a lot of Diplomat's kids. She's not, her dad works in finance there. Are you a Swiss citizen?

Yeon Ji Oh: No. I also discovered recently that Korea doesn't allow double nationality actually. So..

Chloe Berk: Really?

² It was founded was old members of the League of Nations, but has so relation to the United Nations.

Yeon Ji Oh: Because I was kind of thinking about the idea of maybe getting the Swiss nationality but then I discovered that you can't unless you get rid of the Korean nationality

Chloe Berk: Oh, that's such a bummer. Do you know why they have that policy?

Yeon Ji Oh: I'm not really sure. I know that for example for my sister, because she was born in Auckland, she could have technically gotten the nationality, but I think it's also kind of to prevent people from, kind of, exploiting, but not really exploiting, trying to use the ...

Chloe Berk: resources from another country?

Yeon Ji Oh: No, I think I will benefit from the insurance and stuff like that from the other country I think.

Chloe Berk: Yeah, it's crazy Korea has that. In the US, it's what everyone wants right now – another passport to leave. So, how has Geneva being such an international cosmopolitan city influenced your experience there as a Korean?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think people refer to Geneva as international Geneva because of all the international organizations and everything. As true when I was in high school because I was in an international school, I would meet people from diverse backgrounds who spoke multiple languages and everything, so it was really nice to really meet people like that. At university, somehow the friend group that I made, they're all Swiss, and they're all Swiss and something else, but they're all Swiss. They did Swiss high school, and they all do speak English, but I think that most people in Geneva who went to public school, they don't really speak English as well. But now with my friend group, I ended up with people who spoke English. But, even though it is international Geneva, I think I don't necessarily feel it on a day to day basis of how international it is. Just my daily life.

Chloe Berk: Yeah, that is really awesome. Do you, how many Koreans do you think were at your high school, and do you get much exposure to Koreans, other Koreans, at your Uni as well?

Yeon Ji Oh: At high school, there was this one girl who was in my year who was also Korean.

Chloe Berk: Okay, were you friends with her?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah, but we weren't close, close friends. But we would still talk and everything. I met her when I went to Korea and everything as well. And I think there were a few other Koreans, 3 or 4, in the year below. But at university, I try to find people who are Korean, but I

think most people that I found there are either half-Korean, so Swiss and Korean ethnicity, but I haven't met people who are full Korean and who speak Korean.

Chloe Berk: Okay, so, living in Geneva, obviously you're so far from Korea, do you and your family do any special things to hold onto your Korean culture? And do you speak Korean at home?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah, so we speak Korean and we would also follow Korean traditions. For example, *Chuseok* (Harvest Festival), a few days ago, its kind of like Korean Thanksgiving. So we didn't do anything big because my dad came to Geneva a few weeks ago, and he left today, so we ate this dish called *Tteokguk* (Rice cake soup), which is basically rice cake soup, but other than that, we also for example do *Jesa* (ceremony memorializing ancestors), which is a ceremony that you do to in memory of your ancestors. So you prepare specific dishes and lay them out in a specific way on the table and kind of bow down to show your respect and everything. So we also do that pretty regularly.

Chloe Berk: What's your favorite Korean holiday to celebrate and why?

Yeon Ji Oh: My favorite Korean holiday.... I think the first of January it's kind of a big thing in Korea. Everyone wears the Korean traditional costume and you bow down because in Korea, everyone gets a year older on the first of January. I don't know if you already know.

Chloe Berk: I don't actually.

Yeon Ji Oh: Cause, in Korea, you have Korean age and international age. So international age is the age we [the world] use and Korean age is basically that you're one year old when you're born and everyone gets a year older, not only their birthday, but not the first of January. So every new year, you get a year older. So on the first of January, everyone eats the rice cake soup and the meaning behind it, you eat this soup and get a year older and you also get allowance and everything and you also have to bow down. I think that's pretty nice.

Chloe Berk: That sounds super fun! I learned about the holiday that was just recently and about the spam baskets. You bring a basket of spam...

Yeon Ji Oh: I think I've heard of that.

Chloe Berk: Yeah. My teacher was like, or my professor was like, you would bring it to your in-laws house. And I'm a vegetarian, so I don't eat meat. But I was like, that's an interesting gift, a massive basket of spam! I have two younger brothers, and they would love that. One of my favorite things to do in my hometown because I love Italian food is to go to a "little Italy" which is where a bunch of Italian immigrants have settled in San Diego and they have restaurants where

they share their food recipes and other aspects of their culture. Is there a little Korea in Geneva that you or your family have ever gone to?

Yeon Ji Oh: I don't really think we have anything like that in Geneva, but my sister and my mom, they are part of this Korean church community, so they go to that and interact with other Koreans. But besides that I don't think we really, well, I don't know if there are any, but we don't really go to other places.

Chloe Berk: Are you religious? And what type of religion do you practice?

Yeon Ji Oh: I'm not religious and it's why I don't join them.

Chloe Berk: No, I'm not religious either but I think religion is super interesting. I know you hold a Korean passport, but I know you're such a global citizen because of your general life experiences? Do you hold one, but I don't think nationality is the right word. But how do you say where you are from when you introduce yourself to someone how doesn't know anything about you and your background?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think most of times I still say I'm Korean, but sometimes, when I was in Korea, I'd say, I'm from Geneva, because I feel technically I'm 100% Korean. My parents are both Korean, I speak Korean, I only have the Korean passport, but I still kind of think of Geneva as my home in a sense, which is why I think I also have a big connection with Geneva and also affection.

Chloe Berk: You still, you go to Uni in Geneva too, after going to high school there. You mentioned you might be studying abroad in Seoul next semester. How did you choose that, and how are you feeling about that?

Yeon Ji Oh: I applied so that you could put, I think, four places, and you had to rank them. I initially wasn't really thinking of putting Korea as one of my choices, because I think my experience there, when I was in middle school, I was a bit a little bit disorientated, in a sense, because I've lived such a long time abroad, it was weird to be back and to be in a Korean system, because I've never been in one before, and to really interact with Koreans that have really lived their whole lives in Korea. So there'd be times where I wouldn't get, for example, pop references, or, I don't know, they'd, talk about K Pop, and I didn't really listen to K Pop. And those were things that they'd really bond with, except that I wasn't really familiar with all that stuff. So sometimes I felt kind of like, well, in a sense, for me, a culture shock, in a sense, even though I'm you know, in my culture. So it wasn't my best experience when I was in Korea, but I still really wanted to check out how the university lifestyle would be in Korea. Because I felt even though I did have that experience when I was living in Korea, I felt I was kind of missing out, in a sense, and I never really got to see how uni would be in Korea. So I thought this would be the perfect

opportunity, and especially because it's not super long I'm supposed to be going, the semesters. I think it starts the beginning of March, and it's till the end of June. So I thought it'd be nice to kind of learn about international relations, but in the context of Korea and, East Asia, in a broader sense as well, because I didn't really get to do that here, and to also just, again, connect with other Koreans, and I also applied to Yonsei Underwood. So Underwood, especially as a very it's a liberal arts college, but it's very international. So, I think there's a lot of international students there. Oh, awesome. I thought I could connect with Koreans who lived in Korea, but also Koreans who kind of have the same profile as me, because I didn't really get to do that when I was living in Korea. I think

Chloe Berk: That's really cool. Also, what a time to be going back there! You mentioned you don't listen to K Pop or anything. Do you keep up on your own with any other cultural traditions? I don't know if this is the best example, but one of my friends has put me on this Korean skincare brand called Beauty of Chosun (Joseon). Okay, yeah, the tinted sunscreen that it's actually life changing, because I have tried to be into my skincare a lot of the time. And she was like, You need to try this out. It's super popular and famous. Do you do anything like that? And so would you share?

Yeon Ji Oh: Well, I use Korean skincare as well. And Korean makeup products...

Chloe Berk: Your skin looks fabulous, by the way; your fit, your hair, I'm so jealous! What skincare brands do you use? And why do you use them over I guess more..?

Yeon Ji Oh: I use the Beauty of Chosun sunscreen as well. I got it recently because I've heard, I've already heard good things about it. And I think Koreans are really crazy about sunscreen. It's like, you tell them you don't wear sunscreen. Don't be like, What do you mean? You have to wear sunscreen. And I don't know if people do that, here, I don't think so. But, you really just wear it before you do your makeup. For example, it's part of the skincare. And I got that one specifically because I think the skincare, the sunscreen here, they're kind of thick and turns you white, whereas, in Korea, I don't know why, but they have so many different types of sunscreens with different things inside, like niacinamide or stuff like that. And so it's watery, it's dewy and everything. So I got that sunscreen! And then in Korea, I also wanted to get foundation, because I was like, the products are going to be mainly made for Koreans, or that's what I thought. But then all the shades were way too light [for me]. So for foundation, I think I prefer here because it's a bit more diverse. But in Korea, they have really good eyeshadow palettes. They're very sparkly and all that. So I use that as well. Oh, and eyelash colors, I think the Asian ones, not even Korean ones specifically. I think Japanese ones are really well known. I like to use them as well because I think they're specifically made for Asian lashes, so they hold really well.

Chloe Berk: I didn't even think of a different eyelash curler. Are you into skincare and stuff? Is that something you're interested in?

Yeon Ji Oh: A little bit? But I don't really have a crazy skincare routine or anything. Yeah, I got the, I don't know if you've heard of it, but it was, I think very trending on Tiktok and everything. There's this Korean skincare.

Chloe Berk: The mask?

Yeon Ji Oh: Snail mucin.

Chloe Berk: Snail mucin, yeah!

Yeon Ji Oh: I got that, yeah.

Chloe Berk: Oh you did! Have you been liking it?

Yeon Ji Oh: I can't really tell if anything, if it's actually doing anything to my skin, but I like the idea of putting it on my skin and thinking that's doing something, but not sure.

Chloe Berk: Yeah, that's what I think too. My dad always makes fun of me for putting random skincare ingredients on my face. And I'm like, trust me, it works. Promise I'm not just putting snail mucin on my face for fun. Are your mom and your sister into skincare too?

Yeon Ji Oh: My sister, not as much. My mom, not as much either, but she also got this snail mucus cream because she wanted to try it.

Chloe Berk: Alright. Do you think that throughout your whole life you've resonated really with your Korean identity? Because obviously, you've lived there, but I know not for an extended period of time. I don't know if this makes sense, but more like an awakening moment of your ethnicity, where you truly understood that you're Korean. Maybe being in an environment where there's not a lot of other Koreans or anything.

Yeon Ji Oh: I don't think I've had one specific moment where it suddenly came out. I think it's more like I live, it's a daily thing, in a sense that I know I'm Korean and I look Korean, so people are going to talk to me and interact with me based on the way I look. So it's kind of something I live through every day. I think even though I kind of mentioned it, there are times where I don't feel as connected to Korea. It's still a big, essential kind of thing about me that I can't really forget about.

Chloe Berk: I'm just curious. Could you walk me through a typical day in your life, so I can understand, I guess the small nuanced things that you could hypothetically do to resonate with your Korean culture? What will you do tomorrow, or today, or any day?

Yeon Ji Oh: That specifically resonates with me that I'm Korean? So I think it's mostly that I only really speak Korean within my household. So for example, I wake up, I'll have breakfast, I'll be speaking Korean with my family. Then I'll go, I'll go to Uni and see my friends, talk to my friends in French and in English. And then actually, one of my friends, she really likes Korea, so she did a language course or something in Korean, so she's so fluent. So sometimes, it's nice to have someone who also speaks the language, because I don't really have any Korean friends at Uni. And then when I do come back home, I'll go again, back to speaking Korean. And sometimes I try to explain my day, or what happened, what I learned in courses and stuff. And sometimes I can't really explain it well in Korean. So I'll be talking in Korean, and adding words in English or in French. And my mom's like what? What do you mean by that? Like, what's the word in Korean? And I have to look it up on my phone. Most of the time, I don't even know the word because they're very academic words, yeah? So I think it's really the language switch, yeah.

Chloe Berk: How has that been for your Korean? Has it weakened it, or has it strengthened it, being learning or speaking it in conjunction with English and French?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think I don't really have, for example, the level of Korean that most people my age would have in Korea, like, we're also at uni and everything. I don't have a very academic level. And, I thought I didn't have an accent, because no one told me I had an accent. I just thought, I sounded like any Korean. But when I went back to Korea last summer and this summer as well, there are a few people who told me that I do have an accent, so I'm not sure if I really do, or if they're just saying that because I know, because they know that I've lived abroad, but I think I'd like to believe that I don't have an accent. Yeah, I wanted to take, I think I'm planning on taking, for example, courses on my semester, exchange semester, I think in English, because I think it'd be more of a disadvantage, more than anything, if I try to take them in Korean. I tried looking at, like the course outline or something, and it was in Korean, and it was three sentences or something. I don't think I can do an entire course only in Korean with those words. And it was the Korean political economy, so very specific words, and I didn't really see myself doing all that.

Chloe Berk: That's hard. I mean, keeping up with three languages is already enough, more or less when one is Korean and dramatically different from the rest. What language do you think you are strongest in? Like can write the best and can speak the best in?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think not Korean, so it would either be English or French, yeah, but I wouldn't know which one to put above.

Chloe Berk: How do you think that would affect your Korean identity at all? Because I'm taking a Sociology of Immigration class. I know, obviously you're not an immigrant, but, we learned about a study a couple weeks ago where the children of immigrants from Mexico, they know the language, but not as well as their parents, and sometimes they feel excluded from cultural stuff and a true representation their identity, but obviously their situation is different. But I'm just wondering if any of that, I guess, is applicable to you.

Yeon Ji Oh: I think Korean still is definitely the language that feels like it really comes from my heart, and I don't know if it's also with vocal chords and stuff. But when I speak in English, I feel like my voice is coming out of here, and in French, I think a bit deeper. But I feel like when I speak in Korean, it really comes from me, from my heart. So I don't think I've necessarily really felt like I couldn't, like, connect to like, my Korean-ness, in a sense, because, I wasn't as good as, like, expressing myself like and writing in Korean, for example.

Chloe Berk: how many people in your family... do your parents both know English and French? Does your sister? What about your grandparents? My grandparents are kind of strict. And my mom, she grew up in the Middle East and then in the UK, but they would only speak French to her. How is that ... Do your grandparents know only Korean?

Yeon Ji Oh: My grandmother, from my dad's side, she speaks English, and we call her, or we try to call her as much as we can. And sometimes she likes to ask questions in English, or do the whole conversation in English, which to me, feels a bit unnatural, because I don't really like it when we're like... It feels a bit performative, because I know she's more comfortable in Korean, but sometimes she likes to mix things up like that. And my dad speaks both English and French. The reason why we did like Algeria, why we went to Algeria, is because he really wanted to go to French speaking countries, and which is also why we're here now in Geneva and my mom, she speaks French, and she says she's more comfortable in French than in English, but she does speak English as well. I think she just prefers French. My sister also speaks English, and she's learning French at school,

Chloe Berk: And she, they [her family] all know Korean, or your sister knows Korean too?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah.

Chloe Berk: Your grandma, you think when she asks you questions in English? Do you think she's catering towards your English language ability? Or why do you think that is?

Yeon Ji Oh: I don't think she, she doesn't really speak that much in English with me, but more to my sister, and I think she kind of does it to test her English, I think. So, my sister, I don't think she really likes it, because she feels like she's going through tests she has to prove that. My grandma would ask, what kind of like, What book are you reading recently? So she has to come up with a name and what the plot is and everything, and she doesn't really like that.

Chloe Berk: That's hard, because then you have to think of randomly on the spot the last book you read. And I don't know about you, but I have not read for pleasure in two or three months. And I'm like, what is this? Um, how is your course load at Uni? Is it hard? Is it very difficult?

Yeon Ji Oh: Last semester, it was pretty heavy because you could build your own schedule and choose how many credits you really wanted for which semester. And since I'm going on an exchange semester next spring, I had to put all my spring courses for last semester. So I think I had 38 credits or something, which was a lot, because I had, but I don't know, like, how compared to other universities, but within our university, it's a lot, like six exams or something. But this semester, it's pretty free, because I only have three courses and a seminar. And I also have to write my bachelor's thesis.

Chloe Berk: Oh my gosh, because it is 3 years there? So you graduate, are you going to be graduating in Korea, or is there a ceremony back in Geneva?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think back to Geneva.

Chloe Berk: Okay. What classes are you taking during your study abroad and I know you said you were learning about international politics/international relations from a Korean perspective. But what are they focusing on?

Yeon Ji Oh: So some of the courses that I put were Reconciliation and Justice in East Asia. So, from what I read, I think it's about how, for example, looking into the relations between Japan and Korea, because of the Japanese colonization, and how like, if that affects the relationship between the two countries. I thought that was really interesting. Another one was like, called Understanding East Asia, and I think it was about the economic development across the region. And I was also thinking of taking Introduction to Korean Politics. I think it's, like, actually a course for second years. So I'm not sure if I can take it, but I don't think, well, I learned it in primary middle school when I was in Korea. But I think I'd like to actually learn it at Uni again, because here in Geneva, for example, I did Swiss politics. We had a course on Swiss politics, and it was like an obligatory course. So I think it would be nice to kind of do that, but with Korea. I think those are the courses I looked into.

Chloe Berk: That's so cool. It's like coming out exactly what you want to study from a Korean perspective. Do you have, like, are there Korean classes at your Uni in Geneva? I know at Colby, where Sophia and I go to school, we have an East Asian Studies minor, and I think major, and you can concentrate in Korea, I'm pretty sure. But it's not like an official academic path. Do you have that at your Uni?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah, from the courses that we could take, there were topics. There's a course called Topics of East Asian History. I took that course, and I was really excited to kind of see how it would be taught, here in Geneva, because I didn't really have any other opportunities before that to learn about East Asia or, about East Asia, here. But, I was kind of disappointed since, because the teacher was Korean, which I only found out after we submitted our, we did kind of like a group project, I only found that out later because I was convinced he was Japanese, which is not that important, but, I was just shocked. And it was a bit weird because he apparently chooses the countries he wants to talk about. So the year I took the course was about China and Japan, and the structure of the course was kind of funny, in the sense that, normally, in Geneva, at our Uni, you have, 45 minutes of class, then 15 minutes of break, and then 45 minutes, he wouldn't do breaks. And instead, he'd show news videos on what's going on in the world. So he'd show, what's, something about China and something about Japan. And then, the first part of the course, you'd kind of talk about very different things. And the first course I went to was kind of funny, because I wasn't sure if I really wanted to take the course. I was just there to see how it went and everything. And the thing he talked about was how to tell a Chinese person apart from a Japanese person from the way they look, and that was not what I was expecting to learn about, or especially within this then international relations, or history. It's a bit weird to me. And he'd talk about very different things. Then this year, I just went for fun because I realized he's doing the course about Japan and Korea.

Chloe Berk: Oh, awesome.

Yeon Ji Oh: Like, that should have been me last year, but I just wanted to check it out. And I think I was really disappointed. I don't know if it's because, like, I'm Korean, but like, the way he talked about the two countries, I felt like it was really weird, because the first part you just talk about random differences, like cultural differences between Japan and Korea, but I felt like they were really based off on generalizations. Just kind of disappointing, especially coming from a Korean person. The way he talked about Korea, he introduced things that I just know are not true. He'd be like, showing differences and say, like, oh, Koreans sleep on the floor, which is not true! And he literally came up with statistics being like, because in Korea, there is this expression, like, I think it's mostly like older people who use it, but to say something is different. Like, sometimes they'll say, like, something is wrong. But it's really an expression that, like really old people use, or maybe like a small minority. But he literally said, like, throughout the course, that like 90% of Koreans, use this expression and, like, just the way he was talking. I felt

like I didn't really know where, like, he got that information. Yeah, so I wasn't really a fan of the way he taught about the two countries. I felt like we could have talked about much deeper they found, like the second part, he actually talked about the history and the perception of, for example, like Japanese people of Korean people, and Korean people of Japanese people. So I think that was really interesting. But the first part, I thought was a bit weird. And I felt like just in general, the course could have more depth, and, like, we could go through so many different perspectives, but the whole cultural thing, I felt it could be better.

Chloe Berk: Do you have any idea why he would, like, say, any of that stuff?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think his course, he kind of based it off on this comic book in Korea, I think there's like a series, and it's called *Close but Distant Friend*, something like that. So it's basically like a series for like, each country, like they're kind of like introducing the country and everything. And I think it's like a pretty old cartoon series. So I think he based his course off of that, like comic book, and then just kind of went with generalizations.

Chloe Berk: That's a bummer, though, because you're like, I know this information is not correct yet. You're willingly teaching it to us. It's weird, yeah.

Yeon Ji Oh: And for other people, like, who do not know, like, about Korea or about Japan, then they're gonna think it's true and, like, just live thinking that, like, that's the way they live and everything.

Chloe Berk: That's such a bummer. Is there a space to give feedback to your professor once you were done with the course?

Yeon Ji Oh: We normally do a forum where you can evaluate the teachers. I think last year, when I actually took the course and the evaluation was that we didn't have an exam for that course. We just had to write a research paper, and he gave us a good grade for the research paper, and the course itself, I think last year, I didn't really have that many problems with it. So, I don't, I didn't write anything, but it's just this year, when I went to check it out, I was a bit disappointed.

Chloe Berk: Crazy! From what you've seen, how do Swiss or other European views of Korea differ from those that you encountered elsewhere?

Yeon Ji Oh: I don't know, it's not really specific to Swiss people or Europeans. I think it's more like time. I remember when I was growing up sometimes, and, I'd say, far, it's also because I was younger, but sometimes I'd say, I'm from Korea, and people ask me, like, where is that? Like, they wouldn't know where Korea was. Now, I think a lot of people know about Korea and also

with K-Dramas and K-Pop, it's a big thing, but I still do sometimes have people asking me if I'm from North Korea or South Korea. Just a bit

Chloe Berk: What do you answer to that? You're, like obviously, I'm from South Korea?

Yeon Ji Oh: And it's also from a girl that I just met at Uni, and she seemed to know, laughing, so that's why I thought, and that was her question. So,

Chloe Berk: Gosh, that's crazy. I remember the book *The Girl with Seven Names* about the North Korean defector. I mean, this might be a dumb question, but have you ever met anyone from North Korea in your life?

Yeon Ji Oh: I don't think so.

Chloe Berk: Do you think, do a lot of defectors try to go to Seoul or in South Korea because they can get immediate citizenship or actually, never mind, scratch that question. Sorry, I was just curious. It's not even on my list. But yeah, so after you graduate Uni in Geneva, would you want to move back to Korea when you're older?

Yeon Ji Oh: For the moment, I don't think it's something that I've really looked into. I think maybe eventually, in the future maybe I might want to go back. But, right now, I don't think it's what I really want to do.

Chloe Berk: Do you want to stay in Geneva?

Yeon Ji Oh: Honestly, I really like Geneva. But well, now I'm living with my family and everything. I know it's an expensive city to live in, like, do you really want to stay here or, travel and go to other places since, like, I've never really lived in one place for so long. Do I want to explore new cities? I'm not really sure.

Chloe Berk: Yeah, it's a big decision to make. Do you think, because of your unique identity as a Korean, but also having all these global experiences and your location in Geneva, that you have a new understanding of what it means to be Korean?

Yeon Ji Oh: I'm not sure about understanding, but, I think sometimes I feel this pressure, within my friends, or when I go somewhere, that I kind of have to set a good example for my country to show because I probably be perceived as all Korean people act this way, or Korean people think this way. So I try to, you know, set a good example.

Chloe Berk: Yeah, no, I definitely get that. With your just many identities, have you ever done anything in your life that creates bridges between your two identities as being Swiss and Korean?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think for me, the bridge would be the exchange semester, since it's in Korea, so my real home country, but then it's also very international. And I think most of the courses are provided in English. And since I'll be surrounded by international students, for me, it was really kind of like the ultimate bridge with my different identities.

Chloe Berk: Yeah, when you go back to Korea, what do you do? You said you were there last summer, and obviously you're going to be there for school in the spring, but what are your favorite things to do there, and why?

Yeon Ji Oh: So last summer, we actually stayed two months in Seoul, which is,

Chloe Berk: Oh wow.

Yeon Ji Oh: Because we hadn't been back since we came to Geneva. So I was really excited to go. I literally kept a list of all the Korean dishes I wanted to eat, because my mom cooks the Korean food in our household, but there's still dishes that she can't make. So I was really excited to eat. And I kind of did boring stuff, like going to see the eye doctor. I also had to go get surgery for my keloids.

Chloe Berk: Are you okay?

Yeon Ji Oh: Yeah, I'm okay. And I saw my family. So, I saw my aunt and my grandma. She lives in Busan, which is kind of in the south of Korea. Yeah, I met up with a few friends, and it had been a while, so I thought it'd be awkward, but I think it was not that bad. There are also some other friends from France that were also visiting Korea, so I also met up with them. But I think over like, two months was too much for me, because I was kind of bored. I feel people always say, you can't get bored, and so there's always something going on. But I think I just also really wanted to go back home and you know, be with my friends in my own room as well. And continue with my life. And last, this year when I went, we already stayed, like, one month, and we went to celebrate my grandmother's birthday. So we did that, and I had to go to the eye doctor again because I got LASIK surgery last year, which is something that I've been looking forward to, because I wore glasses my entire life. And I think among Koreans it is a common thing that everyone gets LASIK once you're old enough. So, yeah, you know, like, the basic things, like going to the dentist and all that stuff and like, meeting family. Like, I think that's mostly what I did.

Chloe Berk: So, your grandmother's birthday. Did you, how did you guys celebrate that? Like, do you have any special traditions that you do?

Yeon Ji Oh: So it's my mom, my dad, who really plans the whole thing. They booked a room in a hotel, and they sent out invitations to relatives. I felt like it gave the vibe of being a talent show, in a sense, because, like, my dad, like sang, and you'd cast a microphone to people so that they can do something. I didn't do anything because I didn't really plan, but I kind of plan on doing anything. Like, I felt kind of bad because I was just like, no for me. But like, I think nearly everyone did something.

Chloe Berk: Is your family musically inclined?

Yeon Ji Oh: My sister plays the violin. I also learned to play the piano, but it was when I was much younger, and I stopped pretty quickly as well. I also learned the flute, but I also stopped.

Chloe Berk: Is music, would you say, a big part of Korean culture, or is that something more specific to your family?

Yeon Ji Oh: I'm not sure about music on its own, but I think in events like these, you kind of have to show off a talent or something like that. I think we, I'm not really sure what he is to me, but I think the son of my relative. He's very young. I think he's younger than my sister. He's like, 10 or, I can't remember 10 or something, even he led some type of quiz show. So he'd ask questions and people had to answer us, I think really everyone contributes to do something.

Chloe Berk: You mentioned your giant list of food that you wanted to eat in Seoul. What's your favorite food or, like, where's your favorite place to go? What's your favorite food that you like to eat there, and why? Tell me about it!

Yeon Ji Oh: Like, one thing, it's pretty basic. I really wanted a Korean chicken because we don't really have that here, and I feel like it tastes like a very specific way. And so I was really excited to get that. And technically, it's not Korean, but it's *Dongaseu* (J: Tonkatsu, fried pork cutlet). It's like a Japanese dish. It's like fried pork. I think I don't know if you've heard of it or not. I was really excited to eat that as well. And Sundae (Blood sausage). It sounds kind of bad, but I think it's pig intestines or something, and that's not really something you can get here. So I really wanted to eat that as well. I think I really like going to Korean restaurants, because the prices are also different. In Korea, I think you can get a really good meal for 6 francs³. I don't know how much that is like in dollars, but I think...

Chloe Berk: Francs are, I feel like Switzerland is so expensive. Anything is cheap relative to that.

³ 6 Swiss francs (CHF) = \$7.54 USD; ₩ 10850.17 KRW

Yeon Ji Oh: Exactly, like, \$7 or something. So like, you could get, like, a really good meal, like, with the rice and, like, all the accompanying, like, small, like dishes and everything. So that's really nice.

Chloe Berk: What are the accompanying dishes?

Yeon Ji Oh: You have, like, Kimchi, I guess, basic. And also, for example, like other vegetables, with marinated and something you have a very diverse accompanying dishes. And normally they're kind of like, free, like, you ordered the main dish and you get the accompanying ones. Like, just like that. It's like a set.

Chloe Berk: My teacher is going to be watching this and grading me, and I'm sure she's going back to Seoul soon. Where are your favorite restaurants in Seoul to go to?

Yeon Ji Oh: I can't remember the name, but, there's this one restaurant, like near my middle school, and it's this place where they make Sundaegukbap (Rice soup with sausage) or *Dwaejigukbap* (Rice soup with pork). So Gukbap (rice soup) is kind of like a dish served in, I can't remember the word, but it's like, okay, something like this.

Chloe Berk: Oh, yeah.

Yeon Ji Oh: So it's like a stew with the kind of like the pig intestines, or like pork. And that's a place that I really liked going to when I also lived in Korea. I think, like, after, like, you would graduate from primary school, we went there as well. And there's this place also near **Gyeongbokgung**, the palace, where they would serve salmon and vegetables with rice. And I really like that as well.

Chloe Berk: What's your I mean, obviously, like the food and everything. But if you had, like, a favorite activity to do whenever you go to Korea, what is it? Is it like touring the palace? Yeah, sorry, you're not disturbed. Just one off.

Yeon Ji Oh: I think in Korea there's so many photo booths literally everywhere. Like when I went back this summer, we got an Airbnb in the area that we used to live in. And I was so, so surprised to find that they had so many more photos if I did so many photo booths, because they weren't that many when I used to live there. And you literally see one every 10 meters⁴, I think, and it's really fun. Like, I love taking, going into them and taking photos, because they're really colorful. And you can also have accessories, and wear headbands and stuff.

⁴ 10 meters = 32.8084 feet

Chloe Berk: Yeah.

Yeon Ji: So I really like doing that. I think I took so many when I was already there for like, a month, I had like, a big pack of, like, the photos I took. And I think going to cafes as well, because there's so many, and they're very cute. And, like, there's a lot of diversity. Like, Geneva is, like, a pretty, like, small city and Korea, there's so, so many cafes. Oh, and also karaoke, because it's a big thing in Korea, and you have places called like coin karaoke. So, you literally just put a coin in and sing. I think you could sing, like, for example, like the place I went to, 35 songs for like \$7 ish⁵. So I literally did that. I think every night, even on my own. I was like, I need to go. This is so fun and everything. Because in Geneva, I celebrated my birthday at this karaoke, like bar, but it was really expensive and, like, I don't think I could do that every day, and it's not really like a daily thing to do here, and I can't really think of any other like karaoke places in Geneva, but in Korea, there were so many. So that was really fun as well.

Chloe Berk: This all sounds so awesome. I really want to visit Seoul for my study abroad. I have to go to, well it's like a boat, and we are starting in Bangkok. But my family, we are flying to Cambodia first and are connecting through Seoul. My parents booked this flight a month or two ago. I'm like, oh, I wish we could get off there. I've learned so much about it in the past like two or three months. It sounds so awesome. But next time, next time I have to get back. If you could share one piece or aspect of your Korean identity with someone that you believe is the most important, or if you think I have not touched on anything else that you would like to share during this interview about your Korean identity, cultural background. Would you be able to share it? Or both?

Yeon Ji Oh: I think, well, it's more of like, just an anecdote. But one thing that I noticed when I was in Korea last year, when I stayed there for two months, is that I felt like a lot of people commented on your appearance, which is not really something I noticed when I was elsewhere. And it was things like, oh, you're so tan. Oh, you don't have double eyelids. And even when I went to see the eye doctor, like someone from the reception that she told me, Oh, your eyes are so Asian. It's just really weird coming from another Asian, like, who's Korean as well? So it's like, what does that mean? And I just felt like, in Korea, this is like, a certain way that you really, you like, you really have to look a certain way, and that a lot of people just commented on my appearance, not even like, only like family or like relatives, but also strangers. Whereas, I feel like I don't really go through that in Geneva, for example.

Chloe Berk: Interesting. What's your, this and then one more question, so I don't take up too much of your time, but what's your favorite part about being Korean?

⁵ In USD.

Yeon Ji Oh: My favorite part, I don't think I have one specific thing that I like about being Korean. I think it's kind of well, I'm Korean, so I love Korea, and you grow to be proud of your country and all that stuff. Korea, for example, went through this really fast economic growth and all that. It's a very poor country during the Korean War, and then, in like, only a few years, it became, like, one of the top economies in the world. You kind of hear things like that when you're, like, learning history, or like industrialization. And like, when I hear that, I'm like, Oh yeah, Korea and all that stuff. It's also nice to see Korea like, getting, gaining not popularity necessarily, but more people, started, they're more interested in Korea. For example, when I applied for, like, my exchange semester, I didn't know like that people would want to go to Korea. I applied because one of our partner universities, all of our partner universities, they're really, all really, really good universities in Korea, they're really hard to get into. So I really saw it as an opportunity, but I thought that people wouldn't know necessarily about those universities, or, like, I thought they wouldn't necessarily want to go as much, but apparently it was one of like the countries that was like most in demand, so I felt kind of proud of that as well.

Chloe Berk: Yeah, yeah. No, that's awesome. So awesome and something so amazing to be proud of. We learned about South Korea's amazingly fast economic growth period. And I was like, wow, that's crazy for a country to have a total transformative flip from post Korean War to today. It is really awesome. Is there anything else that you would like to share, or is on your mind concerning, like, I guess, anything, any topic that we talked about in the interview, or literally anything else that you're thinking of,

Yeon Ji Oh: I don't think so.

Chloe Berk: Okay, yay. How do I say your name correctly? Sophia is just like Yeon Ji, but I'm probably butchering that pronunciation. So I was just wondering, how does your mom say your name?

Yeon Ji Oh: No, you're saying it, right. It's Yeon Ji.

Chloe Berk: And do you have any nicknames or anything?

Yeon Ji Oh: No.

Chloe Berk: Are nicknames a thing in Korean culture, or not really?

Yeon Ji Oh: I mean, my dad sometimes he has names, but, I mostly go by Yeon Ji.

Chloe Berk: Well, thank you, Yeon Ji, for interviewing with me today. I feel I've learned so much about you, your life, your family and all your crazy experiences across the world, and I really appreciate it. It. And thank you so much for sharing all of this with me.

Yeon Ji Oh: Thank you because when you mentioned the project, I thought it was really interesting, and you seemed like such a nice person on text. I really wanted to see you. Like, well, not really in person.

Chloe Berk: I know hopefully, in person! Sophia and I are coming to Geneva in May, I think. Because, actually, no, you'll probably be in Korea. Will you be? When does your semester end?

Yeon Ji Oh: End of June.

Chloe Berk: Oh, wait, yeah, because it's March to June. Yeah. Well, I guess I'll have to invite myself back to Sofia's house another time. Yeah, well, I'll send you the interview, and I'll send you a bunch of my stuff after it, just to make sure everything's okay, and if you want me to cut anything out or anything. So we'll definitely be keeping in touch a lot. But, yeah, thank you again for this wonderful interview. And I loved learning about you, and thanks so much for sharing your time and all the thoughtful comments you've made. I'm really excited to put this in the archive and the Colby historian Library section. I think it's super useful, and you offer such a unique perspective. I don't know who else in my who else the people in my class are interviewing, but I doubt anyone is anything like you. Yeah well, well thank you so, so much! And I hope you have a wonderful rest of your afternoon and evening.

Yeon Ji Oh: Thank you! I hope you have a good day.

Chloe Berk: Thank you, Yeon Ji! And bye, we'll keep in touch. Thank you. Bye.