

Interview Transcript: Jacob Ju

Jacob Ju: Hey Ini!

IniAbasi Bassey: Hi Jacob!

JJ: How's it going?

IB: It's going okay. Pretty chill weekend I would say. Probably should've gotten more work done but that's okay. Okay, let's get this interview started. Are you excited?

JJ: Sounds good. Yeah, I'm excited! I can't believe I'm doing this again after two years

IB: Yeah! It's a full circle moment

IB: So, I will start off: my name is IniAbasi Bassey, and today - on the 5th of October, 2025 - I am interviewing Jacob Ju through Zoom for the Colby college Korean Oral History project. And do you, Jacob Ju, agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes.

JJ: Yes, I do.

IB: Perfect. And just a brief caveat - you're already pretty familiar with the structure but if there are any questions that I ask that you don't feel comfortable with please feel free to let me know and don't feel pressured to answer that, only answer what you're comfortable with.

JJ: Yeah, sounds good.

IB: Okay, some grounding questions to get us started. Just a little bit about your background, when and where were you born?

JJ: I was born in Los Angeles, California in 2003 specifically around Koreatown in LA. I am a California-born and -raised native, I have not moved out of California throughout my entire life, until I came to Colby, and I have been there ever since. I was born there [there is used in reference to LA], but I moved to Torrance when I was seven and currently live in Anaheim, Orange County, close to Disneyland.

IB: I would definitely ask a bit more questions about them later but how do you like Orange County now versus LA? Do you miss LA? What's been your favorite place so far?

JJ: LA definitely has a special place in my heart mainly because my younger sister was born in LA. When I turned four years old was when my younger sister was born, and so we grew up there for about three to four years. So that beginning period of childhood memories was mainly

in LA, and then we moved to Torrance, only for a couple years because of my dad and his job. I don't remember too much of LA, to be honest, except a couple glimpses of childhood memories. But in terms of where I call home, it's definitely Orange County. That's where all of my childhood friends are, where I went to school for majority of my life, and where a lot of my family came to visit. So that's where I would call home - all my church is there - that kind of stuff.

IB: Aw, that's so sweet! You mentioned that you have a younger sister. In addition to that, just to get a scope of your family, how big is your immediate and extended family?

JJ: It's just four. Right now, it's me, my mom, my dad, and my younger sister, and then my grandma from my dad's side. She also lives with us occasionally but she's a fully dependent senior and she lives in a senior apartments kind of situation in Los Angeles, so she'll kind of go back and forth depending on the day.

IB: And when did your parents/grandparents immigrate to the US?

JJ: The exact year I don't have off the top of my head, but it was in the late 1900s, no, the mid 1900s - that's correct. My dad's dad immigrated first, ahead of him then the rest of his family. That's actually a pretty interesting story - the way my dad's dad immigrated here was that he got a priest certification as a work visa kind of thing. And at the time, he had no skills in terms of actual jobs he could transfer over into the US. Basically, he went to theology school and just took a test because he knew a guy in that organization and technically passed - they just let him through for the green card. That's how my dad's dad came to the US first, and then settled down for several months by himself and then brought the rest of the family from Korea to LA. They moved to Torrance to begin with.

IB: So, they moved from Torrance to begin with, then moved to LA before you were born, and then they moved back and forth until Orange County happened?

JJ: Yes, exactly.

IB: Digging a bit deeper into your community life, what would you say was the racial demographic in your neighborhood like through the years of your childhood? You can talk a bit more in general, but you could also talk a bit more on: were most of your friends Korean or non-Korean as a child? Did that change as you grew older or as you switched communities - which is something you mentioned earlier?

JJ: I'm mainly going to just talk about LA and Orange County, because those are the two biggest parts - Torrance wasn't really significant. In LA, growing up I went to a preschool that was run by a Korean church, because of that all of my friends were Korean. I only spoke Korean, I only ate Korean food, and I despised any other cuisine. I was a true just only Korean person. I don't know why, I was just anti... I didn't speak English even though I was good at it. Apparently, I got straight A's and whatever, I did public speaking but anywhere outside of that

school setting, I was purely just a Korean purebred. Because of that all my friends and cousins are only South Korean.

As I grew older, and I made that move from LA to Orange County - that's when I was in second grade - I kind of had to adapt because I was enrolled in the English learners' course because I wouldn't speak English otherwise, so the teachers thought I didn't really understand English even though I did. So, I was enrolled in that, and I had to adapt.

When I first moved to Orange County, all of my friends - it started with just Korean, because I only stuck around with the people I was used to, comfortable with, which made sense but there was that shift once my dad was like, "Okay, this is enough," and he enrolled me in to play baseball. I wasn't really the biggest sports fan, but the only memory I have of playing any sort of sports is we had a little plastic baseball bat that I'd swing around inside the house, and my dad had a little foam baseball, so he'd throw that - I guess through that - it was pretty fun.

That was kind of a childhood memory. I guess through that, my dad was like, "Okay, maybe we'll just give baseball a shot that way he [Editor's note: he referring to the speaker Jacob] can interact with other people outside of the Korean demographic.

One thing led to another, I was around seven - I just moved here so it was like eight, nine years old, more or less, when I was in second grade. They enrolled me into the little league then after that - I guess I was kind of decent - a lot of my friends happened to just naturally shift into more white, Latino...that crowd because growing up I was the only Asian player in my entire league even in high school. Up until my sophomore year of high school, I was the only Asian kid in my league because, yeah, there were a lot of Asian students - like Korean, Indian, Chinese - within the area, within the community, but they all played different sports. Baseball, from an Asian immigrant parent's viewpoint, wasn't the ideal sport to put their child through, right? So they would play tennis, they'd play cello, they'd play piano, badminton, whatever - something that's safer, not as rough - then my dad was like, "No, screw that. He's just gonna enroll me into baseball." The shift from Korean to non-Korean was from that point.

IB: I'd say follow up question on that is - one thing you mentioned was the ideal immigrant sport, or at least the Asian immigrant sport - could you talk a bit more about those kind of values? One thing that I've come across, just researching, is the topic of the model immigrant. How do you think that's something that's applicable to you? Maybe you personally witnessed that or witnessed that across your friends or community interactions with other Korean Americans around you?

JJ: That Asian American immigrant - it's a pressure, it's an expectation that they hold because they came from pretty rough beginnings and backgrounds - they basically sacrificed everything to come to America. Because of that, it's not that they want the most bang for their buck, but they want the most bang for their buck for their children, so their children don't have to go through all of the difficulties dealing with those kinds of experiences. The only way to succeed in that mindset is they need to get a really strong education, so there was a lot of pressure for me

to excel academically ever since a young age. Whether it be my mom - not necessarily forcing me, but yeah, she basically forced me because I was too young to even know what speech and debate, I had no idea. But my mom would enroll me in these different academies, different tournaments, yada yada, so I would have an advantage in an academic standpoint. It did help, I'm super grateful for that, but there was a lot of pressure on that, for sure, and they kind of kept me a bit closed minded, it kept me a bit closed off. I think that's another reason as to why I only stayed within my circle, because my circle of just Korean or just Asians, we have that sense of belonging and sense of familiarity because we grew up in the same environment, like mindset, compared to, for example just a free spirited, white picket fence child. Because of that, I kind of limited myself a lot, I would say, without me even knowing, honestly, because of the way I was raised.

I personally wanted to play the drums, I personally wanted to explore different...I was more of a hiker, but my mom wasn't a nature person. My mom was like, "Oh, it's too dangerous. You're gonna get hurt, just play piano." I was like, "I hate piano," but she forced me to play for about four years, attend all the music conferences, all these shows, auditions that I was genuinely just kind of getting forced to do.

In the moment, I definitely said, "Screw this. Why am I doing this?" but looking back, I kind of understand why, because it is more of a high class extracurricular that would ultimately help me in the future, which I think definitely did, the compilation of that. But that kind of closed me off to other opportunities that I'm now finding the ability to do now that I have some free time and that adult money/adult time.

IB: Two follow ups that I see: Could you go into a bit more specifics on how you think those activities helped you? Maybe in terms of mindset or discipline, *etcetera*. Also how have your hobbies or activities changed now that you have more autonomy in what you do?

JJ: What was that first question again?

IB: The first question was, "In what specific ways did those activities like playing the piano or staying indoors and doing these safer sports, how did that help you? Or how do you think that helped you looking back on things?"

JJ: Ever since I was a kid, I was super playful, I didn't really follow...I was kind of a rebel. I didn't really follow all the rules, that kind of stuff. Quite loud and I guess for my mom, it did help - it was that duality, it was that balance. Even though I was loud and playful, super extroverted, my mom was like, "Okay, this is too much. If I just continue to put fuel in the fire, then my kid's going to go out of control." So she specifically chose activities and extracurriculars to calm me down, so that way in more serious settings in the future, like in a more corporate setting, I would "behave right," be that obedient child. I would definitely say those kinds of activities, like piano over the drums... The reason also why my mom didn't want me to play the drums was because my dad played the drums. He was like that knucklehead rebel, and my mom was super quiet. She was an art student, and very calm, right? So that duality... And I guess my

mom got scared that if I ended up taking on the drums and those crazier, "crazier," louder activities, I would end up like my dad. You know how everyone's like, "Oh don't end up like your dad, end up like your mom." That's how their parents would say. I would say that's a reason why my mom forced me to go to these after school programs where I would just be doing countless hours of workbook study or these essay prep courses over a gardening course or some sort of fun outdoor recreational sport that I rarely got the chance to do. I guess that's my mom's fear that her expectation of that model son who's obedient and calm is just going to slip away. There's this term, Tiger Mom: a helicopter mom who is just kind of managing you, she was kind of like that in the beginning. Because of that our relationship was a bit skewed early on because it was kind of a love-hate relationship that I didn't understand - I was rebelling - and then your second question was...

IB: Second question was, "How do you think your ideals have changed compared to that now?"

JJ: Definitely a lot more. In terms of me within my current Colby community, my community back home, within my family, I would say I'm literally the only outlier in terms of I actually do what I want to do and I follow through with it. Digging deeper into that, I'm the only person in my entire family - because they all live in California, all my cousins, all my grandparents, uncles, they all live in California - because of that they took the safe route. They didn't really take that risk and sent all their kids to UC schools, great schools, right? But I just kind of caught on to this pattern. Basically all my other friends, all my cousins, my family is telling me there's only one option, that is the safer option, which is the same thing: just go to UC, just ask your churches, family member, friends to give you an internship or a job and then just stay chill, just live a normal life close to family - which is fine, but I was like, "That's a very boring way to live, and you're just limiting yourself because that's the obedient playbook."

Basically, I was like, "Screw this, I'm gonna take a risk; there's a lot more out in the world." That's why I literally went across the country, only wanted to come to Colby - it's not something like Harvard or something like that, right? What really is Colby? People were very skeptical; they were like, "What is this kid doing? This guy doesn't know what he wants to do." But I knew for sure. You know that saying, "Nothing changes, if nothing changes"? I definitely realized that from an early age - I would say around high school - when I [understood] that, "Okay, this pre-med route isn't for me." I think that was another really big shift. So, like I said, going back to the obedient, ideal Asian immigrant son: be a doctor, be a lawyer, be an engineer, make a lot of money, and then just settle down quite close to home. Really simply put, that's it. So, I was taking that neuroscience route actually, all throughout high school; mainly because I didn't really know what to do. I was kind of tired of my mom nagging at me throughout my entire life and I'm like this is one thing I can control. Basically, if I just study a lot and get a good score on the MCAT, if I research a lot, publish a couple papers, I'll be fine. That's super safe, there's no risk beyond because there's only one right answer. It's a long answer because of med school, what not, but it's only one right way.

So I did that, but senior year of high school I just made a big shift. I was like, "I don't want to do this anymore. I want to be more entrepreneurial; I want to get into some more of the

business stuff where I can actually have agency and control over my own business” and this ties back to when I was younger, the rebellious stage. I had my own fidget spinner reselling business, I made my own slime [business] that was really big; I resold; I went to a bunch of garage sales. A lot of the really scrappy hustle culture I was immersed in from a young age without me even knowing. And I basically took that into Colby and now I'm working for a lot of startups compared to other students who are researching in hospitals. My parents are always questioning me, they're not quite sure as to what I'm doing and when I explain it to them they're very skeptical. But I took the risks, and I know individually that or personally that whatever I'm doing fits my personality and my calling and that's how I was able to do that while I was abroad. Like, I'm the only one doing this, right? Going abroad for a full year, my parents thought that was just foreign. They were like, “What even is that? Just stay in school.” They thought I dropped out, but that wasn't the case. So definitely a lot has changed.

IB: Wow, that's good to know. And follow up question to that - I know you mentioned as well that your friends were very skeptical on that. Going through that and also forging that path, your entrepreneurial path for yourself, did you come across a lot of doubts? Especially navigating or contrasting who you were - fitting into that ideal image of a son that they wanted. Comparing also to your cousins and family members who had stayed, did you ever second guess yourself? [Maybe thinking], “Oh, is this the right thing? Am I staying true to who I am or my identity?”

JJ: Yeah it was very difficult starting off. Actually before I even came to Colby, my parents - because there was an admitted students day where they flew you out - my parents already kind of had a feeling it was either Colby or UCLA, two very solid options [but] two very different options. Obviously they told me to stay in-state, but they could tell that they were going to kind of lose me and I'll go to Colby. Before I actually left for Colby, my mom, she made a contract: She was like “Even if you go to admitted students' day, you have to sign this saying this admitted students' day isn't going to [affect] your decision into going to Colby any further. Obviously they decided this is crazy, this is not how it's supposed to work - but that was at the peak of my mom's tiger mom thing. I understand from a parent's perspective, she's losing her baby to the world, right? That's basically what's going on: she was scared. Not having that control over her own son kind of scared her because I was their prized possession. Obviously, I had a younger sister but in Korean culture, the firstborn male child is always seen as the number one in the household. Because it was from Korean history, the number one of the household is the male who would put food on the table [and] do all the farming [and] whatnot. So she was scared of that...

But I ended up choosing Colby, obviously, and yes, there was a lot of imposter syndrome, because my cousins, all my friends, they only stayed in California. I had maybe two friends out of the several who actually chose to go to schools in the East Coast, because like I said, it goes back to that closed mindedness that I think is very prominent, specifically not in Korean culture per se but I'd say just because I'm Korean, in Korean culture it's very clicky. It's very based on the trends. “Who's doing well?” “Who's not doing that?”, that kind of stuff. There's a lot of people that they're just kind of sheep, right? That's why in Korea, the issue of capitalism and consumerism is so bad because if one celebrity has a specific t-shirt on, everyone needs to get

it - they'll literally go into debt just to get that t-shirt, for example. They have no agency and way to think for themselves in a way. That's just kind of how their society is structured because Korea is a small country and in order to survive against Japan, China, these other bigger Asian countries, they had to basically put on a show to show their status - that they're like, doing well. Because of that, they [community and family members] always wanted to stay safe. The trend was, like I said, "Go out of high school, choose a very safe doctor, engineer, CS degree, whatever, go to a UC, bam that's it." After that nobody really knows. Once you get to the decent college, you're fine, you'll be safe but that was never the case. 95% of my friends had either changed their major or they're doing their major now and they're just not happy with it. They ask me all these questions, "Oh, even though you took such a different path, how did you find yourself?" Because now they see even though I'm in Spain at a beach in Barcelona, I'm still working on my computer at this startup that they don't really know or understand a lot about. Like I said, this was a risk, and in the moment when I first started off, it was definitely very tricky, because my friends like I said they're researching at hospitals, they had very safe options. But I took this completely different, foreign, uncharted approach to the ideal or typical Korean American, so it was very difficult, it was very lonely I would say, yeah, that's a good word for it, I was very isolated. I was the only one so I had to stay really strong. But the only way I was able to stay super strong [and] really grounded was through my faith and also my family - for the people who supported me, I just didn't want to let them down. Because at the end of the day, it's not just about you, you are all the extension of you, and that's your family, your friends, etc that just kept me super strong through these tough moments.

IB: Thank you for sharing that. Another segue through what you've talked about - I know you've covered a lot of themes of the academic pressures, sticking with what's going on within the community as well - but to expand on that a little more to make sure that I'm getting everything, "Were there any other common ideals or values within the Korean American community or within your household as well that were dominant themes for you growing up?" I know you also mentioned your church and faith as a big part of that...

JJ: Yeah, there's like 50 different answers for that question. That's a really good question. I guess I'll start off with the faith one, just because I just brought that up. I was brought up in a Christian household and several generations of Christianity run in my family. That helped us stay grounded, [and gave us] a clear structure in terms of how a Christian should behave, how a Christian should talk or act, etc. That has been very difficult - especially [since] there's so many distractions, there's a lot of "sinful things" out in the world that kind of goes against the Christian ideals and values. [So] it was very difficult for me - especially around high school, when everybody was going through puberty, trying to figure things out. I didn't understand why God has given me these difficulties, these trials and tribulations. I questioned a lot, right? I questioned my faith a lot. Even though I went to church every Sunday, I still questioned the religion itself and I questioned my parents a lot. That's when we kind of became a little distant, because I didn't understand why they were kind of forcing this religion on me even though I didn't fully accept it. But I had this breakthrough, "Aha!" moment in senior year of high school I think. I would say senior year of high school, that's when I quit my baseball career, I just quit my season. I think that was, surprisingly, one of the things that was keeping

me back from my faith. In terms of a logistic standpoint, a lot of the games happened to be on Sundays as well that made me skip church and that kind of got me distant within the church community. For me, cutting that [baseball] off got me back into that rhythm of it. The turning point was when I helped my sister. I filled in as a teacher role for my younger sister's junior high school ministry - one of the retreats - because they didn't really have any staff, I guess they were short handed. I was always involved in the church, I did a lot of the VBS [Vacation Bible study], I was the youth group leader. It was more of playful, fun stuff, it wasn't as deep in terms of the religious standpoint and these are deeper conversations about the faith, etcetera.

JJ: [Through] that experience specifically, I was able to touch a lot of my friends and sister spiritually, in a more mature setting than what I was exposed to beforehand. That was kind of my calling, in terms of don't use religion as a coping mechanism that a lot of these students, or like Korean American students are using it as. They just use it as a coping mechanism, because that just kind of masks the idea of how deep and complex the religion itself is. Most people are just like "Oh I'll pray to God when I'm having difficulties" but they don't really understand the deeper meaning behind that. I was able to walk them through...beyond that surface level coping mechanism that they used from church. Then I got closer with my sister. We've always had a really close connection and relationship, but this was completely different, right? Even beyond emotional, it was just a different spiritual feeling that we could never even describe, and we just got closer on a deeper level. That was when I turned back to Christ and that led to me willingly applying to this missionary program - this is quite recent it's actually about two summers ago. I applied to that missionary program, I went to Arizona with my younger sister in a different ministry so that was super impactful. Just seeing how my hands could physically uplift the community. I completely went one off topic but...

IB: No, that was very interesting! I guess moving on from that and the community aspect of things and focusing a bit more on your personal family life now. You mentioned earlier that when you were a kid, growing up you strictly only spoke Korean [and] you only spoke English when you had to or in classes. Was Korean the first language that you learned? Or was it English?

JJ: Yeah, Korean was the first language I learned. Basically, when I was living in LA, before my sister was born, my parents were always working. My dad had his textile business, my mom was helping with that and she was still currently finishing up her arts degree at Otis College in LA. She was a fashion designer...she was kind of finishing that up and she was still quite young. Because of that I lived with my grandparents and my aunt in LA, and they only speak Korean, so I spoke Korean [and] only had Korean food. That had a really big influence as to why I ended up only speaking Korean [and] only wanting Korean food, it was mainly because of that. It was that very old school, traditionalist way of how Koreans act and that's how I was raised [as a] kid. That was instilled in me as a kid and that reflected a lot of the values growing up without me even knowing. This also ties back into the religion in the concept of dating culture, hookup culture, marriage, etc. My grandparents always told me, "You have to be a good boy." The basis was you have to be a good boy, and as I grew up and started to understand what that even meant - I was like, "What does that even mean?", they broke it down into various things, one of them happened to be a bad guy to women, right? So this ties into

several religious beliefs as well, like safe sex until marriage, only having one spouse for the rest of your life. It was something that was obviously taught to me but it was something that I also thought of for myself, it wasn't like, "Okay, I'm just going to pay attention, or I'm just going to be obedient just because he said so." That's just [what] personal and moral, ethical, values wise, I believe was true. Being raised by my grandparents definitely influenced how I view...that's why even now, there'll be a couple flings/situationships here and there, but if I'm not going all in I'm not going to make that irrational decision. I'm like, "Okay, I'm just gonna date this girl just to see how it happens." It's definitely from a very respectful...people call it old school in a traditionalist way, but I generally think in terms of these specific topics, upholding these specific values from an old school traditionalist standpoint is super important, because I think a lot of this Gen Z, new culture is heavily skewed. This one isn't from a new school versus old school standpoint, it's just from a general, ethical standpoint. There's a lot of things that have gone off the rails, for sure.

IB: Wow! Okay, very interesting. Following up with that still on the aspect of you tapping into your Korean culture. I know you mentioned earlier that your grandparents and your aunt played a big role in that, but then post that era of your parents working a lot in LA and moving to like Orange County, for example, how did that process of you learning about your Korean culture look like? Who were the people involved in teaching you about your Korean culture? What aspects of that culture were involved in that? Say, like, food, language, dressing, etc.

JJ: There is a lot to unpack there as well. Like I said, it started I would say with my grandparents. Before I even had any memories of my parents, it was always tied back to my grandparents from my mom's side...my aunt is also my mom's younger sister. So it was started from my mom's side, all the food like seaweed soup, kimchi, everything was instilled from them. All the food was from them, helping out in the kitchen - obviously, I was always making a mess in the kitchen - but helping out even with the little tasks that was instilled upon me from them. They just [taught] me traditional Korean. A lot of the media I consumed as well was only Korean - I think that was another big reason - all the cartoons were dubbed in Korean, all of the films, the K dramas were obviously in Korean, and all the news was all of the Korea nationally broadcasted news, I barely consumed any sort of American news. I knew more about Korea's currently trending bands or something like that, compared to American bands. So that was super interesting.

So that set the baseline. Because I grew up in a Korean American church, that was always my go to. Weekend plans would always be immediately to go to church, go to some family outing within the church. In LA they're only Korean so this would be Korean pastors, since my parents were friends with pastors I have to be friends with the pastor's kid. So that was all tied together in terms of my Korean American identity. It slightly shifted when I moved from LA to Torrance. That transition, this is pretty important, from LA to Torrance was pretty drastic, because that was my first kind of exposure outside of my little Korean safe bubble, right? From the age I was born to seven years old, I only knew the same handful of 50 people, literally my entire life. Outside of that I was heavily sheltered and that's all I knew. When I moved to Torrance, I was enrolled in my first really big public elementary school compared to these little

pre-K [schools]. It was very difficult for me to assimilate when I moved to Torrance, because I still wanted to uphold what I'm used to, like Korean, but there were barely any Korean people in that neighborhood. There were only a couple handful and naturally, I was always drawn to them, but I had to adapt because they already had their own friend groups and I'm just this new transfer. I remember I always hated the idea of going to school because I didn't know anyone and I barely knew how to speak English properly. So I'd always tell my dad I had a stomach ache and I would try to fake barf. My dad literally shoved me into the classroom but I would just resist - I remember this like it was yesterday - I just cried and made a tantrum. Some days he was forced to take me back because he genuinely thought something was wrong with me. It was purely because I had a fear of not being accepted just because of something so new. I just wanted to be in the comfort of my own little bubble.

So the reason I ended up picking up English a lot more at that time was mainly because I was so different. That was a very critical turning point in my life. When I was seven years old, I had to skip kindergarten because there was some weird age cut off thing at this new elementary school, so I went straight from pre K to first grade and there was a pretty big gap. I was one year younger than all of these other kids and so I was different and I was just scared. Anyone could tell that I'm just the runt of the litter like. There were these other second graders, third graders - they were also Koreans, and they actually initially approached me in a very friendly setting because I usually sit by myself or with a couple students that I barely could really talk to? And they approached me in a very friendly setting like, "Oh, hey. What's your name, right? Are you Korean?" So we kind of bonded through that but I didn't realize they were sort of using me for specific things. And I won't get into the details, but there was a lot of physical abuse. They would shove me in the sandbox and treat me like their little minion and whatnot. Because I was so scared and vulnerable at that young age, I had to stay silent for a lot of it, because I didn't want to be even more of a burden to my parents. At the time it was pretty sensitive, because the reason we moved from LA to Torrance is because my dad's textile business, he filed for bankruptcy because it went under. It was a pretty difficult time economically - I'm pretty sure at that time it was the early 2000s - so we moved from LA. I didn't know what was going on at that moment, but I could tell there were some tensions; my parents would be arguing about credit card bills or something going on that was kind of out of the loop.

Like I said, we moved from LA to Torrance pretty out of nowhere, but it was because my dad was struggling to find a new job and he happened to find one in Torrance. So we had to make that quick shift and I stayed silent. But eventually my parents caught on, they were like, "Okay, there's something wrong with my son. He's not eating his lunch that we packed for him, he's not doing well in school", because I would at least do my homework, that kind of stuff. I remember my mom sat me down after dinner one time and then I basically told her what happened: "I was just getting tossed around during recess. I had no sense of community and I was genuinely going through it." It was really difficult for them to see me in this state, because in a way because of their failures in the business they had to see their son go through this new change by himself with no proper guidance, because they didn't really have a community coming into Torrance either. They basically left everything behind because all my family was in LA, so it was difficult. We tried to resolve it with the admin but they just thought it was just child's play. So

basically I was silenced and it was [a situation of who] were they going to trust? A foreign Asian student that could barely speak English or a more established...because they're also Korean American but it was clear that they were more well versed in English so they stated a stronger case. And every time they questioned me I was just kind of silent, so they took their side. That was a pretty interesting form of, not internal racism, but in a way it was kind of classist. There's that sense of class because they were from a bit more well off family and the student, their son, is a straight A student and they see me as a new kid that doesn't fit in. They're going to obviously believe the bigger, better kid. So that was a pretty rough moment that sparked me [to say] "Okay, I need to lock in. I need to wake up." So I tried harder in school, picked up more English and now I'm here.

IB: I'd say contrasting that with...would you say that was the starting point of you picking up American culture? Following that incident, moving to Orange County, what did that process of picking up your Americanness look like?

JJ: After that first grade, I just kind of got through that. I remember my mom enrolling me in a more diverse summer school program and that's when I learned to immerse myself. I got to play soccer, I got to take on different classes beyond just a typical workbook style. It was like a summer camp, right? I immersed myself in that culture a bit more; I was "free".

The following year, second grade, I made my first white friend, I would say, if that's even the right way to put it. But he was Caucasian and we were best friends. I don't know what exactly happened, but I was better at English at that point and we had the same interests in terms of playing in the sandbox. I remember we bonded through that. We tried to dig to the bottom of the sandbox and he'd invite me [over] - it was my first time getting invited to play at someone's house. Because also in Asian culture it's like, "Don't be a burden to other families by going into their house, eating their food. You have to just be obedient, no sleepovers, all that stuff, right? So this was my first time getting invited to a sleepover - they had a huge house. Their parents let them play video games whenever, let them wear shoes in the house let the dogs in the house. I was like "Oh, my God, this is crazy." So that was an eye opening moment: "Wow there's more to life than just kimchi and what I'm eating at home. There's so many different things and different activities that I was never exposed to because I was so sheltered. So that kind of shifted everything.

But I actually ended up moving from Torrance after two years. I had a couple close friends: So I had that one [White] guy and then a couple other Korean friends who my mom still keeps in touch with but I don't really do. After that second year, I moved, but now that kind of prepped me into the next big public school setting. I [could say] "Okay, I'll be okay." Thankfully enough, I did. I didn't get to finish second grade, so I restarted second grade when I moved to Orange County. But I ended up being top of the class. I won the first Spelling Bee and that was a pretty big growth point for me. Ever since then, I've increased my confidence and I was like, "I'm never getting bullied again for skills that I lacked" essentially.

IB: So we've covered your Korean side, your American side, and now what I'd like to talk about is, when identifying yourself as Korean American, did you ever feel pressured to choose one

side over the other? Especially through your high school stages, maybe moving into college? How did you navigate that balance of identities as you grew up from that?

JJ: Yeah, it was super difficult because all my families in Korea are in California. If they were in Korea, I wouldn't have had that anchor kind of holding me back. Every Christmas or every big holiday gathering, I'd obviously have to go back home and see all my family members. In those scenarios, I learned to master [code switching] in various settings. In that setting I had to reuse my rusty Korean and I remember I'd have to either watch Korean dramas to force myself to get back in the flow of conversation before family gatherings. Because I'm the head of the household, at least in my current family I have to represent them well. I had to be more tapped into my Koreanness in those settings. It was pretty difficult because sometimes I could definitely feel myself kind of being inauthentic, especially when I'm talking about my interests or girlfriends - they'll always ask about that but I have to kind of BS [bullshit] and say, "Oh, I'm trying to become a big manager at some fortune 500 company", but that's not really what I want to do, but that will appeal to them and that will please them.

But on the flip side, Colby, for example, is a predominantly white campus, and I have to sometimes put on this facade as well so that's tapping back into my baseball side. As I was playing baseball, if I talked about anything related to my Asian, Korean side I was definitely shocking - obviously among my peers, I'm the only one that looks different. I was already an outlier so if I continued to speak about topics like K-drama, Korean food or stuff that's not "normal" to them, I was just shunned away as an alien so I had to adopt their culture. I remember telling my parents, "Okay, instead of packing me fried rice for lunch, I want to try these Lunchables." I hated Lunchables! It was just ham and cheese crackers. I was like, "What am I eating?" But this is what all the baseball kids are eating, this is what is accepted within their little bubble so I had to assimilate into that. Growing up as I matured, that kind of faded away, but it started from there, and that's how I had to survive. Even though I was better than a lot of these other kids, because I look different I was always looked down upon and it took me ten times as much effort just to make it to the all star team, than if I was just a regular white kid. But I ended up prevailing through and that was another pretty big learning moment for me. I guess that's how society is and I just have to work even harder to survive that. So there's those two different moments.

The experience studying abroad as well. I was abroad for that full year [junior year]. I was in quite diverse areas like London, all throughout Europe, also Australia and around Southeast Asia. But even there, I had to code switch a lot. In Europe, there's a lot of racism towards Asians, just blunt racism. There were moments where I had to make it clear that I'm not just a complete foreigner that I'm from the Americas, I had to kind of make that clear and that was very annoying. It was just another reminder that the world, their view on different races, is just always going to be skewed...that was pretty interesting.

IB: Yeah, interesting! Navigating the idea of code switching between different spaces that you found yourself in, do you feel now like moving from adolescence to adulthood that you found

more of a middle ground? Would you say it's possible for you to find a middle ground between those identities? Maybe not Jacob as Korean or Jacob as American but just Jacob as Jacob?

JJ: Yeah, no, hundred percent. But that was only possible through.... I had to bring tangible evidence that I can hold my ground in American society or just in the world in general. An example of that was going to Colby, a very well established school, making it out kind of thing. Like the startup - I don't know if you remember the startup pitch competition - just winning that specific accolade that builds my resume. It's kind of proof of success with these achievements. People started to take me [a lot more] seriously, they didn't see race at that point, it was just a matter of what I could bring to the table and if this guy has what it takes. Sure it feels more comfortable in certain settings. For example - how should I put this - in Boston, for example, when I went to visit my friends at Boston University, they have a more established Korean club there and they're all Korean Americans. We all grew up in similar backgrounds but they obviously can speak English fluently as well. I do feel more of a sense of belonging, but that's just how it is for any culture. We had similar interests and upbringing so I'll feel more comfortable there, compared to me going to Colby's Frisbee Club, which is just more free spirited individuals that I didn't really have the same ideals and stuff growing up. Definitely I do catch myself in those moments but now there's a lot more pressure, surprisingly, on the expectation I have to uphold or people are just going to be like, "Oh yeah, I knew Jacob wasn't gonna make it in this American society" or vice versa, "I knew Jacob wasn't going to succeed in this startup thing and I knew from the career standpoint he should have just stuck to this doctor stuff or whatever." But now it's just a matter of what I want to do for myself and how I call myself, my identity, what I establish is what I care for basically.

IB: Wow, very interesting! On that same note, I would say you mentioned feeling a bit better sense of belonging at your friend's Korean club, diving a bit more into that on what you define as belonging? Or what defines your feeling of belonging? Would you say it's through music? Would you say it's through values? Would you say it's through food, etc?

JJ: Basically everything you mentioned there defines identity. I don't know if you learned this in your class yet, but there was that Korean Wave when there was...I forget exactly. It was when, BTS [a Kpop band] started to get really big. There was that really big push in Korean media, K-food and culture. From what I remember, I think it was a lady who was in charge of everything. She really marketed that worldwide and that became really big. During that time, it became a bit easier as a Korean American, it became normalized. It definitely became easier to bring up in conversations these topics or foods. People are interested like, "Oh, what is Korean barbecue like?" "Oh, what is Kpop like?" etc, and I was able to immerse myself into various cultures beyond the Korean people. It's still difficult because Korea is still quite a small country, so finding a sense of belonging in such a big world is quite tough. But I think one thing that you really can't fool is your family's background/history. There's not too many people with North Korean heritage - we kind of discussed this a bit earlier - but some of my friends in Orange County, some of their grandparents were refugees from North Korea. So me and those kinds of friends, we have an even tighter relationship, because it's almost like that brotherhood, right? So in high school, I enrolled in this program called global reunification ambassadorship program.

The sole purpose of that program was to spread awareness of the reunification between North and South Korea, and educate people as to the disparities between the two (north and south), how it happened, the difference in the government, the living culture, and the living styles of each. We spread awareness through art programs, writing different poems, or going up and doing speech and debate presentations, etc. Finding my identity through that North Korean heritage, that bond was a lot stronger for me. Outside of just Kpop and Korean food, that's just the bare given, but really deeper that heritage was a lot bigger. I don't know if I mentioned earlier but my grandma, my dad's mom, is North Korean.

IB: Question on that, we've talked about belonging particularly like centered in the US but I know you mentioned earlier that you've also been to Korea. How did that sense of belonging shift? Did you find it easier to feel like you belonged within the community? Did you feel some tension? What was that experience like for you?

JJ: Experience for what exactly?

IB: When you went to Korea

JJ: Oh, when I went to Korea? Okay, I went to Korea for the first time in March. It was a topic that people were super shocked about, or they looked at me kind of weird when I told them it was my first time going to Korea at such a late age. Because basically how it goes down for any Korean you interact with, I mean obviously I'm overgeneralizing it, but 99% of the time it's either if they weren't born in Korea they've definitely visited Korea - they always say they were a little baby, so they never remember going to Korea so it doesn't count. But it does count, you did go to Korea. It was to either visit family or because your parents had some sort of business there, so they kind of took them along, or they went when they were a bit...as they grew up a little older, they always had grandparents or relatives there so they always visit there every summer or winter, for example. A lot of other Koreans have that experience of going to Korea but I never had that experience because, like I said, all of my family, except my mom's eldest sister who lives in Korea, all my family lives in California. So I had no reason to leave nor did my parents or my family ever really leave the US to travel. We always just stayed within the States - like Canada and Mexico doesn't really count but it was within North America. That's all I knew. LA has Koreatown and all my family. That's basically Korea for me, there's no reason for me to leave. When I did end up going to Korea while I was abroad in Sydney, that was also a super last minute kind of thing. I never had that urge, like the dying urge to go just because I already kind of experienced everything I needed, back at home in California. Because the only reason my friends would go to Korea was to visit their grandparents, but I see them every other week, very easily so there was no big urge to go. The only reason we went was because there was a killer deal, roughly 300 bucks round trip with two checked bags and I had to take that deal. I ended up going with a couple other Colby friends and my abroad friend...I had to go. When I went, we had the same exact conversation, people were like, "Oh, have you been to Korea before?" And I was like, "Oh, no, it's my first time" and they all looked at me shocked because I can speak Korean pretty fluently and I'm well versed in Korean culture. They would think, "As someone who's never visited Korea, this guy doesn't know anything about Korea yet he says

he's Korean, right?" I can speak, write and understand Korean super well. I'm up to date with all the Korean trends or media culture, like pop culture kind of stuff. They're like, "Oh, wow, this guy is like a wild card," they didn't know what to expect. That would be the positive sides: they'd be super interested, asking questions. On the flip side, there will be some Koreans who would look at me weird because they would question, "Why hasn't he gone? Is this guy really [as] tapped into his Korean side as he says he is?" There's a lot of speculation that's grown up from that.

IB: And who exactly was speculating? Was it people that you met in Korea, people that you went with to Korea?

JJ: It was the people I met in Korea for the first time, the new friends I was introduced to or even people back home. Because all my friends back home, they've been to Korea several times and when I tell them, "Oh, I want to go to China more, I want to check out Indonesia more..." They look at me super funny. They're like, "Dude do you not understand? At this age, it's the best to be in Korea. We need to learn everything we need to know about Korea yada yada." The main reason is because it's fun. Korea is super fun for any race. At this young age, going-out culture, there's so much shopping, food, whatever; they just want to go for that. They look at me weird like, "Are you just against the Korean fun culture whatnot?" They jump to conclusions because of that. But that's not the case, it's literally because all my family's here, and because I consumed all the media that I would in Korea anyway, in America, there's no reason for me to go. But definitely, when I did end up going I had that sense of "Oh, wow I'm in the motherland. This is a complete difference." So I did feel that sense of belonging heightened at a 10x level than back in LA. That definitely was a very eye opening experience. I was not expecting it but it was great.

IB: Wait, that's so nice. That's so good. And who were the spread of people that you went with? Did you also go with other Koreans, or was it mostly non Koreans that were with you? And were you the only Korean there?

JJ: It was initially just going to be Koreans, so Jacob Choi, you know, and then there were two more abroad friends I met in University of Sydney that we were going to go. But I also ended up getting close to this Chinese friend but he was super interested in Korean culture. Honestly, in the beginning, he told me people mistook him for Korean because he loved Korean food so much. Very funny story, he happened to meet a Korean girlfriend in Sydney. She's a Sydney native, she was born and raised there. They're still dating now, long distance. It's pretty crazy. We ended up taking him along as well. That was in a way kind of a Korean pride moment, because okay as I am also Korean, even though I haven't been to Korea for the first time, I can share my culture in a deeper, immersive way to someone who's not Korean, for example. It was a very great bonding moment for me with Korea, and also being with my friend, showing him this new place that's what I call home. It's specific things like mannerisms: you have to look away when you drink in front of people who are older than you, that kind of stuff. It's not just an in Korea thing, it's a generalized Korean thing that I learned back at home...I like teaching him. He's only a couple months younger than me but I was like, "Bro, you have to look away"

when we were completely hammered. Those little moments were really fun and I learned to appreciate that. And everywhere I was walking in Korea, I thought I was only going to see Koreans, but I saw surprisingly a lot more other people of color that I didn't realize. I only heard on the news that there was a spike in tourism but seeing it in person, I was like, "Wow, Korea is actually on the map now." It used to only be Japan and China and Korea was always kind of overlooked. But like I said, after that Korean Wave, it just boomed and there's just so much interest from all parts of the world.

IB: Yeah! Okay, wonderful. One last question on that and then I'll probably wrap it up pretty soon. Another thing that you did mention were the friends that you took. In your experience moving around, like moving from Orange County to Colby, and also your study abroad experiences, in defining your community in these places how was that? What did that process look like for you? Did you find yourself still gravitating a lot more towards other Koreans? Did you see yourself diversifying your friend groups more? What was that like for you?

JJ: In high school, the first big shift was when I quit baseball. A lot of my white and Latino friends kind of fell off. I only keep in touch with a couple of them and then my senior high school, it's like I fully assimilated back to the Korean, Asian dominant friend group. Those are my friends who I consider my day ones because we went to elementary school together all the way to high school. But there was that gap within high school where to survive or fit in, I had to assimilate myself with a different friend group but I still keep in touch with them. Moving to Colby, obviously, I had to open up my options because there's maybe three Koreans on this campus. I never found that to be a problem because I was also used to that and that's something I wanted to do more beyond just stay within my own comfortable bubble and is something I will continue to do. A saying that I really like is from Anthony Bourdain - I picked it up as I was traveling a lot - it's [says], "Be a traveler, not a tourist." There's many ways to interpret this, but for me it's to really take in the culture for what it is. Don't try to put your own definition on what that culture is, or go to that culture expecting a specific thing and putting it around your narrative, right? For me, that's what that means. Just take everything as is and learn to appreciate it; don't put your own bias on that specific culture for example. The only way to do that is to open your arms and open your eyes to various different cultures, beyond my Korean background, that's the mindset I also took on as I came to Colby. You have to be a lot more open-minded. You're in Waterville, Maine, there's like two thousand people on this campus, realistically, there's not going to be food or people who have the same thoughts as you. But you just have to kind of take it in just go with the flow. You know, you see our apartment, it's Korean, Chinese and two African Americans, and that's just a very diverse kind of group that a lot of people think... Oh, I also noticed a lot of students at Colby, because it's a lot smaller it's like high school where there's a lot of cliques. They only stay with the East Asian group, or within the Caucasian groups or the Latino group. Yeah, sure you could have friends that intertwine, but they always go back to that same group, there's nothing wrong with that. That's just what you're familiar and comfortable with. For example, our apartment - even my parents or my friends back home, they're like, "Wow, I would have never expected that" But you know that's something that I'm like, super open to and that I'm very grateful for because if I never had that mindset, or if they [his roommates] also didn't have that mindset of accepting someone who's different, then this

would have never worked out. But now these guys have been my best friends since freshman year of college - that's something I'm super appreciative of. Obviously, while I was brought I had to even expand that open mindedness even more. There's so much culture and I cannot put my own westernized bias on anything. Sure, I can put my input on it when someone asks but like, everything is appreciated, and just absorb that culture instead of just putting your culture on theirs. I don't know if that answered your question but yeah.

IB: Yeah, it did. Thank you. The final wrap up from me, I'd say so talking about all of these and also just to tie things a little bit more into the theme of what this year's class is *Islands*. We did touch on it a bit earlier in terms of managing that balance between your Korean and American identities and spaces that you find yourself. But I guess the final question for you now is, how would you define Jacob Ju as the Korean American now? Who would you say is right now in terms of his interests, what he likes, what he identifies with, who he identifies with. What's important to him now? And what from all his experiences will he be carrying forward?

JJ: I see, wow, that's a very, very good question. I would say the first thing that pops into my head is I'm someone or Jacob Ju, from that different perspective [third person], is someone who is unapologetically me in terms of the way I perceive success and the "richness". I think that was a really big takeaway from this entire college experience and study abroad experience. How I define success and me being rich is specifically through the value of your circle, the people who love you and the people you love. That's only heightened through, obviously, money like people still think success is only defined in terms of how many people you know, how much money you have, the belongings and all these materialistic things. But at the end of the day, I've faced several different family members passing away, a lot of family or friends falling ill to the point like they can barely move and evidently, the only thing that really matters is - let's say you have a lot of money - spending that time and money with the people you love and the people you care for is the only thing that really matters. And for me, the only way to really achieve that is for me to continue this unapologetic, it's very unorthodox self. The way I'm going to achieve that is through constantly just connecting with people from various cultures and making sure in the process of doing that, it's centered around a moral compass of health and wellness. It's quite broad but I don't want to promote these negative things that's very prevalent in the world. The going-out culture, having fun with it is great, but I think something that's centered around having a peaceful mind, a positive, healthy mind is super important and that will transfer on into your spirituality, your physical health, your mental health, etc. Building that is super important and I guess we'll see it from here. I hope to be at the point where I can travel wherever, I can work from wherever and also stay in good physical shape so I can provide for my family and for my loved ones. At the peak of my potential, I'd say.

IB: Wow, that's wonderful! Well, thank you, Jacob for making out the time for this interview. I greatly appreciate it and I appreciate the time you took out and the stories that you shared. I guess I'll follow up with you with a copy of the recording once I get it and, yeah, just have a great night.

JJ: Yeah, thank you Ini for having me. This has been fun. And now you get to know a lot more about me. You did learn a lot more about me. Even though we've been friends kind of on and off throughout the years, we've never really had the chance - nobody really has a chance to - kind of sit down for these talks. Even within our apartment, the deep talks we've had is when we're drunk at 2am or something like that. There's not much other than that. Yeah this has been good.

IB: Yeah thank you, Jacob. I'll probably see you in a few minutes because I'm heading down.

JJ: Sounds good. Yeah, good night. Bye.