

Interview Transcript

Hakan Eroglu: My name is Hakan. Today is Ninth of October 2025 and I'm interviewing Eunseo Lee through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Eunseo, do you agree to grant the College permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Eunseo Lee: Yes.

HE: Okay. To start, could you start by telling me a little about yourself and your family? Where were you born and how was it like there?

EL: I'm a twenty-two year old university student. I'm born in *Cheongju* city and raised in *Gyeonggi-do*. I live with my parents and younger brother. Living in Seoul was fast paced and competitive, but also very convenient and full of opportunities. I feel like the city's energy has shaped me to always be curious.

HE: Okay, that's nice. You live in Seoul now, right?

EL: Yeah. I live in Seoul like five years.

HE: Okay. Wow. That's a lot. Did you come to Seoul for university?

EL: Yes.

HE: What do you study?

EL: I'm studying chemistry.

HE: Studying chemistry?

EL: Yes.

HE: And what led you to study chemistry? Why did you study chemistry?

EL: Actually, I wanted to study food and nutrition, to understand the fundamental principles of how the world works at the molecular level. But in this part, I think chem major is better than food and nutrition major. So, I changed my mind and I hope to work in the R&D department in a semiconductor industry.

HE: Okay, you have your plans set for after graduation.

EL: Yes.

HE: Okay, that's nice. Outside of your studies, what do you like to do? What are you passionate about? Do you have any hobbies?

EL: I really like taking pictures and I really like animals. I have two cats and sometimes I take pictures of cats and some of nature. I also do running. These are my hobbies.

HE: I saw some of your [*Instagram*] stories for that [laughter]. You're 22-years-old and a university student. Do you identify yourself as Gen Z?

EL: Yes.

HE: What do you think your biggest challenge as a Gen Z in Korea right now?

EL: Challenge?

HE: What's the most difficult part about being a student, Gen Z, in Korea?

EL: I think a lot of old generations are very conservative. They are not used to the Gen Z people. They sometimes cannot understand the actions from Gen Z. It's difficult sometimes, [to] let them understand.

HE: What do you think is a perspective that's different from each generation? You mentioned the old generation is not understanding. Can you give me an example of that, if you want to?

EL: A lot of my parents' generation, they think being polite is very, very important. I think Gen Z people are more interested in being cool than being polite. I think it's the biggest difference.

HE: Oh, I saw that [chuckles].

EL: You agree [chuckles]?

HE: As you know, South Korea has become more diverse over the last few years, the influx of foreign people – like myself, I was there [chuckles] in recent years. In your experience, how do you think these different people from different backgrounds are perceived in Korea?

EL: Diverse?

HE: People from other countries, how are they thought of in Korea?

EL: Ah. I think immigrants or foreigners are appeared so often on TV and the media or even in the restaurants. I think people think [they are] familiar. These days.

HE: I see. What about, let's say, North Korean people in South Korea, like defectors?

EL: They appear in the TV shows very frequently. I think they're not that special.

HE: I see. They appeared in TV shows, you said. How were they portrayed in them? In what light were they portrayed in those TV shows?

EL: Story [*sic*] from them is very unique, because we cannot experience that kind of things. Their stories are very variety and dynamic. I think people think their story [is] very interesting.

HE: I see. Do you remember the first time that you became aware of North Korea as something other than a place on the media or something?

EL: Yes, as I mentioned, it was when variety shows featuring North Korean defectors became popular when I was younger. Hearing their stories on TV was [the] first time.

HE: I see. Did this topic ever become a conversation with your friends or family?

EL: Not that much.

HE: When you hear about North Korea now, where do you usually hear it from? Social media, or from movies—mostly variety shows, as you said?

EL: Mostly from medias, from social media and variety shows, or YouTube channel.

HE: Oh, do you watch videos about them?

EL: Yes. YouTube channel ran by the North Korean defectors.

HE: Okay. That's interesting. Are you interested in North Korean defectors?

EL: Yes, because it's very interesting, hearing their stories.

HE: When you think about North Korea, do you think South Korea and North Korea have diverged a lot? Because they were one country before. Do you think it's diverged a lot that other side becomes interesting now?

EL: Yeah, it's diverged a lot. Because it's been more than seventy years after Korean War.

HE: In your daily life, does this issue feel like something that's present every day or does it feel more like something that's abstract, like it's far away from you - it doesn't concern you.

EL: It's a very distant issue. Because living in Seoul is so busy. We don't often think about this topic.

HE: Your life is much more busier than...

EL: Yeah. So busy.

HE: The theme of this course that I'm interviewing you for is islands. For that, I want to say, when you think of North Korea and South Korea, if you think of them as islands, would you say they are two distinct islands or would you say they are one island that's separated?

EL: I think it's separated. I think it's politically and economically separated. We cannot go there and we cannot cross there.

HE: There's an idea that North and South Koreas are one people. There's a shared culture. Does that feel true to you?

EL: Yeah, because basically we use same language. And we share same history.

HE: I see. [pauses] Do you think unification is something that's important right now?

EL: Unification?

HE: Yes, unification.

EL: [pauses] Oh, what is the question?

HE: Sorry. Do you think unification should be one of the priorities right now for Korea?

EL: No. Because we're separated for so long and I think we're economically separated. I think unification is hard. But I think unification is a good method because our birth rate is very low. I think we need to solve this problem, and I think unification could be the key to solve this problem.

HE: Oh, I see. Let's say in a possible case of getting closer with the North. Apart from solving the birth rate problem, what do you think the challenges will be?

EL: For unification?

HE: Yeah, let's say they became closer, the two countries. What's the challenges?

EL: Ah. I think the challenge will be the economic cost. Because we need to build a lot of roads, hospitals, school, like that. There's a lot of economic cost and our economical level is different. I think social integration is difficult.

HE: I have a few questions about that. You said South Korea will have to build schools and roads in North. You think that South Korea would lead the development of North Korea. It would be more like North Korea being integrated into South and not South being integrated into North, right?

EL: Yes.

HE: I see. And the other question is, you said social integration. Would you personally become friends with a North Korean? [pauses] Or, sorry, let me rephrase it. Have you ever imagined what it'd be like to talk with a North Korean?

EL: Yes. Because our language is changing. Korean–North Korean–is different from South Korean. These kind of differences are very interesting. I thought about it.

HE: Oh, okay. You just want to see the differences in language.

EL: Yeah. It'll be very interesting.

HE: Have you ever wanted to, if you talk with them, apart from language, what do you think you can connect with them on? What kind of life experiences?

EL: Experiences?

HE: Yes. Let's say you met with a North Korean person. How do you think you can connect with them?

EL: Ah. Connect. I think culture in South Korea is very popular to them. For example, dramas and movies and TV shows are very popular to them. I think we can talk about that culture.

HE: Wait, I didn't know that. I didn't know South Korean dramas were popular in the North.

EL: Yeah, it's very popular.

HE: Interesting. Do you think that could be used as a way of bringing people closer?

EL: Bring people closer? Yes.

HE: I see. Living in Seoul, it's a big city, right? [pauses] Does this idea of a— Oh, sorry, my bad.

Sorry, I was looking at the wrong place. Do you have anything you want to add?

EL: Add?

HE: You said North Korea is interesting to you. Can you expand upon that?

EL: Expand?

HE: Like, talk more about it.

EL: Oh, what is expand?

HE: You mentioned that you found the language interesting, the language difference. What else do you find interesting about North Korea?

EL: Ah. I think they're very conservative. They want to keep using old Korean and be in old society and culture. Our thoughts are very different. Way to think is very different. And we experienced totally different lives. But we can communicate very easily because we use the same language. It'll be very fun.

HE: You mentioned that, actually, now that I look back on it, you mentioned that you wanted to study food at first, right?

EL: Yeah.

HE: What kind of food are you interested in?

EL: I'm interested in nutrition, nutrition science.

HE: What does that mean?

EL: Nutrition science? It's like protein, water, vitamins, and then they work in our body.

HE: Oh, I see. You're interested in the chemistry of the food.

EL: Yeah. Biochemistry.

HE: Continuing on the theme of food, do you think food is a big factor in culture?

EL: Yes. Food is very big part of culture. Eating culture on the table and the kinds of foods are a very big part.

HE: Do you think that's a way of connection with the North?

EL: Yes. Because basically, Korean food is same with them. We share the same food with them.

HE: Also, the traditional North Korean dish, *Naengmyeon*, is really popular in South Korea, right?

EL: Oh, yes. You're right. Did you try?

HE: I did try. It was good. Do you like it?

EL: No. [laughter]

HE: No? [laughter]

EL: I want more salty and sour. We're very addicted to spicy foods.

HE: I know. I've experienced that.

EL: Salty, spicy.

HE: You think the differences in food culture is a result of the division or did it exist before?

EL: North Korea is very conservative and they don't like American culture or European culture. They don't eat foreign foods. I heard that they only have Korean foods. But in [South] Korea, there are a lot of kind of American food, European food, Chinese food, Japanese food, Korean food, and Turkish food. I think it's the most difference.

HE: So South Korea is more global in a sense. It has more access to world.

EL: Yeah. And there are a lot of fusion foods. Mixed food.

HE: I have a question about that, actually. South Korea's connectedness with the world. Some people—experts—say that South Korea is like an island in the middle of the Korean sea because their only land border with North Korea is closed and stuff. What do you think of that? Is South Korea

really like an island in a political or geographical sense for you?

EL: That's true. We need to take a plane to go to other countries. But in Europe or America, they can use bus or trains to go to other countries. Going to another country is very easy. But in Korea, we need to go to airport and take the plane and we need to make a passport.

HE: Does that become an issue in your daily life ever?

EL: Yes, because I think that's why Korean people are very conservative. It's very hard to experience exotic culture, foreign culture. It's a weakness of Korea.

HE: I see. Well, this was really informative. I really thank you for your time and your responses.

EL: Oh, that makes me happy.

HE: Do you have any last things you want to add?

EL: No. There are a lot of TV variety shows on TV and a lot of social media and YouTube appearing North Korean people. I think their culture is very familiar these days.

HE: You say these days. Do you think it was not as familiar for your parents' generation?

EL: Yes. Because North Korean defectors were few these days, and media is not good those days. Getting news or informations regarding North Korean people was very hard, difficult. But these days, that's very easy.

HE: And that led you to form different opinions than your parents.

EL: Yeah.

HE: I see. Well, thank you.

EL: I hope you could finish this project well.

HE: Thank you.