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Interview with Young Mi Chi

Young Mi Chi

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Interviewee: Young Mi Chi

Interviewers: Eimy Martinez, Marlet Ceballos

Date: December 8th, 2020

Location: Zoom

Collection: Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 112: Women and Social Change, From 1890s to the Present, Fall 2020

Length: 00:41:37

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Young Mi Chi immigrated with her family from Korea to the U.S. in 1976. She grew up in Koreatown, Los Angeles, where she was very involved with her faith community. Inspired by her strong Christian values, her passion is to help others. She is currently a transporter and a sewist in the Auntie Sewing Squad.

Summary: Young Mi Chi talks about her faith community and growing up in Koreatown. [00:01:23] Along with her response about her community and her involvement within, Young brings up the Auntie Sewing Squad. [00:08:22] As a sewist and being transported she explained her roles. [00:10:54] Bringing the topic of what is going on right now, Young began to talk about her life and how has it changed as a result of the pandemic. She shares her opinion about the government's role during the pandemic and Christian following of the Trump regime. [00:18:05] In the final section, Young ends this interview by explaining how women's work is not valued enough and what we need to do more in order to find our worth. [00:38:13]

Oral History Transcript

[00:00:01]

Marlet: Hi. I'm Marlet.

Eimy: Hi I'm Eimy.

Young:[00:00:07] Hello, my name is Young Mi Chi. I'm yeah, I'm one of the members of the Auntie Sewing Squad, I'm based in Los Angeles and I've been part of it since March, late March, I think probably just a couple of weeks after it was started by Kristina Wong. And yeah, I've been working on it since March in the past couple of months, actually. I've gotten busy with work, so I've been sporadically participating. But, yeah, I've been making face masks of all different kinds. Yeah, I've never had to study so many face masks ever in my life.

Eimy:[00:01:14] Could you tell me about your community and how it was like growing up?

Young:[00:01:23] Yeah, so I grew up in Koreatown. I immigrated to the US with my family of six. I'm the last of six or four children and obviously two parents and we came to Korea town from Korea and I grew up there and lived there. And then I ended up going to New York for college, so. My community, you know, I don't know if you know much about Koreatown in L.A., but even though it's predominantly Korean, it's very mixed with Central American immigrants and some Mexican as well as Central American immigrants. So my little elementary school in Koreatown. Was very mixed and actually one of my best friends was. I think she is three quarter Mexican and then one quarter Chinese, so her last name was Chen. She totally looked like a Chicana. But yeah, I am so grateful that I grew up in a very multi-ethnic. Part of, you know, L.A. There are still quite a few Korean shops there, and I had Korean friends and went to Korean church, so and obviously my school is mixed too. So I had a very ethnically diverse upbringing and really compared to other, you know, immigrants who grew up in mostly white communities, I just feel very blessed because my culture and my identity was, for the most part, affirmed and validated.

Marlet:[00:03:32] And do you live in L.A. right now?

Young:[00:03:36] I live in West Covina, which is part of L.A. County, but not right now

Marlet:[00:03:43] How were you involved in your community specifically?

Young:[00:03:50] Since it's a different community now, I am more involved in my faith community, which is my church, which is actually in another part of this county called South Pasadena. So I'm very much involved in serving poor families and children. In Pasadena, which is very mixed, South Pasadena is very. Affluent, but just north of it in Pasadena, there's still quite a huge range of economic status. And so our church has been really proactive about. You know, serving families there, like right now were because the kids are, you know, studying from school and some of them are missing their free meals at school. So they have a program where the parents could come and pick up the meals. But some parents can't. So our church has committed to delivering the meals to those homes for the past three months. And so I've been part of doing that. I'm actually a night owl and I get up kind of late, but I have to get up early to go and pick up these meals. And but it's such a blessing to be able to do that. And since I'm an artist, I've been adding like little drawings or art supplies or, you know, cards that I've made and just bless them of just getting the meals and stuff. So other members of my church have been doing that in different parts of the days and so small ways like that and giving out like Thanksgiving kits and inviting the community. My church meets at an old movie theater. I don't know if you saw. Oh my gosh, that film. With Ryan Gosling. It's, it's really about L.A. I don't know why I'm totally blanking, but my church was actually in that movie. It's called The Rialto and it's a church that's really like an endearment. Well, the building is very dear to the community, so a lot of people in their 60s and 70s have been there when they were little or they took their kids, but it was one down for a long time. So they were really angry when they knew that a church was coming in. And we wanted, you know, like we weren't going to be a movie theater, you know, so there was huge protests, like, what are they doing? They're going to blah, blah, blah. And well, needless to say, we've done everything we can to win their hearts over and. Please, God, we have won their hearts over, so we're like Christmas, we've had like classic

movies playing and we had like, you know, movie night where we had dressed up, like in their thirties and forties, old box office and have really cheap candy, like five cents and ten cents. They we're really creative surge, so it's been really fun, and then I'm going to go to a meeting to talk about how we can, you know, just beautify the theater, even though we can't be meeting people in that neighborhood and anyone can come and do a drive through or something. So, wow, it's really got to be more creative, right? Because there's so many things we can't do the way we used to do.

Marlet:[00:08:02] Exactly. Yeah. I mean, it's really hard stuff.

Young:[00:08:08] Well, I mean, it really does force us to be creative and get out of the box. So I mean. Time thrive for artists

Eimy:[00:08:22] So going on more to like the Auntie Sewing Squad, so. Why did you choose to join?

Young:[00:08:29] Yeah, because I already I mean, I that's my I would say MO is I have to help people, you know, I love helping people. I love helping people in need. People who anyway so I've already been regularly serving in Skid Row. I don't know if you know about Skid Row. It's it has the largest concentration of homeless population in the US. It's insane, so I've just have the heart to go and volunteer, and I found an art studio there where I can volunteer, so I've just been looking, you know, checking Instagram just to see what things are happening. And I saw someone posts that a group had donated masks for the homeless. So I just contacted the friend who posted it and he connected me to some of the woman from that group. And I joined her group. And she's the one who told me about the Auntie Sewing squad. And she just said, you know, this group's been really. You know, resourceful and awesome, so I join that group. And and then the rest is history, I mean, that group is, you know, has grown like crazy. I think it's over 800 now. Yeah. And nationwide, but it all started in Koreatown.

Eimy:[00:10:06] Oh, wow.

Marlet:I really. I didn't know that.

Young:[00:10:11] Yeah because Kristina Wong, who started it, she lives in Koreatown. So I think she just decided to do something and then her she did her friends. Yeah. And then and then the word quickly spread because you know I have a sewing machine because I've always been interested in like making my own clothes. I don't have any fashion background or anything. Obviously I went to an art school, but so I have it and I do like to sew. So I thought, like, this is a great opportunity. I have the skills and the tools, so I want to help.

Eimy:[00:10:54] Also a follow up. There was a little section that our professor had provided and it said, like what you do in the squat and if I'm not wrong, it said that you were at Sewist and you were transported. Can you explain more of what that means, like the transport? Yes.

Young:[00:11:16] Yes, well, so you can imagine this incredible network. Might we have.

Materials like fabric, elastic thread, all kinds of, you know, extra supplies, basically, so people are engaged in so many different levels that are people like on their own making thousands because they're just like super fast and they're not really doing anything else. And then there are people who are working and are making little mask here and they're they're just making like five, 10, 20. And they don't all we don't use like shipping unless we mail, like, large quantities to people who are requesting the masks. So that means we need to have an entire network of people delivering fabric to the different people who need it. Elastic, thread. And then even like Hair Products that we decide to give each other. So people are not only making mask, they're also like baking people are the people that are just baking to help support people who are sewing. And then there are people who are baking and sewing, you know, or like people who regularly, like, make natural soaps or candles or like that might be their business or that might be their hobby hobby, but they'll make it and then make it available for people. So then it gets delivered to one location where people can go and pick it up. And and sometimes I like downtown L.A. is about half an hour from my house. So any time I have to go anywhere near, I'll tell people I'm making this trip. What can I pick up or deliver for people, you know? So it's just this incredible network of just very generous, kind and trusting people and just making it happen so that people have all the supplies they need because lot of the supplies are donated. But also people are donating money and then they're buying the supplies. So there are people that are doing that and then everyone else just kind of making themselves available to fill in whatever the gap is. So it's been incredibly efficient, I think, because people, you know, when our hearts are united for the same cause, I think, you know. People become efficient, just wanting to fill any gap. Yeah, so if someone were to actually make a map of how this works, they would be amazed.

Marlet:[00:14:28] Also, along with the sewing squad, I don't know if you've heard of other groups that make a mask. I guess I can relate to people who bake and make candles for stuff. But in your opinion, like what makes the auntie sewing distinct from other groups, like other helping groups?

Young:[00:14:47] Yeah, I actually don't know of any other groups, but I know that there were a few people that were part of other groups that have joined ours. And what they mentioned was that were very responsive, very immediately responsive and just caring. You know, I don't know that they necessarily have like we even have a like auntie care system. So they've already set up some system where if you want an Auntie care, you go on to this page that they created and then whatever is offered is listed. So you write down, you know. Yeah. What you want that's available. And then, you know, if you want it delivered because you can't pick it up or if you can pick it up and things like that. So it just there's just a lot of love in this in this group, I think, and people that are really willing to go above and beyond and then people that are just really consistent and very dedicated. Yeah, and I don't know if, Because Christina being Chinese, American, Taiwanese. You know, her network might be a lot of other Asians, but there's a lot of Asians in this group and which is probably why I like the whole auntie thing is kind of an Asian term. Oh, I mean, it might be that might be similar. And, you know, to combine a culture where, like, everybody's your Tia.

Eimy:[00:16:29] Yeah, you're right.

Young:[00:16:33] Where they just become your family because, you know, like you you grow up together. So it's it's it's that kind of community, I think, that she was able to develop. And maybe because of like the common culture, the communality of culture, where we value family and relatives and extended family and really, you know, treat each other that way. So I think that's been really, really special, the kind of bond we've developed, like with strangers, really, you know, we've drawn together with the same goals and and just value for the importance of what we're doing and wanting to bless the people who receive them, you know.. So, yeah, I mean, the things people produce there. They're so beautiful, you know, they like presented and take these beautiful compositions and photos of it, I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm an artist.

Young:[00:17:44] I don't I mean, I think my mask are nice, but I definitely don't take the time to present it like that.

Marlet:[00:17:51] And some the time and obviously draw

Young:because it's what. Yeah, they really take pride in their work.

Eimy:[00:18:05] Ok, so moving on, how has your life changed since the pandemic started?

Young:[00:18:15] Believe it or not, I've become more extroverted. I mean, I'm I'm a total introvert, even though I'm I like interact with a lot of people because I volunteer a lot. I'm a total introvert, so I've been fine during this pandemic because I, I'm, I work at home anyway. So I'm alone a lot except to interact when I go out. But because everything's on zoom. You know, it's hard to hide and assume, especially when it's not like a gigantic group, you know.

Eimy: Yeah.

Young:[00:19:06] And then you have to talk. And then I honestly have had regular Zoom every week, almost the entire time, at least three or four times a week. Well, at least where sometimes I'm teaching I'm doing like workshops on spiritual resilience, helping a lot of people in my church and through my church, but also just doing a lot of studying about that, because I really want to help people experience freedom and emotional spiritual freedom and stuff. So I'm, you know. Because I feel like I'm doing OK. I really want to help other people who are not doing OK in whatever capacity. So, you know, the desire to do that, really pulls me out of my comfort zone, you know, and I've had to be very extrovert. I think it's called a functioning--what's it's called something where I'm an introvert, but I, I function like an extrovert or appear like an extrovert, something there is an actual term for that.

Eimy: [00:20:36] Yeah, it's interesting. Yeah.

Marlet: [00:20:42] I never thought about like in real life where you can actually hide in a group of people, but now zoom wise and I think through the internet it's kind of hard to not talk.

Young: [00:20:56] Yeah.

Marlet: [00:20:58] Kind of like being noticed.

Young: [00:20:57] Yeah. And then it's your face.

Marlet: [00:21:01] Pretty much. How do you feel like our government has done little to nothing to help those affected by the pandemic?

Young: [00:21:14] Yeah, that might be the common belief, my God. Yeah, and I think that's really, really unfortunate. Yeah, I mean, however, I feel about, you know, the current president. It's shocking, you know, the little leadership that they took on at the federal level, you know. So, I mean. Some of what we're experiencing in terms of, you know... All the horrors in hospitals and our health care workers suffering as much as their suffering in the hospitals. I mean, it's definitely I think we can blame the federal leadership, the president and the administration. And then just the whole issue with the need to wear masks, I just feel like that might be the biggest error. From the president. In, you know, the fact that we're still arguing the need for masks is ridiculous and horrifying. You know, because I'm Korean and I am looking at what's happening in Korea and I have friends who are there now teaching English there and totally envious that they're just going about their business, but everyone's wearing masks.

Eimy: [00:23:15] Yeah.

Young: [00:23:16] And how sad that so many people, so many businesses are suffering and all these health care workers are terrified. I mean, I feel for them, you know. I mean. Yeah. And all the families that have lost, I just feel like if we were on the same page of just wearing the stupid mask.

Eimy: [00:23:48] I agree,

Young: [00:23:49] I mean, yeah, and I'm carrying like extra masks in my car in case I run into somebody who's not wearing masks to offer them, you know, I mean, a lot of the time it's like homeless people I'm giving it to. But what I realize, they don't necessarily have the luxury of washing it either. I know that there's a lot of things they're trying to place to help with that in Skid Row and in almost areas like there are people actually going around with, you know, hand sanitizers and things like in a cooler so that they can go around at least sanitizing their hands once in a while. But, I mean... Yeah, the problem, you know, it's always the poor that that's affected by whatever is happening and the people at the top, they're completely unfazed. But the fact that the president and his administration that they all got it says a lot. You know, no one's immune to it and you just can't be so callous about it.

Eimy: [00:25:05] Being on this topic, like the president and everything, how did you feel leading up to this election season?

Young: [00:25:17] Um. Well. So because I'm a spiritual person, I've been praying, but the thought I had was. You know, I mean, being a Christian and and, you know, I don't know if your family or yourselves are religious, but a lot of Christians are very conservative for Trump and then saying all kinds of things that I don't agree with. But I just had this sense that Trump was a punishment to us and that his time was done, you know, if his whatever, you know, God allowed, like his time was done. So I actually felt that he wasn't going to get re-elected, even

though all these Christians were prophesying that he was going to get re-elected. So I just had peace that he wasn't. And then after the election, when it was looking like he's definitely--Biden is definitely getting elected. I just felt so relieved. And I realize I have been traumatized for the past four years waking up with horrific news, you know, that that you just think it's unconscionable. How can anybody do this, make these decisions and say these things, and it's just like every day. Being traumatized by this person with zero compassion. And I'm like, this person is mentally ill because clearly he has no empathy, I just felt like--

Marlet: [00:27:31] It's okay.

Young: [00:27:33]...yeah, anyway, I just so I felt it made me realize, well, I've been terrorized by this person and I'm sure people in this country have felt terrorized by this person who is. You know, like stoking the flames of other terrorists, domestic terrorists, they're not Muslims from the outside, they're racists on the inside, you know, so I mean, I'm just--Yeah. If anything, I feel really convicted that Christians have not done enough to serve the poor to protect the poor and the vulnerable, you know, so I feel really convicted to do that. No, yeah, I'm just going to work harder to, you know, be more vocal about my activism and advocacy. I mean, I'm doing that by volunteering, but not necessarily talking about it with and just praying and praying for hearts to change and for racism to die, you know but, I feel like, you know, we're never going to really get rid of racism as long as you know, people are broken, people think no. Yeah, they sometimes have an experience like genuine love where they feel. Value themselves, and so they have to demean other people, feel more valuable than someone else because they haven't been valued. So sadly that's a really vicious cycle. So I'm going to try to love as many people as possible.

Marlet: [00:29:35] Being brought up on the topic of racism and gender challenges. Have you ever faced any challenges throughout your life?

Young: [00:29:45] Um..I mean, I've been called things, you know, just like "chink" like those kind of things in passing, but those things don't it's never affected me. Thank God. And I think that says a lot about just my parents, they're secure in love for me and and just God protecting my heart. Um, but, I feel like I have been very fortunate in that. I haven't, myself, experienced much discrimination directly. Of course, I know they exist.--And other people in my life have. I myself--other than just being like the regular --not being called on to speak or my thoughts taking seriously in conversations. Those kinds of things like here and there. I think what's more dangerous...that I've noticed about myself and maybe other people is the "internalized discrimination" where I believe that of myself. Because that's what's projected to me. You know. Um, that my voice isn't that important. That I don't really--my work isn't that valuable. So I may not be as assertive about what I have to bring or my value. And--And of course, when you see other people doing that they are always seen as too aggressive. Right? Like when men assert themselves it's like nothing. They're being ambitious or whatever, but when women assert themselves they're being too aggressive. Too hostile. Um, maybe some of that has kinda fed into that?I'm not sure. It could also be part of my personality. I'm not afraid of confrontation but I don't wanna escalate things either so im very calm as you can tell. So it really depends. But, yeah because I work for myself for a lot of my time, a lot of my life. I

haven't directly experienced so much discrimination. Like I said, you know, when you walk down the street you can hear all kinds of things like words like that. I've never heard anyone say like "go back to where you came from" but definitely words change and those kinds of things.

Eimy: [00:33:07] Since on the topic what do you think are some examples that we might do to fight these challenges or inequalities?

Young: [00:33:20] Um well if you directly receive it..I think not to validate it by getting emotional or letting them, you know, robbery of your peace, confidence and courage. So I mean you can think about a smart comeback and have it ready. I think that's totally fine but just don't let them provoke you and take away your confidence. But in terms of the work place or people you know are discriminating... I think you have to stand up for yourselves. We can't be afraid to speak your mind. If you feel like you got unfairly assets-sometimes they have performance reviews...I think you have every right to ask, "how can I do this better?" or just contest like I think I've done a better job? We have to. If we just kind of let that continue then they're not going to think anything different. You know? They'll just think you agree. Um, so there was a quote that I shared on my Instagram that someone else shared. The quote said, "Power doesn't concede unless somebody pushes back. Unless there is protest, power doesn't concede." Cause they are fine with the way things are. So unless somebody pushes back and says, "No, you don't have that power. I'm taking my own power back." Then they may or may not concede. Or you might push them to a place where they have to concede because you have the right. --Another thing I think it's important to have conversations with people you love, think differently--I mean I have friends of other color, I know that--even my mom had her own races/biases. I know that about Koreans. Uh because i've heard it. You know my aunts--So yeah I just try to have these conversations about this-- that's not right. Everybody's equal in the eyes of God nobody is more valuable because of their race, status, their intelligence or whatever how much money they have and they're all equally valuable and we have to see value in each other the same way. And no one is above us and no one is beneath us. And I just have to keep saying until they agree and believe it. she knows my friends are all really in there and more successful than I am... so yeah just calling them out in having those conversations and I think because of the things that have been happening now there are alot of tools out there, you know, people are modeling how to have healthy conversations and just willing to have calm conversations about these issues and not get so emotional.]

Eimy: [00:38:01] Alright, I think this concludes our interview. Would you like to say any other closing thoughts or...

Young: [00:38:13] Yeah. I do. One thing that was really important about the Sewing Squad because sewing is really women's work. Womens work isn't valued..right? Like if our mothers were paid for raising us and, you know, all the housework they would be all millionaires because it's such a valuable work and sewing and crafting and making if you think about it, it has a lot to do with caring and caring for your family, community and it's really powerful, beautiful work. When you think about-- you know I think a lot of the people in this squad the age range is really big but it's like from little young daughters all the way up to grandmothers and great

grandmothers.--And I thought so much about my mom as I was doing this--she passed away a couple years ago. Um because she was a seamstress and that was her work. She didn't speak any english, she worked for a Korean company, manufacturing. She went and did that sweat labor and getting paid like the pieces you know like a pocket would be so many--and so I know about the super cheap labor department. And the fact that I get to do this as a luxury because I have the time to do it and I can bless other people you know with this thing. It's a luxury that my parents gave me through their sacrifice you know so I just thought it was really beautiful to be able to do that and bring like a whole-- the entire circle of their sacrifice and their work and their work that is really about building community and people together. Also think about meals and how that brings people together. Sewing circles, you know, like that brings people together and then even this it brought people together through womens work. So again, it made me appreciate the beauty and power of women's work. We cannot take it for granted and you know our moms made a lot of mistakes.

Marlet: [00:41:10] Thank you for sharing that.

Young: [00:41:14] Yeah, you ladies, I'm so proud of you that you guys are studying in your areas and doing this.

Eimy: [00:41:25] Well thank you so much for doing this interview.

Young: [00:41:31] Good luck. Good luck with your studying, careers and just believe everything about yourselves.

End [00:41:37]