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Interview with Grace Yoo

Grace Yoo

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Interviewee: Grace Yoo

Interviewers: Kat Patrice and Jaspreet Klair

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Location: Zoom

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Length of Interview: 00:30:02 (approx 30 minutes)

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Dr. Grace Yoo is a Korean American who was raised in southern California and currently teaches in the Asian American Studies Department at San Francisco State University. She has two sons that helped her with the mask-making process during the summer. She also encourages her students to be advocates and get involved with each other and the community.

Thematic Overview: *(01:11)* Grace Yoo discusses how the start of the pandemic was an anxiety-producing time. *(06:37)* Yoo recounts her journey with the Auntie Sewing Squad, how she got students involved, and how her family supported her sewing. *(16:31)* Yoo explains that anti-Asian hate is nothing new and the only difference now is that other communities are now expressing solidarity with Asian American communities *(22:47)* Yoo believes that all Asian Americans are confronted with "foreigner" stereotype. *(26:11)* Lastly, Yoo expresses her delight over the increase in the popularity and acceptance of Korean and Asian culture in the West, citing things like BTS and famous Korean dramas as influencers.

Oral History Transcript

Kat Patrice (KP): *00:07-00:28* Okay, so today is April 29, 2021. My name is Kat Patrice and my classmate and I, Jaspreet Klair, are going to be interviewing you, Miss Grace Yoo, for our Asian American women's history class under the direction of Dr. Chrissy Lau. So yeah, we just wanted to first ask you just in general, just in general if there's anything you felt was very important to tell us about yourself, before we start the interview just anything that you want us to know right off the bat.

Grace Yoo (GY): *00:44-00:54* My background is Pacifica. I know you all are calling from Monterey or you're all going to Cal State Monterey, maybe that's one thing and I'm looking forward to the interview and being interviewed by all of you, you both are students at Cal State Monterey. I teach at San Francisco State, and so it's great to see our Cal State students involved in this project.

KP: *01:07-01:09* Awesome. Okay, Jaspreet you wanna kick it off?

Jaspreet Klair (JK): *01:11* What was your experience like at the beginning of quarantine versus now?

GY: *01:19-03:05* I have to say at the beginning of quarantine, I mean, I don't know about you, but you know, we were freaking out. You know, there was no toilet paper in my whole city, there was no milk in my whole city, and it was... It was a really anxiety-producing time and to tell the truth, to tell you the truth, I didn't know how to sew and I, you know at the very beginning of the pandemic, it was close to our spring break at San Francisco state and one of my colleagues, Professor Valerie Soe, was like "Hey you should be sewing during spring break," and I'm like I don't. I don't sew. I don't have a sewing machine. How am I going to sew? And she said it's really important to start sewing right now, because, you know people need- we're in a pandemic! And I understood in my head what she was saying, but I think what really got to me and got to my heart is when I started going to my local grocery store. And I was running into young people working at the store without a mask right at the beginning of the pandemic and it just... It broke my heart, and I was like there are essential workers out there, right now, with no PPE, with no covering. They need a covering and if you went on Amazon at the time to get a covering it was like this was March but then they said May. You can get a facial covering in May, and I'm like okay, like, we need coverings now. And so again I didn't know how to sew, but within a week I learned to sew and I was sewing my first mask for young people that are working at the local grocery store here because I was just, I was worried for them, you know, and there were like long lines to the store and, you know, we didn't have milk in our city, toilet paper, I mean pure craziness at the beginning and so I got involved at the very beginning,

because I was so, it was like life and death, I was so worried about young people in my community but older people as well.

KP: *03:17* Okay, and now do you feel like your efforts were worth it, or were they in vain or, how has your work kind of like transformed and affected the community?

GY: *03:30-06:10* Well, you know, at the very beginning, I didn't know how long this pandemic would be. All I know is that we needed to have facial coverings, right? And I was terrified, I really was terrified at the very beginning, but learning to sew and putting my energy into sewing really helped me cope during the pandemic. And then being part of the Auntie Sewing Squad and the community that we created really helped me, and not to mention, you know, in order to make a facial mask you need, elastic. And I mean elastic was really hard to come by. In fact I was on Nextdoor begging people for elastic, and my first mask were made out of the elastic of bed sheets, and I was like combing my whole house looking for elastic. And Amazon said elastic was not available till May, and I was just like how am I going to get elastic? Again, Professor Valerie Soe who was part of the Auntie Sewing Squad at the time, said why don't you just join the Squad? Somehow, have elastic and I was like wow! So I joined the Squad, I got elastic. And joining the Squad has changed my life and learning to sew has changed my life during the pandemic. After I learned to sew, you know, we were making masks for like Muni bus drivers, we were making masks for local healthcare workers. And then, you know, I'm a teacher, I teach at San Francisco State. I was really worried about students. I mean, I know I was having a hard time, but I know young people also were having a hard time, and I know young people didn't have a lot of opportunities. All of a sudden, we had a switch to remote learning, you know, so quickly. And it was just overwhelming, and so I decided, you know, for the summer that because I learned to sew, I wanted to teach young people how to sew. And so I put a little kind of call out to San Francisco State students to see who wanted to sew, and I had over, you know, 10 students that responded that say they want to learn to sew. So we were sewing and we were doing a research project, at the same time, in the summer, and so 10 SF State students, along with their friends from Smith College, Hamilton College, UC Santa Cruz, learned to sew this summer and we were making masks. And we made a total of 1500 masks between June to December and I'm just so proud. In fact, let me see if I can (laughs) show you some pictures of some of these amazing students. Do you mind if I share screen?

KP: *06:17* Um, you should have permission, let me see.

GY: *06:19* Okay, great so let me, let me locate the slides of my students and just the work they did in terms of making masks. I know, it sounds like your Professor may have wanted you to learn to sew as well?

KP: 06:32 All she did offer us... Like her Friday office hours right?

JK: 06:37 mm hmm. Yeah.

GY: 06:37-10:09 And I encourage you all! Like you should all consider learning to sew. It's still not too late to sew and I encourage you all. It's such a great skill set, and you know the pandemic is not over. We're gonna need masks still. So I just wanted, this is just some slides that I've been sharing at various presentations, and I started sewing March 24, 2020, and this is the conversation I had with Professor Valerie Soe who said I can teach you how to sew. And I, you know, I put a call out there on Facebook and I got a sewing machine. My colleague, Professor Kira Donnell, loaned me her sewing machine, and so this was like my first day trying to sew. I mean I don't even know how to turn on the machine. That's how bad it was that I had to tell my colleagues, "I think your machine's broken, I can't turn it on!" But Professor Valerie Soe helped me move through this and I must say, if I had to do a year in review, my high points were being part of the Auntie Sewing Squad, but the high points were the Auntie Sewing Squad I must say, and the vaccine being discovered. And the low points have been the terror of not knowing what our government was doing during the pandemic, also anti-Asian hate violence, and the fires of California. The fires of California were really intense for me but, I must say the masks, the making of the masks and using the masks were really helpful. And by the way, I didn't know the magnitude of what we were doing with the Auntie Sewing Squad until I saw the news. One day, I was sitting and watching the news Saturday morning, and they were saying, "The Auntie Sewing Squad was helping make masks for Muni bus drivers", and then I was like OMG. We're making masks for Muni bus drivers. Where are the masks, you know, where's our government? And then I realized the magnitude of what we were doing. And again, these are sort of one of my first masks, for our local grocery store workers, and again I didn't know how to sew, but, you know I needed to sew. And this is the summer research project I did with my students. It was a research project, but they also could learn how to make masks, and they were learning research methodology like yourself. So you know, one of the big issues I had was like I didn't even know, even if they wanted to sew, if I could find supplies because not everyone had a sewing machine. And so, with the support of the Auntie Sewing Squad and Professor Valerie Soe and another Auntie named Auntie Elise. She helped me locate sewing machines for students, and so we got sewing machines for students, and then we got, you know, fabric, elastic, and thread. I mean people were donating fabric, elastic and thread, and then the Auntie Sewing Squad was also offering that as well, and so you know we started sewing, it was just amazing and again, one of the first learning outcomes for my students was learning to sew. These are some of the students week one. Let's just learn to sew and amazing, at the end of our session they made a mask. And then by week two, look, look at this is week three! They're making different kinds of masks. And just some amazingness of these students. That's week three. Oops. And so we keep making masks but not only do they make masks, these students

learn to teach others, they teach others too, how to sew as well, and so I think this is my next slide.

KP: *10:23* I'm, I'm curious... where exactly are you giving these presentations?

GY: *10:29-11:30* Oh I'm giving presentations to conferences. Association of Asian American Studies Conference... Uh, wherever people want to hear about it, and so I'm giving presentations and sorry, let me, and that's not really working with, my computer is acting a little weird. Let me try again. I think what I was most excited with the students is that they were teaching other students. That's the exciting thing. So they taught Cal State LA students how to sew, and Pitzer College students how to sew, and then this spring I just said, you know, this spring I hadn't had time to work with my students but they organized their own sewing session. And they taught others to sew. They said they had 20 students that came out. And they taught others to sew. I must say that the bulk of my time with the Auntie Sewing Squad and the bulk of my time with the students was really until December. Once the vaccine got discovered this semester, I've been just so busy with my classes and getting ready to go face to face with students in the Fall. Do you have other questions?

JK: *11:33* Yeah so, how has your family and community responded to your work as an Auntie?

GY: *11:43-14:22* Well, I had my children, I have a 17 year old and a 22 year old son, they're both sons, and I made them volunteer with the Auntie Sewing Squad, and so this summer, they were cutting fabric, so you know, and they weren't just cutting fabric, they were just using regular scissors like this to cut fabric, because to make a mask, it is so labor intensive, and if you could have pre-cuts, that would really be helpful. And so that's what they did for me this summer is do the pre-cuts. They were cutting it out for me. I know, it's a pain at times, because I don't have the best scissors you know. But they were cutting it out, I requested that, and so my family were involved in that production. My husband was always excited I was sewing. I think it reminded him of his own mother who sewed, and his mother, who also worked in the garment industry, and so sewing it's, you know, a part of his family's biography, and so I think hearing the sewing machine was kind of a reminiscent of just his own family. And yeah I just think in my home for my whole family, they just felt like the work that we were doing was productive and contributing to folks. You know, I was in charge of 1500 masks to San Quentin this summer. San Quentin prison had just so many cases this summer and so many people died, that the Auntie Sewing Squad decided as an act of solidarity and support to make masks and we were able to send in 1500 and that was the requests that I helped manage. And so my family kept saying "Aunties mailing all these masks" and then I would go mail them back out to San Quentin, and so our whole house was full of masks for San Quentin. And this is an oral history, I hope that my own children will see that, you know, in an act, when there's a crisis, if we can

you know, of course, take care of our family, but if we can always think of others, that we'll just all be better off, I mean, that's my hope and even including my students, we're in a crisis, but we can think of others, and give to others, you know? I mean we will all be better off. And so that was my hope. I was trying to model generosity, even when we were all sort of stressing out and unsure about our own future. I really do think that when you can, you know, help others during a moment of crisis, you're really just helping yourself right? It really can provide meaning and purpose, and I do think this sewing has provided myself meaning and purpose. I'm also super excited because I think, if you interviewed my students, they also probably would say sewing this summer providing meaning and purpose.

KP: *14:34* You know it's really wonderful how you're able to follow through on that request and get all those people the help they needed. It's very admirable.

GY: *14:44-15:24* Yeah I mean, we've been sewing for Muni bus drivers, for assisted living facility, migrant farm workers, folks at San Quentin prison, but also elders here in the Bay Area, the Korean Center of the East Bay. I'm excited that I learned it sew, but I'm also excited that so many students also wanted to sew this summer, and also the Fall because we continued working on this in the Fall, recruited additional students again for a total of 1500 masks made by San Francisco State students and myself, as well as other students who have been part of it, Hamilton College, UC Santa Cruz. It's been great. I've been telling my students, they now need to start a San Francisco State sewing club or a crafting club.

KP: *15:33-16:06* Yeah, okay so speaking of San Francisco and the Bay Area, and also because you mentioned that you were born in LA and originally lived in SoCal, um, I also was raised in LA. I wasn't born there but I grew up there, and now I'm in Santa Cruz, but I personally was curious about your experience, like, as a Korean American in in Southern California, which does have a very strong Asian and Korean population and influence, and then also I guess the Bay area, too, which is like has a strong Asian community as well. What has been your experience just growing up and then also during this time of, like, increased anti-Asian rhetoric? Um, just, can you tell us a little bit about that?

GY: *16:31-19:13* Well, so there's a lot there in that question, and I must say that this has also been a really difficult time period during the pandemic when our, you know, ex-President, you know, was calling the the pandemic that, you know the "Kung flu". And just the anti-Asian rhetoric and the anti-Asian racism that then emerged during this time period... That's a lot for a lot of us to deal with. And I must say the sewing really helped, sewing, just thinking of sewing and sewing for others, but I must say, also too, not only is it important to sew, but it's important to speak out. I've been involved in different movements here to speak out, to create solidarity, statements to speak up for others to encourage others to be in solidarity with Asian or

community. You know 32 years ago, I worked at UC Riverside and there were hate crimes happening there to Asian Americans. And it's crazy that in 32 years that the same things that I saw are still around. I mean anti-Asian racism has been around for 150 years and so it pains me to see it all over again. I just see it all over again. But the only thing that's really different this time is that I'm really seeing other communities in solidarity with Asian Americans and that's what warms my heart. The other thing that, I think, that is different this time that I didn't see before is the digital hate. There's a lot of digital hate, that you'll see a post and people just being really hateful and that's really different. It's hard to see that. And my hope is if there'll be more solidarity, even in those ways, because during the pandemic we're seeing a lot of posts on our social media or other people's social media that acts of solidarity can also happen via just responding to people's social media posts. And that's something that, you know, I'm encouraging folks that I'm connected to to show acts of solidarity in that way as well. And then, as a Korean American, you know, I want to say that again, this anti-Asian hate and racism has always been around. I mean my father immigrated in 1963, and you know, no one would rent to him, he didn't have a place to live and so ended up in Los Angeles and K town. And you know, I mean that's why K town in Los Angeles is where it is because that's where Koreans could live. And so you know the racism that we see today is not new. It's always been around. The only thing different is I just feel like there are more communities that are aware of it. And there are a lot more young people speaking up and that warms my heart because I'm OG! I'm an OG so that means we need young people to speak up and we need young people to be in solidarity and that's what warms my heart during this pandemic, like I've been seeing that among young people like yourself.

JK: 19:27 I have a question so what are your thoughts on some parents not sending their children back to school because they fear their children might face racism or harassment?

GY: 19:38-20:43 Well, and I think those concerns and worries are real, especially during this pandemic. It's been so frustrating because I think people are taking out their anger and their frustration on vulnerable communities like Asian and vulnerable folks that they perceive as vulnerable, and that's actually happening right? And so what do I say to parents who're feeling worried about sending your children back to school, they're afraid of bullying, they're afraid of you know, bullying racist acts. On their children, I say to those parents speak up, organize with other communities of color and you know, work in solidarity. Join that parent teacher association, start to speak up, talk to the principal. I mean if the principal has to deal with not only like one parent, but like 10 parents?? Then they're gonna take some action so that's my feeling is a way to cope through any of this is through community, and solidarity, and speaking up. And I think we're seeing that, and I just hope parents of young children will do that, will organize together and speak up! That's the only way through this all.

KP: 20:55 So, you mentioned that a lot of young people are speaking up, but do you think that there is any kind of disconnect between like the rhetoric of younger people the rhetoric older people, regarding the same situation, and you know how they're coping with it?

GY: 21:12-22:1 Do I think there's a disconnect? I actually think that younger people are more connected, because all of you are on social media, you're seeing these visual images. And that's why I'm just amazed by it. I've been going to protests and marches, Black Lives Matter movement, you know, anti-Asian hate and violence marches. And it's across group and just various people from various communities coming together because they want to stop Asian hate, they want anti-racist practices to be occurring, and they want to be an anti-racist and and so they're showing up. And that's what gives me hope is that there really is the solidarity that I've never seen before, and I do think that's maybe the gift of the pandemic is that people have a thoughtfulness to be thinking about these issues that may not be their own issue, but they're realizing "hey we've got to speak up about this and we've got to stand together", and so that's what's really, I mean, hopeful for me to see.

KP: 22:20 Do you think that either during this time, or in the past, maybe when you were growing up, that Korean American face different issues than Japanese Americans, than Chinese Americans? Or do you think that, in general, you know there's just horrible racism and hatred towards any Asian American?

GY: 22:47-23:56 Well, I do think that all Asian Americans face similar-ish stereotypes of being seen as the perpetual foreigner. You know, that we're not really ever from here? I think that's a common stereotype and I think all Asian Americans experience that. I think, maybe the differences between Korean Americans and other Asian American groups is just the timing of immigration to this country. And the timing of this political consciousness, right, that might be different than other Asian ethnic groups. It's just the timing of this, I feel like, you know, Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans may have been ahead of this because their families have been here for longer periods of time, you know, for the last hundred years. And so, their consciousness may be so different and they may be more organized, but I think Korean Americans, along with other Asian Americans experience similar things. This idea that you're never from here, that you're always a foreigner. That has always been with us for the last 150 years, and because it's perception that we're a foreigner, that is also where the violence of the hate and racism gets directed to. We know there's been all kinds of race riots directed towards Asian Americans for the last 150 years, so this is not something new. But for Korean Americans, the consciousness around that might be, you know, a bit later than other Asian American groups.

JK: 24:14 Ok. I think that's all from me.

GY: 24:16 Oh okay.

JK: 24:18 Do you have any other questions.

KP: 24:21-24:25 I did have another question that just popped into my head. Like because I am a Japanese minor, so I started like Japanese culture and language, but always interested in like the differences or intersections and, like the different Asian and Asian American groups so that's I think that's why I keep asking questions about like your Korean American...

GY: 24:45-24:47 I love that, I love it. I love that you're interested in all of that, and I think it's so great that you're working with Dr Christy Lau.

KP: 24:54-24:59 I am working with Dr Lau and I also work with Ogaki-sensei also. She's my mentor in the Japanese department.

GY: 25:04 That's great it's wonderful.

KP: 25:05 I've got great teachers, great mentors all around. Well guess what I.

GY: 25:10 Yeah I was gonna say you're going to be ready to go travel get to Japan.

KP: 25:15 yeah that's the plan. My question for you is. I know that there's been like such an increase in like the acceptance of Korean culture due to like Korean dramas and Korean music like BTS and that kind of stuff, I was wondering what your thoughts about that were, if it's something that you're super excited about or, if you think that. I know some of my own Korean friends are like Kpop is a Korean thing and let's keep it in Korea and it sucks that Americans are now taking it in like absorbing it into their interests and stuff, but there are other Koreans and Korean Americans are like this is amazing that Korean culture is like now influencing a Western audience and it's like available to a wider audience. So what are your thoughts on that whole thing?

GY: 26:11-28:23 Well, I think Korean culture has gone mainstream for a while now, at least a decade. I teach a class called “Koreans in America,” I must say that that class for the last at least good 10 or 15 years, people are taking it because you know there’ll be, I mean, one time I had class full of BTS fans. And so I mean, I think it's an amazing, it's great because it's a way for folks who might not be familiar with Korean culture or Korean history to find a connection and that's the amazing thing was with things digital and the internet is that there are these new kind of connections being made. That didn't exist when I was growing up, it would be like Korean what Korean? What is that? But now people can just Google their way through, they can find music, they can get things delivered to their house, I mean it really is changing the way, I think, how people may perceive difference, it's almost like the internet's really changed that. I mean I'm here in the Bay area, H Mart is a big like Korean store and there's not a large Korean community here but everyone's like H mart it's opening up and I'm like okay. Korean flavors in everything are in, the music’s in, and you know part of it is, I have to say it's also the government has also encouraged that as well kind of the export of culture. Knowing that people want to come to Korea and it's also been done intentionally as well. And so I mean, for me, I don't have any strong opinions. I'm just excited that you know I find young people that will come they're coming into my class wanting to learn more, and I think. if that gets them to my class I think more power to all of us, knowledge is powerful. And I've actually had students, you know they've had careers in Korea as a result of taking my class going abroad teaching English and they've been there for a couple years they come back they saved enough to buy you know, a house so... I think it's wonderful it's an opportunity for young people.

KP: 28:28-28:30 Do you think about that the influx of Korean culture and the normalization of Korean culture is helping with the STOP Asian Hate movements? And now so many people are recognized Korean Americans and Koreans as like it's not that that they're other anymore.

GY: 28:51-29:53 I think it definitely does. It does help. I think people, I mean I feel like young people well versed with the internet, I mean I have students that are telling me that, you know, they're gaming and then their best friend is from, you know, Turkey, or you know I mean, it's amazing with the internet and those possibilities that's like the best of the internet is those connections. That travel pass borders right, and I mean that's the hope of the internet and that's in terms of that question that's the best possibility around the internet is that it can create more understanding and connection and a solidarity with communities that might be different than one zone. That's the ultimate hope of the internet, I mean the other part of the internet, it also can you know, encourage hate and you know kind of a nationalism and you know, that's the other extreme, of the internet, but I think the best of the internet is this ability for people to empathize, to finding interest in somebody different and connect. That's the best of the internet.

KP: 29:57 Most definitely. All right, well, I think that's the last of my questions, too.

GY: 30:04 Great.

KP: 30:07-30:17 Okay, well, thank you for speaking with us Miss Grace Yoo. I'll go ahead and end the recording now.

JK: 30:18 Thank you so much

GY: 30:20-30:22 Should we take a picture with you all. I take a picture, put it on the Auntie Squad site.

KP: 30:25 I love that.

GY: 30:27 Okay smile. Okay, great, I'll put it on the Auntie Squad.

JK: 30:33 Thank you so much for your time.

GY: 30:35 Great meeting you all hope you get an A in the class.

KP: 30:39 Great meeting you.

JK: 30:41 Bye take care.