

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Hannah Lee
Interviewers: Kelly Liao
Date of Interview: July 4, 2020
Transcribed by: Kelly Liao
Edited by: Josh Kim
Audio Track Time: 1:57:20

Background:

Born in Seoul, South Korea, Hannah Lee spent her early childhood in Indonesia until she was five. She moved to Houston with her family in 1985. After high school, she pursued her higher education at Boston University and graduated with a B.A in Art History and a Minor in Communications. Growing up with a passion for acting, Lee started her professional acting career at 27 after she quit her job at Samsung Engineering. With an international experience as a performance artist/actor across 6 countries and 3 continents, Lee has been involved in more than 10 plays and 5 movies. Besides acting, she works as an aesthetician and manages an online clothing business with her parents.

Setting:

This interview was conducted through Zoom during COVID-19, in the comfort of each person's homes.

Key:

KL: Kelly Liao

HL: Hannah Lee

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

KL: Today is July 4, 2020 and we are here with Hannah Lee for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history project. Welcome, Hannah. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview with us.

HL: Oh, thank you so much for having me.

KL: How are you doing today?

HL: Oh, it's Fourth of July. It's great. I'm doing pretty well. How are you?

KL: I'm good.

HL: Awesome. I'm a little nervous, actually... I've never—this is a really rare and awesome opportunity for me. I feel really, really honored that you guys would choose me to interview.

KL: Mm-hmm. No problem [both laugh]. So I guess my first question is where and when you were born?

HL: Where and when? I was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1980, July 15—it's actually my birthday right around the corner.

KL: And could you describe the community you grew up in?

HL: I was born there, but I immediately moved to Indonesia. My dad was working there. My dad was working in different companies in Indonesia, because they had more jobs over there. I hung out with a bunch of Indonesians basically growing up. And then at the age of 4 or 5, I moved to Houston, Texas, and we pretty much started out living in basically the ghetto. So I think I grew up with a lot of diversity. There were a lot of Latinos and black people around me. A few Asians, and not so many white people. And so, yeah, that's my stark recollection of growing up as a newbie in America, and also in Houston, Texas. Yeah, I just a lot of diversity, a lot of different-looking people than I was used to.

KL: And so how would you describe the household you grew up in?

HL: The—the house what? [**KL:** The household.] The house code? What do you mean by that?

KL: The household, your family?

HL: Oh, household! Sorry, sorry about that. Um how so? Culturally?

KL: Like, what—what do your friends and—what do your parents do? Or, what languages you speak at home?

HL: Yeah, so my parents... they came here trying to figure out what to do career-wise. I don't think they really had any ideas, but they pretty quickly decided to go into business, and so they actually still have the business that they started out with. And it's in Harwin. So basically growing up with them, they were working a whole lot. And they started out at the flea market, and then they eventually got their own brick and mortar. And they basically sold clothes wholesale on Harwin. And... because they weren't really around, because they were working so much, I feel like... I feel like I had to learn a lot about how to kind of fend for myself in America. This—this starkly different culture that I was now thrust into, I didn't really get any kind of direction from my parents. They were so busy. So I was pretty much taking care of myself. I think even food-wise—I remember eating a lot of ramen noodles [laughs], cooking it for myself and with the other kiddos that were around me that were also like, just, you know, without their parents.

HL: Um, even like, studying, I had to like—I didn't really get a lot of help from my parents, like I remember I had a really, really hard time with learning the English language. I had to get ESL. Yeah, I was pretty much, like, fending for myself, or, depending on the school system, to help me out. Yeah, I hope that answers the question.

KL: Yeah, sure. And, do you have any siblings?

HL: Yes, I have one brother. He's younger than me by a year and a half.

KL: Were there any values that your parents emphasized during your upbringing, even though, like, they're kind of busy?

HL: Values... being Asian, I feel like it was very important for my dad to instill in me the focus on the other person—a person that wasn't taken care of—or the group. And so, I—I felt like... I was either directly or indirectly taught to... look out for what was needed outside of myself, and meet that need and to serve that need. So... I think that's—that's good in some ways, but also I think it kind of—kind of hindered me in other ways. Because I—I... I know that growing up now, I feel like I've taken a lot of time making sure that my parents were okay, that my family was okay. So that sometimes trumped my own ambitions or—my own ambitions or my own desires, or my own tasks.

Also, we grew up in the church. So... I think that my parents both came into the faith later on. They came into the faith, basically, after they came to America, because my uncle was going to church, and just basically introduced them to Christianity and Jesus, and so... I think they eventually caught on to Christian values. And then they—once they really, really caught on and they really started to see the importance of it. So I grew up with a lot of Christian values. Just caring for other people, loving one another. And... I learned as best as I could [laughs].

KL: That's great. And so, what languages do you speak at home?

HL: At home? Oh my gosh, that's a really good question. I think growing up—I'm sure you've heard this a lot from Asian Americans, but they kinda had to—Asian Americans kind of have... this dilemma growing up in America, where they're—they feel like the values that they're raised up with in at home are completely opposite from the values that are out, like, on the streets and outside at schools. So, you know, there's basically a choosing that happens, you know, and I definitely, definitely chose the values of my peers and Americans.

And so,... sorry, you asked me what languages do I speak? So, I think that, in the—when I was younger, kind of out of rebellion, I wanted to just speak English and only English to my parents. Um... and so my dad basically scolded me for speaking to him in English. And he was—and then there were—there are a lot of issues with the whole English and Korean thing. I was even, like.. I was even criticized for my writing when I was in high school, because of the fact that I was—was raised with the Korean language. So therefore, I didn't know how to translate... my writing of English language, very well? Like I wasn't able to articulate very well, in writing the English language. I would write in the passive voice instead of the active voice, in just English—passive voice, which is, I guess Korean. I didn't know that.

Anyways, I know that I learned both languages growing up. And I was encouraged to speak in Korean, especially since my—my dad and my mom both spoke to me in Korean. So, I tried to speak in Korean, but I think that my will eventually won out and wanted to speak to them in English. I wanted to be friends with them, like my American friends were friends with their parents. But that pretty much got shut down pretty, like, instantly [laughs]. So, I eventually had to choose, or I had to—I had to decide, okay, I might have to speak to them in Korean, and only in Korean. So it pretty much eventually switched back to Korean. I speak it now—I speak a kind of a mixed Korean and English to them.

KL: And you mentioned you moved to the US when you were like, 5 or 6, right?

HL: Four or five. I actually—I think I was about 5. Yeah.

KL: Okay. So do you know what motivated your family to move to the US?

HL: My dad tells me that he just wanted a change. I think that what hid—what kind of like, set it off, was... my dad realized that the opportunities that I was given, that I would have been given if I were to have stayed in Indonesia weren't going to be the best. At the time, it was still a third world country. And it was all just done in Indonesian. And it was all just Indonesian. So I—I think my dad basically decided, "I have to send her, I have to—we have to move to a country where they're going to be afforded better opportunities." And so, he decided to quit his job in Indonesia, and just start fresh in a brand new country. And so yeah, it was kind of like, for us, for our education and our upbringing, but also for, just, a new start for him and his career.

KL: So what was the first city you came to when you came to the States?

HL: Houston.

KL: Okay. And did you remember, like, your first perceptions of the US?

HL: [Gasps] Oh god... [**KL:** That was a long time ago.] It was a long time ago. God, I...

KL: Or anything, like, unexpected or surprising?

HL: I remember—the things that I remember really strongly were the—the hard parts of being a—a just, complete newbie, a complete newbie to the States. And... and I think the first recollection I had was at school. I went to school on the first day, and I think it wasn't even—it was like pre-K or something like that, it was really, really early on. But I remember being, like, "I do not speak a lick of English. I do not speak the language of all these kids." And I just remember feeling so, completely powerless, and kind of weak, you know? Because I was this really, really, kind of... I was kind of a hyper kid. I think I really liked to talk a lot. Well, I didn't really like talk a lot, but I remember just thinking to myself, like, I don't even have that ability to make friends, you know? And so... yeah, it was really, really... really, really hard for me in the beginning.

Um, but yeah, like, any good things, I don't really remember them. I don't remember, um—I don't know, I think there was one time when I went to California for the first time, it was pretty early on. And I remember seeing some kids and the sun. The sunny weather was amazing. And I just remember thinking, it was really, really happy there. And there was just a world, and it just seemed like a really, really happy place where there were people who were like—that looked like me. You know, Koreans out there, and so I felt a lot more comfortable in LA. But that was just a short little stint that we had there. We had to go there for immigration. But yeah, don't really have too many memories. I'm sorry, it was so long ago.

KL: Okay, good. Now I'm going to move a little bit to your college life. [**HL:** Yeah.] What college did you attend?

HL: I went to Boston University.

KL: Could you talk about your experience there?

HL: God, yeah, Boston University was a trip. It was so different from Houston. People were way more liberal over there, way more sophisticated—I felt like people that were my own age were just way more political and philosophical. I mean, I didn't feel like any of my peers growing up in Houston, talked the way that they did, and about the things that they did—they're talking about current events, and they were

talking about movies, like on a very deep level. And I don't know, I just felt... I don't know, I felt like, a little bit behind or something.

HL: But yeah, I did feel like there was a huge learning curve, but I was happy to make that huge learning curve. I was happy to get into politics and philosophy. It—it was also—it's a huge—Boston's a huge college town as well. And so it was also like this nice diversity over there. And so, yeah, I think I enjoyed it. Um, aside from the culture clash, I think—I think it was pretty okay for me. Yeah.

KL: Why did you choose to go to college in Boston?

HL: Um, it was pretty much the only college that accepted me, [laughs] if I can just be real. Yeah. But I also wanted to get as far away from Houston as I possibly could.

KL: And what were your areas of interest during college? Did you always know you want to study art—?

HL: Art history? Um... no, I actually wanted to study communications at first, and I knew that Boston University had a really, really strong communications program. So I, I was pretty excited about that. And I think I partly chose Boston University for that too. But I... pretty early on, learned about the—the kind of—the dangers of media and how it was all kind of a sham. That's kind of what you hear going into college at first. And so... and this was back in 1998. So it was a long time ago as well. But I think I very early on decided to switch from communications to art history, because I knew that I wanted to study that in my soul, in my gut, was something that I was going to enjoy and so...

HL: I was always drawn to the arts, that was like, very, very clear to me, and I had this one class in art history in high school, and I remembered it so—so poignantly as being like, just such a joyous time for me, to like—such a joyous opportunity to study, so I decided to just go in this direction. I had no idea. I wasn't thinking about a career. I wasn't thinking about really anything. I just wanted to study something that I knew that I would enjoy. So I picked that.

KL: Could you talk about your extracurricular activities during college?

HL: Yeah, yeah, I... I took this one class in acting, and it was just an elective. Um... but yeah, there was something in me that was deeply afraid. Because I—I knew that I'm—I knew that I wanted to be an actress when I was in ninth grade in high school. But for some reason I just, like, decided that with a person who has this kind of a face, who looks—who's Asian, it just wasn't going to be a very lucrative career for me, not very practical for me. And you know, growing up with Asian parents, I feel like financial security was also huge. And so, I just decided to forfeit it pretty early on, pretty much when I went to college. But I definitely took this elective just without even thinking about it, just because I thought it was gonna be fun. And... it was really interesting, it was really hard. Um... but I felt like there are these, like, muscles that were just starting to come to life all of a sudden again, and it was like, I almost had to like massage and break into these muscles that were like dying to be broken into. And—and so I remember it just like, really, really kind of struck me that I was like, there's something there that... I don't really know if I like it? But it's something that, I was like, hmm—it was just like, food for thought, I was just like, hmm.

HL: And I remember thinking how hard it was, how much I didn't like it because it was so hard. But also—I also realized that it was like, a challenge that I wanted to overcome. Just like the speaking part, I didn't feel like I was a very good speaker. I still kind of don't feel like I'm a very good person—not a very

articulate person. But um, I just feel like... language has so much to do with acting, how you speak this language has so much to do with acting. And so that was one of the biggest challenges that I wanted to overcome, and I was like, really, really, like... really, really excited about overcoming. Like, I needed to sound American, you know. And so... I don't know, there's something really, really nice there. And I also thought there was something that I was kind of like, it—it was almost something that with enough practice, it would come naturally. You know, this presentational flow of speaking this language that may or may not be the easiest thing for me. I mean, I spoke English well enough at the time, but... yeah, to do it on a stage in front of people was a totally different thing. But yeah, that was one of my extracurricular activities that... was cool.

KL: Okay. Do you remember your first role or your first play?

HL: Like ever? Um... [laughs] yeah, I do. I think it was the Wiz. It's this musical called "The Wiz" and I did it in high school. Yeah, and I played the Wiz. So, I don't know if you know about "The Wiz," but it's basically like this musical version of "The Wizard of Oz." And it's—it's kind of set in the 70's, to kind of like, this disco music, and... you know, really funky. And I was the Wiz, and—and I remember just kind of thinking to myself, "Oh my gosh, I have the smallest part ever." Um, and it only—my part only came at the end. And so I was kind of... I don't know, I kind of went in there thinking that I must not be a very good actress, you know, if I got this small little roll, but, um—yeah, it was—it was still really, really fun for me though, because, "Here's my chance to," kind of... I don't know. See if this was going to be something that was enjoyable for me. And it was deeply terrifying, actually. But... I still really loved it [laughs]. [KL: Yeah.] It's cringy to me, because it's my very first time. It's my very first role and so, yeah, that's—that's all I have to say about that.

KL: Okay. And going back to your college a little bit, what were some defining moments for you during college? Were there any mentors you looked up to?

HL: Um, hmm... defining moments—yeah, that's a really interesting question. There's this guy who ended up becoming my best friend. Me growing up in Houston, and... pretty much just knowing a very, very conservative worldview, and being raised with just, Korean parents who kind of sheltered me. Um, I guess... his name was Kevin, my friend Kevin. When I met him—so he was from California. And he was pretty liberal, the way that he thought was very liberal. He—he pretty much opened me up to this whole—a whole way of thinking, where, you know, you could question pretty much everything that you are raised up in, just to kind of see—just kind of like sift through it all, and see if it was something that you actually did believe in. And so Christianity definitely fell into that bucket. A lot of things, you know, just even... the people that I was, you know, that I was wanting to be friends with, the kind of things that I was interested in, just different philosophies of life, different types of music, different movies—he just introduced me to a lot.

I—I really, really enjoyed... just talking to him, because we would just basically walk around, just walk around on the streets, you know, just like, talking about our lives and the way that we... why we believe in the things that we believe in. We just like philosophized about everything, you know, and I think that it was good for him as well, because... well he was cracking me open number one, but I think it was also confirming for him some things. He was able to kind of like, voice his opinions on things, and so—I don't know, he definitely influenced me a lot. Um, and... yeah, I don't really know, we're—we're actually not friends anymore, because later on, I eventually came back to... a reawakening of my faith. I had an experience with Jesus, and I decided that Jesus was definitely the way for me. And so then when I ended up having a conversation after the fact, with my friend Kevin, he was... he really wasn't open to that,

and—and I still was like, I wanted to put my foot down and say, "Hey, yeah, this is actually—this is the way and the truth and the life for me." And so... take it or leave it, you know, like, let's—yeah, and so... I think that was the kind of deal-breaker for us as friends. Sadly, but yeah, he—he definitely—I wouldn't say that he was a mentor, but he was a friend of mine that really, highly influenced me a lot.

KL: What was your first job after graduation?

HL: Oh, god. My very first job after graduation was I taught English in Korea. My dad thought that it was a good idea for me to kind of like, sow my roots—dig up my roots in Korea. And so, I went over there with this contract to teach English, and... yeah, that was my first job.

KL: How long was that?

HL: It was supposed to be a year, but I ended up leaving after eight months.

KL: Oh, okay. [**HL:** Yeah.] And when did you start your acting career?

HL: That was... not until I was probably 27. Yeah. I—I was working for Samsung Engineering at the time, but somehow I found out about a gig—an audition for "Joy Luck Club" in Houston. And I auditioned and I got the—the main role. And, yeah, that was my first gig in Houston. Yeah.

KL: Why did it take you, like, a pause, between your acting class in college and your later acting career?

HL: Oh—yeah, no, I—no, I decided to quit acting when I went to college. Decided that it was not gonna be for me. Yeah, but, um—and then I—so—but after college, knowing that I wasn't going to do acting... after college, I was looking for jobs, and trying to figure out my life, and I was so clueless. I was so directionless. I was like, what am I supposed to do with my life? And so I was just getting job after job. I was just working at these, like, random places. I first worked at a nonprofit organization in Houston. And then I worked at—as a receptionist at a pediatrician's office. And then I got a job at Samsung Engineering. And I completely hated it [laughs]. Um, and I did that for four years. And then—it was around then that I was just like, "I am going to, like, shoot my face, if I don't, like, figure this thing out, figure out what my calling is." You know, what my purpose is, and what I'm supposed to do with my life. So... that was when "The Joy Luck Club" opportunities came up.

And I... I started doing it, I started rehearsing, and I remember thinking to myself, like, "I love this—it's so hard, but I love this so much." And so, I think it was around then, not too long after that, that I quit my job [laughs] for Samsung Engineering. Um... 'cause—'cause it was too hard to have, like, a full time job at a corporation, and to do acting as well, you know, and, like... I just thought, like, "I'm so tired right now." And plus I was also very involved in my church, and so I was basically, like, doing three big projects at the same time. And so, I realized I had to cut some things, and I decided to cut my full time job at Samsung. And I also decided to cut my—my church thing and decided eventually, "Yeah, I need to take this acting thing a little bit more seriously, 'cause it won't leave me alone." You know, "I know that I still want to act. And I can't shake it off," you know. So... yeah. That's kind of that.

KL: And you mentioned, like, many struggles you had with acting in the beginning. Like how do you later overcome them? Or are you still trying to overcome—overcome?

HL: Yeah, yeah, struggles. Oh my god, acting is so hard. Um... do you want to know what the struggles are?

KL: Oh, yeah.

HL: Wow. Um... oh, god. It's a lot of work, it's a lot of character development that you have to like, do a lot of research for, and, but you also have to be ready physically and vocally. You have to be really limber with your body, strong and limber with your body, and just basically take on a role that's not you, you know, and make it believable enough. And so, I found it really... I felt like one of my first... but also emotionally, I felt like one of my first challenges was to kind of... kind of break down my walls, you know, and to show my heart, you know, show—show emotional fragility, you know. I feel like, as... well maybe it was just the way that I was raised or whatever, but I felt like it was really hard for me to show my emotion, you know, my emotions. And it was hard for me to cry, so hard for me to show. It was really easy for me to show anger—it still is [laughs], but it's—it was really hard for me to show weakness or struggle.

So... I remember... I had to do a lot of soul searching, and just live life, basically, just knowing that it was okay to... to be weak, I guess. It was okay to not know everything, and to have things be hard and to admit that to myself and to the world. You know, because it's one—one level is to admit it to yourself. But the next level is to admit it to somebody else outside of yourself. So, I was—I think that was the biggest—that was the first thing that I remember thinking, like, this is—acting's really, really hard, because a lot of acting is...

[Video stops because of internet disconnection (32:54-36:06)]

HL: Hey there. I'm so sorry. I think it's my internet.

KL: You're good. Do you want to continue the topic? I guess you are talking about your second challenge of acting.

HL: Okay, yeah. My challenge—my second challenge of acting, hmm... I think it's the—the character work. You have to do a lot of research, and I think I was—I've never actually been formally trained in acting. So therefore I have to kind of like figure it out myself—physical time budget comes in. Yeah, like the steps—I think it's also different per character too. You know, it's very different—how are you gonna get to know person, you know? Get to know a whole other human being. So yeah, I think it's—that's a huge challenge for me. And then—and then getting all that information and then kind of like, fleshing it out through your own expressions, in your own flesh, you know, through your own body, and—and voice. You know, it's... kind of a strange thing. You just kind of try it out. You gotta feel it out. Yeah.

KL: I saw you later move to Czech Republic. Did you go there to gain more acting experience? Or...

HL: Yeah. Yeah, I did it. Yeah.

KL: Oh, could you talk about your experience, you know, in Czech Republic?

HL: Yeah, that's a really good question. There's a really interesting story to that. So, my initial kind of like, journey to acting—I was just getting a little small roles and stuff like that in Houston, and also taking classes and stuff. So, I—one of the—one of—and also watching a lot of performances too. And so there's

this one time when I saw a production of "As You Like It" in Houston, and it was performed by the Prague Shakespeare Festival. And... and they were performing it in Houston. And I knew that they were also going to be going to Prague to perform it as well. But that performance completely blew me away. It's the first time that I saw a Shakespeare production where I felt like I knew exactly what was going on. And I didn't know the play. I mean, I was just like, blown away. I don't know, it made me feel intelligent, made me feel like, "I... I get this play, and I was enjoying this play, you know?" And it's Shakespeare! Like, I've never enjoyed Shakespeare before. So, it was—that was really, really exhilarating for me.

So afterwards, after the play was over, I was just complimenting everybody, was telling everybody how much they blew me away. And then, I hung out with them afterwards at a bar, 'cause they were like, hanging out. And I was just telling them, "Oh my gosh, you guys are incredi—incredible, amazing. I love that you guys are going to Prague. I'm so jealous. And then there's this little voice inside of me that said, like, "You should—you should ask them if you can join them. You should go with them." So I was talking about it and one of the actors was like, "You should totally ask the director if you can come with." I was like, "Really?" He was like, "Yeah, I think he would be okay with that." So I did. And he was thrilled about the idea of me coming to help them.

He said he couldn't pay for my flight or my lodging, but come. So I was like... okay, like I had just quit my job at Samsung. And I was helping my parents out at their business. So, I didn't really have anything going on, really. I mean, I was helping my parents' business out, but that was just to do something while I was acting. So I booked my ticket, and I joined them on this trip to the Czech Republic, and I was just helping them during their performances, just collecting tickets, collecting money and passing on tickets. That's it. But then, that was only supposed to be a two week trip. But then, after the two weeks was over, one of the actors came up to me and said, "Hey, are you going back home after this?" and I was like, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, because there's another audition with the same company that you should totally extend your trip and try out for." So I was like, "Okay."

So... I was pretty nervous about it. But I did. I extended my trip. And I auditioned and I got the part. I got a part for this tiny little part, as a fairy in... what was it called? *Midsummer Night's Dream*. But I was so thrilled, because it was a company that I was so wanting to be a part of, 'cause they blew me away, they're an amazing company. So, I went ahead and I started rehearsing with them, rehearsals started happening and all that. But then, not too long after, the show gets canceled. They said, "I'm so sorry, we cannot do this show. We don't have enough money." So I'm like, great. I extended my trip for like, three months, basically. And now I have nothing to do here in this foreign country, and I'm already starting to get bored. So I was like, "Gosh, what am I gonna do now?"

So I was like, I need to find a job, I just need to occupy myself with something. So I was looking for jobs. And I eventually found a job at school, an international school. And they really liked me. And they said, "Hey, can't we want to hire you? But can you stay for a year?" And I was like, a whole year? And they're like, "Yeah." And so then I was like, "What am I gonna do for a year?" and I'm just thinking about it, I was like, hmm, a whole year in Prague. So I asked myself, like, would this actually be good? And I knew that there was a lot of films that were shot in Prague. And there's a lot of theaters in Prague. And I was like, this might be the actual—actually, like, the perfect idea for me to stay the year in Prague.

So I went ahead and I wrote up this really long email to my parents. Like, just—just kind of explaining to them that I had thought about everything, that I had a job, a full time job, and it was gonna pay for everything. I was going to take care of myself, I was going to get a flat on my own. That—that Prague would be a great city for me to really try out my acting in film and theater. And they had—you know, I

like, basically my—(I) made my ex(planation) so... so, like, thorough, that they couldn't—that they couldn't refute me, that they pretty much just said, "Okay, yeah, it seems like you have everything figured out."

So... so yeah, after that, I basically, like, went ahead and did that, I decided to stay for a whole year and I just—yeah, and I just did it. And it was awesome. I—I definitely got acting roles. I ended up auditioning for a really cool movie, it's "Snowpiercer." I don't know if you know Bong Joon-ho. Have you seen parasite? [KL: Yes.] Bong Joon-ho. Yeah, he—he had—I didn't know him at the time, but he had a movie that was being filmed in Prague, "Snowpiercer," and I auditioned for it—I didn't get the part, but... I still think about that, and I just think how crazy it is for me to have auditioned for Bong Joon-ho... and I get really excited. But I got other gigs, I got other jobs—acting jobs while I was in Prague. So it was a really good thing for me. Yeah.

KL: And then you later left for the UK, right? [**HL:** Mm-hmm.] How was the experience there?

HL: Yeah, um... god, yeah, that was when my parents saw that I was actually getting work in Prague. And, so then they're like, "Hey, you've never gotten formal training for acting, and we can see that it's, like, very promising. So we want to invest in you to get training." So I was like, "Are you serious?" And they're like, yeah, so I said, "Well the thing is, I cannot pay for any of it 'cause I don't have any money. You're gonna have to pay for everything." So then they agreed to do that, and I was like, "Alright, fine. I'm gonna go to London." And I'm—and I wanted—I really wanted to study at this Meisner school, this intensive Meisner school called the Actors' Temple. And... it was a three-month long intensive, and it was crazy. Very, very... [sighs] it was very, very hard. But it was good. Yeah, and so I just basically—I found the cheapest little, like, flat that I could find. And I just—I just did the acting training for three months, and I got to know London, and I didn't really try to get any acting jobs 'cause I was studying at the time. But yeah, the—the culture of London's very... yeah, it's—it's a lot of fun. It's a lot of fun over there. But yeah, that was kind of my experience. It wasn't very long, it was only three or four months, so...

KL: That's really cool. [**HL:** Mm-hmm.] You also moved to Germany, right?

HL: Right after that, yeah. Yeah, so I went to—I tried to go back to London and I got kicked out. So then I got back home and I stayed here for a couple months. And I was doing a lot of soul searching again, like, what am I going to do here in Houston? I can't stay in Houston. There's nothing for me here in Houston. So then I... but I was—I was really drawn to just, like, the European aesthetic. I love, um... yeah, I love—I love their... the freedom that Europeans have when it comes to art, and I also love how—how... it's—it's a way more respectable field, the arts are, then Americans kind of—well, unless you are an artist in America, you know, and unless you are making a career out of the arts in America, then—then it's still considered just a hobby, which isn't really highly esteemed in America, or—in Asians, of course, like, saying, you know... I think, kind of like, "money is king," you know, like, unless you're making a really, really lucrative career out of the arts, then it's kind of considered not that respectable in America or to Asians.

So—but to Europeans, like, I don't think money is really the kind of validator, the qualifier, but it's more like, just, do you have... do you have something to say? Do you have something that you want to show? Do you—do you really mean what you say? You know, and... I don't know, I can't really explain it. I just know that it's way more respected, to be in the arts in Europe. And, I also love just how really anything goes, you know, because of that, there's no rules to the arts over there. There's such a freedom of

expression that I was just really drawn to and wanted to learn from. So, I wanted to stay in Europe, and I heard that Berlin was pretty much the arts capital of Europe. So I decided to go there.

And definitely, Europe was... the perfect place for me to, like, flesh out all of my artistic yearnings and cravings, and I got to really just... experiment, you know? I did everything. I did music, I did performance, I even let my, like, fashion sense, kind of like—I—I made, like—I really came up with a lot of ideas as to how I could open a business like, selling clothes. You know, like, doing commerce, I think is also part of my artistic expression, you know, and so... I got to try everything while I was in Berlin. It was great—great city, yeah. [KL: Absolutely.] So much fun, yeah.

KL: Among all the different countries you've been to, what was your favorite artistic or acting experience?

HL: Artistic or acting experience, out of all those countries? That's a really good question. Um, I think... hmm. Honestly, this is a very—sorry, I'm gonna do something really quickly—this is kind of like, a strange answer, I feel like, but... I feel like it's... it's my answer, that's what I'm gonna say—I really feel like my favorite artistic... hmm, god, that's a really—I'm gonna give you two answers, okay? Um... oh god, there's so many, um... I think that the audition for Bong Joon-ho was pretty up there, because it was great opportunity. Like a very, very big opportunity. And even though I didn't get it, I was so happy to try. And I think that that's a big step for me, because it was such a huge opportunity. So that was like one of my tops.

But then the second answer that I would have to give to you was—is basically that... in Berlin, my best friend and I, whom I was living with, we would just try out these, like, photo things and, these, like, ideas for photography, and we would just—I don't know, we would like, paint our faces with skulls, and we would just like... do these crazy things, like we would just like, strip down naked, and just go to a park, and just take pictures of each other [laughs]. And—or—or we would like, paint our faces with these skulls, and we would like, busk on the streets. I would—I would busk—I would—I would play my guitar and I would sing music. And then my friend, who's a dancer, would like, dance to my music. And we would do this for money, you know, on the street in the middle of like, a flea market kind of situation. And it was so, like, raw and rugged. And obviously, we didn't make a lot of money, that wasn't really the point. But the point of it was that we could do it, we had the freedom to do this, because Berlin is so open to any type of performances. And—and so, I think—yeah, artistically speaking, creatively speaking, it really allowed me to kind of like, flex my muscles in—in so many different directions, and really kind of like, fight through a lot of the fears that I had, and just try things. And so that was—those were—those two things are my top reasons. My most favorite ones, yeah.

KL: How do you adapt to a new environment? Do you find it, like, challenging to make those transitions?

HL: Oh no, I love new environments! I... I am what's called a third culture kid. And so I... you know, anyone who moves from between the ages of 0 and 10 once, you kind of... don't—you grow up not really feeling like you have a home. And so, I think that as an adult, you kind of like, are always looking for a sense of home or a culture that is your home. And so I've always been in search of any experience that I would feel at home in, or any country that I was—I would feel at home in—that's why I like, moved around so many times. So, I—whenever I come across a new situation where I'm traveling, or living in a completely new foreign country, I—it's so much fun for me, because I'm learning, and it's like, I'm meeting new people—like, I can talk to any stranger, and just, like—they will feel like my friend, you

know? I—I love—I love anything new, actually. It's—it's thrilling to me, because I'm learning things, and—yeah, it really, really stimulates me a lot.

KL: So how do you think your international experience has influenced you—your artistic performance?

HL: Um [laughs], god, that's such a good question. How do you think—how do I think that it has influenced my artistic expression? Such a good question. Yeah... I think... well, I think number one, it's made me realize that America is definitely its own country, and there are definitely some characteristics about America that are just American. But all in all, me having traveled so many places—to so many places, like human beings are all the same. We are—we are connected in so many more reasons than we are—than... than we are not, you know? And so, I—I love the fact that we can truly under—everybody can understand each other if you have the open mind and the open heart to do so.

And so, that gives me a lot of comfort—comfortability on stage, that regardless of how weird I'm behaving, or, you know, like, how... you know, how different my character, like, choices are for a particular person—people are still gonna have to accept it. Because as human beings, like—you know, like, you either—you either take me in, and you watch me, and you listen to me, or you're turned off, and you like, walk out of the performance, and so either way, it's up to you, you know? But I have—I feel the freedom and the comfortability to just... be however I want when I'm on that stage, and so I feel like that's really influenced my artistic expression as an actress.

KL: Yeah. What in your opinion are the prospects for Asian actors in Europe versus in the US, considering you've spent time, like, in both places?

HL: What do I think are the prospects of Asian actors in Europe as opposed to the US? [KL: Mm-hmm.] Hmm... prospects? What do you mean by that? Can you explain that question to me?

KL: Oh, yeah. So I mean, how do you see, like, the role or the future of Asian actors in these two different places? (Do) you find, like, uh—

HL: Good question, yeah. Well, I think that this particular time is really special for Asian actors and performers, because there's just like, this new openness that's just hap—begun from “Crazy Rich Asians” and the huge success that it's had. I think that people are starting to realize, “Yeah—oh, snap, like, people—Asian Americans have not gotten any representation at all. And that is not okay.” You know, that is not good for... for the world, really. And so I think that even in Europe, they're starting to realize that, and so... yeah, it's just—it's actually happening all throughout the world. So, hopefully things—I know that I still have opportunities in Europe. Well, I feel like I have more opportunities in Europe now that that's happened, and also in America now that that's happened. But obviously during the COVID-19 quarantine, things have all—everything—every industry has come to a halt, or... just, hopefully, a very, very short, temporary break. But—but yeah, right before the quarantine happened... yeah, I've—I found that even the—the agencies in Europe were wanting to see more Asians in commercials and in TV shows. And, um—and in America there's a whole lot more opportunities opening up. So yeah, either—or—whichever country you want to go to, whichever region of the world you want to go to, I think it's gonna be good from this point on, yeah. [KL: Yeah.]

Just have to decide where you want to get settled [laughs], where you want your home base to be. But I will have to say that in Europe... and granted, every—everyplace still has their own like preju—prejudices and preferences. It's—it's still—we're still moving up with baby steps, you know, all of us. But yeah, I

think that as an artist, as a performing artist, you will definitely have a lot more freedom in Europe than in America. I feel like America, most of the work that you will be given has to do with whether or not you're going to make HL whether or not the company that's hiring you is going to make a lot of money. And so if your face is going to be money in their pockets, if it's gonna bring in more ticket sales, if it's gonna bring in more publicity, if you're already popular enough for people to—a lot of people to show up, then that's really gonna be the... yeah, the kind of decider of whether you get hired or not. Whereas in—in Europe, you can be a complete nobody. And you can still get hired, you know. You may not get paid for it, but you will still be working, you know. And so, you got to figure—what—what is more important to you.

KL: I think you mentioned, in pop culture, we've seen, like, the rise of Asian American representations, such as “Crazy Rich Asians,” “The Farewell,” and also the—“Parasite.” So I'm wondering, what do you see the changes and the representation of Asian Americans in the US?

HL: In the US? What I feel—well, how do I feel like Asians are being represented?

KL: Yeah.

HL: Can you—can you repeat the question again one more time? So sorry.

KL: So basically, what I mean is that how do you see like these changes and representation of Asian Americans in the US?

HL: [That's] a really good question, I feel like... Asian Americans are starting to have more—like, better characters to play out. And that's always a good thing. There's better stories, more human—like, real human beings, you know, with a huge story arc. That's actually happening in America. And also representation of our own stories. You know, people are—Asian Americans are... I think they—a lot of Asian Americans have written a lot, but now it's actually starting to come to the forefront, you know? Directors, a lot of directors are coming out. A lot of producers are—well, they may not be coming up, but they're actually starting to get the limelight, the coverage, you know? And I think that's really what is—what was necessary. But yeah, like, Asian American representation is definitely happening. People just need to keep on doing it, you know? They need to... write more stories themselves, Asian Americans need to... direct more things, you know, produce more things, produce their own stories. No one's gonna do it. No white person can do it for you, you know? In fact, we probably shouldn't let them [laughs]. I mean, we should just do it ourselves, really. Yeah, I hope that answers your question.

KL: Yeah, definitely. So can you talk about your artistic involvement in Houston?

HL: Mm-hmm. Okay, right now, I'm working on two—I have two readings that I'm working on. And, right now, everything—because everything is halted due to the quarantine, everything is being done on Zoom. Even theater productions are being done on Zoom, which is kind of odd, but whatever, that's the way it's gonna happen. And yeah, so I'm involved in these two readings. One is at the Rec Room—with the Rec Room, and it's a play that's not yet finished, but it will eventually be finished for us to read it and record it, and then present it to the—to the world, whoever has the link. And then the other one is happening very short—very soon. It's with the same playwright that I did my last piece with, called “Peaches.” And her name—the playwright's name is Soo-jin Lee. And she is—she invited me after the reading of “Peaches,” she said that she really liked my work, and she wanted me to do a cold reading of her next project, which is also not yet finished, but it will soon be finished. By the time—it may be

already finished by now. But yeah, it's very exciting to still be working and to still be, like—like, neither one of these projects I had to audition for, you know? I'm just, basically, chosen as somebody that they wanted. Which is—really, really thrilling to see, like, some changes happening in my—my career. Yeah, those are the two things that I'm working on right now. Um, yeah.

KL: That's great. And I see you that—see that you are currently carrying on three jobs as an actress, managing a business online, also as a (?). I'm wondering, like, how difficult it is for you to balance your life with multiple functions. [HL: Oh my gosh!] Does it limit—limit your acting roles to only those available locally?

HL: Um... okay, so one of my—one of my dreams, I guess—I guess one of the things that I really, really wanted to establish for myself was a freelance career. Because as an Asian American actress, I have to keep myself flexible. In case I have to go on a plane and travel somewhere for a job, or, you know, audition in Austin, or something, or... yeah, while still making money, here—here in Houston, which is where I live. So, I—that's the reason why I have so many jobs. I have my—my biggest and most important job is acting, of course. And that means I have to stay flexible to do these—like traveling and—to travel and to work elsewhere if I need to, but then I need to make money. So my other two jobs are just to make money, like, on a very consistent basis. And so, the (?) job I just got recently, and that is literally twice a week. Right now, it's been kind of like, now once a week, you know, and so—and I like it because I get to do something that I enjoy that has nothing to do with acting. And it's giving facial massages and bodily massages to my clients. And... and I could also tell my boss, if I need to audition or go somewhere that week, as long as I tell her in advance. She's cool with me just kind of skipping a week.

HL: And so my—my third job is working for my parents, and I help manage their website, and I sell clothes for them on their website, and I just take photos of the merchandise, and I do their social media marketing and whatnot. And that pretty much I can do whenever I want, you know, 'cause I (do) it at my house, so... Yeah, it's all pretty much an open schedule. Um, I do feel like things can feel a little bit schizophrenic. but I'm like, busy all the time, which is great for me. Because I just—that's how I prefer it. I love staying busy, and I love doing—have something different to do. Yeah, every day is definitely different, yeah. Right now, during quarantine, it's perfect, because... yeah, like, we're kind of slowing down a little bit, so my other jobs can kind of take preference for now. But yeah, when the quarantine is over, maybe things will start to get a little bit too much, but I'll—I'm sure I'll figure something out, yeah.

KL: That's great. So, what was your favorite role that you played? How did you land in that job?

HL: Mm, my favorite role... I think my favorite role was "Caught." Um... yeah, and I'm not going to say that it was easy. It was difficult, I had to perfect the accent—the Chinese accent. And that took a lot of practice. But it was fun practice, you know? I... I don't know, I just really felt like... that role was so enjoyable for me, because I was basically playing a Chinese artist, who was kind of help—who kind of helped manipulate the public with a lie. Um, that was kind of one of the things about this role that was very fun. And she also was Chinese and so that was fun to play a completely different ethnicity. I was also Asian. But I just—I just decided to—just to make her this very, very kooky character, you know? This character that was kind of like, wiley, you know, and just... she had something up her sleeve, but you didn't know until later on.

And so—and the whole entire play, like, basically like, blows up in your face, the whole audience, like, discovers later on, this whole big secret that comes out at the end. And it was so much fun! The—the play was so beautifully written, and... yeah, and it was really fun to play this kind of, like, eccentric, wiley,

character that... yeah, as weird as can be. I like playing weird characters [laughs]. Um... yeah, and I—and I felt really, like, this character was my own, like, I wanted to—like, no one was pushing me to play her a certain way. It was pretty much my own idea—like, my own vision of how I saw her, and... and I just, kind of, had a lot of fun fleshing her out to the fullest. Um, yeah. So that was why—that was—that was my favorite one.

KL: I heard that show is like, about, like, Chinese protest art and things like that. How does your role deal with Asian American identity and also Chinese protest art?

[Break (1:11:32-1:14:14)]

HL: Hey there, hi! [**KL:** Sorry, I know it's like, a long interview.] What's that?

KL: Sorry, I know it's a long interview.

HL: Oh, it's okay.

KL: Ah, okay. So shall we continue?

HL: Yes!

KL: Going back to the play you just talked about, I'm wondering, like, could you talk a little bit more about, like, how your role deals with Asian American identity and Chinese protest art?

HL: Oh, god. How did my role influence Asian American identity? [**KL:** I mean deal with, or, like—] With like, Asian American identity? Hmm... I think that it was just—to be able to see a character who had so many different layers, you know, an actual human being who also happened to be Asian American... was just so different to actually play, and also—also to see performance like that. I think that there isn't much artwork. There aren't too many plays that include that, that show an actual human being with an agenda, you know, with different, certain mind frames that are so complicated as a character that I was playing. She—she was really kind of dark and twisted in some ways.

I mean, she has different... she has different things that the public sees—first you see her coming in as an artist, who—and this is an—all a ruse, you know, she's... she's basically just trying to dupe the public, you know... into believing a certain thing. And, I—I feel like later on you realize that she's actually an Asian American artist, and she wasn't... like a—just a Chinese artist, you know, a Chinese Chinese artist that she comes into the play making you believe. So the artist definitely—the audience definitely feels duped.

And so—but it's—but it is an Asian person, regardless of whether you're Asian or just Asian American. Yeah, and you really get to see a real human being with so many different layers, and you really get to see the difference between—hey, yeah, there is a difference between an Asian who's Asian Asian, and also just Asian American... sorry, that's a really difficult question to answer. Yeah, that's—I—I just really—I just really felt like it was a joy to play a human being who had so much different layers, and who had a huge role in a play. Yeah.

KL: Um, let me change the question. Um, how, like—what does your role, like, say about Chinese protest art? Or, the whole play?

HL: What does my role have to say about Chinese protest art?

KL: Like, what—how [it's] connected to Chinese pro—protest art, based on your own understanding?

HL: Hmm, yeah. Um... gosh, there's so many... I—I don't know, I feel like... so, the artist that played opposite me was really the one that did the protest art. And so he was the one that made this—made this piece he called “Art.” And it was basically, like, this huge story that he fabricate—fabricated while he was in prison. And he... ended up making up this whole experience that he had while he was in prison. And he took a real prison as proof that this person actually exists and that he could actually have been in prison there. And he took all these little details of his experience in prison, and he got them from different books that he had read. And he made it so believable to the public. And he wrote this memoir about it. And it was his way of... hmm... trying to—trying to piece this together.

But it was his way of... yeah, just showing the world that this is—there's—there's no real big difference between a lie and the truth. And... but even if you create this story and you say that it was your own experience, that—really it's—maybe it didn't happen to me, is what he's saying, but it happened to somebody, it happened to all these different prisoners. And so it was his, kind of, statement to the world that this—these things do happen, you know. But I think that was the—what was so controversial about that was that it didn't happen, it was a complete farce. And that's why he was kind of nullified. His voice didn't really matter, because he lied about the story. But I think that my character was cool about that, because even as the person that didn't write the story, I was still his accomplice in getting the story out to the world. And, um... it was kind of like our little testimony, you know, to the world, like, we can actually still make art by saying that these things actually—these injustices do happen. And we don't really care that we're lying about it, you know? This is the real—this is actually the truth for somebody else. And... it's kind of like an experiment, I guess? It's kind of like a perform—it's performance art. Maybe we can create performance art by actually going into the prison and being an actual prisoner in—prisoner in reality. But instead, we decided to write a story about it, as if we were there.

And so that was our performance art piece, you know, by making you guys believe that we actually went—or, not us, but like, this one guy. He actually was a prisoner, and then later on, the world—or he gets discovered that, you know, that he was lying about it, that the whole story was just fabricated. And that blows up in his face. But—yeah, um, I guess that's one way—I kind of understand their points. That sure, these stories are legitimate because other people do experience them. But I also don't agree with creating these stories and duping the public into thinking that they actually happened to you, because there's a huge difference in whether you have actually experienced it or not. But I do believe in protest—but I do believe in performance art, but you have to have already done the art, you have to have actually become a prisoner. Even if it's just a performance art piece to be an actual prisoner, you have to actually step into the prison, wear the prison clothes, eat the disgusting food, and go into like, solitary confinement. If you actually want to create an art piece out of it, instead of just saying that you did it, you know? That's where the huge world of difference actually happens. So... yeah, I don't really know. But that's—that's their way of protesting. I guess. That's how they decided to protest using art. It's interesting [laughs].

KL: Um, so I'm wondering how difficult and competitive it is to land an acting role. Like, do you work through an agent who represents you and looks for roles that best—suits you the best, or do you do it all by yourself?

HL: Yeah, um, I actually only got an agent... I would say about half a year ago. Maybe it's already... yeah, maybe it's been almost a year by now... No, it's not quite a year. But yeah, I—I don't really have a lot of experience with an agency in America. But I had an exper—I had—I had an—I still have this agency in Europe, actually. And, I mean... honestly, at this point in my career, I feel like, I'll just—I really just want to work at a job that I'm gonna be excited to play. And that's not always—sometimes that's hard to come by. Not all acting roles or jobs are very interesting. But luckily, most of the roles that I've had are very stimulating, intellectually stimulating and interesting and exciting for me to do. But agencies—yeah, I don't really know. I—I think it's—I have, kind of, lack of experience with an agency, so I can't really answer that question very well. Yeah, because before that, I've—I've only just—I've been without an agent, and I just had people kind of, via word of mouth, just get to know me, or I would just find out about auditions and I'll just go there directly myself. Yeah, any way for me to just get whatever job that I can, yeah.

KL: Mm-hmm, I see. Do you think your Asian identity has opened you more opportunities or given you more limitations in your acting career?

HL: Um, that's a really interesting question, because there are too many Asian roles or opportunities out there for me. Um, compared to if I were white, you know? Or even if I was black, you know? I think black people have way more opportunities. But then again, I don't know what—what it is like, exactly, for them. That's what it seems like. But, um, it's—in one way, I don't feel like there's a lot of roles, but then another way, whatever roles do come my way, it's easier for me to get them, because there aren't too—there isn't too much competition out there. There's maybe like, two other Asian American actresses besides myself that are, like, kind of, eligible for these—these types of jobs—in Houston, I mean. And so, in a way, it's a plus, because either way, one of us are gonna get it, and so one of us are going to be working. And so that's definitely a bonus on our parts. But there aren't too many jobs to pick from, so that's also hardship. So...

KL: How do you keep yourself motivated and committed to acting given the competitions and limited roles for Asian actors and actresses?

HL: You just have to—you just have to decide that that's what you want to do. You can't give up. It's like, anything, you know, that you want to do—if you want to—if, like, any goal that you have—you wanna be fit, you know, if you wanna have a body that's healthy and strong, you know, you got to exercise every day. Or, you know, every other day or whatever, but if you decide—if you decide that that's what you want, you want a fit body, then you have to make it out there every single day and work consistently on a consistent basis. And even though it sucks, or it's hard, or it hurts, you know, you got to just like, go—like, you know, like, you got to show up. Once you show up, then, it's like, what else are you gonna do? You're gonna just, like, start to do it once you show up, you know? You gotta put on your tennis shoes, you gotta go outside, you gotta run or what—wherever, however you choose to exercise. Just like that, it's like, that's what commitment is to acting. Even though there's all these things against me, I don't have a lot of roles available to me, it seems like, you know? Or, you know, me looking the way that I do, you know, I'm only going to get certain types of jobs, that's what it feels like. But, you know, instead of focusing on that, just focus on like, go out there. And like, you know, like, break the status quo, you know, go out there and try to like, audition for—audition for things where they wouldn't normally cast you as an Asian—as an Asian American person, you know? Maybe they didn't originally see you playing this role that was created for a white person, you know, but just like, go on and audition anyways. And, yeah. But really the commitment is just—just—you can't quit, you can't quit. The lack of

money can't be the—the reason why you quit, because you gotta figure out how to make money otherwise, you know? Yeah, you just—you just got to decide you can't quit [laughs].

KL: Do you think Asian actors [are] being typecast into particular stereotypes?

HL: Do I think that Asian Americans are typecast in particular stereotypes? [**KL:** Mm-hmm.] Um... hmm. I don't think that there is enough representation for me to make that call yet. [**KL:** Okay.] I don't—I don't think that I see so many Asian Americans. But since “Crazy Rich Asians” happened I've been seeing a lot more Asian Americans out there on, you know, in films, or on—on the screens. And I—I feel like... that is definitely starting to, like, kind of break down any stereotypes that Asian Americans might have had. They're starting to do away with them. They're starting to do away with representing Asian Americans as—I don't know, your quintessential, like—your nerd, or your quirky person, or your quiet shy girl, you know? [I] think they're starting to realize, like—no, there's so many types of personalities out there that are Asian—that Asian Americans have, and we can put them out there like that. Yeah, and so, I... hopefully... yeah, hopefully these things will start to show more—show up more of these—the whole run of the gamut of Asian American personalities.

But YouTube is definitely a huge place to find Asian American work. And—and the, like—see little skits—you can see little skits and stuff like people creating their short films, or people are creating—where they're casting Asian Americans... just playing normal people, just—just, like, romantic scenarios, just all types of different everyday scenarios, you know? And so, that is definitely starting to break the stereotypical worldviews, or, you know, stereotypes of Asian Americans.

KL: Sure. And now, we're going to move to talk about, like, some identity questions. Since you mentioned you been to so many different places and have so much different international experiences, I'm wondering, how do you identify yourself?

HL: How do I identify myself? Whoa! Um... since I've been to so many different international places?

KL: And also like, you mentioned, you kind of feel, like, lack of belonging.

HL: Yeah, yeah. How do I identify myself? God...

KL: Like, do you think you're like, Asian American, Korean American, or just American? Or—

HL: Oh... yeah, I'm definitely Korean American. [**KL:** Mm-hmm.] Definitely. Yeah, I... I think that—and Asian American, I mean... yeah, Korean American, Asian American, that's how I identify myself. I don't think that I'm one without the other. I don't think that I'm Korean without also being American, you know, 'cause I—when I go to Korea—and I went there not too long ago for a film—a short film—it was, it was difficult for me to kind of like, speak Korean, in this role, because of my accent, because my accent is Americanized. And so, I had to train my Korean speaking very, very well. So, I—I know that I'm not exactly Korean, according to them. I'm very American, according to Korean people. And in America, I don't feel... entirely American either, you know? I—I... I've never really identified... I never really felt that comfortable or at home, being here in this country, you know?

I felt most at home in Europe, actually. Yeah, and the reason is because—the fact that they're really okay with talking about what makes different types of people different—like, Italians are Italian because of this, Spanish people are Spanish because of this, Greek people are Greek because of this. So they're really

keen on pointing out the differences and what distinguishes one people group from another, whereas Americans kind of... think that everybody's the same—"Oh, we're all American. Well... you know, we all eat, you know, like, french fries, and, you know, like, we all eat American food," it's like, or—or—I don't know, there's—there's nothing to really say, "Well, we are American because of this." You got to get deeper, you got to get into, like, "Well, I'm not just—you know, everybody's an outsider in America, you know? Even if you've been here for generations and generations, somewhere in your history, you can trace down a path of people group that, just, is completely different from Americans. And so, I—I'm always really enthusiastic about figuring out where people come from, you know, where people have been—like, way back in the day came from, where their roots are, because it's definitely not America, America's young country. And so, how I identify myself, I guess it's Korean American. But... yeah, that's a very, very simplistic way of, kind of, identifying myself, I guess.

KL: How do you think your international experience has impacted your process of identity formation?

HL: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, and Europe is what changed it. Yeah, just this openness to be able to be proud of talking about what differentiates me and what differentiates other people. You know, I don't—I don't take the status quo of like, "Oh, I'm American," as like—like, good enough. I don't take that as good enough, and it's like, "No, like, come on. Like, tell me more. Let's dig deeper. Like, I want to know more about your history and about who you are. Yeah. So... yeah, that's a very interesting question.

KL: How do you think your acting experience has impacted your identity formation?

HL: Ooh... how has my identity—god—been impacted by acting. Um... you mean my identity as an Asian American, or just my—my sense of self?

KL: Sense of self, I guess?

HL: Ah, I think... I think I realized... I'm just going back to my—some things that I talked about before. So we are, just—a lot of us are very connected, you know? I don't care how different you are—like, kind of—now going back—backtracking on what I just said about how different we are... I like talking about differences because that just discloses things that make you special, things that kind of, like—things that I don't know about, you know, I want to know about things that I don't—that aren't me, if I talk to somebody. I want to know about things that are different from me and him, or her. But I—I feel like... ultimately, it's to kind of sift through what makes us all human, you know, what makes us all connected. Because ultimately, we all are seeking human connection, and anything that draws us closer to each other, I think... Yeah, I think that my acting has definitely made me aware of, like, we all experience these human—very real human emotions like anger, sadness, loneliness, you know? I mean—and joy, you know? We—we—we all experience these things, so we can have compassion on each other—for each other when we... when we see something like this on stage.

And even if it's anger, you know? Like, I love watching very angry performance, 'cause it's like, so real, you know? And I actually love seeing people, like, really express their true anger, you know, or—or their true joy, you know? Really... I mean, don't you love that? Don't you love it when people see—are able to express true joy? There's something so exhilarating about it. I love watching YouTube videos and social media for this very reason. When I see something real, that's theater! You know, when you—people try to be as real as can be when they act on a stage. And so, what's in the form—what act—how acting has informed me is that, like, I... I don't have to hide. I think that's the biggest challenge as an actress is, you know, you're afraid to, kind of come up out of your little shell, you know, and—and show yourself, show

your heart on your sleeve, you know? And I think that, kind of, the turning point is when you realize, dude, no one—we're all the same, like, no one's going to judge you. They want to see you, they want to see your humanity, they want to see your truth. They want to see all the real things about you—your anger, your sadness, your joy... you know, your frustrations, your—your disappointments, they want to see that.

I think that's the reason why social media is so hugely popular, you know? It's like, addictive, you know? People want to see, so—they want that human connection, they just want to see a hu—a real human being, being themselves. So yeah, that's how acting has informed me, to give—has given me that permission to just be myself—and I'm not saying that I got it! I'm not saying that—I still have my own insecurities about showing myself in social media and all that, or even on stage, you know, but... yeah, slowly but surely, it's, it's—it's getting there.

KL: Absolutely. Do you feel your, like, different layers of your identity to be in conflict with each other?

HL: Do I feel like different layers of my identity conflict with each other? That's a really good question—you. have good questions [both laugh]. Hard—hard, but good questions. Do I feel like different layers—must be—gosh, different layers of my—my identity conflict with each other. Um... hmm. Um... god... I think that when I was younger, it was—there were way bigger conflicts. But now that I'm older, I think the conflicts are getting less and less. But there are conflicts. I think it has to come—it comes from my faith, um, being a Christian, definitely. That's one side of myself that I don't talk about too much. But [it] definitely conflicts with a lot of things, you know? I think there are certain things that I'm encouraged not to do as a believer in... as a Christian. That, and also just like, moral codes, you know, just certain things that my parents instilled in me, but I think that, um... yes, yes. The answer is yes [laughs].

KL: How do you try to resolve those conflicts? like through acting, or—

HL: Um, I resolve them with a lot of grace. I tell myself, “You know what, you're human. You're gonna make mistakes, you're gonna fall, you're gonna be a hypocrite, you know, sometimes. You're gonna—you're gonna have one foot in one ideology and the other foot, your actual behavior, is gonna be a totally different way. You're going to be a walking contradiction, a lot of the times. Like, give yourself grace. Like, give yourself permission to, to... sometimes be this conflicting person, you know? And... yeah, just give yourself—just forgive yourself. Give yourself grace, yeah. ‘Cause you're not perfect, and you're never going to be perfect, and nobody else is. So, it's alright [laughs].

KL: How would you describe the Asian American community Houston? In what ways do you get involved?

HL: Huh... I don't really have a lot of Asian American friends, I'm not gonna lie. Um, I think my—the chapter in my life where I was more connected to Asian Americans was when I was going to an Asian American church. But I no longer go to that church. And—and actually—and so I kind of feel like my friendships have kind of dwindled. The friendships that I had from that church have—has kind of dwindled, but, um... Yeah, I wish there was more of an avenue for me. I feel like the—the Asian Americans that I do stay close to are the ones who are performers who are also Asian Americans. And I just feel like those people are so golden, just ‘cause whenever—whenever I see them, I'm just like, “My family! My friend!” You know, there's just like, this instant kinship, there's this like, depth of connection

that it's just like, "Oh, we're both Asians!" Like, ah! Just so much excitement. You know, 'cause it's so rare to find an Asian American who's also a performer.

HL: Um... but yeah, those are the people that—like I said, there's just like, this instant connection to them. And so, I try to... I mean... yeah, I mean, if I can stay connected with them more, it would be great. But I don't necessarily have friends just because of the fact—just because of their ethnicity. I make friends with people that I'm just... that I'm really drawn to, or, you know, there's some—some sort of—I don't know, there's something there that I feel like, really led to, like, just, reaching out to them for, you know? Yeah, I guess I don't really hang out with people just 'cause they're Asian Americans. So lately, I don't—because—since Asian American performers are so few and far between, I don't really get to see them so often. Yeah, so that's just the—that's just how I do things. Yeah.

KL: Now we're going to move on to talking about COVID-19, recently. How has your work or daily life been affected by the pandemic?

HL: My work? Or daily life... Yeah, a lot of... a lot of staying at home and working from home. But, um... I think that it's a good thing, you know, because I've just recently moved into this new apartment, and I'm realizing that, yeah, I have to create a nice little safe haven for myself here and make it super homey. And so it's nice. But, yeah, it's—the pandemic is... yeah, my—my daily life is just trying to keep myself sane and safe, you know, by being here at home by myself, and trying to hang out with people and still have Zoom meetings and whatnot. Or hang out with people at the park, you know, so I can still maintain my friendships with them. But yeah, it's hard. Not gonna lie, it's very, very difficult to lead a normal life during the pandemic. Not easy, but yeah. But we gotta—we gotta try.

KL: Yeah. How has the pandemic affected the art scene or theater in Houston?

HL: The pandemic? Oh my gosh, the art scene is like, so shot right now. Theaters—theaters are like, pretty much losing money, and just—there aren't any performances happening. So, everything in the theater world has literally come to a—just a serious halt. Like, nothing is really happening. And even, like, films have stopped being shot, and things on Netflix have just become, like, canceled, and stuff like that. So... yeah, it's a real tragedy that we're facing right now. But... hopefully things will start to change, but we don't know exactly when.

KL: Mm-hmm, yeah. So with the uncertainty of COVID-19, what's your view of the future of theater industry? Do you think it will be online, or—

HL: God, I hope not. You can't do theater online. You just can't—I mean, you can because it's actually happening right now, but it's just so not the same. You know, theater, the whole beauty, the magic of theater is seeing a real flesh and blood human being in front of you performing. You know, you have to be able to see them right in front of you and smell them and just hear their voice, you know, not through a screen. So, I—the future of theater... god, I have no idea. But hopefully all this stuff will be squared away very, very soon so that we can get the theater life going back—you know, just, kicking back up again.

KL: Yeah. And how do you think the COVID-19 and also the recent protests against racial justice have impacted Asian American communities? Like has the COVID-19—has these, like, events changed your perspective about the future of Asian Americans? [**HL:** Because of the COVID-19?] Mm-hmm, and also the recent protests, the BLM protests.

HL: And also the racial protests? [**KL:** Mm-hmm, yeah.] I think that there is a true awakening of Asian Americans to be able to step up and support their African American brothers and sisters, and just to be like, “Hey, yeah, we’re also people of color, and we’re here for you.” I feel like, that is hopefully starting to happen amongst a lot of Asian Americans. I do see from the coverage, the news coverage or the social media coverage that I’ve seen online, I do see that happening. But there—they need to be more vocal. I think we all—I need to be more vocal, you know, and to step up and be like, “Hey, yeah, we—I do support Black people, and I do support the rights of Black people, and all these injustices that are happening, like, that—they are not okay, they cannot keep on happening. We have to really stand up and support them.

And so—so yeah, during the pandemic, this is the perfect time to do it. We’re all, like, stuck at home, and we all are in need of human connection, we’re craving it, you know? So like, any way that you can just maintain your friendships and your alliances with—with people of color, and—and Black people too, like, in particular, it’s like—it’s—it’s gonna be, you know, it’s—it’s such a chaotic time for—during the Black Lives Matter movement that people, just... any way that we can instill, like, an environment of peace, and be peacemakers to these people is going to be a testament to the world, you know? Like, hey, we’re all banding together in support of one another, let’s all, you know, like—I hope it inspires you to do the same.

KL: Mm, yeah. And—yeah, the final two questions [laughs]. What are the future goals for your career, and what’s—in your personal life?

HL: My what—my future goals?

KL: In your career and your personal life.

HL: God, my personal goals, I... in my career? Dude, I just—yeah, I wanna be—I wanna be out there on the Hollywood screen. I want to be on the silver screen and be the face that the whole world sees, you know, and I want to be an outstanding actress, you know, and I just... I mean, I love the theater to no end, and I still continue—wish to continue to do that. But, you know, theater doesn’t really pay very much. And I love art for art’s sake, but I also need to, like, make a living. I want to, I want to kill it in life. I don’t want to just live frugally all the time, you know? And I [don’t] want to be living worried about how—how much I’m spending on this particular meal, you know, and, um—I do okay, because I have these two other extra jobs. But I want to just rely just on acting for my career, my income.

HL: Um, and what was the second question? For my personal life? (What) are my goals, um... gosh, I wanna eventually, like, have a family, you know? I wanna meet the right guy and have a family. I mean, that thing’s, just—just like, the normal stuff. I mean, when the right time—when the right person comes along, obviously. Yeah, I’m in no rush to meet that person. I think that life will eventually show him up to me.

KL: I guess this is really the last question. So do you have any advice for younger Asian American artists?

HL: Advice for younger Asian American artists? You gotta do it. You gotta go for it, sooner than later. But you know what? If you feel like it’s too late, it’s never too late. It is never too late. I was 26 or 27 when I started, and I took a lot of breaks. And you know what, if breaks are what you need, take those breaks. This is life. You know, life is not your acting career. Life is your life. And you are the one to...

figure—you gotta figure it out yourself, you know? Take—take breaks if you need to take breaks. Take—take extra jobs if you need to take extra jobs that have nothing to do with acting. But if you want to keep on acting, do as much artistic expression as you can, do everything to get yourself inspired. You know, go out and see plays, go out and see different music performances, go out and see everything that will instill and inspire this creativity in you, something that just grips you in your guts, you know? Read books, you know, read books that are going to just—just, enliven your soul, and your spirit and your heart, you know, and make you feel as human as can be in the best way. Do everything that's gonna make you feel totally alive.

Don't worry so much about money. You'll figure that part out. That's a tiny little goal. That's a tiny little, like, fear, you know, like, you... if you need money, the desperation will fuel you just figuring it out, to find a job. But you know, figure out what makes you feel alive and do it, but don't give up, because there—Asian Americans—artists, are, like—the world needs Asian American artists to do Asian American art. And so we are. Yeah, I implore you, I beg of you to just do it. Really.

KL: Mm-hmm, yeah. Yeah, these are all my questions for today, thank you!

HL: Thank you so much! That was so much fun [laughs]!

KL: Sorry, there are so many questions.

HL: Thank you so much for just—for asking them, you had really good questions.

KL: Okay!

HL: Thank you for your time.

KL: You too, and hope you have a nice rest of your day.

[Interview concludes.]

HL: Thank you! Will this be published, or how can I find this, any—

KL: We will transcribe the interview, and later, along with the video, and later, we'll, like, send back the transcript for you to review.

HL: Awesome. Thank you so much, Kelly. Well, you have a blessed day. [**KL:** Thank you!] Bye!

[Interview ends]

