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Confronting *Sa-i-gu*: Twenty Years after the Los Angeles Riots

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Twenty years ago on April 29, Los Angeles erupted and Koreatown cried as it burned. For six-days, the LAPD was missing in action as rioting, looting, burning, and killing devastated the city. The “not guilty” Rodney King verdict ignited anger and frustration felt by South Los Angeles residents who suffered from years of neglect, despair, hopelessness, injustice, and oppression.¹⁾ In the Korean American community, the Los Angeles riot is remembered as *Sa-i-gu* (April 29 in Korean). Korean Americans suffered disproportionately high economic losses as 2,280 Korean American businesses were looted or burned with \$400 million in property damages.²⁾ Without any political clout and power in the city, Koreatown was unprotected and left to burn since it was not a priority for city politicians and

1) Rodney King was found dead in his own swimming pool on June 17, 2012, shortly after publishing his autobiography *The Riot Within: My Journey from Rebellion to Redemption Learning How We Can All Get Along*, in April 2012.

2) *Korea Daily Los Angeles*, May 11, 1992.

the LAPD. For the Korean American community, Sa-i-gu is known as its most important historical event, a “turning point,” “watershed event,” or “wake-up call.” Sa-i-gu profoundly altered the Korean American discourse, igniting debates and dialogue in search of new directions.³⁾ The riot served as a catalyst to critically examine what it meant to be Korean American in relation to multicultural politics and race, economics and ideology.

So does race matter in America anymore? On the 20th anniversary of the Los Angeles riots, the answer may depend on whom you ask. We still disagree on how to name what happened on April 29, 1992. Was it a riot? Uprising? Civil unrest or rebellion? A year after the Los Angeles riots in 1993, I along with others tried to organize a symposium to understand what happened and facilitate dialogue between different racial and ethnic groups in Los Angeles. We debated and struggled on how to name Sa-i-gu, and we came up with the term “political-protest-turned-into-riot.” Twenty years later, we are still debating how to name the six days of violence that burned Los Angeles in 1992. The argument about how to name the six days of violence symbolizes a still divided city that is “separate and unequal.”

Sa-i-gu served as an impetus for fundamental changes in Korean American identity and provided guidance for the future direction of the community. Many observers commented that the “Korean American was born or reborn on April 29, 1992.”⁴⁾ The Korean American

3) Edward Taehan Chang, “As Los Angeles Burned, Korean America was Born,” *Amerasia Journal*. 30.1 (2004): vii.

4) Ibid.

community also began to reevaluate its economic, cultural, and political positions in America. What does it mean to be Korean American in multiethnic and multiracial America? The Korean American community has come a long way as it continues to become part of the multiethnic and multiracial city of Los Angeles and beyond.

The purpose of this paper is to revisit the LA riots of 1992 and analyze how the Korean American community has changed and implemented lessons it learned since 1992. What happened and how was the Korean American community affected by the LA riots of 1992? What lessons have Korean Americans learned from it? How did the Korean American community change since 1992? What has changed overall? What has not changed? What is the future direction of the Korean American community twenty years after the riots? These are some of the questions that this paper intends to discuss and address.

During the LA riots of 1992, Korean-immigrant-owned stores were targeted by African American rioters. Many black business owners displayed “black-owned” signs in front of their stores hoping to prevent rioters from mistaking their shops as Korean owned. The targeting of Koreans during the riots was a result of the historical so-called “Korean-African-American conflict” which emerged as a visible and urgent urban problem during the 1980s and the early 1990s. For example, racial tension was heightened when a number of black youths were killed by a Latino gang in the LA Harbor area during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The heightened inter-ethnic tension among minority groups not only challenged the traditional white-black race relations paradigm during that time but

also demands new visions and institutional reforms in our society today.

From Black-White to Multiethnic Paradigm

As an influx of immigrants dramatically shifts the demographics of major metropolitan cities such as New York and Los Angeles away from white majority to white minority-and neighborhoods with no ethnic majority-the multiplicity of races and ethnicities challenges traditional thinking about race relations in terms of black and white. The state of race relations today is so fragile and polarized that maybe we are one incident away from another eruption as the Trayvon Martin case illustrates. The shooting death of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida by George Zimmerman (neighborhood watch captain) ignited a national debate on race and justice. Many raised questions about the circumstances of Martin's death and the initial decision not to charge Zimmerman and the legitimacy of Florida's Stand Your Ground law. Many people across the nation were outraged and protested urging prosecutors to press charges against Zimmerman. The case clearly illustrates the fragile nature of race and ethnic relations in America today.⁵⁾

Asian Americans and Latinos were the fastest growing racial group in America between 2000 and 2010 (see Table 1). According to a Pew Research report released in June 2012, "Asian Americans are the

5) A stand-your-ground law states that a person may use force in self-defense when there is reasonable belief of a threat, without an obligation to retreat first.

fastest-growing ethnic and immigrant group in the United States. For the first time, the influx of Asians moving to the U.S. has surpassed that of Hispanics, while American employers increase their demand for high-skilled workers.” The Pew Research Center report confirmed that Asian-Americans also tend to be educated and prosperous.

The demographic shift began with the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act which brought new waves of immigrants from Asia and Latin and Central America and significantly altered the face of America. In Los Angeles, demographic change has been the most dramatic between 1970 and 1990 as the Latino population doubled from 15% to 39% and Asian Pacific Americans nearly quadrupled from 3% to 11%. In the meantime, the non-Hispanic White population declined from its 71 percent share in 1970 to a narrow numerical plurality of 41 percent of the county’s population in 1990 (Oliver and Grant 1995).

According to the U.S. Census (1990), the City of Los Angeles had become truly multiracial and multiethnic: the Latino population constituted 40 percent, whites 37 percent, African Americans 13 percent, Asian Americans 9 percent and Native Americans 1 percent. As of 2010, the City of Los Angeles has become truly a minority majority city as the Latino population increased to 48.5% while whites declined to 28.7%. Asian Americans comprise 11.3% and the African American population dwindled to 9.6% in 2010.

Table 1. Population by Race in the United States: 2000 and 2010

Race	1990	2000	2010
White	80,0%	75,1%	72,4%
Black	12,6%	12,3%	12,6%
Latino	8,99%	12,5%	16,3%
Asian Americans	2,77%	3,6%	4,8%
Native Americans	0,9%	0,9%	0,9%

In this context, racial and ethnic relations in Los Angeles and beyond in the United States have shifted from biracial to multiracial. This demographic diversity not only challenges the traditional view of America's racial and ethnic identity and culture but also raises fundamental questions towards the constructions of multiracial America.

As a result, the politics of race has not only exacerbated tensions between whites and blacks, but also intensified conflict between racial minorities. The demographic shift and restructuring of the American economy increased racial and class polarization. The growth of the Asian American and Latino population aggravated relations between Korean and African Americans, Latino and African Americans, and white and African Americans. Troublesome is the festering tribalism, especially between the newly emerging minority majority Latinos and the declining African American minority at several flashpoints of conflict, and between Asian American businesses and the underclass Latinos and African Americans in a city such as Los Angeles. Despite the dramatic demographic shifts, both public and private sectors have failed to act to meet the changing needs of a diverse population. African Americans have voiced concerns that they are

losing the political and economic gains made during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. Latinos have demanded proportional representation to reflect their population increase. Asian Americans have begun to gain access to, and representation in, mainstream political processes which has incited the resentment of other groups. The hardening of racial boundaries has exacerbated tensions, especially among minority groups.

The problems associated with the intermixing of ethnic groups within a rapidly changing political and economic structure was violently brought to global attention with the April 29, 1992 race riots in Los Angeles. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots of 1992, it came to public attention that the face of South Central Los Angeles also changed dramatically as well. Indeed, the Los Angeles civil unrest of 1992 was America's first multiethnic civil unrest (Chang 1994). Interestingly, Chinese and Japanese Americans practiced ethnic dis-identification and distancing as they blamed Korean immigrants for causing racial unrest in Los Angeles.⁶⁾ Assimilated Chinese and Japanese Americans felt uncomfortable being lumped together with Korean immigrants as Asian Americans. Asian American history is replete with examples of each Asian ethnic group shying away from each other whenever there is racial trouble, in the wishful hope that they are identified as a singular group and not lumped together with other Asian groups.

6) For ethnic disidentification see Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Patheticity* (Temple University Press, 1992).

With the breakdown of legal and residential barriers, middle-class African Americans began to move out of urban ghettos into suburban neighborhoods; this has had a dramatic impact on the demographic composition of South Central Los Angeles which- has traditionally consisted of “black neighborhoods.” In the 1980s, the African American population increased only by 13%, but the Latino population increased by 53% and Asian Americans by 108% in South Central Los Angeles. As a result, the Latino community in South Central Los Angeles grew from 6% in the 1970s to roughly 40% in the 1990s. These demographic changes along with the restructuring of the American economy have had a profound impact on racial and ethnic relations in Los Angeles as well as other major metropolitan areas in the form of increasing inter-minority conflicts and white backlash against minority groups.

By the early 1990s, Los Angeles shifted from a biracial (white/black) to a multiracial setting, and we have witnessed increasing incidents of ethnic and racial conflict particularly between minority groups. The general population growth in South Central Los Angeles as well as other greater Los Angeles areas has intensified competition for limited housing and jobs among minority groups. Adding to the long-standing conflict-ridden relationship between African Americans and the white majority, dramatic demographic shifts in the last twenty years have led to polarization among racial and ethnic groups, particularly among minority groups (i.e., Korean-African American, Latino-African American, and Asian-Latino). In particular, the Korean-African-American conflict emerged as one of the most visible and urgent problems of urban America as conflict

intensified between the two minority groups during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Boycotts and protests against Korean immigrant store owners broke out in major cities in the United States throughout the 1980s. The Red Apple boycott (January 18, 1990) in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York pitted Korean immigrants against African Americans as it became a symbol of racial conflict in America. During the early 1990s, the so called “Korean-black conflict” replaced white-black tension as the Red Apple boycott lasted for almost 15 months. To better understand why and how tensions between Korean immigrants and African American residents intensified during the 1980s and the early 1990s, it seems logical to look into the characteristics of the Korean immigrant community.

Characteristics of the Korean American Community

During the past forty years, the Korean American population and community has increased dramatically. As table 1 shows the Korean American population increased from less than 70,000 in 1970 to more than 1.4 million in 2010 according to the U.S. Census. If we include “Korean alone or in combination with others,” the Korean American population increases to 1,730,238.

The median family income of Korean Americans increased from \$47,624 in 2000 to \$60,640 in 2010. Per capita income for Koreans in 2000 was \$18,805 and increased to \$26,417 in 2010 (U.S. Census). There are several reasons why the median family income of

Table 2. Korean American Population in the US

Year	Population
1970	69,130
1980	354,593
1990	798,849
2000	1,076,872
2010	1,4243,784

Korean Americans increased significantly between 2000 and 2010. First, the overall income of Americans has increased during this period. Second, second generation Korean Americans are educated in the United States and do not face the language and cultural problems their immigrant parents did. Therefore, they are more likely to enter into professional occupations. Third, the rapid economic growth of Korea resulted in capital flow from Korea into the Korean American community. Both Korean and the Korean American economy has expanded and enjoyed rapid growth. Lastly, recent immigrants from Korea come with more money and capital than those who came decades before. The combination of these factors contributed to the substantial increase of median family income for Korean Americans between 2000 and 2010.

Contrary to popular belief, the Korean American community is not homogeneous, but diverse in areas of language, nativity, generation, identity, and class backgrounds. Language use divides Korean Americans into three identities: Koreans in America, 1.5 generation, and second generation Korean Americans. In 2006, a majority of Korean immigrants spoke the Korean language (80.7%),⁷⁾ and 1.5

generation Korean Americans were often bilingual. A majority of second generation Korean Americans, however, could only speak the English language (80.3%), although an increasing number of the second generation is learning the Korean language and culture.⁸⁾ In addition to language, the occupational structures of the Korean American community also attest to divisions within the community. Among employed Korean Americans 16 years and older, 43.9% were in “management, professional, and related occupations” in 2006 and 14.6% were in “service.” Sales and office occupations accounted for 28.9% of total employment. It is important to note that the Korean American community is polarized along generation and identity, language, and class background. Korean American women today are much more likely to be working outside the home (50.8% in 2006) and for long hours.⁹⁾ In 2006, the average Korean American woman worked outside the home 51 hours a week; 80% worked outside the home full-time. Unfortunately, this has not lessened their burden of work inside the home.

Two distinct characteristics set Korean immigrants apart from other Asian Americans: a church-centered community and entrepreneurship. The church is the most numerous and dominant institution in the Korean American community. Studies have shown that approximately 70 percent of Korean immigrants are regular churchgoers. Korean American churches are the most important social, cultural, and

7) US Census Bureau’s 2006 American Community Survey.

8) Ibid.

9) US Census Bureau’s 2006 American Community Survey found that 50.8% of Korean American females 16 years and over were employed and 2.9% were unemployed.

economic institutions that serve the needs of Korean immigrants. Church is a place where recent Korean immigrants can worship God and share their immigrant experiences and cope with language and cultural barriers in a new society.

Since Korean immigrants view small business as an avenue for success in America, Korean immigrants have been actively developing and cultivating a niche in the small business sector. This may explain the reasons why Korean immigrants have the highest self-employment rate in the US.¹⁰⁾ Korean Americans ranked the highest in self-employment in 2007 (12.8%). A combination of factors facilitates high self-employment rates among Korean immigrants. Cultural misunderstanding, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with American society put Korean immigrants at a disadvantage in the U.S. labor market. Korean immigrants also find it difficult to find jobs commensurate with their education level. Korean immigrants come to the US with “ethclass” (ethnic and class) resources because of American immigration policies that encouraged Koreans with capital to immigrate to the United States.¹¹⁾ Korean immigrants are and were in an advantageous position to enter small businesses by utilizing their ethnic and class resources and networks. In particular, Korean immigrants opened grocery markets, liquor stores, nail salons, garment subcontracting firms, restaurants, and laundry businesses. Furthermore, racial discrimination and structural factors seem to push Korean immigrants as shop owners or “middleman minority” serving largely

10) In-Jin Yoon, *On My Own: Korean Businesses and Race Relations in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

11) Illsoo Kim, *New Urban Immigrants: the Korean Community in New York*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

minority (African American and Latino) clientele. Korean immigrants function as the “middleman minority” as they are heavily concentrated in retail and service industries.

The proliferation of Korean-owned businesses in the African American community during the 1980s exacerbated conflicts between the Korean American and African American communities.¹²⁾ Several highly publicized boycotts of Korean-owned businesses by African American residents intensified racial conflict between the two communities during the 1980s and the early 1990s. Cultural misunderstandings and culture clash fueled antagonism between Korean immigrant merchants and African American residents. As a “middleman minority,” Korean merchants acted as a buffer between dominant (white) and subordinate (African American and Latino) group conflicts in American society. The middleman minority theory predicts friction between immigrant-seller and poor-minority-buyer relationships in America’s inner cities.¹³⁾ Volatile relations between Korean American and African American communities in Los Angeles exploded into mass destruction of properties and loss of lives on April 29, 1992. It is noteworthy that in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, anti-Korean violent crime increased dramatically. Between February 5 and March 11, 1993, eight Korean American merchants were killed by gunmen-five in Los Angeles and three in other cities, and six were seriously wounded.¹⁴⁾ It is also interesting

12) Edward T. Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond* (New York: NYU Press, 1999).

13) Edna Bonacich, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” *American Sociological Review* 38 (1973): 583-94.

to note that between 1991 and 1992 there were a total of forty-six Korean American homicides due to various reasons; that's an average of twenty-three Korean American homicides a year in Los Angeles County for those two years. From 1993-2010 there were a total of 131 (thirty-three were from robberies) Korean American homicides due to various reasons; that's an average of 7.7 Korean American homicides a year.¹⁵⁾ Although we don't know exactly how many of these Korean American victims died as a direct result of the black-Korean conflict, we know that in 1991-1992, fourteen of the forty-six Korean American homicides were a direct result of robberies. In other words, Korean American homicide rates seemed to increase dramatically during the height of black-Korean tension in Los Angeles County between 1991 and 1992 and began to trickle off after the LA Riots. In addition, there were total of seventeen Korean American homicides in 1993, and fourteen were from robberies. By 2010 the Criminal Justice Statistics Center only recorded two Korean American homicides in Los Angeles County.

Twenty-years later, the so-called Korean-black conflict still echoes as reflected by Ward 8 D.C. Councilman Marion Barry's public comments about his city still being divided along racial lines and the so-called "Korean-black tensions."

"We got to do something about these Asians coming in and opening up businesses and dirty shops," Councilman Barry said in an interview. "They ought to go." Witness the South Los Angeles

14) "Stop the Violence!" Candlelight Vigil & Service flyer on March 21, 1993 in City Hall, Los Angeles.

15) Criminal Justice Statistics Center, State of California Department of Justice, Office of Attorney General, homicide report, 1987-2010.

Community Coalition's preparations for a Week of Commemoration to observe the anniversary of the riots, which excluded the Asian American voice and appeared to pit Korean and other business owners against black and Latino community activists in a promotional photograph titled "Rebuild South Central Without Liquor Stores." Do we want to rebuild LA by excluding a particular group? Ironically, there are more liquor licenses in Koreatown than in South Los Angeles, largely thanks to city politicians who control Koreatown. It is one example of how the city remains unable to compromise and formulate urban policies that are mutually beneficial.

Sa-I-Gu

Historically, most of the US media has portrayed Asian Americans in general as the "model minority," forcing them into the role of the "middleman minority." This image pits Asian Americans against other minority groups and has fueled resentment particularly toward Korean Americans. By praising Korean immigrant merchants in Los Angeles as a shining example for other minorities to emulate, the press, before *Sa-i-gu*, implied that African Americans had no one but themselves to blame for their circumstances. Both the "model minority" and the "middleman minority" concepts imply racial stratification, creating a three-tier system with whites on the top, Asians in the middle, and Latinos and blacks at the bottom. As journalist and author Helen Zia noted in *Asian American Dreams* in 2000, *Sa-i-gu* demonstrated that "...the model minority was taking a

beating from blacks, whites, and Latinos who seemed only too glad to deliver their comeuppance.” Zia also commented that in Los Angeles, Korean Americans “had taken the hit for all Asian Americans.” The mainstream media did nothing to cover the Korean American perspective during and after the riots. Thus, Korean Americans were not only denied the legitimization of political grievances, their grief was entirely unacknowledged. Historical misrepresentations of Asians and Asian Americans had residual effects that continue to this day. These images have had significant impact on how others see Asian Americans and how Asian Americans see themselves.

Within the Korean American community, Sa-i-gu served as an impetus for a fundamental change in identity, which many observers believe occurred on April 29, 1992. The Korean American community also began to reevaluate its own economic, cultural, and political positions in America. What does it mean to be Korean American in multiethnic and multiracial America? Sa-i-gu also exposed many problems and challenges for the Korean American community: a lack of leadership and political power, generation split, and lack of contact with other communities.

The community did not passively accept riots. Within a matter of days, more than 30,000 Korean Americans in Los Angeles came together for a “Peace March” that is said to be the largest gathering of Asian Americans in all of Asian American history.¹⁶⁾ Also, with

16) Edward Chang, “America’s First Multiethnic ‘Riots,’” in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San (Boston: South End Press, 1994).

an increased awareness of the importance of a Korean American identity was the awareness that the 1.5 and second generations play a critical role in the community. It is the younger generation that will present the community's identity to society at large by getting involved in politics and the media to increase the voice and representation of the community. For second generation Korean Americans, the civil unrest gave them a new sense of belonging and ethnic pride as they participated in relief efforts and peace marches.

Despite suffering and hardship, Korean Americans have learned many valuable lessons from the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Ironically, *Sa-i-gu* brought visibility to the Korean American identity as they were prominently featured by both ethnic and mainstream media. On May 31, 1994, I published an op-ed piece titled "An Emerging Minority Seeks a Role in a Changing America" in the *Los Angeles Times*. Very few people knew about the plight of Korean immigrants before *Sa-i-gu*. In the aftermath of *Sa-i-gu*, many readers were interested in knowing who Korean Americans were. Twenty-years later, I published another op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*, with the title "A Community Coalesces." The article talks about how the Korean American community is now embraced as an integral part of Los Angeles' diverse mosaic. In particular, Koreatown has emerged from the ashes, resurrected as a vibrant, successful transnational enclave. I concluded, "it is proof, one more time, that Los Angeles is anything but black and white."¹⁷ Korean Americans learned that they must politically empower themselves. Korean Americans had no

17) Edward T. Chang, "A Community Coalesces," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2012, A25.

allies in city hall, Sacramento, or Washington D.C. because they solely focused on economic security and betterment in American society. No one cared for the Korean American community, as politicians retreated to their own respective communities. Korean Americans learned the hard way that little would be done for them and they must empower themselves politically. Korean immigrant churches also need to play proactive roles in educating, informing, and transforming the Korean immigrant consciousness. Korean immigrant churches have been static, conservative, and traditional in dealing with community issues. Korean immigrant churches must provide a new leadership and the spirit of community activism to promote peaceful co-existence with different racial and ethnic groups in America. One of the important lessons of Sa-i-gu was to reach out and build a multiethnic and multiracial community in LA. How can we get along as neighbors, and yet protect our own civil rights and basic needs that may be contradictory to our neighbor's needs and interests? It is a long and painful process, but it must start now. Korean Americans must seek a new role in creating an inclusive, multiracial, and multiethnic America.

Sa-i-gu was not just a wakeup call for Korean Americans alone. It was a wakeup call for Asian Americans and all minorities who are struggling in the economically depressed and crime-ridden inner-city districts. And yet, we still have not learned all the meanings and lessons from Sa-i-gu. The problems and structural conditions that ignited Sa-i-gu still continue in South Los Angeles as well as in impoverished neighborhoods in the United States. Economic disparity between haves and have-nots, poor education, high unemployment

rates, police brutality, and racial discrimination were the main causes of Sa-i-gu. Twenty years ago, many observers described Los Angeles as “a keg of dynamite ready to explode” anytime. The Los Angeles civil unrest of 1992 brought major social issues to the surface: racism, class, language, culture, new immigrants, violence, crime, the urban underclass, and ethnic tribalism; but these forces have never been addressed or even discussed not only by the powers that be but by the established minority leadership or new ethnic power elites.

Reflections on Twenty Years Since the LA Riots

Twenty years later, Los Angeles is still divided along racial and ethnic lines and struggling. We have not made any substantial changes and improvements with the structural conditions that caused the LA riots of 1992. Although we are far more accepting of differences and tolerant toward others, it seems that we have a long way to go to improve race relations. We do just enough to get along.

And yet we do not hear much about the so-called “black-Korean conflict” twenty years later. There seem to be several reasons for this change. First, Korean Americans no longer dominate mom-and-pop stores in the South Los Angeles area. During the height of “black-Korean conflict” in the 1980s, the majority of mom-and-pop stores in black communities were owned and operated by Korean immigrants. Recently, however, Southeast Asian refugees, Arab Americans, and Latino businessmen moved into South Los Angeles

areas. For example, approximately 30-40% of liquor and grocery markets in South Los Angeles are owned and operated by non-Koreans according to Byung Han Cho of the International Korean Grocers' Association.¹⁸⁾ In particular, middle-eastern business owners are aggressively taking over liquor and grocery stores in South Los Angeles. As a result, Korean immigrant owned stores are no longer singled out or the target of boycotts and racial conflict. The demographic shifts in South Los Angeles have also helped to reduce tensions between Korean immigrant merchants and African American customers. Since 1992, the combination of "black-flight" and the influx of the Latino population in South Los Angeles dramatically altered the landscape of the area. Many blacks relocated to the Inland region of San Bernardino and Riverside counties, and others returned to their roots in the South. More importantly, Latino immigrants moved in and began to compete for scarce resources and services which heightened tensions between the two racial minorities. It appears that tensions between Latino immigrants and black residents of South Los Angeles are more urgent issues than the so-called Korean-black conflict.

Attitude and behavioral changes of both Korean Americans and African Americans may have also eased tension between the two groups. As both Korean immigrant merchants and black residents suffered during and after the Los Angeles riots of 1992, they realized

18) Soo Jung Lee, "Challenge from non-Koreans - Liquor and Market," *Korea Daily Los Angeles*, July 19, 2010. According to the same article, 30-40% of Dry Cleaning business in Southern California are owned and operated by Vietnamese immigrants.

how dependent they are on each other. During the riots, many Korean stores were burned down and African American residents had to walk several more miles to shop and get their basic needs such as milk, diapers, and bread. Korean immigrants also realized that they have to reach out and become part of the community if they wanted to succeed in their businesses. As a result, both Korean immigrant merchants and African American customers became more courteous to one another, and it may have diffused tensions between the two groups.

For Korean Americans, much has changed in the last twenty years. An ethnic minority once virtually invisible in American society - and often mistaken for either Chinese or Japanese Americans -has emerged as an economic and political force in Los Angeles civic life. Korean Americans learned that they had to become politically active and empower themselves. Before *Sa-i-gu*, Korean Americans had no allies in city hall, Sacramento, or Washington, D.C. Their lack of political clout became apparent as their businesses were abandoned to looters and arsonists during the riots. The Korean American community has come a long way as an integral part of the multiethnic and multiracial city of Los Angeles. Today, the degree of civic engagement by Koreans is evident, especially as the community fought recent efforts to divide Koreatown into three city council districts. While the effort to prevent the so called gerrymandering failed, Koreans united and presented a strong political voice during the Los Angeles City Council Redistricting Commission meetings; in the 1990s, this would have been unheard of.

Although Asian Pacific Americans comprise 11.3 percent of the

Los Angeles city population, no council district has an Asian American majority. On the other hand, the African American population has dwindled to 9.2 percent of the city's population, yet three city council districts have African American majorities. It is time to include Koreatown in an Asian American-majority council district. Twenty years after Sa-i-gu, Los Angeles still struggles with the issues that led to the devastating riots-economic disparity, poor education, impoverished neighborhoods, high unemployment, police brutality, and racial discrimination. That cannot continue, just as progress in race relations must not be allowed to languish as we continue to grow as a diverse community. Today, Korean Americans are fully embraced as members of the Asian American community, and Koreatown has emerged as a strong and successful ethnic minority. Koreatown is now a multiethnic neighborhood that has been embraced by Los Angeles residents. Before Sa-i-Gu, Angelinos knew Koreatown existed, but most didn't have significant interaction with Koreatown or its mostly immigrant residents from Korea and Latin America. It is now a common sight to see many non-Koreans patronizing coffee shops, restaurants, and shopping malls in Koreatown. Many Angelinos are now familiar with Korean foods like Kimchi, Kalbi, Bulgogi, and even the Kalbi-Taco.

Conclusion

As we commemorate the 20th anniversary of Sa-i-gu, this is an opportune time to launch dialogue among diverse communities, and

engage in serious policy formulation on how to address the socio-economic, racial, and political conditions we face today. Some aspects of this work may already be in progress, but now it is time to act for change.

Korean immigrants painfully learned the importance of breaking out of ethnic isolation and reaching out to other communities to forge working and harmonious relations. The contrasting histories of the African American community and the Korean American create a productive backdrop for exploring various factors that are unique to Asian immigrant culture as opposed to the factors unique to the African diaspora. In startling contrast to their relationship with the African American community, Korean Americans and Latino Americans have existed in relative harmony in insular communities. It is important to recognize the multidimensional nature of different historical experiences that often result in different forms of disempowerment, agendas and priorities for each group.

Asian American journalist Helen Zia wrote: “How could we build and maintain relations with African Americans and other people of color while safeguarding the equal rights of Asian Americans-whose interests may occasionally conflict with other communities of color?” Building coalitions of color in contemporary society is much more formidable than it was in the 1960s; this is a result of contextual shifts and new complexities in the internal organizational structure, and objective interests of different racial groups. To build effective multiracial alliances, we need to pay attention to differences and conditions within and among racial groups. Due to the hardening of racial boundaries predicated on economic realities, the strategic

approaches of such cross-racial organizations must move beyond the humanistic ideologies of cross-cultural communication and racial harmony to address the substantive issues of the different racial and economic life-situations that make up contemporary society.

K.W. Lee, a renowned Asian American journalist, poignantly raised the issue of leadership failure within the Korean and Asian American communities in building coalition with African American and other communities. “Established Asian and Korean leadership feel that they owe debt and gratitude to black civil rights movement,” Lee said. “They do not want to offend black community and overcompensate and tell them what they want to hear. More importantly, established Asian and Korean leadership are alienated from their own immigrant community because they themselves are cut-off from own heritage due to language and cultural barriers. In other words, established Asian and Korean leadership failed to communicate and represent the voice of immigrant experience that are different from English-speaking, US educated, second generation Asian and Korean American leadership. In addition, [the] spirit of noblesse oblige appears alien to these Asian American professionals.” I concur with K.W. Lee’s call for bold, courageous, but not ethnocentric leadership that is willing to forge multiracial and multiethnic coalitions.

Globalization and internationalization also are profoundly influencing younger generations who have grown up with different attitudes, interests, and norms. Hopefully, they will influence racial and ethnic relations in America, making Americans of all kinds more open to diversity and are more willing to embrace people of dissimilar ethnic and racial backgrounds as friends and marriage partners. Young

Americans grew up with the Internet and international social networking, so they are more informed and accepting of diversity, pluralism, and multiculturalism. Although America has a long way to go in battling racism, hopefully the future is bright, as our youth no longer see America as simply black and white.

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Abstract

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Twenty years ago on April 29, 1992, Los Angeles erupted and Koreatown cried as it burned. For six-days, the LAPD was missing in action as rioting, looting, burning, and killing devastated the city. In the Korean American community, the Los Angeles riots are remembered as *Sa-i-gu* (April 29 in Korean). Korean Americans suffered disproportionately high economic losses as 2,300 Korean American businesses were looted or burned and suffered \$400 million in property damages. Without any political clout and power in the city, Koreatown was unprotected and left to burn since it was not a priority for city politicians and the LAPD.

As we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of *Sa-i-gu*, we still disagree on how to name what happened on April 29, 1992. Was it a riot? An uprising? A civil unrest or rebellion? During the LA riots of 1992, Korean immigrant-owned stores were targeted by African American rioters. The so called “Korean-African-American conflict” emerged as a visible and urgent urban problem during the 1980s and the early 1990s. This symbolizes that Los Angeles is a divided city that is still “separate and unequal.”

Sa-i-gu served as an impetus for fundamental changes in Korean American identity and provided guidance for the future direction of the community. Many observers commented that the “Korean American was born or reborn on April 29, 1992.” The Korean American community also began to reevaluate their own economic, cultural, and political positions in America. What does it mean to be Korean American in multiethnic and multiracial America? The Korean American community has come a long

way as it continues to become part of the multiethnic and multiracial city of Los Angeles and beyond.

The purpose of this paper is to revisit the LA riots of 1992 and analyze how the Korean American community has changed and implemented lessons they learned since 1992. What happened and how was the Korean American community affected by the LA riots of 1992? What lessons have Korean Americans learned from it? How has the Korean American community changed since 1992? What has changed? What has not changed? What is the future direction of the Korean American community twenty years after the riots? These are some of questions that this paper intends to discuss and address.

Key Words

LA riots, Sa-i-gu, multiculturalism, Korean American, race relations

