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KOREAN AMERICANS

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Korean Americans are the fifth largest Asian ethnic group in the United States, after Chinese, Filipinos, Asian Indians, and Vietnamese. With a population more than 1.5 million, most Korean Americans today arrived after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act.[1] The community is among the fastest growing ethnic groups, experiencing 27 percent increase in growth from 2000 to 2007, compared to the country's overall growth rate of 7 percent.

Sometimes referred to as the "new urban immigrants," many Korean immigrants came from middle-class, urban, and professional backgrounds. Drastic changes in the Korean economy in the 1960s and 1970s that turned war-torn Korea into a rapidly growing industrial, capitalist economy had a direct impact on emigration to the United States. Many more Korean people qualified for white-collar jobs than there were jobs to fill in Korea. This led many highly skilled and educated Koreans to look for opportunities elsewhere, including Brazil, West Germany, and the United States of America. Another significant segment of the Korean American population are the more than 100,000 Korean women who came as wives of U.S. servicemen, and another estimated 250,000 Korean children who have arrived as international adoptees since 1950.[2] Korean immigrants in Los Angeles, New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, Dallas, and Seattle have established Koreatown as base of their community.

HISTORY

Prior to 1903 a small number of important political figures and student leaders arrived in the United States. They shaped the "highly political" nature of the

early Korean American community as they contributed, sacrificed, and dedicated their lives to the independence movement. Korea lost its sovereignty when it became protectorate of Japan in 1905 and was colonized in 1910.

The first official Korean immigration to the United States began when more than 7,000 Korean immigrants came to Hawai'i as sugar plantation laborers between 1903 and 1905. This initial wave of immigrants was mainly young, single, male workers with a large Christian population (close to 40%). Life for Korean laborers in Hawai'i was difficult with low pay and harsh working conditions. The average daily wage for men was sixty-seven cents, while for women the average was fifty cents; in 1909, Korean and Japanese men were paid eighteen dollars per month while white Portuguese men were paid $22.50 per month for the same work.[3]

Approximately 700 Korean women came as "picture brides" to Hawai'i and mainland between 1910 and 1924. The majority of picture brides were much younger than their husbands, and the average age difference between bride and groom was about fifteen years. They came as picture brides for economic, education, political, and personal reasons. With the hardships of raising children, performing domestic chores, and working side by side with men in sugar cane fields, picture brides withstood many challenges.

With the outbreak of Korean War (1950–53), Korean immigration to the United States resumed as orphans, war brides, students, and diplomats came to the United States between 1950 and 1964. The Korean population in the United States remained small until the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. It is important to note that South Korea and the United States share a complex military, economic, political, and cultural link. Direct military and political ties between the two nations helped to fuel Korean immigration to the United States. In addition, the drastic changes in the Korean economy in the 1960s and 1970s that turned Korea into a rapidly growing industrial, capitalist economy had a direct impact on emigration to the U.S. The passage of the 1965 Immigration Act and close ties between the two countries fueled rapid growth of Korean population in the United States.

CURRENT STATUS OF KOREAN AMERICANS

Contrary to popular belief, the Korean American community is not homogeneous, but bimodal in areas of language, nativity, generation, identity, and class backgrounds. Language usage divides Korean Americans into three identities: Koreans in America, 1.5 generation, and second-generation Korean American. A majority of Korean immigrants speak the Korean language (73.2%), and the 1.5 generation Korean Americans are often bilingual.[4] A majority of the second-generation Korean Americans, however, can only speak English (80.3%), although an increasing number of the second generation is learning Korean language and culture.[5] 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 percent were in "management, professional, and related occupations," and 14.6 percent were in "service." Sales and office occupation accounted for 28.9 percent. 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%) and for long hours.[6] The average Korean American woman works outside the home 51 hours a week; 80 percent work outside the home full-time. For many immigrant women, this is a drastic change from their previous roles in South Korea as housewives. The added role of working outside the home has not lessened their responsibilities of domestic duties (Table 1).

Role of the Church

The church plays a major role in the Korean American community, which sets it apart from other Asian American groups. It is the most numerous and dominant institution in the Korean American community. Studies have shown that approximately 70 percent of Korean immigrants in the United States are regular churchgoers, while Christians (Protestants and Catholics) make about one-quarter of the South Korean population.[7] Korean American churches, overwhelmingly Protestant, are the most important social, cultural, and economic institution to serve the needs of Korean immigrants. Church is not only a place of worship, but it is also a place where Koreans can socialize with co-ethnics,

Table 1. Korean Americans at a Glance

Population	1,500,003
Median age	32.9
Education:	
Less than high school	9%
College degree or higher	51.7%
Average household size	2.68
Homeownership	49.2%
Per capita income	$24,964
Poverty:	
Overall	11.2%
Child	11.3%
Senior	19.7%
Foreign-born	67.3%
Limited English proficiency	43%
Self-employment rate	12%

Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2007.

share their immigrant experiences, and cope with language and cultural barriers in a new society. For immigrants who experienced downward mobility, the church allows its leaders and members take on leadership roles unavailable at work. Many Korean churches also maintain cultural traditions by celebrating holidays, serving Korean food after services and at functions, and teaching the Korean language to second-generation children. Churches and/or members provide information and assistance in housing, education, employment, entrepreneurship, health care, and/or Social Security. Limited English speakers can find help with translation and interpreting for schools, agencies, and courts.[8]

Korean churches have been criticized for focusing on their own needs over the needs of ethnic or surrounding communities, and also for combining conservative Christian theology with cultural values to reproduce social hierarchies, especially by gender. For example, Korean female elders (church officers elected in Presbyterian congregations) are older, have more years of education, and are wealthier than their male counterparts, while other ethnic groups did not indicate such gender differences in their eldership.[9] Korean women are more likely to attend and provide much of the voluntary services and activities than men, but they are often excluded from formal leadership positions and/or recognition.[10]

As emigration from Korea slowed down and the children of post–1965 immigrants came of age in the mid-1980s, Korean American church leaders predicted and observed a "silent exodus" of young adults leaving Korean immigrant churches as they questioned their ethnic and religious identity formations.[11] Second-generation Korean American young adults have remained in faith communities but tend to join pan-Asian or Korean American churches and college campus ministries. These racially and/or ethnically segregated churches and campus ministries allow the second generation to simultaneously experience the comfort of worshipping with co-ethnics (where, for example, they can use Korean words or phrases and swap similar cultural stories and experiences, such as growing up with immigrant parents) and distance themselves from racism and racial marginalization that they encounter from other racial/ethnic evangelicals in multiracial and predominantly white organizations.[12] Long considered to be a private matter in dominant U.S. society that has emphasized the separation of church and state, religion is a public, communal experience that connects and intersects race, ethnicity, and faith for many Korean Americans.[13]

Entrepreneurship

Korean immigrants view small business as an avenue for success in America and have been actively developing and cultivating a niche in the small business sector. This may explain why Korean immigrants have the highest self-employment rate in the United States (12.8% in 2007). A combination of factors has facilitated high self-employment rates among Korean immigrants. Cultural misunderstanding, language barriers, and unfamiliarity

with American society put Korean immigrants at a disadvantaged position in the U.S. labor market. Korean immigrants also found it difficult to find jobs commensurate with their education level. Korean immigrants came to the United States with "ethclass" (ethnic and class) resources because of American immigration policies that encouraged Koreans with capital to immigrate to the United States. Korean immigrants are in advantageous position to enter small businesses by using 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, often relying on unpaid or low-paid labor of spouses, children, other relatives, and/or coethnics.

Racial discrimination and structural factors seem to push Korean immigrants to be shop owners or "middleman minority," serving largely other minority (African American and Latino) clienteles. Korean immigrants bought small retail and service businesses in low-income and predominantly black and/or Latino neighborhoods because these areas were underserved by mainstream businesses and provided less competition. For example, major grocery chains that served middle-class, white neighborhoods were less likely to open and retain stores in such areas, citing high crime rates and lack of a high-spending customer base. As a result, Korean immigrants occupy a middle space—in both economic relations and social relations, arising from their status as racial minority employers or business owners who hire employees and serve customers of other minority groups—in a society stratified by race and class.[14]

As American cities shifted from biracial (white/black) to multiracial populations, increasing incidents of racial and ethnic conflict have occurred between minority groups. During the 1980s, the tension between Korean immigrant merchants and African American customers emerged as one of the most visible and pressing racial issues in America. Two highly charged racial incidents in New York and Los Angeles intensified conflict between the two communities. A 15-month boycott of Korean-owned stores in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, NY, between January 1990 and May 1991 was known as the "Red Apple Boycott." On March 16, 1991, Korean American store owner Soon Ja Du shot and killed 15-year-old African American Latasha Harlins in South Central Los Angeles. It became a highly volatile and explosive issue because this shooting occurred 13 days after the infamous Rodney King beating incident in Los Angeles, CA, in which four white police officers beat African American motorist Rodney King. Since both the Harlins shooting and the King incident were captured by security and video camera, local and national television networks repeatedly aired the footages for more than a year. "Korean-black tension" emerged as one of the most visible and explosive racial issues, as it became synonymous with racial conflict. At the same time, crimes committed against Korean small-business owners in metropolitan areas (such as the 1992 murder of a store owner in Detroit, MI),

and the lack of economic, social, and political resources in inner cities that predated the arrival of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs, received little coverage.[15]

The 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest and Korean American Political Mobilization

The acquittal of four officers who beat Rodney King sparked a mass destruction of properties and loss of lives on April 29, 1992, resulting in a multiracial eruption of violence in Los Angeles that destroyed approximately 2,280 Korean-owned businesses and caused $400 million damages.[16] In the Korean American community, this civil unrest is known as the "*Sa-ee-Gu*" (4-2-9). Scholars and activists often remarked that as Los Angeles burned, Korea America was born—or reborn—on April 29, 1992. *Sa-ee-Gu* is considered as the most important historical event—a "turning point," "watershed event," or "wake-up call"—during one hundred years of Korean American history.[17] The civil unrest destroyed Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and workers' paths to attaining the "American Dream." It also exposed many problems and challenges for the Korean American community: a lack of leadership and political power, generation split, and lack of interaction with other communities. Korean immigrants realized the importance of breaking out of ethnic isolation and actively reaching out to other communities to forge working and harmonious relations.

Korean Americans have responded to this wake-up call through political mobilization and participation, and 1.5 and second-generation Koreans in particular are entering mainstream politics and leading organizations that serve as voices of the ethnic community and work with other racial/ethnic communities. Immediately following the civil unrest, Angela Oh, a second-generation attorney, became a spokeswoman for the Korean American community; in 1997, President Bill Clinton appointed Oh to the President's Initiative on Race Advisory Board. Republican and immigrant Jay Kim, from the 41st District, became the first Korean American elected the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992.

In Washington, Paull Shin, a college professor, retired after three decades of teaching and was elected to the state house of representatives in 1992 and the state senate in 1998. In 2000, Harry Kim was elected as the first Korean American mayor in the U.S. in Hawai'i County, Hawai'i (Big Island) and served two terms.[18] Democrat Jun Choi, a 1.5 generation Korean American, was elected mayor of Edison, NJ, in 2006. Boston City Councilor Sam Yoon announced his intention to run for mayor in 2009; Yoon co-founded Asian Political Leadership Fund, with New York City Councilman John Liu and Yul Kwon, 2006 winner of "Survivor: Cook Islands," to support Asian American political candidates and promote civic engagement within the Asian American community.[19] Michigan native Eugene Kang, who worked on the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders for Obama presidential campaign, was appointed as Special Assistant to the President in 2008.

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Notable Korean Americans

David Chang—Chef/restaurant owner. Chang's Momofuku ("lucky peach") restaurants in New York's East Village have garnered critical reviews, awards, and following for his innovative interpretations of serious Asian cooking in casual settings.

Sarah Chang—Violinist. Chang was born in Philadelphia and began studying the violin at age four. She has toured and performed with most major classical conductors, artists, and orchestras around the world. In 1999, she received the Avery Fisher Prize, regarded as one of the most prestigious awards given to American instrumentalists.

Margaret Cho—Comedian, actor, and author. Cho's one-woman shows, *I'm the One That I Want, Notorious C.H.O., Revolution, Assassin,* and *Beautiful*, have toured the United States, Canada, and Australia and have been released as films, DVDs, and CDs. Her performance has been honored by the Asian Excellence Awards, ACLU of Southern California, National Organization for Women (NOW), and GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation). In 2007, she starred in the eponymous "The Cho Show" on VH-1.

Herbert Young Cho Choy—Senior Circuit Judge. In 1941, Choy (1916–2004) was the first person of Korean ancestry to be admitted to the bar. In 1971, Choy became the first Asian American judge to serve on the federal bench when President Richard Nixon appointed him to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

K. W. Lee—Journalist. Lee immigrated to the United States in 1950 and was the first Asian immigrant to work for mainstream U.S. daily publications, covering such topics as the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. His investigative series on Chol Soo Lee, who was wrongfully convicted of killing a San Francisco gang leader in 1973, helped win an acquittal and release of Lee from California's death row.

Sammy Lee—Olympic diving champion. Lee, the first Asian American Olympic gold medalist, won a gold (platform) and a bronze medal (3-meter springboard) in 1948 and another gold (platform) in 1952. He is a retired physician.

Nora Okja Keller—Writer. Born in Korea and raised in Hawai'i, Keller's first novel, *Comfort Women* (1997), received a 1998 American Book Award. She was inspired to write the novel after she went to a human rights symposium at the University of Hawai'i in 1993 and heard the term "comfort woman"—a euphemism for sex slaves who served the Japanese army during the 1930s and 1940s—for the first time.

Hines Ward—Professional football player. Ward, of African American and Korean background, received a hero's welcome in South Korea after he was selected as 2006 Super Bowl MVP. Ward has shared the racial discrimination and taunting that he and his mother Young-hee Kim faced from South Koreans, Korean Americans, and African Americans because of his mixed background, and created the Hines Ward Helping Hands Foundation for mixed-race youth in South Korea.

Organizations also advocate for and mobilize Korean Americans, building alliances with other racial/ethnic organizations and/or mainstream government and social agencies. Organizations such as Korean American Coalition (KAC), the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium (NAKASEC), and Korean Health, Education, and Information Research Center (KHEIR) have membership and branch offices in different cities to unite co-ethnics across the United States. Organizations that are based in a specific ethnic enclave—such as the Koreatown Youth and Community Center (KYCC) and Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) in Los Angeles' Koreatown—identify and serve the needs of the local ethnic community and other racial/ethnic/immigrant individuals who also live and work in "Koreatown." While generational, class, and ideological differences continue to exist, the work of such organizations promote political participation within ethnic community and build interethnic/interclass alliances with other communities.[20] Other organizations pursue education, research, advocacy, and policy work on the Korean peninsula to link Korean America to a transnational and global context.[21]

Korean America includes descendents of those who landed in Hawai'i in 1903, as well as ethnic Koreans who have migrated recently from China, Russia, and Latin America.[22] Korean adoptees such as filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem and authors Katy Robinson and Jane Jeong Trenka provide insights to transnational adoption and identity through films and literature.[23] Politically, socioeconomically, and ethnically heterogeneous more than ever, Korean Americans are embracing their roles in creating an inclusive, multiracial and multiethnic America, redefining identities and communities as local, national, and global citizens.

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