

2009 Civilization and Peace

The Academy of Korean Studies

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in this forum was, therefore, to explore ways to achieve peace in a globalized world and harmonious coexistence among people of diverse cultures and values, instead of strife and war.

This book is the collection of final revised versions of papers that were presented in the 2009 Global Forum Civilization and Peace by eminent scholars. I am grateful to the authors for taking the time to further develop their papers for this publication. The Academy of Korean Studies hopes that this publication will be useful reading for all those seriously concerned with world peace. Finally, I would like to thank everyone involved in this publishing project for their hard work.

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Kim Jung Bae

President

The Academy of Korean Studies

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Yet, the act of remembering the globally radical version is a political challenge, as Ato Sekyoo-Otu writes of remembering Fanon in the current moment: a challenge to remember both “the fledgling promises and prospects” as well as the “congenital errors and imminent tragedies”⁶⁰ of a world history understood as a spatial relationship among peoples brought into being violently and not yet fully confronted or resolved.

Community in Transition: Korean American Empowerment in the 21st Century

Edward Taehan Chang

Introduction

In a truly joyous, proud and inspiring historic moment for millions of Americans, Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States of America on January 20, 2009. Americans across the nation celebrated as President Obama turned a dream and hope into reality as his inauguration speech was delivered forty years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Exiting his last term in office, President George W. Bush became one of the most unpopular departing presidents in history. America’s confidence level was at its nadir with only a 22 percent approval rating according to the CBS News/*New York Times* poll.¹ Americans were disillusioned and deeply disappointed by the Bush administration’s economic policies as inflation soared; unemployment rose sharply, and many lost their homes to foreclosures. Americans were ready for change. It was a timely moment in history for presidential candidate Obama with his

⁶⁰ Sekyoo-Otu, Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience: 11.

¹ Bush’s Final Approval Rating: 22 Percent CBS News—Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News, January 16, 2009.

campaign to bring change and hope back to the United States. Indeed, as the first African American president of the United States of America, President Obama brings hope to millions of underprivileged Americans such as women and racial minorities who have historically been denied their equal rights and fair opportunities. The outcome of the 2008 election raises a fundamental question about race and politics in America: Can this Obama administration rescue America from its economic problems as well as provide solutions for its sociological/racial inequalities? Does race matter anymore in America? Is race no longer a major issue in American society and politics?

When in fact, despite the election of the first black president in America, racial inequality still remains one of the central challenges American society faces today. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine and analyze problems and challenges faced by Korean Americans in the context of the election of Barack Obama as the president of the United States. Because Asian Americans have often been labeled a "model minority," what fundamental problems and challenges must Korean Americans contend within the face of this misnomer? What does the election of President Obama signify for Korean Americans? Specifically, what does it mean in particular for younger-generation Korean Americans? What is the future prospect of Korean American political empowerment? Lastly, how should Korean American communities respond and/or change?

"The American Dilemma: Racial Inequality"

W.E.B. Du Bois poignantly stated that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."² Gunnar Myrdal, in his book *An American Dilemma*, also concluded that race is one of the fundamental problems in America.³ Cornel West asks the question,

"What has race mattered to the American past and how much does race matter in the American present? Does race still matter?"⁴ Historically, overemphasis on the black-white paradigm and two-group paradigms of race relations has led to an oversimplified understanding of interracial-group relations in America. In the 1960s, with the Civil Rights Movement, race occupied center stage in American politics. The 1970s, however, proved to be years of racial quiescence, as the racial minority movements of the previous period seemed to wane (Oni and Winant, 1986). In just the past two decades, major metropolitan cities such as Los Angeles and New York have undergone dramatic demographic changes with major influxes of immigrants of color. In these metropolitan areas, whites, traditionally considered to be the majority, are quickly becoming the minority. In many institutions and neighborhoods, it is becoming common that no one ethnic group emerges as a clear demographic majority. The phenomenal growth of both Latino American and Asian American populations in particular have contributed to a vastly diverse American population, both economically and ethnically (Ong 1994). More importantly, the heightened inter-ethnic tensions between minority groups exposed the complexity of race relations (Latino-African American, Korean-African American, and white-African American). This ever-increasing multiplicity of racial and ethnic relations in contemporary America challenges the traditional white-black discursive paradigm, introducing an entirely new dimension of issues and dilemmas into the scholarly arena of American race relations (Chang 1994; Torres 1995; Hune 1993). The diversification of contemporary race relations has not only supplemented theoretical discussions on race, but has helped to redefine previous understandings about race, class, and gender identities.

Conservative scholars have argued that pluralism and diversity are divisive and fracture the nation, posing a major threat to the unity of America.⁵ Hirsch argues that the study of the cultures of racial

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin, 1989: 13.

³ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944.

⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

⁵ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987;

minorities "should not be allowed to supplant or interfere with our schools' responsibility to ensure our children's mastery of American literate culture."⁶ Unfortunately, such an argument is based on the assumption that all Americans are of European origin and the underlying premise that Western civilization is superior. On the other hand, Okuhira contends "the core values and ideals of the nation emanate not from the mainstream but from the margins—from among Asian and African Americans, Latinos and American Indians, women, and gays and lesbians. In their struggles for equality, these groups have helped preserve and advance the principles and ideals of democracy and have thereby made America a freer place for all."⁷ Two competing and opposing ideologies that pivot on the questions of how to interpret and represent American history as well as how to educate our students continue to dominate discussion in race and ethnicity in America. Conservative scholars argue that there should be a Eurocentric national standard. Advocates of a multicultural approach argue for a more inclusive account of history that more accurately reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of America.

Nonetheless, race is one of the most salient features of American life; whether consciously or unconsciously, race is one of the first things Americans use to identify a person upon meeting. In fact, although most people assume that "race" is a biologically-determined or a scientifically-created term, racial differences or racial categories are social creations that have shifted over time (Omni and Winant 1994). Racial formation theory, proposed by Omni and Winant, posits that race and racial categories are historically, socially, and politically constructed concepts.⁸ Omni and Winant emphasize the importance of

E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy in America: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*. Knoxville, Tenn.: White Direct Books, 1991.

⁶ Hirsch, 1988.

⁷ Gary Okuhira, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994.

⁸ Michael Omi and Howard Winant *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

understanding the "centrality of race"—that is, how race has been central in American politics playing a critical role in denying opportunity to many (minority) Americans. Racial formation is defined as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omni and Winant 1994: 55). They argue that racial formation is developed through racial projects. A racial project is defined as "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines." In other words, a racial project is when one racial group receives more resources and the other receives less. Through racial projects, both large and small, race becomes "common sense"—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. Throughout much of U.S. history, racial categories were created to divide humans into different groups, with whites usually receiving favored treatment while non-whites faced overt racial discrimination. Historically, non-whites have been portrayed and defined as inferior in the United States. This practice not only created racial categories, but more importantly, it justified and rationalized the uneven distribution of wealth and resources along racial lines. In this context, racial barriers were considered very difficult to breakthrough or overcome. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the process of "racial formation"—how "race" is defined and who gets to define it. I contend that the experience of Korean Americans has been shaped by "racialization" and its interpretation and meanings.

Racial inequality, or the gap between whites and people of color in terms of income, occupation, educational attainment, homeownership, and access to health care, has been and still is a fundamental dilemma for American society. The median family income for families of color has typically been approximately 61 percent of the median income for white families.⁹ Although Asian Americans as a whole earned a higher family income than whites, this statistic masks differences

⁹ "Check the Color Line: 2009 Income Report" Oakland, Ca: Applied Research Center and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, Feb. 2009.

between Asian ethnic groups. For example, Asian Indian (122 percent), Japanese (114 percent), and Chinese (102 percent) Americans earned higher incomes than whites, but Cambodian (53 percent), Laotian (57 percent), and Vietnamese (75 percent) lagged far behind. A median family income for Korean Americans was only 79 percent of the median white family income. More importantly, "Black, Latino and Asian American families are less likely to be homeowners than white families, and have significantly fewer financial assets."¹⁰ Economic inequality between whites and non-whites is much greater if we use asset holdings as measurement. "One estimate showed that in 2004, families of color owned \$0.13 in assets for every \$1.00 held by white families."¹¹

Despite historical and institutionalized barriers against blacks and other minority groups, Obama broke new ground when he became the first African American and non-white president. He symbolizes the "American Dream"—the ability to achieve goals and break through barriers in American society. Since Obama was a minority candidate, race was a potentially awkward, painful, and difficult issue that could have ruined his entire campaign. Instead, speaking candidly to his audiences, he took the issue of race head-on when he declared that race is yet an issue to be dealt with today and cannot be ignored:

Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore now. We would be making the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America—to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality. The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in

¹⁰ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, *The State of the Nation's Housing*, 2004, as cited in "Check the Color Line: 2009 Income Report" Applied Research Center and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, Feb. 2009.

¹¹ Center for Enterprise Development, "2007-2008 Assets and Opportunity Scorecard" Washington, D.C.: Center for Enterprise Development, 2007, as cited in "Check the Color Line: 2009 Income Report" Applied Research Center and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, Feb. 2009.

this country that we've never really worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.¹²

Praising Obama's courageous and eloquent speech, *The New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd commented that "in many ways, Barack Obama's speech on race was momentous and edifying. You could tell it was personal, that he had worked hard on it, all weekend and into the wee hours Tuesday. Overriding aides who objected to putting race center stage, he addressed a painful, difficult subject straightforwardly with a subtlety and decency rare in American politics."¹³

One of the most significant policy changes we can expect from the Obama administration is the hiring and promotion of qualified minority candidates who have been previously ignored, bypassed, or discriminated against. President Obama sent a strong message by appointing three Asian Americans, two Latinos, and five women as his first cabinet members. He also appointed the first Latina Supreme Court justice—Sonia Sotomayor. The Senate must confirm the president's nominations to the Supreme Court, the cabinet and other executive staff. Once the president nominates someone to a specific position, it is referred to the committee with jurisdiction over the position or the agency in which the position exists. Obama's nominees all brought with them high qualifications and were easily confirmed by senate subcommittees. In the past, many minority candidates with rich experience and stellar qualifications have been overlooked or not even considered for cabinet positions. However, President Obama's appointment of ten minority candidates as his cabinet members

¹² Senator and candidate Barack Obama's speech in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/03/18/us/politics/20080318_OBAMA_GRAP_HHC.html#

¹³ Maureen Dowd, "Black, White & Gray" *NY Times* Op-Ed, March 19, 2008.

signaled a fundamental shift in the hiring and promotion of qualified candidates regardless of their racial and gender backgrounds.

The Obama administration also initiated a comprehensive reform of immigration and health care systems. Along with rescuing the U.S. economy, health care reforms (universal health coverage) became the centerpiece and core of the Obama administration's agenda. About 47 million Americans do not have health insurance because they cannot afford it, or it is not even available to them. Can the Obama administration rescue the American economy and reform health care at the same time? Why would anyone object to the idea of providing health care to all Americans? In particular, why are many poor Americans without health insurance against the Obama administration's health care reform? More importantly, how do we explain the emotional outburst of many Americans against the health care reform? Initially, the main objective of health care reform is to provide health insurance to all Americans by establishing a "public plan." The public plan will compete with a private insurance plan, and it would help reduce costs and make health care affordable to all Americans.

Opponents of the health care reform argue that a government plan might draw many customers away from private insurance, and that those companies may fail. In addition, if a public plan underpaid doctors, health care providers might drop out of the program; thus, patients would have fewer physicians and fewer choices. On the surface, the health care reform debate seems to be about rational "choice" and the right to choose a doctor. Subsequently, many health care reform town hall meetings have turned into emotionally charged anti-immigrant and anti-minority crusades organized by conservative groups. The Fox News channel reported, "Health care reform could end up bailing out employers who hire illegal immigrants and skimp on their health benefits" (July 30, 2009). Most Americans associate "illegal immigrants" with Mexican and/or immigrants from Latin America. Therefore, the terms "illegal immigrants" or "undocumented workers" connote persons of color, and race has become one of the key issues in the health care reform debate. We must note that this is not the first time that the government has proposed a national health

insurance system. In 1946, President Truman proposed a system of national health insurance, but it failed as the American Medical Association vehemently opposed national health insurance as "socialized medicine."¹⁴ More importantly, Southern Democrats opposed a national health insurance system because they believed that it would integrate the hospital. In other words, "keeping black people out of white hospitals was more important to Southern politicians than providing poor whites with the means to get medical treatment."¹⁵ In the 1990s, President Clinton again tried to introduce a form of universal health care, but it too failed. Paul Krugman identifies partisan divide and Republican control of Congress as the main factor for health care reform failure during the Clinton administration. Ultimately, backlash against the election of the first African American president, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and partisan divide made it too difficult to pass the health care reforms with a "public option plan", resulting in the Congress and Senate passing the health care reform bill without the "public option plan." In light of the recent turmoil over the health care debate, one can argue that race or racial divide is still playing a major role in shaping policies in American society. Furthermore, it is uncertain at this time if President Obama can mobilize forces to carry out immigration reforms as he faces organized opposition from conservatives and the Republican party.

From Unassimilable Alien to Model Minority

How have Asian (Korean) Americans been portrayed and represented in the media? Historically, Asian American images have long been absent, distorted, and/or misrepresented in television, film, and other mainstream media. More importantly, media images of Asians and Asian Americans were often quite negative and

¹⁴ Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007: 67-68.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

demeaning: they all look alike, they are perpetual foreigners, and they relentlessly pursue success. The main driving force in producing a movie is "audience fickleness in film selection and the desire by film producers to protect their multimillion dollar investments by selecting talent with established audience power" (Seel 48). In other words, these stereotyped images of Asian (Korean) Americans have been created, perpetuated, exploited and reinforced by mainstream media to protect the investment dollars and ensure profit. It is important to note that, "historical misrepresentation of Asians and Asian Americans has residual effects that continue to this day" (Ono and Pham 2009). These images have had significant impact on how others see Asian Americans and how Asian Americans see themselves (Fong 2002).

Although the United States is known as a nation of immigrants that welcomes newcomers from all over the world, the history of Asian immigration and naturalization prior to 1965 has been that of restriction, exclusion, and ineligibility for American citizenship.¹⁶ Asian immigrants were not only subjected to immigration restrictions and exclusion, but have been more importantly defined as "unassimilable aliens" ineligible to become naturalized citizens of the United States. The Naturalization Law of 1790 granted naturalized citizenship to "white" immigrants only (Takaki 1998). Since the height of the Civil Rights Movement, however, Asian Americans have been celebrated as a "model minority." Asian Americans have been praised for their high achievement in education, hard work ethic, and high self-employment rate. How do we explain the contradiction of pre-World War II ideations of "unassimilable aliens" to an idealization of Asian Americans as a consummately industrious, compliant, self-sacrificing and politically pliable "model minority?"

Having fought so long against negative portrayals as the unassimilable aliens, the Yellow Peril, Orientals,¹⁷ and perpetual

¹⁶ For Asian American history see Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*. New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 1998; Suchang Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. New York: Wayne Publishers, 1991.

¹⁷ On September 9, 2009, the State of New York passed resolution that prohibits using

foreigners, Asian Americans initially welcomed the "model minority" label. However, Asian Americans quickly realized that the model minority image is more of a burden than any breakthrough for Asian American race politics (Fong 2002). Upon closer scrutiny, the model minority image is a distortion of reality as it disguises and diverts critical attention away from acute social and economic problems faced by many Asian Americans today. Indeed, Southeast Asian refugees (Hmong and Mien) have the highest unemployment rates in the United States—higher than black and Latino populations. Many young Asian American students suffer from serious mental health issues and suicides due to the tremendous pressure to fulfill unrealistic expectations of being a model minority. More importantly, the model minority image pits Asian Americans against other minority groups and fuels resentment toward Asian (Korean) Americans. By praising Korean immigrant merchants as "a shining example" for other minorities to emulate, the press was implying that African Americans had no one but themselves to blame for their failures (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Asian (Korean) Americans also face a "glass ceiling" as they are often portrayed as unassertive, technically-oriented, passive, poor leaders, and socially inept.¹⁸ Many qualified Asian (Korean) Americans face employment discrimination; they are often bypassed for managerial or decision-making positions. There is no doubt that the model minority stereotype helped to promote Asian (Korean) Americans as hard-working, successful, and model citizens. Subsequently, issues faced by Asian (Korean) Americans, such as the glass ceiling and mental health concerns, do not gain much sympathy from others.

The Korean American community paid a heavy price when they became a target of hatred, arson, and looting during the Los Angeles

derogatory term "Oriental" in official state documents. Instead, the New York state document must use the term "Asian American" or "Asian Pacific Islander." See *Korea Times*, September 11, 2009.

¹⁸ Timothy P. Fong, *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*. New Jersey: Upper Saddle River, 2002: 118.

riots of 1992. Korean immigrant merchants were portrayed as a "model minority," and played the role of "middleman minority." According to middleman minority theory, immigrant merchants (e.g., Koreans) are likely to experience friction with at least three important segments of the population: clientele, competitors, and labor unions (Bonacich 1973). In South Los Angeles, Korean immigrant merchants not only faced boycotts from African American customers, but also hostility from African American merchants who charged that Korean immigrant businesses drove them out of business by undercutting prices. 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. According to Zia (2000), "Korean Americans had taken the hit for all Asian Americans that the model minority was taking a beating from blacks, whites, and Latinos who seemed only too glad to deliver their condescendance." U.S. dominant culture via the media did absolutely nothing to cover the Korean American perspective. Thus, Korean Americans were not only denied the legitimization of political grievances, but also their grief was entirely unacknowledged.

Korean Americans: Community in Transition

The Korean American community has expanded rapidly both in quantity and quality since the early 1970s. Although Korean Americans are often lumped together with all Asian Americans, there are several unique characteristics that distinguish Korean Americans from other Asian Americans. First, church is one of the most important religious, social, cultural, and educational institutions in the Korean American community. Surveys have consistently shown that more than two-thirds of Korean immigrants attend church regularly.¹⁹

¹⁹ A Joint survey conducted by *Korea Daily* and Korean American Economic Development Center in 2006 found that 79% of Korean Americans in Southern California are Christian; K.C. Kim and S. Kim (2002) estimate that 70% of Korean Americans in

The annual budget of the top five mega-Korean American churches in Southern California exceeds ten million dollars.²⁰ And yet, Korean American churches tend to be dogmatic and conservative, self-serving rather than attempting to meet the general needs of the immigrant community. In recent years, however, Korean American churches have begun to take an active role in improving issues affecting Korean American communities. For example, Young Nak Presbyterian church established the non-profit YNOT organization to help with social services for senior citizens and improve the educational environment for low-income families.²¹ As the most prominent and important religious and social institution in the Korean American community, a church must assume more social responsibility and play an active role in shaping the future of the Korean American community.

Second, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, Korean Americans have the highest self-employment rate in the United States with 12.8%, compared with 7.4% for whites, 3.7% for blacks, and 6.2% for Asian Americans in 2007. Many Korean immigrant-owned businesses are located in inner cities serving primarily African American and Latino clientele. Proliferation of Korean immigrant-owned businesses in inner cities during the 1980s heightened tension and increased conflict between Korean American merchants and African American customers.²² Disputes between Korean immigrant merchants and African American customers broke out in several cities in America, and exacerbated conflicts between the two communities. During the

Chicago are affiliated with a Korean church. See "Korean Immigrant Churches in Chicago: History and Current Situations" in *100 Year History of Korean Immigration to America*. Edited by the Korean American United Foundation, 2002: 70.

²⁰ According to the *Korea Daily Los Angeles* December 28, 2008, the top five Korean American churches in Southern California exceed ten million dollars: Eunhye 20 million, YeulinMoon 13.6 million, Sarang 13.4 million, YoungNak 11.5 million, and Oriental Mission 10.3 million.

²¹ *Korea Daily*, Los Angeles, January 20, 2009.

²² Edward T. Chang and Jeannette Diaz Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond*. New York: New York University Press, 1999; Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1996.

Los Angeles riots of 1992, Korean-owned stores in south Los Angeles were targeted by rioters and looters and suffered major economic damages and losses. Should Korean American business owners abandon the inner city and relocate to "safer" locations? Will second generation Korean Americans take over and succeed in their parents' small businesses?

Third, contrary to popular belief, the Korean American community is not as conservative as it is widely believed to be. Because of their association with Christianity and high self-employment rate, Korean Americans are generally viewed as more conservative than other Asian American groups. In fact, Korean Americans voted heavily against the so-called anti-gay initiative "Proposition 8" during the 2008 election in California. Among all Asian American voters who voted for Proposition 8, Korean Americans had the highest rate with 72%, compared with 54% for all Asian Americans. It is widely believed that Korean American churches and pastors actively encouraged their congregation members to vote for Proposition 8. And yet, the Korean American community seemed to be polarized in terms of political ideology, as 34% identified themselves as liberal, 37% middle of the road, and only 24% conservative.²³ The same public opinion survey found that 43% of Korean Americans identified themselves as Democrats, 12% Independents, and 22% Republicans.

What fundamental problems and challenges do Korean Americans encounter in the United States? The most difficult problem Korean immigrants face is a language barrier. A *Korea Daily* 2006 survey found that 43% of respondents spoke very little and/or no English. This is a slight improvement from the *Korea Daily* 1999 survey, in which 50% of respondents answered that they spoke very little and/or no English at all.²⁴ More notably, length of residence in the United

States did not greatly improve Korean immigrants' English language abilities. It is a clear indication that the language problem is the most difficult issue for Korean immigrants to overcome regardless of length of residence in the United States. Generally speaking, women are less fluent in the English language than men as 32 percent of men and 51 percent of women spoke very little and/or no English at all. Second, 16 percent of respondents identified economic hardship and difficulties as the primary problems for Korean immigrants. Contrary to the model minority myths, many Korean immigrants are struggling with economic problems in a new society.

A small proportion of respondents also mentioned lack of contact with friends and relatives, safety, juvenile delinquency, racial discrimination, and cultural barriers as obstacles faced by Korean Americans. In any case, these issues seemed to be of less concern for Korean immigrants than the language barrier and economic security. This might indicate that the majority of Korean immigrants are struggling with issues of day-to-day survival and alienation from mainstream society. Generation conflict is another major issue facing the Korean immigrant community. According to a survey by the Youth Empowerment Project in New York, 74 percent of respondents view generation conflict as a problem in the Korean American community.²⁵ They identified lack of communication between parents and children (51%) and cultural misunderstandings and stereotypical notions (20%) as the main causes of generation conflict in the Korean American community.

In recent years, the Korean American community is also becoming increasingly exposed to issues of police brutality as several Korean Americans have been shot and killed by police officers.²⁶ The African American and Latino communities have long criticized police

²³ Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAPS) was conducted between November 2000 and January 2001 in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Honolulu. See Andrew L. Aoki and Oktyoshi Takeda, *Asian American Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008: 70-73.

²⁴ A joint survey by *Korea Daily* and Korean American Economic Development Center in 2006.

²⁵ "Generation Conflict Severe Problem in Korean American Community," *JaeYae DongPo Shin Mun*, April 3, 2009.

²⁶ Six Korean Americans have been shot and killed by police in California between August 2005 and April 2009, see *Korea Daily, Los Angeles*, April 11, 2009: A3 and *Korea Daily, Los Angeles* April 13.

brutality and abuse which have led to historic race riots in the United States.²⁷ Unaware of historical racial oppression and isolation from mainstream society, Korean immigrants have long neglected the issue of police brutality. Now, with the rise in police shootings, the Korean American community in Los Angeles has taken an active role in improving relations between the Los Angeles Police Department and Koreatown residents. To inform, educate, and better deal with Koreatown residents, the Korean American community has begun to offer one-day workshops for LAPD officers on Korean American history, culture, and community. Many LAPD officers who attended the workshops commented that the experience was very informative and educational, consequently enabling them to better deal with Koreatown residents. These are the first steps toward improving relations with not only the LAPD, but government agencies as well as the Latino, Black, white, and Asian American neighbors of Koreatown, Los Angeles.

Discussion

After the Los Angeles riots of 1992, one of the most important lessons learned by the Korean American community was the need to raise political consciousness and to empower themselves politically. To increase political visibility and power, many Korean American community organizations launched voter registration drives, held community forums, and began educational workshops. Shortly after the Los Angeles riots of 1992, the Korean American community felt optimistic about advancing in political power when four Korean American candidates were elected to public offices. However, Korean American political empowerment has had limited success, and the community has been unable to achieve a level of representation that matches their population level.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau voting data, the number of Asian American voters has increased 21.3%, from 2.8 million in 2004 to 3.4 million in 2008. During the 2008 presidential election, several states reported a new record as many first-time voters visited the polls. According to CNN exit polls, 69 percent of Obama voters were first-time voters. Although Korean American voter participation has been on the rise since the Los Angeles riots of 1992, political participation of the Korean American community has been lower than the national average. During the 2008 presidential election, Obama's candidacy boosted and motivated Korean American voter participation. According to the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium (NAKASEC) exit poll,²⁸ 27 percent of Korean Americans were first-time voters, a figure higher than the national average of 11 percent (CNN exit poll).

How can members of the Korean American community politically empower themselves? What would Korean American political empowerment mean? What are the most effective strategies toward this end? Gaining access and increasing visibility in the political system is the first step toward political empowerment. Since the LA riots of 1992, the Korean American community has had major success in gaining access and visibility in the political system, as many young Korean Americans have been appointed as deputies or assistants to elected officials. During the 2008 presidential campaign, the Democratic party's leading candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, visited Los Angeles Koreatown, seeking vital support from the Korean American community. Judging from the attention such major political candidates focus on Koreatown in order to garner support, the Korean American community is recognizable as a key constituency force to be reckoned with.

Prior to the Los Angeles riots of 1992, Korean Americans were virtually invisible; they were often mistaken for either Chinese or Japanese Americans. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, Korean

²⁷ Both Watts riots (1965) and Los Angeles riots (1992) were ignited by police brutality against an African American motorist.

²⁸ "NAKASEC: Asian Americans React to Obama Historic Election." *Asian Week* November 12, 2008.

Americans have struggled to gain voice and visibility, and have emerged as visibly, one of the fastest flourishing ethnic groups in the United States. It took *Los Angeles Times* editors more than a month after the riots to publish the op-ed piece "An Emerging Minority Seeks a Role in a Changing America".²⁹ In contrast, the *Los Angeles Times* took immediate action when it published the op-ed on the Virginia Tech shooting only two days after the tragic event.³⁰ It appears that Korean Americans have gained visibility, voice, and recognition in Los Angeles politics since the early 1990s.

The next step is to enhance political representation in the electoral political process. Representation is a critical part of participatory democracy, and the most influential political representations are usually elected officials.³¹ There are two different forms of representation: descriptive and substantive.³² Descriptive representation is "distinguished by an accurate correspondence or resemblance to what represents, by reflecting without distortion." In other words, descriptive representation for Korean Americans means having more Korean Americans in all branches of government. Following this definition, Korean American descriptive representation is possible with the election of many Korean American candidates to elected offices.³³ Alfred Song is the first Asian (Korean) American elected official in California, and he was elected to California state legislature in 1963. When four Korean American candidates won elections shortly after the 1992 riots, the Korean American community hailed this as a milestone achievement. Since then, the number of Korean American elected officials has steadily been increasing. Jay Kim is the

²⁹ Edward Taehan Chang, *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1992: B5. Editor of the *Los Angeles Times* contacted author to write op-ed since most American readers knew very little of Korean American community.

³⁰ Edward Taehan Chang, "Feelings of Guilt by Association." *Los Angeles Times*. April 18, 2007: A21.

³¹ Andrew L. Aoki and Okiyoshi Takeda. *Asian American Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008: 95.

³² Hana Feinchel Pitkin. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

³³ Andrew L. Aoki and Okiyoshi Takeda, 2008: 95.

only Korean American who has served in the United States Congress between 1993 and 1999. Mary Chung Hayashi (Korean American) was elected to California state legislature in 2007. Despite an increasing number of Korean Americans in the U.S. population, Korean American communities have struggled to elect their own candidates, and have long been underrepresented in government.

On the other hand, substantive representation is "acting for others, an activity on behalf of, in the interest of, as the agent of, someone else."³⁴ In the context of Korean American politics, substantive representation means having someone in the government who works for the causes and issues important to Korean Americans. A representative does not have to be a Korean American.³⁵ Unable to elect Korean American candidates to represent Los Angeles' Koreatown district, the Korean American community in Los Angeles has relied heavily on substantive representation through lobbying, campaign contributions, litigation, and protest. Although scholars have debated which form of representation is more effective, Korean Americans learned the painful lesson of having no representation during and after the Los Angeles riots of 1992. At the time, they were without any Korean American elected officials in city, state, and federal government. During and after the Los Angeles riots, the Korean American community also had no substantive representation when politicians retreated to their own respective racial and ethnic communities, and instead blamed Korean immigrants for causing racial conflicts.

There are many barriers and obstacles to Korean American political representation and empowerment. Korean (Asian) Americans have one of the lowest voter registration rates in the United States. More importantly, many Korean (Asian) Americans tend not to vote after registering to vote. Many Korean (Asian) American organizations, such as the Korean American Coalition (KAC) and the National Association for Korean American Services Education

³⁴ Hana Feinchel Pitkin, 1967: 113.

³⁵ Andrew L. Aoki and Okiyoshi Takeda, 2008: 96.

Consortium (NAKASEC) launched "voter registration" campaigns, but have had limited success. Political gerrymandering is one of the structural obstacles Korean (Asian) Americans must overcome. Los Angeles Koreatown is divided into three city council districts; therefore, Korean American votes have been diluted, and it has been almost impossible to elect Korean American candidates. To increase political representation, the Korean American community must not only increase voter registration and voting rates, but more importantly, they must enhance political muscle to redraw political district boundaries. When Korean American votes are diluted due to political gerrymandering, Korean Americans cannot have descriptive representation and empower themselves.

Perhaps political incorporation is the final stage of Korean American political empowerment. The most important step toward political empowerment is to establish civil rights, as well as political action committees and organizations that can sustain political representation and incorporation. The Korean American Coalition (KAC) of Los Angeles was established in 1983 by the 1.5 generation to promote the civic and civil rights interests of the Korean American community. As a non-profit and non-partisan organization, KAC's activities focus on education, community-organizing, leadership development, and coalition-building with diverse communities. If the KAC serves as a voice for young, professional, and moderate Korean Americans, the NAKASEC serves as the progressive immigrant voice of the Korean American community. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots of 1992, young and progressive Korean Americans established the **National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC)** in 1994. The NAKASEC mission is "to project a national progressive voice on major civil rights and immigrant rights and promote the full participation of Korean Americans in American society."³⁶ However, KAC and NAKASEC have not yet emerged as viable civil rights or advocacy groups for the

Korean American community. NAKASEC has been able to forge progressive coalitions with other communities, but lacks wide support from the Korean American community. The KAC has been actively involved in Los Angeles politics and is recognized as one of the most important Korean American organizations in Los Angeles, but they have not emerged as a national organization.

Ethnicity and race play an important role in shaping and influencing America's domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, understanding how ethnicity and domestic politics interact with foreign policy is critical because of American society's diversity.³⁷ The Chinese American community established the Organization Chinese Association (OCA), and more recently the 80-20 Initiative to enhance Chinese American and Asian American political visibility and representation. The Japanese American Citizen League (JACL) is the most influential national Japanese American organization that promotes positive images of the Japanese American community to mainstream American society. The Japanese American community has been able to elect several Japanese Americans in both Senate and Congress, and receive adequate political representation. Currently, there is one Japanese American Senator and three Congressmen. During the Clinton administration, Japanese Americans were also well-represented with one cabinet member, one Senator, and two Congressmen. The Japanese American community launched a major fundraising campaign to establish the Japanese American National Museum (JANM). The JANM was established with support from the Japanese American community, Japanese corporations, and major funding from the U.S. government. Japanese American politicians played a major role in securing government funding. In addition, the Japanese American community has been actively promoting and publicizing the sacrifice and contributions of Japanese American soldiers during World War II. According to the Go for Broke Educational Foundation website, "in 1986 World War II Japanese

³⁶ NAKASEC website www.nakasec.org

³⁷ Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, Race, and American Foreign Policy: A History*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992.

American veterans decided to create an organization committed to telling their story. A story shaped by the Nisei's character, that of courage, honor, determination, and loyalty. It is also a story of a group of patriotic men who served their country with the utmost pride, despite being treated unjustly because of their government's prejudice." The Jewish American community also established the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in 1958 to influence American foreign policy toward Israel and shape America's Middle East policy. AIPAC is regarded as one of the most successful and influential organizations that has direct access to members of the Senate, House of Representatives, and White House. The Korean American community can learn much from the Jewish, Japanese American, and Chinese American communities in how these communities have tried to politically empower themselves.

In recent years, the Korean American community has begun to organize and actively participate in political mobilization. For example, the Korean American community organized the grassroots HR 121 coalition to launch a campaign to pass a sex-slave resolution in 2007. The HR 121 resolution called for the "Japanese government to formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner." The Japanese government hired an influential lobby firm, Hogan and Hartson, and paid \$450,000 to stop HR 121.³⁸ And yet, this Korean American grassroots campaign generated wide support not only from the Korean American community but also from women's groups and other human rights organizations, and was able to thwart the Japanese government's lobby against HR 121. The Korean American community savored the victory and learned valuable lessons as they successfully launched this nationwide grassroots campaign.

Conclusion

Known as "new urban immigrants," Korean Americans have been primarily concerned with homeland politics and issues of two Koreas before the Los Angeles riots of 1992. As a "community in transition," however, Korean Americans have begun to take proactive steps in seeking internal integrity, cohesion, and political empowerment since the early 1990s. There is no doubt that the election of the first African American president in the United States will open more opportunities for non-whites, including Korean Americans, in politics, business, education, arts, and culture in the United States. During the Presidential election of 2008, Asian, Latino, and African American voting had expanded dramatically compared to the 2004 election.³⁹

With the emergence of a younger generation, the future of the Korean American community will depend on how its members shape, influence, and determine their own futures. Race and ethnicity seem to matter less to the younger generation compared to older and previous generations. Compared to older generations that are predominantly white, emerging generations are comprised of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with a sizable Latino and Asian American youth population. Young generations no longer see America as simply black and white, and are more willing to embrace multiculturalism. According to a 2006 Gallup Poll, 95 percent of young persons (18-29 years old) approved of interracial dating.⁴⁰ Globalization and internationalization profoundly influenced ideas, attitudes, and trends of younger generations in America as well as the rest of the globe. Younger generations who have grown up with different attitudes, interests, and norms will greatly influence racial and ethnic relations in America in the future. Younger generations are more open to diversity, and are more willing to embrace Latinos and Asian

³⁹ According to the Immigration Policy Center report (IPC Fact Check, August 13, 2009), the number of Latino voters increased by 28.4%, Asian American voters increased by 21.3%, and African American voters increased by 15.1 in 2008 Presidential election.

⁴⁰ Thomas Tseng, "Millennials: Key to Post-ethnic America? *New Geography*, July 30, 2009.

Americans as their friends and marriage partners. Younger generations have also grown up with the internet and international social networking; therefore, they are more informed and accepting of diversity, pluralism, and multiculturalism. The new question is: would Korean Americans born in the United States still be interested in their specific ethnic heritage, culture and language and actively participate in the preservation of and empowerment of the Korean American community?

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