Korean American History

Hyeyoung Kwon  
(University of Southern California)

Chanhaeng Lee  
(State University of New York at Stony Brook)

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Chapter 1
The First Wave of Korean Immigration

Objectives:

1. To help students understand the push and pull factors of early Korean immigration
2. To help students learn the struggles of early Korean immigrant pioneers who worked in Hawaiian plantations
3. To encourage students to think critically about the invisibility of Korean immigrants in American history textbooks

Time: One hour

Background:

Korean American history is not well known among American students. When one asks students whether they learned Korean American history while growing up or attending school, the answer is usually “no.” Even though Korean American history is not covered in U.S. history textbooks, it does not invalidate the experiences of Korean immigrants. Like any other Asian group in America, Korean Americans have historically been active participants in the making of what America was and is.

Korea was not receptive to foreign influences after the seventeenth century because of its turbulent experiences of invasions by neighboring countries. Due to the devastating effects of the Japanese invasions (1592 and 1597) and the Manchu invasions (1627 and 1636), Korea avoided interactions with foreign countries except China for more than two and a half centuries during which it was called the “Hermit Kingdom.” After a Japanese ship Unyo was driven away by the Koreans in 1875, however, Korea was forced to accept the disadvantageous foreign relations by signing the Treaty of Kanghwa of 1876 with Japan.

Under the treaty, the Japanese took over Korea’s right to foreign trade. The treaty brought a self-imposed isolation of Korea to an end and eventually paved the way for other unequal international treaties with Western powers. The presence of foreigners turned the Korean peninsula into a battlefield in which the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) were fought over. After winning these two major battles, Japan formally declared Korea as its protectorate.

During these years of socioeconomic crises, Horace N. Allen, a Protestant medical missionary and a diplomat from the United States, convinced King Kojong to permit the emigration of Koreans to Hawaii. The timing was ideal for Allen to persuade King Kojong, since massive natural disasters of famine and drought devastated Korean farmers in the beginning of the 1900s. Farmers who had lost their major source of income and food started moving to port cities such as P’yŏngyang and Inch’ŏn in order to find work. Along with other recruiters from the United States, Allen convinced these farmers to work in the Hawaiian plantations. Nevertheless, few Korean farmers expressed much interest in leaving their homeland until the missionaries like the Rev. George H. Jones, Dr. and Mrs. H. G. Underwood, and the Rev. Henry
G. Appenzeller actively convinced members of their congregations to go to Hawaii, a “Christian land full of opportunities.”

There were many newspaper advertisements that boasted about life in Hawaii. Many Koreans who faced poverty and political instability at the time were lured by the advertisements promising free housing, decent wages, and medical care. Recruiters described Hawaii as “the paradise island” to attract more people to leave Korea and work in Hawaiian plantations. Many Koreans also borrowed money from a bank in Inch’ŏn which was established by a recruiter David Deshler. Funded only by the Hawaiian Sugar Plantation Association, Deshler’s Bank lent the Koreans one hundred dollars to finance transportation fees. Once the workers arrived and began working on the plantations, the bank expected that it could take out money from their paychecks to pay back their debts. As a result of the active recruitment efforts of missionaries and recruiters, Koreans from diverse backgrounds such as ex-soldiers, farmers, government clerks, artisans, and laborers immigrated to Hawaii.

Around this time, Japanese plantation workers in Hawaii were frequently engaged in labor protests to fight against low wages and dreadful working conditions: 34 labor strikes were made by the Japanese between 1900 and 1905. To offset the rebellion of Japanese plantation workers, who then made up two-thirds of the entire plantation work force on the islands, the plantation owners showed great interest in recruiting Korean workers who were portrayed as “more obedient and respectful to their employers than any other Orientals.”
There were a handful of Korean diplomats, students, and merchants who came to the United States between 1883 and 1902. It was not until the S. S. Gaelic, a merchant ship with 102 Koreans, landed at the Port of Honolulu did the number of Korean immigrants increase significantly. Most of these Korean migrants had lived in cities before migrating to Hawaii. The group also consisted primarily of single males: nine out of ten Korean immigrants from 1903 and 1905 were male. Furthermore, due to the recruitment efforts of missionaries, 40 percent of Korean immigrants during this period were Christians.

Between 1903 and 1905, there were approximately 7,000 Korean immigrants in Hawaii. However the immigration door was closed in 1905 when the Korean government was forced to sign the Japanese Protectorate Treaty over Korea also known as the Úlsa Treaty. The Japanese government terminated issuing visas to Koreans for two reasons: to protect Japanese laborers in Hawaii from competition with Korean workers, as well as to prevent the Korean national independence movement in the United States.

Life in Hawaii was very difficult for the Korean pioneers. They woke up early in the morning by a loud siren and worked approximately ten hours a day for sixteen dollars a month. Workers wore ID number tags around their necks and had to keep their bodies bent over all day. Cutting sugar cane required such gruesome labor that their hands were full of blisters and badly cut by the sugar cane. Easurk Emsen Charr, who immigrated to Hawaii at the age of ten, recalled in his autobiography The Golden Mountain as follows:

A mansize pickaxe was given to me with which to work. I was to cut down the brushwood and to dig up the roots with it. That pickaxe was so big and heavy, and my hands so small and tender, that pretty soon both of my palms blistered and began to bleed.
In the sugar plantations, a *luna*, an overseer or supervisor on a horse, strode through the plantation and watched over the workers. When they caught those who were not working, the *lunas* often whipped them. Women who worked in the camps side-by-side with the men received even less pay for their labor. Some women worked in the camps doing laundry, making clothes, and cooking. According to Ronald Takaki, “Their knuckles became swollen and raw from using the harsh yellow soap.”

![Bronze of a Korean woman of Koloa plantation in Hawaii by Jan Gordon Fisher in 1985](Photo from the Historical Marker Database)

Between 1904 and 1907, about 1,000 Koreans who initially immigrated to Hawaii moved to different locations in the mainland to pursue better opportunities. For example, some Koreans worked in the mines of Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming while others moved to Alaska’s salmon fisheries. Some Koreans settled in Arizona or California and built the railroads. Due to their relatively small number, however, the Koreans in the mainland could not develop their own communities.

**Suggested procedures:**

1. Ask students if they ever had an opportunity to learn Korean American history at their school. Emphasize that Korean *American* history is not the same as Korean history from a world history class. Most likely, no one will raise their hand because Korean American history is not covered in their American history classes.
2. Discuss early Korean American history. If students are old enough to follow instructions, simply make copies of the background information, but if they are younger, simplify the background information and use it to tell a story.
3. Ask students why Korean immigrants decided to come to the United States. Who and what kind of pre-migration conditions facilitated their immigration? How did Christianity play a role? How were the working conditions in Hawaiian plantations?
4. Ask students if they would do something different if they faced the same situation. Allow them to think about the question and have them discuss their response with a classmate for five to ten minutes.

5. Let students imagine that they can communicate with a Korean immigrant pioneer through a telegram. Ask students to write a telegram message that advises him/her what to do and what not to do.

6. On the back of the message, ask students to write how the Korean immigrant pioneer would respond to their advice.

7. After they finish creating the message, have everyone share their answers with their classmates. If students say that the immigrant pioneer would not listen to their advice, have them elaborate further their messages and reemphasize how difficult it was for the immigrants to make their decisions.

References

Chapter 2
Korean Picture Brides and the Korean Independence Movement in America

Objectives:

1. To nurture understanding of the historical context that caused picture brides to immigrate to the United States
2. To encourage students to critically think about the role of Korean independence movement activists in the United States during the Japanese occupation in Korea

Time: One hour to one and a half hours

Background:

Like Asian Indians and Filipinos, Korean immigrants suffered not only from colonialism in their homeland, but also from racist laws in the United States. For example, many Korean immigrants had a difficult time renting homes due to racist laws and were not allowed to own land after the passage of the California Alien Land Law of 1913 which prohibited “aliens ineligible for citizenship from owning land or leasing it for longer than three years.” Koreans were categorized as aliens who were ineligible for naturalized citizenship at the time. In addition, they were denied services at many public recreational places and restaurants. Dr. Lee-wook Chang, former president of the Seoul National University, recalled his experience with racial discrimination as follows:

I entered a restaurant and sat down in order to have lunch. Although there were not many customers, the waitress did not come to my table. After awhile, a young receptionist came to me and said with a low voice that, “we can’t serve you lunch, because if we start serving lunch to the Orientals, white Americans will not come here.”

However, what distinguished Korean immigrants from other immigrants was their strong sense of ethnic solidarity which arose from their fight against colonialism in Korea. Most of early Korean immigrants had a great concern about their homeland. According to Bong-Yoon Choy, they always perceived themselves as “temporary sojourners,” and devoted their time and energy to the Korean national independence movement.

Most Korean immigrants left their homeland between 1902 and 1905. Koreans were prohibited from immigrating to the United States after this official emigration period because the Japanese government believed that Korean immigrants would hinder Japanese workers’ rights on the Hawaiian plantations and participate in anti-Japanese activities in America. Nevertheless, there was a small window of opportunity for Korean women to move to the United States as picture brides.

Because American laws prohibited interracial marriages at the time, Korean bachelors who immigrated to the United States had a very hard time finding wives. This phenomenon led to a significant gender disparity within the Korean immigrant community. About 90 percent of early Korean immigrants in Hawaii were male. It was the practice of picture brides that these bachelors’ pictures were sent to Korea and shown to single women who were willing to migrate.
to the United States and become their wives. For the Japanese government, as Sonia Shinn Sunoo pointed out, the practice was expected to function as an effective means to quell the political passions of Korean immigrants in America. For the Korean picture brides, it would provide an opportunity to escape the traditional gender role imposed by the Confucian society of their homeland.

The practice began with Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910. Because Koreans were considered Japanese nationals after the annexation, the Korean picture brides could use the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907 between the United States and Japan which allowed the wives and children of Japanese immigrants to enter the United States. From 1910 to 1924 when all Asian immigration was prohibited by the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, more than 900 picture brides immigrated to Hawaii and more than 100 to the mainland to marry Korean immigrants.

Most picture brides were much younger than their husbands. In fact, many Korean immigrant bachelors sent photos that were taken when they first arrived in Hawaii. As a consequence, many men in the photos looked much younger. One of the Korean picture brides, Anna Choi, a fifteen year old at the time of marriage, bitterly recalled the day she met her husband for the first time: “When I first met my fiancé, I could not believe my eyes. His hair was gray and I could not see any resemblance to the picture I had. He was forty-six years old.” Though many picture brides were disappointed by their fiancés, most of them decided to stay in the United States because a refusal to marry them meant going back to Korea. “I cry for eight
days,” another picture bride recalled, “and [I] don’t come out of my room. But I knew that if I
don’t get married, I have to go back to Korea on the next ship. So on the ninth day, I came out
and married him. But I don’t talk to him for three months.”

As the picture brides came to the United States and married Korean men, a new Korean
family and community was developing in America. However, most Korean immigrants planned
on returning to their native country after making money in the United States. For this reason,
when they heard that Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910, they grieved over the loss of their
homeland, a motherland to which they hoped to return one day.

Their grief and sorrow helped Korean immigrants to develop a sense of ethnic solidarity.
They organized the Korean national independence movement in the United States to protest
Japanese colonialism. The patriotic zeal of Korean immigrants enabled them to send their funds
to Korea and build political organizations and military schools in the United States. In short,
Korean immigrants were “bound to their past by the loss of their home country.” As Elaine Kim
puts it, “Korean farmers, waiters, and domestic servants by day became independence workers
by night.”

Many Korean immigrants focused on education as a means of liberating Korea from
Japanese colonialism. As a result, Korean immigrants’ literacy rate was the highest among
Asians living in the United States by 1920. Korean immigrants built language schools to teach
Korean history and language to their American-born children. Recognizing that language was the
foundation of their national identity, Korean immigrants set up Korean schools in many cities
such as Sacramento, San Francisco, Dinuba, Reedley, Delano, Stockton, Manteca, Riverside,
Claremont, Upland, and Los Angeles. Many Korean immigrants, including pastors, served as
instructors. They used the Bible and Korean newspapers as their textbooks.
The influence of churches at the schools was widespread. By 1918, there were 39 churches that taught Korean history and culture to children of immigrants in Hawaii. In 1920, approximately 800 Koreans attended these language schools in Hawaii, outnumbering their enrollment in public schools. The magnitude of the enrollment not only displayed the organizing power of the Korean churches, but also revealed the depth of Korean American patriotism in their fight against Japanese imperialism.

Furthermore, the Korean churches served also an important resource for Korean immigrants fighting for the independence of their homeland. They were gathering places where many Korean immigrants engaged in political activities. Among these activists were a few significant figures who led the independence movement in the United States. These individuals included Chang Ho Ahn, Syngman Rhee, Yong-man Park, and Jae-pil Suh. Though they all believed that Korean immigrants needed to unite and show loyalty to their homeland, they had different visions; so they used different tactics to achieve their goals. On the one hand, Yong-man Park argued for a militant approach and developed a military academy to train young males to use arms against Japan. Syngman Rhee and Jae-pil Suh focused on diplomacy and propaganda as a way of liberating Korea from Japan, while Chang Ho Ahn emphasized the power of education. In particular, Chang Ho Ahn stressed cultural renewal and the creation of a patriotic leadership among Korean immigrants. Ahn later established an academy and worked as the secretary of labor at the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai.

Forcibly separated from their homeland, Korean immigrants were often mistaken as the Japanese people. In such case, many Koreans asked to be completely disassociated with the Japanese. On one occasion, a Korean immigrant, Kwang-Son Lee became angry at her history
teacher who could not distinguish Korean people from the Japanese, and remarked, “Are you so ignorant you don’t know what a Korean is? And you a history teacher?”

A significant incident occurred in 1908 that revealed Korean immigrants’ loyalty to their homeland. Durham Stevens, an American who was employed by the Japanese government, made a public announcement that Koreans were benefiting under Japanese rule and were not fit for self-government. When his speech was published in the San Francisco Chronicle, Korean immigrants were furious and asked Stevens to make a formal apology for justifying Japanese imperialism. When this request was denied, a group of Korean immigrants confronted Stevens. It was at the time that one of the protesters, In-hwan Chang, took out a gun and assassinated Stevens. During his trial, Chang denounced Stevens as “a traitor to Korea” and said, “To die for having shot a traitor is glory, because I did it for my people.” Many Korean immigrants rallied for Chang and donated money for his defense. Though their efforts to release Chang failed and he was sentenced to serve 25 years at San Quentin State Prison, Chang remained a hero within Korean immigrant communities.

Suggested procedures:

1. Begin class with a quick and playful review game by using information from the previous lesson on early Korean American history. For example, ask them about working conditions in Hawaii and why Koreans decided to immigrate to Hawaiian plantations. Emphasize that many Korean immigrants did not intend to stay in Hawaii but return to their homeland after making money.
2. Using the background information of this chapter, discuss the conditions in which Koreans lived during the Japanese colonial domination.
3. Introduce the practice of picture brides and explain why they had to immigrate to Hawaii with Japanese passports.
4. Ask students how they would feel if they found out that Korea was colonized by Japan. Allow five to ten minutes to think about the question and have them write down their answers.
5. Have them share their answers with a person sitting next to them, and then ask a couple of students to report their responses in front of other classmates.
6. Divide students into different groups (about four people per group). Give them different descriptions about Korean independence movement activists (Syngman Rhee, Chang Ho Ahn, Yong-man Park, and Jae-pil Suh) based on the background information. Provide students with a poster-size post-it note and ask them to create an outline explaining these activists.
7. Ask students to select a spokesperson to report back to the larger group. Have the spokesperson present the outline to the entire class.
8. After each presentation is finished, discuss the different strategies that these activists took in order to fight for Korean independence. Let students discuss which approach was the most successful in achieving Korean independence.

References


Chapter 3
The Korean War and the Second Wave of Korean Immigration

Objectives:

1. To encourage debate on the consequences of the Korean War
2. To help students understand the complexity and unusual circumstances of the Korean Americans who immigrated to the United States immediately after the Korean War

Time: One hour to one and a half hours

Background:

In 1945, Korea finally won its independence from Japan. However, Korea’s hope to gain the sovereignty of the nation-state was increasingly threatened by the Cold War. After World War II, the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States turned the Korean peninsula into a war zone from June 25, 1950 until July 27, 1953 when the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed. Koreans refer to the Korean War as literally Yugio (June 25) since it marks the date on which the North Korean Army crossed the 38th parallel, a dividing line chosen by U.S. military planners at the Potsdam Conference of 1945 between North and South Korea.

The Korean War brought about devastating consequences for many Koreans. During the three years, according to Ramsay Liem, three million civilians lost their lives and approximately two million troops were killed or severely injured in the battlefield. Due to the war, the peninsula was again divided into two Koreas along the Demilitarized Zone. This division separated many
Korean families. A report of the Korea Red Cross indicates that about 10 million family members were separated. Despite the massive number of casualties and its horrible effects on many Korean families, the Korean War remains the "Forgotten War" in the eyes of American people because it was eclipsed by the triumph of World War II and the defeat of the Vietnam War.

![Korean refugees in Pohang on August 12, 1950](Photo from Harry S. Truman Library and Museum Photograph Database)

The Korean War brought a massive number of American soldiers into South Korea. A report estimates that the number of American soldiers reached approximately 330,000 during the Korean War. Among them, 70,000 military personnel remained in South Korea after the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty signed on October 1, 1953.

While the presence of American soldiers influenced the lives of all Koreans, it had the greatest effect on the women who were employed on the military base or worked around the stations. Many women worked on the base as interpreters, clerks, receptionists, cashiers, cooks, and waitresses. Just outside of the stations, other women worked in bars and clubs. For those Korean women, American soldiers represented the ideal of material abundance. They also viewed marriage to an American soldier as an effective means to avoid the patriarchy of Korean society.

With the passage of the War Bride Act of 1945, wives of American soldiers were free to immigrate to the United States on a non-quota basis. About 6,000 Korean women took advantage of the law to immigrate to the United States as GI wives, accounting for 40 percent of Korean immigrants from 1950 to 1964. This period is commonly called the second wave of Korean immigration. The number of Korean military brides reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. Each decade witnessed the immigration of 40,000 Korean women as wives of American servicemen to the United States.
Upon arriving in the United States, Korean military brides developed their own communities. Many Koreans associated military brides with prostitutes, and as a result of this stigma, they were targets of ostracism in Korean American communities. They also failed to blend into the American mainstream society due to racism and cultural isolation. They were often expected to retain Orientalist traits of Asian women such as “docility, deference, and domesticity” by their husbands. Though many military brides tried to raise bicultural and bilingual children, there was enormous pressure on them to raise their children in the so-called normal American way. However, within the community of military brides, they were able to share their unique hardships with each other.

Another group that entered the United States during the same period was children who were war orphans or the offspring of mixed parentage. As a consequence of the Korean War, many children in Korea became orphaned while some parents had to give up their children due to
extreme hardship and poverty. Many parents painfully let go of their children, believing that America would provide better opportunities for their children. Approximately 5,000 children came to the United States as adoptees, with more girls than boys. Along with Korean military brides, these adopted girls accounted for more than 70 percent of Korean immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s.

Many adoptees grew up in predominantly White middle class neighborhoods without many opportunities to interact with other Korean Americans. Adoptive parents believed that they had to help these children assimilate into the American mainstream society rather than expose them to Korean culture. As a result, many Korean adoptees grew up without learning about their heritage and culture. Recently, however, many adoptees have started to speak out about their unique experiences of isolation and discrimination. They also started to form support groups such as the Korean American Adoptee and Adoptive Family Network, the Adopted Korean Connection, the Boston Korean Adoptees, the Korean Adoptees of Hawaii, and so forth to create their independent, yet common identity.

Lastly, another outcome of the Korean War was the increasing number of highly educated Korean Americans who came to the United States. Influenced by American cultural dominance in South Korea, about 6,000 Korean students entered the United States between 1945 and 1965 to seek higher education. A few students returned to Korea after receiving their college degrees, but many of them managed to stay and establish permanent residency and even became naturalized citizens.

**Suggested procedures:**

1. Write “Korean War” on the board and ask students to brainstorm what images come to mind. This is a way to test how much prior knowledge they have of the Korean War. If they do not know much about the war, highlight the fact that it is often viewed as the “Forgotten War” by American people because it was overshadowed by World War II and the Vietnam War.
2. Discuss the consequences of the Korean War on the Korean people, specifically war orphans and military brides.
3. After the discussion, instruct students to stand and assemble at one end of the classroom in a single group. Read the below statements one by one. After a single statement is read, each student must choose one side of the classroom—respectively marked as “I agree” and “I disagree”—and move and stand by their chosen side. Read each statement slowly and make sure to repeat or explain the statement if necessary.

   - Koreans had to fight the war in order to bring peace.
   - The presence of American military personnel was a great blessing for people in Korea.
   - If not for the help of American soldiers, Korea would not have modernized.
   - Korean adoptees were fortunate to find a new home in America.
   - Military brides made a great decision to immigrate to the United States with their American husbands.
   - If not for the presence of the United States during the Korean War, I would not enjoy the life I have in America today.
   - Korea would not have been divided into two nations if the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union did not exist.
4. After each statement is read and once students are divided along the ideological lines, ask students why they have chosen one side over the other.

5. For each statement, there is no middle-ground or a “maybe” response; each student must choose a side and be willing to explain the reasoning for her or his choice. To save time, two or three students from both sides should be allowed to speak. In order to promote participation, the instructor should call upon students. The instructor has to make sure that every dialogue remains respectful, fair, and free of unnecessary conflict. The instructor may play devil’s advocate with any students’ ideas to encourage critical thinking. In the unlikely situation that heated conflicts arise, the instructor should remind the students that the class activity should not be taken personally.

6. After finishing the activity, the instructor should discuss the common ideas that come out of the activity. The purpose of the activity is not to encourage opposition but to help student realize that there are common interests, despite opposing personal view points. For example, students may agree that war should be the last resort and that U.S. military intervention is not always justified.

References

Chapter 4
The Immigration Act of 1965 and a New Group of Korean Americans

Objectives:

1. To learn Korean immigration history through the interview process
2. To help students understand economic, political, and social conditions that facilitated the immigration of their family members
3. To facilitate intergenerational dialogue between students and their family members
4. To sensitize students to the needs of immigrants who face language barriers

Time: One hour to one and a half hours

Background:

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that there were 1,076,872 Koreans in the United States. What caused this dramatic increase in the Korean American population? Were there any changes in the political environment that facilitated such a rapid influx of immigrants from Korea? In this chapter, we answer these questions.

First and foremost, it is very important to understand what was happening in the United States around the time that it opened its doors to a large number of immigrants from Korea. The late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States was an era of the Civil Rights Movement. Working class individuals and other racial minorities joined the African American-led fight against racial and economic inequalities in the United States. Many activists carried slogans such as “Serve the People” and “Power to the People.”

Civil Rights march, Seattle, 1965 (Photo from the Museum of History & Industry Photograph Collection)
One of the byproducts of the Civil Rights Movement was the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 which abolished “the 1920s system that favored immigrants of Western European origins.” More specifically, the Immigration Act of 1965 removed the token quotas placed on Asian immigration, and allowed a maximum of 170,000 Eastern Hemisphere immigrants to enter the United States per year. In addition, the law did not place any quota on immediate family members such as spouses, children under the age of eighteen, and parents of U.S. citizens.

President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the immigration reform bill of 1965
(Photo from the photographic collection of Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum)

The primary purpose of the Immigration Act of 1965 was family reunification. However, many Koreans who did not have family members in the United States at the time took advantage of another provision in the Immigration Act of 1965 which sought to recruit professionals and skilled workers from overseas. In 1969, according to Bill Ong Hing, 23.2 percent of Korean immigrants used the occupational categories. An additional 11.6 percent entered the United States as immigrant investors in the same year.

Many new Korean immigrants were highly skilled professionals from urban areas. Class background was not the only difference between the earlier Korean immigrants and the newcomers. Unlike the earlier Koreans who were mostly bachelors, new immigrants came to the United States with their families. They did not view themselves as “sojourners” or exiles, but saw themselves as immigrants seeking a stable life in the United States. Furthermore, many newly arrived immigrants entered the service or technology sectors instead of going into manufacturing and agricultural sectors like earlier immigrants.

What pushed these professionals to leave their homeland and immigrate to the United States? One important push factor was the political instability of South Korea after the Korean War. To briefly explain the political atmosphere, a military coup followed immediately after the collapse of Syngman Rhee’s government. Consequently, Major General Chung Hee Park took
over the government. Koreans’ political right to criticize the government was severely restricted during his military dictatorship.

Chung Hee Park and the Military Coup of May 16, 1961  
(Photo from the Overseas Koreans Foundation)

Under his leadership from 1961 to 1979, South Korea’s export-oriented economy developed rapidly. Though the economy developed quickly in South Korea, the number of white-collar jobs did not match the number of highly educated Koreans in the city. More than one out of every four males with college degrees was unable to utilize their education to find professional or managerial jobs. This fierce competition thus pushed Koreans to seek better employment opportunities outside of Korea. In short, political instability and labor market competition of the 1960s and 1970s pushed many highly educated Koreans to immigrate to the United States.

However, what might have appeared as an open door policy did not last for too long. In 1976, for example, the provision that was designed to recruit medical doctors from overseas became restricted as a result of an intense lobby of the American Medical Association that feared competition with Korean physicians and surgeons. Almost simultaneously, the South Korean government introduced a law that restricted the emigration of large property holders and high-ranking military personnel. By this time, the restructured capitalist economy in Korea also improved the lives of upper-middle class Koreans. Therefore, since the 1980s, many wealthy Koreans have had the incentive to remain in Korea instead of leaving their homeland.

The change in immigration laws and the widening income inequality in South Korea affected the social structure of Korean Americans. Studies show that the median income of Korean Americans has declined while there has been an increase in the number of Korean Americans living below the poverty line because a greater proportion of working class from Korea have used their kinship ties with American citizens to enter the United States.
Though these newly arrived Korean immigrants came to the “land of opportunity” with hopes to achieve the American dream, they faced discrimination like many earlier immigrants. Korean immigrants educated in the fields of medicine, teaching, and administration realized that there were limited employment opportunities for racial minorities due to the non-transferability of educational capital and language barriers. A large number of these professional Korean immigrants resorted to opening their own small businesses such as liquor stores, greengroceries, and restaurants in segregated minority neighborhoods. The development of small businesses in the inner city eventually led to Sa-I-Gu, the violence and tragedy of the Los Angeles riots of 1992.

**Suggested procedures:**

1. Before beginning the topic, give students a homework assignment and have them interview their parents or relatives to find out about their immigration history. For the interview, write the following questions on the board.

   - Why did you come to the United States?
   - What was it like to live in the United States for the first couple of years? Did you ultimately find the occupation of your dreams?
   - What year did you immigrate to the United States and what kind of pre-conditions facilitated your decision to leave your homeland?
   - How old were you when you arrived in the United States?

2. When they talk about the year in which their family immigrated to the United States, make sure to indicate what happened around that time (for instance, the Immigration Act of 1965, the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s and 1970s, and the Los Angeles riots of 1992).

3. After a few students have a chance to share their answers, let them reflect on the interview process by asking the following questions:

   - What did you learn from the interview? Did you learn new things about your parents, family members, historical events or a time period?
   - Did the experience of interviewing your family members stimulate thoughts about Korean immigrant experiences?
   - Did the experience change your feelings about your family members?

4. At the end of the discussion, remind students that many history textbooks do not tend to include ordinary and everyday life experiences of Korean immigrants, and as a result, there have not been enough opportunities for American people to learn about Korean American immigration history. Tell students that everyone has a valuable story to share with others about their lives. Although government records and other historical documents are often seen as more important, oral history preserves the stories of ordinary people and captures experiences that may otherwise slip away with each passing generation.
References

Chapter 5
Striving for the American Dream and Korean Small Businesses

Objectives:

1. To enable students to explain why there is a greater propensity for Korean immigrants to gravitate toward small businesses
2. To sensitize students to some of the hardships that Korean immigrants face in running small businesses

Time: Two thirty minute sessions or one and a half hour sessions

Background:

Korean small businesses in Los Angeles Koreatown, 1997
(Photo from the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection)

Korean immigrants have changed the landscape of many cities by opening small businesses. In American cities such as Los Angeles and New York, Korean immigrants can be found on almost every street corner running dry cleaners, nail salons, greengroceries, liquor stores, and flower shops. Many Korean shop owners provide services not only for other Korean Americans but also for other minorities and Whites. In fact, there is widespread recognition of Korean American small business ownership in the United States. Based on the 1980 U.S. Census, In-Jin Yoon estimated that about 12 percent of Korean Americans were self-employed in small businesses. Among the 17 ethnic groups that entered the United States between 1970 and 1980,
according to Yoon, Korean immigrants marked the highest level of self-employment. The rate of self-employment among Korean Americans reached 17 percent in 1990.

This chapter examines the reasons for the greater propensity of Korean immigrants to pursue self-employment. First, around the time Korean immigrants began arriving in the United States in greater numbers, opportunities for self-employment opened up. Prior to the large influx of Korean American immigrants, many Jewish Americans operated the small businesses in the inner cities where Koreans now own their shops. However, second and third generation of Jewish population moved out of the inner cities in the 1960s and did not continue their parents’ small businesses. Instead of taking over their parents’ businesses, children of Jewish Americans moved into the mainstream labor market, with a substantial percentage going into professional and white-collar occupations. While many Jews left the inner cities, the number of consumers increased, thereby creating an increasing demand for replacements. Korean immigrants who arrived in the United States after 1965, thus, took advantage of the economic opportunities in these “abandoned cities.”

Why did Korean immigrants who came to the United States with relatively high levels of education see this phenomenon as an opportunity? First of all, their professional and middle class backgrounds did not protect them from racial discrimination and language barriers. Many Korean immigrants were not familiar with American customs and culture, and their college degrees from prestigious Korean universities were not often recognized. According to anthropologist Kyeyoung Park, it was impossible for Korean immigrants to apply their training in Korea unless they went back to school in the United States. Even if they went back to school in America, it was difficult for these first generation immigrants to master a new language, leaving them extremely disadvantaged when competing with native English speakers. Korean immigrants, therefore, decided to be self-employed in their own businesses despite the expected hardships of running small businesses. Studies suggest that the decision to pursue self-employment was not their personal preference but rather a survival strategy.

Second, for many Korean immigrants who faced language barriers and culture shock, small businesses offered the possibility of fostering a stable life in the United States. To run a small business was a solution for those who experienced discrimination in the mainstream labor market but wanted to support their family, raise children, and eventually invite their parents from Korea. Their businesses ultimately made it possible for many Korean immigrants to send their children to American colleges to obtain professional jobs in the American mainstream labor market.

In addition, the immigration process based on family reunification encouraged many Koreans to share their business expertise with their family members and other Korean immigrants. Korean store owners used a variety of resources within their community to start up businesses. Korean newspapers often had numerous advertisements about available businesses. Moreover, Korean churches became a place in which they used kye, a rotating credit association, to finance their businesses.

With the help of social networks and available resources, many Korean Americans started businesses in inner city neighborhoods where competition was less fierce and real estate prices were relatively cheaper. These business owners felt that running businesses in White middle class suburban neighborhoods would be more difficult because they would have to compete with the already existing corporate chain supermarkets. For those who had limited English proficiency and lacked financial resources, to open up a business in a low-income neighborhood was a stepping stone toward future business in safer middle class neighborhoods.
Self-employment assured a life of hard work with no guarantees of success, regardless of type or characteristic of the small business. In fact, small business owners were cheap laborers who put some of their earnings into the pockets of distributors. Many newly-arrived Korean Americans found themselves in the most physically exhausting and labor intensive businesses that required working long hours with their unpaid family members. For many Korean Americans, however, small businesses were a strategy for survival. To run a small business also meant an investment in the future of their children.

Nevertheless, because of their middleman position - between the manufacturer and the customer - Korean store owners eventually became targets of hostility from other minorities who wrongfully blamed Korean immigrants for taking opportunities away from them. These misconceptions and rumors led to interethnic conflicts.

“Relaxing in Koreatown,” 1986
(Photograph from the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection)

Suggested procedures:

1. Ask students if they know someone who owns a small business. Have them describe the nature of those businesses and talk about why Korean Americans are more concentrated in small businesses than other ethnic groups. If parents of any student have a small business, allow the students to elaborate on how their parents’ business affected their lives, particularly their childhood memories. It is expected that these children helped out with their parents’ business at an early age as unpaid workers or did household chores while their parents worked long hours. Have them fully reflect and discuss their work experiences and intervene by asking them what they have learned from their experiences (for example, cultural connections with their co-ethnic community, serving as a translator or problem solver, and their experience of searching for a carefree childhood).
2. Have students take out a piece of paper and write down some of the expected hardships that Korean business owners may face. In addition, ask students to write down the possible reasons why Korean immigrants run small businesses despite these difficulties. Students may talk about long hours, dangerous neighborhoods, language barriers, and/or limited human-power. Move on to discuss the circumstances in which they were forced to open small businesses instead of working as professionals in the American mainstream society. After the discussion, ask students why their parents or small business owners in general want their children to study hard and work in the American mainstream society rather than inherit their business.

4. Lastly, draw a timeline on the board and divide it into three sections (Before 1965, 1965 to 1975, and 1976 to the present). Review the first three lessons about early immigration and ask students how the first wave (pioneer workers in the Hawaii), the second wave (war orphans and military wives) and the third wave of Korean immigrants were different from each other. Explain how many Koreans who immigrated after 1965 took advantage of the Immigration Act of 1965 which had a provision that was designed to recruit professionals from overseas. Remind students that many Koreans who came after 1965 were relatively well off compared to previous immigrants of the first and second waves. Move on to discuss why they experienced downward mobility and could not get a job in the mainstream society. Emphasize the preconditions that allowed them to open small businesses using the background information presented above. Discuss how social networks and the family reunification category in the immigration law played a role in the making of Korean immigrant entrepreneurship.

References

Chapter 6
Korean Churches in the United States

Objectives:

1. To familiarize students with the roles of Korean churches in helping Korean immigrants maintain their ethnic ties
2. To provide an opportunity to compare and contrast students’ experiences in church with those of other newly arrived immigrants

Time: Forty five minutes

Materials needed: One basket

Background:

Korean churches in the United States play a very important role for Korean immigrants. Historically, Korea was not a Protestant country. Rather, Buddhism and Confucianism were the two major religions that influenced the lives of Koreans. However, a large number of Korean immigrants have been associated with Christianity since the beginning of Korean American history. At the turn of the century, missionaries in Korea built schools and hospitals and provided various social services for Koreans. They were successful in spreading Christianity and made
concerted efforts to recruit laborers that would eventually work in Hawaiian plantations. Approximately 40 percent of immigrants who went to work for Hawaiian plantations were Christians.

When Korea was colonized by Japan, the Korean immigrant church became a major place for the Korean national independence movement. After Korea was liberated and a large number of immigrants started to move to the United States, the immigrant church again became the center for community services and cultural activities. Studies suggest that approximately 70 percent of Koreans living in the United States are Christians. The leading Korean denomination is Presbyterian followed by Baptist, Methodist, and Full Gospel.

"Americanization class" at Korean Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles
(Photo from the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a large number of Korean immigrants who arrived after 1965 were middle class professionals from urban areas. According to Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim, those who lived in the urban areas were more likely to associate with Christian religions than people living in rural areas. However, not all church goers were Christians before coming to the United States. Some initially went to churches to receive social services necessary to adjust to the American way of life and later became Christians. Though attending church for religious activities seems to be the primary motive behind high attendance rates, the social service and fellowship aspects of Korean churches help increase the number of Korean Christians in the United States.

For many Korean immigrants, churches also help them maintain their cultural and ethnic ties. Churches often serve Korean meals after services, celebrate Korean traditional and religious holidays, and house Korean language schools for the children of immigrants to learn the language of their homeland. Some church language schools have extensive summer programs focused on teaching Korean language and culture.
Today, Korean churches are mostly run by the first generation Korean male immigrants. Though many American-born children attend church with their parents, there is growing dissatisfaction expressed by English-speaking church attendees who feel that Korean immigrants mix religious activities with Korean traditions including gender inequality. While English speaking congregations are increasing, the generational and cultural gaps between the first generation Korean immigrants and American-born populations remain unresolved within many churches.

Despite some of these problems, churches play an important role in providing immigrants with social services. Pastors often serve as family counselors and are deeply involved in finding jobs for many immigrants. Members of church exchange all kinds of information ranging from education, health care, social security benefits to business know-how. Also, newly arrived immigrants who experience language barriers can receive language assistance.

In addition to the social services that many Korean churches provide, a number of immigrants attend Korean churches to make friends and socialize. Separated from their friends and family members in Korea, immigrants often feel isolated and lonely. Because adjusting to a new way of life is difficult, sharing stories with other immigrants in similar situations often helps them relieve stress and cope with their alienation and anxiety. Most churches also hold outdoor services accompanied by recreational activities such as sports, games, and singing in order to foster intimate circles of friendship among church goers.

Finally, Korean churches provide opportunities for many immigrants to hold important positions and statuses. They often serve as elders, program directors, and youth group leaders. Many Korean immigrants held high social positions in Korea but could not maintain similar positions in the United States because of language barriers and other difficulties related to their assimilation. Korean churches provide meaningful positions for Korean immigrants who yearn for the social status that they had enjoyed in their homeland.
Suggested procedures:

1. Take out an empty basket and ask students, “If you could fill up this basket with the objects that represent your Korean American identity, what would you put in?”

2. While they are thinking, the instructor facilitates the discussion by telling students what he/she might put into the basket. For example, the instructor can use the picture of a Korean drama (below) and tell students that because the instructor is a big fan of many Korean dramas, he/she would put a video into the basket. After the instructor shares their story, allow students to take out a piece of paper and draw the items (for instance, the Korean flag or a taekwondo uniform) that they would like to put in the basket and have them share their answers with other classmates.

3. After students share their answers with classmates, ask students whether they attend or have attended church. Based on the exercise, ask students whether they feel that Korean churches help them maintain their ethnic identity. Facilitate the discussion by asking what kind of activities they engage in at church, whether they get a chance to learn Korean language, or what kind of food they eat on Korean holidays.
4. Give them enough time to elaborate their answers and explain to students the role Korean churches play in helping Koreans feel connected to their co-ethnic community. Have students compare their experiences in churches with those of immigrant family members by asking how Korean churches help immigrant families?

References


Chapter 7
Los Angeles Koreatown: Past and Present

Objectives:

1. To enable students to understand the underlying reasons for development of ethnic communities
2. To help students identify the historical changes that took place in Los Angeles Koreatown
3. To promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills by having students create their own grant proposals based on topics related to Korean ethnic communities

Time:
Session one: Thirty minutes to forty five minutes
Session two: One to one and a half hours

Background:

Currently located in the Wilshire district, Los Angeles Koreatown got its official name “Koreatown” from the City of Los Angeles in 1980 as a result of the noticeable increase in Korean population and Korean-owned business throughout the area. Before the 1950s, as Angie Y. Chung pointed out, the Wilshire district served as a commercial and residential area for White Angelenos. With the elimination of residential segregation statutes in 1948, however, African Americans began to move into the district from South Central Los Angeles.

Many newly-arrived Korean immigrants also moved into the district and opened businesses. The first mini-mall was built at 3122 West Olympic Boulevard in 1971 when Hi Duk Lee, a former miner in West Germany, opened the Olympic Market in the same building and rented out the remaining units to other tenants. Since 1971, Koreatown has undergone many transformations. Olympic Boulevard became the heart of Korean business activities, displaying Korean language signs. Later on, Koreatown expanded to include Western and Vermont Avenues and other major streets west of the downtown.

Koreatown in the past

Bong-Youn Choy estimated that about 1,000 Korean plantation workers moved out of Hawaii to the mainland for better economic opportunities between 1905 and 1907. In Los Angeles, Korean Americans rented a house in the Bunker Hill area to establish the first Korean Presbyterian Church in 1906. In the 1910s, around 40 to 50 Koreans lived on Macy and Alameda Streets and the Bunker Hill area. The residential area of Korean Americans shifted to an area surrounded by Vermont, Western, Adams, and Slauson Avenues in the 1930s during which the Korean Presbyterian Church built its own church at 1374 West Jefferson Boulevard.
The Wiltern Theatre on the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue in Los Angeles, cir. 1938
(Photo from the Special Collections of University of Southern California)

Korean Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, cir. 1930
(Photo from the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection)
After the immigration reform of 1965, Koreatown became the major destination point for incoming Korean immigrants to the United States. Koreatown grew rapidly and started to develop many social service agencies and media stations to assist newly-arrived immigrants. The place offered cultural comforts to many immigrants who faced language barriers. Over time, Korean immigrants used their entrepreneurial skills and resources to turn Koreatown into an economically booming community. In 1982, with the help of the Koreatown Development Association (KDA), California Department of Transportation officially put a “Koreatown” sign on Freeway 10 between Normandie and Western entrances.

Koreatown today

Koreatown is still home for many newly-arrived Korean immigrants. In contrast to its name, however, Koreatown is a multiracial neighborhood. The vast majority of residents in this neighborhood are Latinos. A report of the 1990 U.S. Census found that Korean Americans made up less than 15 percent of the residents of Koreatown.

While Koreatown still serves as the heart of different Korean American community organizations, television, radio, and news media, as well as various religious organizations, the main characteristic of an ethnic enclave—a socially and spatially constrained place occupied by newcomers whose low-income status and racial segregation forced them to develop a place of their own—is gradually disappearing. Once housing discrimination was abolished, many wealthy Korean immigrants also started to move into suburbs like Cerritos, Fullerton, Glendale and Irvine. However, many working class immigrants and elders stayed in the Koreatown area.
Though many Korean immigrants moved out, Koreatown continued to develop into a hub of commercial activities with the flow of investment from South Korea. There are numerous night clubs, shopping malls, cosmetic stores, restaurants, PC rooms, karaoke, and spas in the neighborhood. The construction of bars and clubs attract many people who desire the lively nightlife. While these night time establishments allow many Koreans to get the feel of a mini-Seoul, these after-hour spots inevitably produce serious social problems such as gang violence, drunk driving, prostitution, and other crimes.

Very recently, many wealthier Korean immigrants who left Los Angeles Koreatown are returning with the construction of high-end condominiums and apartments. These returning residents include those who sent their children to college, young couples, and college students seeking the urban life style. As a result of the newly-built residential places, rent prices in Koreatown are skyrocketing and many low-income residents are being evicted from their homes.

With the growing number of transnational businesses and commercial buildings, Los Angeles Koreatown is projected to grow further. However, rising rent costs and other urban developments in Koreatown negatively impact on low-income families who live, work, and raise their children in the community.

Suggested procedures:

1. Start the discussion by asking students whether they have visited Los Angeles Koreatown. Encourage students to talk about what they do when they go to Koreatown (for example, going to Korean markets, noraebang, and/or Korean restaurants). It may be a good idea to take students on a field trip to a mini-Koreatown nearby or Los Angeles Koreatown to connect the lesson with out-of-class activities. However, if the instructor is unable to collect permission slips or reserve a bus in advance, this lesson plan can be based on students’ experiences of interacting with people in their ethnic community.

2. Continue the discussion (either during the tour or in the classroom) by asking the following questions.

   - Why do you think Koreatown was created?
   - How do you feel when you visit ethnic places in Koreatown? If anyone has been to Korea before, how is the Korean ethnic community similar to or different from places in Korea?
   - How is the neighborhood in which you currently live similar to or different from Los Angeles Koreatown?

3. After discussing the above questions, tell students about the history of Koreatown and how the current Koreatown is different from or similar to the past Koreatown. Explain to students what caused the change (for example, the Immigration Act of 1965, the development of small businesses, and Korean immigrants moving into suburban areas).

4. Have students create a grant proposal. Drawing from the lessons the instructor has covered so far, students can decide on a proposal that will convince donors to fund their project. To make the project more interesting, ask students what they would do if the imaginary donors contribute one million dollars to only one Korean American community project. If the instructor wants to make this project more relevant to the topic of Koreatown, he/she may ask students to create an organization in Koreatown that
would serve a specific population (for instance, an alliance of Koreatown residents for newly arrived immigrants living in a low-income neighborhood, a youth empowerment/leadership project emphasizing the Korean American experiences, or a museum that displays items related to Korean American history, etc.). Divide the students into different groups of four to five people and have them answer the following questions on a sheet of paper:

- What would you name your community project (project title)?
- Who is involved? Is there any partnership with other community-based organizations?
- Rationale and background history: who should receive money for this project and why for this particular population?
- What are the goals and objectives of this project? What do you want to accomplish?
- Strategies to accomplish your project goals/objectives.
- Evaluation: How will you know if you have succeed or not? You need to document whether or not you accomplished your goals.

5. After students finish answering the questions as a group, have the group members present their project in front of the class. Let students vote for the best project and give the winners bonus points or some other form of prize.

References

Chapter 8
Korean Americans and Education

Objectives:

1. To sensitize students to different educational pathways
2. To help students understand why there are high educational expectations among many Korean immigrant parents

Time: One hour

Materials needed: Color pens and posters

Background:

Korean American students’ academic achievements have been glorified and captured by numerous mainstream media headlines. For instance, a Los Angeles Times article in 1995 praised the high rate of Korean American enrollment at Harvard University. According to the report, more Korean Americans as a percentage of their total population were enrolled at Harvard than any other ethnic group.

Behind this apparent academic success, however, there is high pressure from Korean parents. Korean parents often attribute their children’s academic achievement to their family honor. As a result, Korean American students often complain that they are under enormous pressure to get good grades. For example, many Korean American students express that a “B” for their parents is equivalent to an “F.” In extreme cases, the high expectations have resulted in suicide attempts by Korean American students. In this chapter, we will explore the reasons for these high expectations and pressure from Korean immigrant parents.

The parenting styles of Korean immigrants reflect the culture and social structure of Korean society. For example, Korean parents grew up witnessing fierce academic competition in their homeland. They are also heavily influenced by the long legacy of East Asian countries’ imperial examination systems and Confucian values. Consequently, Korean immigrant parents often believe that educational success is an effective means for a stable life and promote their children’s school achievement with training styles of parenting.

For many Korean immigrant parents, their children’s academic performance is considered to be a sign of their own parenting ability. Accordingly, Korean parents tend to sacrifice more for their children compared to other racial groups and exercise greater supervision over their children’s educational issues, ranging from what universities they should attend and what majors they should choose to what kind of career paths they should follow. This is because many Korean parents see their children’s academic achievement as a long-term family investment. As a result, many parents tend to make their children feel guilty and shameful about their sacrifices whenever they do not meet their high expectations.

While many Korean immigrant parents are optimistic about their children’s future in the United States and have high expectations for them, they are also keenly aware of the racial discrimination associated with being Asian American. In fact, despite the relatively higher
educational aspirations of Asian parents, the economic rewards for the educational investment of Asian Americans have been lower than those for Whites. For this reason, Korean parents pushed their children to enter the academic or professional fields such as engineering, science, and medicine, with the hopes that their children would escape racial discrimination in those career fields.

![Rafe Esquith (center) and the “Hobart Shakespeareans” of the Hobart Elementary School, Los Angeles](Photo from the American Documentary)

Even countless commercial advertisements for cram schools (hagwŏn), displaying the exceptional educational backgrounds of the instructors, support the idea that education as well as credentials from prestigious universities will be critical in obtaining great jobs for their children. Korean American children, who are often praised and glorified by the mainstream media as academic superstars in American education, face ever-increasing pressure when their ethnic community supports the stereotypes. In general, Korean immigrant children recognize their parents’ sacrifice and feel obligated to please them by becoming highly skilled professionals. In consequence, they tend to choose careers that would provide them with greater financial security and social status.

Nonetheless, high expectations among parents often produce internal conflicts in Korean children as they are torn between meeting their parents’ expectations and pursuing their own interests and dreams. When Korean children fail in the eyes of their parents, it negatively influences children’s emotional well-being.

Most of Korean parents, regardless of their class background, have high expectations for their children. However, the educational strategies used by Korean immigrant parents are not uniform. While many upper-middle class Korean parents can compensate for their children’s limited proficiency in English by sending them to cram schools, working class parents living in low-income neighborhoods have a harder time turning their high educational expectations into reality due to their long working hours and limited access to financial resources. As a result, more children from working class backgrounds tend to resent their parents’ unrealistic expectations and demands.
Suggested procedures:

1. Have students take out a sheet of paper and answer the following questions:
   - How do you find out about the college admissions process?
   - Who usually guides you through the process? Private tutors, school counselors, and/or parents?
   - Are you pressured to attend a prestigious college? Why or why not? Are you free to choose any career you want? Why or why not?

2. Ask students to share their answers with other classmates. For the first and second questions, students will usually answer that they find out about the admissions process through peers, private tutors, or school counselors. Some students may say that they receive help from their parents. But many Korean parents often have difficulties in providing their children with detailed guidelines due to their limited knowledge about the American school system. Students usually get help from academies outside of their public schools but not everyone has the same privilege to attend such institutions because of different class backgrounds. For this reason, it is important to let students talk about the different ways of navigating through the school system both inside and outside of school. For example, if most students say that they attend private institutions outside of school, ask them if this is the case for the students of low-income families. If they say that their parents are interested in their educational process but cannot guide them well because of their limited language proficiency, ask them whether White middle class parents face the same challenges or not.

3. After allowing students to share their responses, ask them to answer the last set of questions. They usually talk about parental pressure, peer pressure, or stereotypes of Asian American students. After they share their answers with classmates, ask them why their parents press them to study hard or why they feel compelled to demonstrate their intellectual ability.

4. After letting students discuss their educational experiences, review how stereotypes of Asian American students as academic superstars sometimes make them feel they don’t fit into these images. Discuss some of the forces (for instance, racial discrimination or class differences) that push many Asian Americans to fit into these stereotypes.

References

Chapter 9
Korean American Ethnic Identity

Objectives:

1. To help students realize how printed materials or images can create stereotypes about Korean Americans
2. To promote understanding of how negative stereotypes about Asian Americans or Korean Americans have damaging effects on their experiences
3. To encourage critical thinking skills by using observations

Time: One hour

Materials needed: Images posted in this teachers’ guide

Background:

Many Korean American children experience confusion about their ethnic identity. They suffer from the perplexing experience of growing up in America without being a full part of it. This chapter examines the historical and current contexts that prevent Korean Americans from being completely accepted into America. It also explores why it is difficult for them to embrace their ethnic culture.

While Asian immigrants have been placed within the workplace of the United States, as Lisa Lowe maintained, they have been also considered “unintelligible” and “foreign” to the national polity. In other words, Asian immigrants were required as a cheap labor force from the mid-nineteenth century, and yet they were marked as racially and culturally unassimilable “others” in the United States: Asians were “required but not welcomed.”

In the realm of political and popular culture, Asian immigrants were considered an “inferior race.” They were associated with stereotypical images such as the “yellow peril” and the “perpetual foreigner.” The yellow peril stereotype was created during the mid-late nineteenth century with the immigration of Chinese workers to the United States. According to David Palumbo-Liu, the Chinese were associated with an innumerable, infinite, and unsanitary “mass” in the American imagination. In this context, Chinatowns were characterized in terms of “excess” of population and disease. They were perceived as a medical menace to Americans.

The image of the yellow peril later applied to the Japanese. If the yellow peril stereotyped the Chinese as a fearful mass and medical threat, then the Japanese were imagined as a political and military threat to the United States. In particular, the rise of Japan as a major world power created anxiety among American people around the time of World War II. As a result of such fear, American people viewed Japanese Americans in the United States as a potential enemy, and eventually incarcerated many of them in concentration camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The yellow peril was a common theme in comic books, fiction, newspapers, and even scholarly works. This stereotype negatively affected the lives of all Asian Americans. In 1910, early Korean immigrants also suffered from the yellow peril stereotype in a racial riot, known as the “Steward Incident,” in Upland, California where White farmers and workers violently
attacked and threatened to kill Korean orange-pickers of the orchard owned by Mary E. Steward to dispel them from the Upland area.

“The yellow terror in all his glory,” 1899
(Photo from Contexts: Understanding People in Their Social Worlds)

Another popular stereotypical image associated with Asian Americans was the perpetual foreigner. Throughout American history, Asian Americans were always treated as foreigners who were unable to fully assimilate into the American mainstream society. Many believed that Asian Americans were inherently outsiders within the American political and social spheres,
regardless of their citizenship or length of residence in the United States. As Thomas P. Kim argued, Asian Americans are still being ostracized as racialized foreigners by political elites, particularly when they are represented as a political hurdle to building a majority party coalition.

These stereotypical images enabled the passage of many racist laws and prevented many early Korean immigrants from enjoying the same privileges and legal rights that Whites benefited from. Although many discriminatory legal practices have been eliminated today, many American people still perceive Asian Americans as foreigners. It has negative consequences on Korean immigrants and their children in their daily interactions with others.

American-born Koreans often hear the question, “Where are you from?” or receive compliments when they speak English without an accent. However, underlying these simple remarks or compliments is an implied message that being American means being White. In this sense, a Korean person with yellow skin and more narrowly-shaped eyes cannot be seen as a full American. Korean Americans may try to speak English without an accent, learn mainstream cultural values, and even marry a White person, but as long as they retain their ethnic features, they will be seen as foreigners. In the worst case, Korean Americans have been victims of hate crimes due to racial stereotypes associated with their physical characteristics.

As a result of these stereotypes, many Korean American children, especially those who are born in the United States, suffer from identity crisis. In extreme cases, some American-born Koreans buy into negative stereotypes and feel ashamed of who they are. Some try to change their physical appearance by changing their hair color or by having plastic surgery to remove their ethnic features, but they often end up being neither. This painful experience is vividly described in “A Letter to My Sister,” written by a Korean American female to her sister who committed suicide.

I remember the first time, when I found you after you had cut your wrists with a kitchen knife, and later when our father, using his deft surgical skills, sewed you back up in his office…your obsession with plastic surgery exposed the myth of the whole beauty industry, which portrays plastic surgery as a beautifying, renewing experience… it began with your eyes and nose, and you continued to go back for more. You tried to box yourself into a preconditioned, Euro-American ideal and literally excised the parts that would not fit…We became pathetic victims of whiteness. We permed our hair and could afford to buy trendy clothes. Money, at least, gave us some material status. But we knew we could never become “popular” in other words, accepted. It had something to do with our “almond-shaped” eyes, but we never called it racism. You once asked, “What’s wrong with trying to be white?”…I feel disgusted and angry and so, so sorry when I think of how I participated in the self-hatred that helped to kill you.

For American-born Korean children growing up in immigrant households, it is hard to communicate their frustration and confusion with their parents. Many immigrant parents came to the United States to find better opportunities for their children. They believed that it was language barriers and cultural differences that prevented them from obtaining professional careers in the mainstream society. As a result of their negative experiences, they often push their children to study hard and be accepted in the society.

However, Korean children often complain that their parents’ high expectations add stress to their lives. What creates even more confusion among these children is that the same parents who push their children to excel in the American mainstream society also tell their children to retain their Korean culture and language. When there is miscommunication and misunderstanding, Korean children of immigrants face profound uncertainty about their identities.
The loss of ethnic heritage and language can have profound consequences on Asian American children and their families, especially when losing their primary language means the inability to speak with their immigrant parents. With the substantial decrease in public support for bilingual education and current shifts to resolve the immigrant language problem through early education policies and “English Only” preschools, the primary language retention rate for Asian children of immigrants is expected to decline much more rapidly. Today, as many as three-quarters of second generation Asian American children speak only English at home despite the large number of immigrant parents who cannot speak English fluently.

Communication is the primary link for all parent-child relationships. When Asian Americans lose their parents’ language in the process of acquiring English, it is impossible for many monolingual immigrant parents to convey their advice and effectively teach their children about social and cultural responsibility.

There should be an attempt to provide positive experiences of learning about ethnic language and culture for Korean American children. For Asian Americans stereotyped as foreigners or outsiders, the pressure to prove their inclusion into the mainstream society and display accepted American characteristics can hinder the development of their ethnic identity.

**Suggested procedures:**

1. **Before starting this class,** encourage students to go through some mainstream magazines or other forms of media and observe how Asian Americans are represented. Students will usually find as follows:

   - Asian Americans are underrepresented in the media.
   - Asian American women are sexualized in many mainstream forms of media.
   - Asian men are emasculated.

2. **Discuss how the invisibility or misrepresentation of Asian Americans in the mainstream media has an impact on their everyday life experiences.**

3. **Divide people into four groups and distribute the images on the next pages and ask them to come up with answers for the following questions:**

   - Describe the picture and explain how the images maintain negative stereotypes about Asian Americans.
   - Does the advertisement contain language that is potentially offensive?
   - If you could recreate the image, what would you do and why?
Group 1 Details Magazine (Gay or Asian?)

One craves for chicken; the other takes it General Tso-style. Whether you're into shrimp balls or shaved balls, entering the dragon requires a bit of head lolling, up on your chopsticks, and make sure your tickets are showing. Stinky farts, Grasshopper: A sharp eye will always take home the plumpest elk.

1. Dior sunglasses: Sale at Nordstrom and available on the corner. $159
2. Ryan SeacrestRain: Shredded spks, just like they were designed to be. $99
3. Delicate features: Filled by a cup of tea and a bit of saucy sauce. $25
4. Dolce & Gabbana suede jacket: Keeps the cold away and stunning sights on the battlefield. $1,200
5. Wutty t-shirt: It helps simple streetwear to get the Asian flare and provides for free. $30
6. Ladyboy fingers: Soft and long. Perfect for both men and women. $50
7. Louis Vuitton bag: Don't be duped by the price, it's from fake materials. $4,000
8. Evisu jeans: $500, a formal ass requires a formal wear.
9. Metallic sneakers: When the Punks Indi takes the stage, nothing it could be lost in translation.

Group 2 Wong Brothers (Abercrombie & Fitch)
Group 3 *Time* Magazine: Those Asian-American Whiz kids

Group 4 *Hub Pages*: Korean actress Yunjin Kim
4. Have everyone share their group responses and conclude the exercise by asking the following questions:

- How do these images affect the way others look at Korean Americans in their daily lives?
- Over the long term, how do these images affect the way we look at ourselves?

References

Chapter 10

Objectives:

1. To help students gain empathetic understanding of the issues related to racial conflict from different perspectives
2. To develop critical thinking skills and creativity by encouraging students to freely express their knowledge through a script writing process
3. To have students explore different topics and perspectives through a role-playing game

Time: Two to three class sessions

Background:

Burned out car on Florence Avenue west of Normandie, April 30, 1992
(Photo from the Los Angeles Times)

On April 29, 1992, Americans across the nation eyewitnessed the shocking pictures of racial violence in Los Angeles. Korean Americans’ hopes and dreams were burned to the ground and their desperate pleas for help were neglected and ignored. This was the day a jury rendered their verdict on the case involving Rodney King, an African American, and four LAPD officers. Rodney King was seriously beaten by the police officers on March 3, 1991 and the entire incident was caught on tape. When the jury decided that they were not guilty, Los Angeles streets including Pico-Union, South Central Los Angeles, and other parts of Koreatown were soon stormed by violent insurgence. Stores were robbed and destroyed by looters, the streets were filled with fire and smoke, and innocent bystanders were injured and killed.

As a result of the riots, 52 lives were lost and 2,239 people were injured. About one billion dollars in damages were done to residences and businesses, and over 14,000 people were
arrested. Korean immigrants were the major victim of the riots, and many store owners watched in disbelief as their stores burned. During the three day riots, 2,300 stores owned by Korean Americans were looted and/or burned in South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown. One Korean was killed and 46 Koreans were injured. The damages suffered by Koreans accounted for about 45 percent of the total loss of the riots.

There are competing explanations about what caused the riots. When mainstream reporters wrote about the riots, Korean immigrant views were left out and the media portrayed the riots as if they were caused exclusively by conflicts between the African American community and the Korean American community. However, it is crucial to fully understand the historical context of the incident. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 were caused by three factors: firstly, the explosion of anger against the American power structure that produces racial and economic inequality in the United States; secondly, a lack of multiethnic education that prevented Korean Americans and other minorities from understanding each other; and lastly, Korean Americans’ lack of political representation.

Los Angeles experienced a massive economic change in the 1970s and 1980s. Due to the deindustrialization which means “a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation’s basic productive capacity,” a number of mainstream capital and corporations moved to other areas or developing countries to abandon South Central Los Angeles that had been a predominantly African American residential area. Along with the mainstream capital, many African American middle class also left the area for more affluent neighborhoods. In the process of deindustrialization, according to Edward W. Soja, more than 70,000 jobs disappeared in Los Angeles between 1978 and 1982. The residents of South Central Los Angeles were one of the most severely hit victims by the plant closings and massive lay-offs. They were “deproletarianized” to be abandoned as an urban underclass.

Moreover, African Americans in South Central Los Angeles have been a victim of police brutality. Long before the Rodney King incident, a thirty nine year old African American woman, Eula M. Love was killed by two LAPD officers in 1979. Despite the fact that she didn’t injure anybody, the officers shot her a dozen times. At least fifteen people were killed by LAPD officers in 1982. About 1,500 young African Americans in South Central Los Angeles were arrested in 1988 simply because of “looking suspicious” after LAPD introduced “Operation Hammer” in the name of anti-gang sweeps in the area.

As a number of Latino immigrants from Mexico and Central American countries, particularly from El Salvador and Guatemala, entered South Central Los Angeles, the area also experienced a dramatic change in demographic composition. A report found Latinos comprised 31 percent of the residents of South Central Los Angeles in 1980, but this figure reached 46 percent in 1990. However, more than 60 percent of these Latinos lived under the poverty line. They also competed with African Americans over increasingly scarce resources.

The abandonment of South Central Los Angeles by mainstream supermarkets and retail chains created an opening for Korean immigrants who faced discrimination in the mainstream labor market. Liquor stores and indoor swap meets were the two most conspicuous institutions that Korean immigrants invested in. A report estimated that there were 728 liquor stores in South Central Los Angeles. The ratio of liquor stores per resident in the area was three or four times higher than the ratio for the rest of Los Angeles. Even though they were designated as “liquor stores,” however, as Nancy Abelmann and John Lie pointed out, most of Korean liquor stores served as a neighborhood supermarket that sold groceries and offered check cashing services to the residents. Korean immigrants also helped reconstruct the local economy by innovating new
forms of business establishment such as indoor swap meets. Similar to open-air markets in Korea, these indoor swap meets functioned as department stores by selling a variety of consumer goods from low-cost clothing, shoes, and electronics to jewelry.

With a strong belief in the American dream, Korean immigrants viewed America as a land of milk and honey. They worked hard day and night to accomplish the dream. By opening small businesses in South Central Los Angeles and reshaping the local economy as active agents, they filled the gap caused by the flight of supermarkets and retail chains. Unfortunately, however, Korean immigrants did not have enough opportunities to learn about other minorities who were their primary customers. Schools never taught Korean immigrants about the African American Civil Rights Movement that eventually gave more rights to minorities including Korean Americans.

To make matters worse, many Korean immigrants showed racial prejudice toward African Americans and Latinos. Before coming to the United States, Koreans absorbed the racist ideology disseminated by the U.S. cultural dominance in their homeland. By emphasizing their position as the “model minority,” Korean immigrants also attempted to dissociate themselves from African Americans and Latinos as a means of upward mobility within the racial hierarchy of the United States.

The absence of multicultural education also prevented other minorities from understanding the communication barrier that Korean immigrants faced. Due to their lack of verbal communication skills, Korean immigrants had difficulty in engaging in informal conversation with non-Koreans. A lack of knowledge of Korean immigrant hardship reinforced the notion among African Americans that Korean Americans were foreign intruders deliberately trying to take over their community.

(Photograph by Chanhaeng Lee)

It was Korean Americans’ lack of political power that exacerbated their helplessness. Before the riots, as Edward J. W. Park pointed out, Korean Americans reproduced homeland
politics within their own community. Political ties to homeland politics was political capital for Korean American community leaders. As is evident in the case of the Korean American Grocers Association, Korean Americans’ participation in local politics was limited to protecting their economic interests by contributing their financial resources to politicians. However, the riots brought to an end the “politics of ethnic insularity” of Korean Americans. During and after the riots, Korean Americans did not receive any substantial help from politicians and came to believe that their lack of political power was responsible for their victimhood. In this sense, the riots awakened a political consciousness among Korean Americans. They realized that it would be necessary to improve the political power of Korean Americans and to articulate their interests in the politics of post-riots for the future of their community.

Unlike the mainstream media’s portrayal, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 were not simply a conflict between African Americans and Korean Americans. Rather, the riots were an “over-determined” multiethnic clash caused by economic injustice, racial discrimination, police brutality, demographic change, cultural difference, and political imbalance.

The lessons are clear. Korean Americans who endured discrimination in the “land of opportunity” need to gain political representation to protect themselves. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 were a wake up call for many Korean Americans. On May 3, 1992, more than 30,000 Korean Americans gathered in Los Angeles for a Peace March. There was a clear message behind the march: Korean Americans would be willing to take part in making an America that allows people to have dignity, basic freedom, and common respect. The riots gave Korean Americans an opportunity to rethink their American dream in a multiethnic society. More importantly, the 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans began to play a critical role in representing the community and serving as a voice for the voiceless immigrants.

Suggested procedures:

- First session assignments:

  1. Using the background information as a guideline, initiate a discussion about the multiple causes of the Los Angeles riots of 1992.
  2. Ask students what kind of community they want to live in. Have them draw the ideal community on a piece of paper. Give them about fifteen to twenty minutes and allow students to share their drawings. Ask students the following questions:

     ● What would you do to make this ideal community into a reality?
     ● How can learning Korean culture and language help one accomplish this goal?

- Second session assignments:

  3. Ask students what topics were most impressive. For example, the instructor can write down the issues that were covered in the class (for example, early immigration, picture brides, the Korean War, and so on) on the board and have students reflect on their learning process. If they start naming the topic that struck them, have them elaborate on the topic further.
  4. Based on their responses, place them into different groups. It is usually ideal to designate three people in a group so everyone can actively participate in the exercise.
5. Ask students to create an imaginary Korean American character based on the lessons and readings covered in class. For example, they can create an imaginary Korean immigrant pioneer, picture bride, or national independence movement activist (see examples below). Encourage students to imagine themselves as a screenwriter.

- Immigrant pioneer: Students can create an imaginary Korean immigrant who decided to immigrate to Hawaii and work in the plantations. The play can show the difficult situations in Korea (push factors) and the process of separating from their loved ones. Students can emphasize how they were forced to work long hours with very low wages after their arrival in the United States.
- Picture bride: This script can focus on a Korean picture bride and explore the historical context in which they came to the United States. The script can highlight how she was deceived by the matchmaker who purposely showed her the picture on which her future husband looked much younger. It can also demonstrate how she was disappointed upon arriving to Hawaii but eventually formed a family with her husband.
- Independence movement activist during Japanese colonialism: Students may create a character that fought for Korean independence during Japanese colonialism by organizing political activities at church.
- Additional examples: a Korean American store owner who lost his/her store during the Los Angeles riots of 1992; a Korean youth who has conflict with parents; Korean American who has confusion about his/her identity as a result of living in a White neighborhood; or an immigrant student entering an American high school for the first time.

6. Give them a time or page limit so that their role-playing game is not too long or too short. In most cases, three page scripts are appropriate for a ten minute role-playing game.
7. After students finish producing their scripts, give them enough time to practice. If necessary, let them go outside of the classroom to rehearse and have them perform it in front of their classmates.
8. After all the plays, the instructor can have the imaginary characters come up to the front of the class to take questions from the audience.

References