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## From an Ethnic Island to a Transnational Bubble: A Reflection on Korean Americans in Los Angeles

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So much more could be said in reflecting on Sa-I-Gu. My main goal in this brief essay has simply been to limn the ways in which the devastating fires of Sa-I-Gu have produced a loamy and fecund soil for personal discovery, community organizing, political mobilization, and, ultimately, a remaking of what it means to be Korean and Asian in the United States.

## From an Ethnic Island to a Transnational Bubble:

A Reflection on Korean Americans in Los Angeles

Edward J.W. Park

EDWARD J.W. PARK is director and professor of Asian Pacific American Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. His publications include "Competing Visions: Political Formation of Korean Americans in Los Angeles" (*Amerasia Journal*, 1988) and "Labor Organizing Beyond Race and Nation: The Los Angeles Hilton Case" (*International Journal of Sociology and Social Research*, 2004).

In the aftermath of the Los Angeles civil unrest of 1992, one of the few areas of agreement within the Korean American community was that Korean Americans do not live on an ethnic island. No matter how much Korean Americans built up the walls of ethnic insularity, the civil unrest unequivocally asserted that the



Los Angeles Koreatown, July 25, 2011.

Photograph by Edward J.W. Park

lives of Korean Americans are enmeshed with lives of others and that Korean Americans ignore this at their own peril. The rage of African Americans in South Central after the Rodney King verdict, the crushing poverty of Central Americans in Pico Union, the brutality and the indifference of the Los Angeles Police Department, and the cluelessness of elected politicians all mattered in what happened to Korean Americans before, during, and after the civil unrest. The most significant Korean American response to the civil unrest was the emergence of a new leadership that would shatter ethnic insularity for political participation and grassroots engagement. As the politics of rebuilding played out, a new cadre of Korean American community leaders emerged that was united in its ties and networks to institutions and interests beyond that of the Korean American community. To be sure, the Korean American community remained riven with divisions and disagreements, but it was no longer whether you supported Kim Dae-jung or Kim Young-sam for South Korean presidency, but over rebuilding liquor stores in South Central or supporting Bill Clinton or George H.W. Bush. Reflecting the depth of this transformation, the journalist K.W. Lee claimed, "Korean Americans were born out of the ashes of Los Angeles Riots."



Los Angeles Koreatown, July 25, 2011.

Photograph by Edward J.W. Park

For the next few years, it was clear that Korean American community in Los Angeles had been transformed. Korean Youth and Community Center (KYCC) emerged as a largest and the most important community organization precisely because its leadership had the capacity to reach beyond the ethnic community and build relationships with corporate boards, private foundations, politicians, and African American community leaders. Few miles east of KYCC, Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) quickly led the progressive charge by forging alliances with labor unions, reaching out to and representing Latino workers against Korean American employers, and providing leadership on progressive causes ranging from immigrant rights to affordable housing. In addition, social service organizations such as Korean Health, Education, Information, and Research Center (KHEIR) added Spanish language capacity to serve the large low-income and uninsured Latino population, providing much needed prenatal and maternity care. At the end of the 1990s, it seemed that K.W. Lee's claim was indeed coming true—Korean Americans in Los Angeles made the transition from an immigrant community with one leg still firmly planted in its homeland to a bona-fide American ethnic community who finally acknowledged that its fate lied within the city.



Koreatown Galleria on the corner of Olympic and Western is a good place to get a sense of the post-civil unrest Koreatown. Built in September 2001 on a site that includes the footprint of a strip mall that was burned to the ground, the complex holds over seventy shops in two main floors. A supermarket that claims to be the largest Korean supermarket outside of Korea takes up the entire basement floor. The Galleria was built just in time for the Korea/Japan World Cup in June 2002, and it served as a gathering place for tens of thousands of Korean Americans who drove in from all over southern California to cheer the South Korean team that made an improbable run to the semifinals. For the Korean Americans who had been steadily moving out of Koreatown to the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley and Orange County, they saw a shockingly different Koreatown. Ever since the International Monetary Fund forced the South Korean government to loosen its capital control during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, South Korean corporations and private individuals have been investing in Koreatown to take advantage of the depressed real estate values in the aftermath of the civil unrest.

As the South Korean economy bounced back and real estate value in Seoul skyrocketed, the flow of money from Seoul to Los Angeles increased dramatically. In addition to the Galleria, South Korean money strategically transformed pockets of Koreatown along key corridors with a mix of upscale commercial developments and high-density apartment and condominium complexes. In 2005, *New York Times* reintroduced Koreatown to the nation this time as a “revived and upscale” district filled with luxurious spas, high-end restaurants, and karaoke noraebangs. By 2007, the transformation of Koreatown was complete: it saw its median home price shoot up to \$847,000—almost twice the price for Los Angeles County and 50 percent more than Orange County.

Even the national economic collapse of 2008 could not derail the reinvention of Koreatown as a new site for South Korean investment. The entry of South Korea into the U.S. Visa Waiver Program in November of that year resulted in a dramatic increase of Korean tourists and other short-term visitors—in 2010, U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics reported 1.3 million admissions of South Koreans who can now enter the U.S. with only their passports and spend up to 90 days to pursue business or pleasure. The impact of this new influx is everywhere in Koreatown—new hotels, new restaurants, new bars, new cafes, valet parking at strip malls, an hour wait at all-you-can-eat Korean barbecue restaurants. Betting on this future is Korean Airlines, which will break ground in 2012 on the \$1 billion Wilshire Grand Tower project at the corner of Wilshire and Figueroa that will bring in two towers with 560 hotel rooms, 100 condominiums, and 1.75 million square feet of commercial space and rewrite the skyline of Downtown Los Angeles. Tower I will have a ten-story LED billboard that will cycle Korean Airline commercials depicting the Korean countryside, the glittering lights of Seoul, K-pop boy and girl bands, and other images of Hallyu—the “Korean Wave.” *Huffington Post* wondered if the *Blade Runner* future of Los Angeles has finally arrived. Korean Americans did not need political engagement and grassroots coalition building to find a voice in Los Angeles—what they needed was South Korean money.



Twenty years after the civil unrest, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Korean Americans in Los Angeles and Koreatown—the symbolic and the cultural center of Korean Americans—traded in their ethnic island for a transnational bubble. To be fair, many of

the individuals and organizations that played crucial roles in Korean American engagement are still there and doing important and difficult work: both KYCC and KIWA changed “Korean” in their names to “Koreatown” to more accurately reflect their fundamental commitment to community—and not strictly ethnic—service. KIWA has recently released a report on the housing crisis facing low-income residents in light of Korean-funded real estate development and has continued its class-based advocacy. Korean Americans who were undergraduate students in 1992 have risen to important positions of political leadership and responsibility, working in City Hall, Sacramento, and Washington D.C. Yet, it seems clear that the center of power and influence over Koreatown has now shifted from community-based organizations towards developers, bankers, and redevelopment agencies. At the corner of Wilshire and Western, the sleek steel-and-glass 22-story Solair development wraps around the Metro station. This verticality, combined with pedestrians and vibrant street life, makes this corner of Koreatown look more like Manhattan or Kangnam than the horizontal and car-happy Los Angeles. Across the street is Ma Dang Courtyard, a four-story shopping mall anchored by CGV Cinema, the largest theater chain in Korea, which is making a foray into the U.S. market by opening South Korean blockbusters in Los Angeles at the same time they come out in Seoul. In the past twenty years, Koreatown has become too important and too valuable for global investors for the American ethnic bona-fides to find firm footing. For Korean Americans who experienced the civil unrest and continue the quiet and the time-consuming labor of building interracial and interethnic coalition, it is difficult to be seen and heard above the bright lights and the loud din of transnational spectacle.

## The Fruits of Demographic Change

Jervey Tervalon

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“I don’t believe in integration to achieve miscegenation” is a line from a Kid Creole song that appeals to me because I was born in New Orleans, where race was chaste and was inescapable unless one chose to pay the very high price to pass: Ignoring the diversity in your own family. Then, where one fit in society had