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KOREAN AMERICAN STUDIES: THEN AND NOW

by

Ashley Chong

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the International Studies

Alyssa Park
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
International Studies have been completed.

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International Studies Honors Advisor

KOREAN-AMERICAN STUDIES: THEN AND NOW
A LITERATURE REVIEW

by

Ashley Chong

Alyssa Park, Faculty Mentor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for a
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Honors in International Studies

ABSTRACT:

This thesis is a literature review of Korean American studies that compares work from the Old Guard (pre-2000s) and the New Guard (post-2000s) with the goal of finding an overarching trend occurring over time. Through analyzing sources from multiple disciplines, I argue that the main trend from the Old Guard to the New Guard is a pulling away from South Korea. As the Korean American Studies field progressed, it found itself needing to create distance between itself and South Korea. Because of how traditional Korean values were overturned and questioned due to immigrating to the United States, Korean Americans claimed an identity as Korean Americans rather than Korean immigrants living in America. I conclude that although the trend from the Old Guard to the New Guard is that of creating distance, moving forward, the trend is bound to change as the Korean American community grapples with its potential exclusiveness and as South Korea becomes more active on the world stage.

INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

On January 13, 1903, a boat pulled into Honolulu bearing on it the first 101 Korean immigrants to America. These immigrants came from a country that would in two years become colonized by their neighbor Japan. The first immigrants came to work pineapple and sugar plantations, were mostly Christians, and almost all unskilled, poor workers. These immigrants came to the United States for “better economic opportunity but not to settle down permanently (Hurh 1984, p45).”

After Korea was annexed by Japan, immigration trickled down to include just picture brides, political refugees, and students. Immigration slightly picked up again after the end of the Korean War between 1951 and 1964 and mostly consisted of adoptees, war brides, and professional workers. The majority of Korean immigrants came after the 1965 Immigration Act that lifted quotas from country of origin. This wave of Korean immigrants were highly educated and economic migrants, coming to the United States most likely for better educational opportunities for their children or a better quality of life.

More than a century after the first Korean immigrants arrived, Korean immigrants and their children have now reached a point of earning their own box to check off on an ethnic identifying list. According to the Migration Policy Institute, in 2013 there were 1.1 million Korean immigrants in the United States, making up approximately 3% of the foreign-born population (Zong & Batalova 2013), including a mix of Koreans who have recently immigrated as well as families who have lived in the United States for generations.

And as Korean immigrants settled into the United States and had families, their children grew with a mix of American and Korean influences. The children saw themselves as something in between their parents’ heritage culture and the culture of their American

surroundings: not quite one and not quite the other. Matching the interest in Korean Studies, the first Korean Studies Center opened at the University of Hawaii, the first of more than twenty others to open along the coasts and sprinkled throughout the country.

Now people claim the label Korean American rather than saying that they are Korean immigrants in America or Americans with Korean descent. The Korean American population has celebrities, athletes, politicians, and other public figures to tout as their own. And now there is a trend of Korean Americans “returning” to South Korea for a year or two to ‘find their roots’. Again and again, the definition and boundaries of what makes a Korean American is contested and redefined.

KOREAN AND-? : IDENTIFYING MYSELF

I am a daughter of Korean immigrants who moved to the United States during the 1980's. I was born in Peoria, Illinois but didn't stay in America; due to my father's job with the Caterpillar Mining Company, after my birth, we went on to live in Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia for nine years before returning back to the United States. My family lived in Peoria for five years before being relocated to Montréal, Québec in Canada where we stayed for five years. I left Montréal after our third year of living there to start my undergraduate degree at the University of Iowa.

Because of my upbringing across countries, and most notably in South-East Asia, I was and still am hesitant to claim the Korean American identity for myself. In South-East Asia, I was not part of the minority population because I was Asian. Additionally, I was sheltered like many of the other East Asians who live in South-East Asia, enjoying a more comfortable life with certain privileges like maids and drivers.

At the University of Iowa, I was removed from the context of my family and began trying to pin down ethnically and culturally who I was. Church was a big part of this. Growing up, my family first attended Korean language churches until my parents realized that my brother and I weren't learning anything because our Korean language proficiency wasn't up to par. This started a pattern of going between Korean language churches and English language churches, with my preference leaning heavily to those in the English language. When I came to Iowa, I chose to attend the English ministry of a majority Korean church that additionally housed a Congolese ministry and a Russian ministry. Here, I found some sort of solace by being with other Korean Americans.

My sophomore year I took a course titled 'Asian American Experiences.' It was initiated by Asian American students across campus to be a place to learn about Asian American history and have discussions. We did end up learning about Asian American history but the class also became a safe space for students to unload stress from microaggressions, frustrations from lack of media representation, or to discuss a previous experience that scarred them. It was thrilling to be in a space with other Asian Americans but also slightly draining because I thrust myself fully into the discourse in an attempt to simplify and understand my cultural background. I didn't have many parallel experiences with my classmates but still let their catharsis fill the spaces where I didn't understand myself. Because of this, I became bitter towards White people after hearing my classmates' stories. I absorbed the experiences vicariously in an attempt to make myself fit into the Asian American identity, even as I didn't share the same experiences.

Since then, I have found ways to decrease the rage and work through my own identity as a member of the Korean diaspora. Through writing experimental multilingual poetry, namely by using *hangul*, the Korean alphabet, in my work, I have found peace with the fact that I have a more complex upbringing than a daughter of Korean immigrants who spent her entire life in the United States. My experience in South-East Asia and in Montreal colored my Korean diasporic experience differently than that of a Korean American and I came to accept the complexity of my cultural identity.

Even after finding a better understanding of myself, I have wondered if I had any grounds to claim the title of Korean American. By the end of my senior year, I will have lived in the United States for the same amount of time that I lived in South-East Asia: nine years. Does this balance the scales so that I can confidently claim the Korean American identity for myself or does my experience as living as part of a majority always outweigh my experience as a Korean in America?

METHODOLOGY

I have taken on this thesis to more systematically work through the field of Korean American studies. I have organized the areas of my exploration in two ways: by time period and by theme. I have split the time periods roughly into Old Guard (until the 2000s) and New Guard (past 2000s). My personal interests in Korean American studies guided the decision of my sources. For example, I chose Abelmann's *The Intimate University* because I myself am a Korean American in university.

The nature of Korean American studies is interdisciplinary and this was reflected by the authors of my sources. From the Old Guard, Min and Hurh hail from Sociology. Kim writes from an Education background, as is clear because he wrote his article for teachers

with Korean immigrant children. Abelmann, who spanned the Old and New Guard categories, wrote from an Anthropology background. Excluding Kim, the Old Guard was mostly comprised of social science disciplines: Anthropology is the study of culture whereas Sociology is the study of society. Interestingly, the New Guard featured two new fields of study: Nelson came from an American Studies background and Young came from a Psychology of Religion background and is primarily a pastor, rather than an academic. This is an interesting contrast to the Old Guard in that rather than becoming more specific, the fields of discipline from the New Guard became more broad for American Studies, and more niche, for Psychology of Religion.

Additionally, as I read my sources, I realized that there was a difference between terminology that authors used. The Old Guard authors, excluding Abelmann, used the term 'Korean immigrant' whereas in the New Guard, the term 'Korean American' was used. Presently, there is a difference between being a Korean immigrant and being a Korean American, but in order to reflect the shift in mentality that occurred between the Old Guard and the New Guard, I will retain the labels the authors used in their works.

After reading my sources I identified three themes that were discussed between the Old Guard and the New Guard: generational differences, the ethnic community, and the definition of the term Korean American. This thesis does not cover all of Korean American studies nor does it try to; instead, its academic goal is to highlight the movement of the field by tracing the movements in these themes.

THEME 1: GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Hierarchy or Death

In 1997, Kim Hyung-Chan published an article in the Integrated Education journal titled "Education of the Korean Child" that explained the Korean culture to help explain to

educators why their Korean students were different and struggling in class. In it, he highlighted three key cultural concepts that he believed summed up the Korean culture: controlling feelings, saving face, and *nunchi*, or “quick sense to detect or feel the changing mood of their superiors” (Kim 1977, p17). According to the author, *nunchi* was an “inevitable by-product of a rigidly stratified class society (Kim 1977, p16)”, a result of how Korean culture was firmly anchored in Confucianism. Confucianism works on the logic that “[i]n order to establish and maintain order in the family...a hierarchical organization of family...justified children’s loyalty, respect, and devotion to their parents, and a wife’s subordination to her husband (Min 1998, p26)”. This is very contrary to a typical White American family, where equality is upheld and children speak as informally with their parents as they would with their friends. By being raised in an environment that prioritized order through upholding hierarchy, Korean children quickly learn their position in the hierarchy and how to maintain balance.

Because of *nunchi*, a child learns that it is “useless to reason, to discuss problems logically or to present objective data in an attempt to help adults understand his points of view (Kim 1977, p17).” In a strictly age-based hierarchy, one cannot advance their position and therefore no amount of logical arguing will be effective to sway the opinion of the superior. Therefore since attempting to engage critically with people in different positions is fruitless, Korean children don’t know how to think independently or how to reason.

The flip side of this framework is that likewise, superiors are surprised when people in a lower position than them talk back or assert their agency. In the Korean society where everyone practices *nunchi* and prioritizes hierarchy, a wife talking back to her husband or refusing his wishes would be out of the norm. However, life in America applied pressure

onto the previously accepted and unquestioned norm as Korean immigrants had to adjust gender roles to survive financially.

A Working Wife, An Upset Balance

In Min's account of Korean immigrant lives in New York, he highlighted the gender role reversal between the husband and wife. Unless Korean immigrants were doctors, lawyers, or accountants, they became small business owners of stores like nail salons, laundromats, and grocery stores. In the latter cases, wives had to work in order to survive in New York City. Often the wives would run the cash register and contribute largely to the success of the business.

However, the Korean patriarchal society did not acknowledge the wives' contribution to the business. Even though wives contributed equally or potentially more to the business than their husbands did, the Korean woman was always seen as "a "helper" in the family business rather than a co-owner [which] diminishes her society status and influence in the Korean immigrant community (Min 1998, p46)." The author gives an example of how his wife ran the family business as he pursued his graduate degree out of town. He acknowledged that his wife did the brunt of the work, but the Korean business associations did not acknowledge her and only invite him to important meetings.

Additionally, Korean men struggled with loss in occupational status. Often they thought that working for a small business was degrading. Min gives an example of how a husband who was an engineer in Korea was reluctant to talk to customers and felt like his job was demeaning while his wife, who was a high school graduate, enjoyed her job. Because Korean men felt like they were demoted in profession, they tried to assert their hierarchical position at home. But as Korean women became heavily involved with the

family business and contributed to finances, they gained confidence and started to talk back. One husband explained that his wife was “forced to work for family survival in a special situation (Min 1998, p53)” but that it didn’t mean that she should be an equal because if they were, then they would lose their custom and be more like American families where “women are more aggressive, but that’s why they have lots of conflicts and divorces (Min 1998, p53).” And yet the irony is that “Korean immigrant men have a divorce rate three times higher than men in Korea; Korean women’s divorce rate is five times higher than women’s in Korea (Min 1998, p51).”

Children Talking Back

The upheaval of hierarchy was not limited to the husband-wife realm. Children also started to have differing opinions than their parents as they interacted with classmates at their American schools and witnessed the American way of life. In 1977, Kim worried about Korean immigrant children integrating into the American society because of their inability to reason or enunciate a clear logical argument. But as the children grew up, they were exposed to the American values of equality and individualism, which run contrary to the heart of Korean culture, and started to change. As they internalized American values, their parents “transferr[ed] their own unfulfilled career goals to their children...because their future is [the parent’s] hope (Min 1998, p69)”. Korean immigrants also prioritized giving their children an ethnic education, often at churches, to teach Korean values and the Korean language. Still, in the midst of parents’ dreams for their children and attempts to instill in them Korean values, their children went against their parents.

Your Dreams or Mine? Expectations and Realities

The Han family is an extended family of Korean immigrants, who are referred to as first generation, and their Korean American children, who are the second generation. Abelmann's case study of the Han family members examines both those who immigrated to America and their children and highlights how Korean customs, gender, and parental expectations shape the Korean American college experience.

For Owen, a second generation male, his college experience meant proving that he was "an Asian American would-be doctor with a difference (Abelmann 2009, p92)." He was aware that as an Asian American in the pre-med track, he was fulfilling the stereotype of "the pushy Asian American family, interested only in status and material success (Abelmann 2009, p92)." He continually pushed back against this, repeating in interviews that he chose to be a doctor to help people and find meaning. Owen grew up believing that university would be a place for liberal dreams, finding Truth, and growth. But these sentiments were passed down to him through his father and his perception on education.

Owen's father's beliefs on education stemmed from his experiences in South Korea during its fast-paced chaotic modern history. Abelmann goes so far to say that Owen's father "asked of this university nothing short of what he asked of America with his decision to immigrate (Abelmann 2009, p129)." Coming from a South Korea that disappointed him with its failure to be democratic and fair, Owen's father dreamed of a place where one could live free from history and be fairly rewarded for hard work. In his mind, the American university was the closest option to his ideal and he worked hard to make sure that it yielded the results he craved. He cultivated a 'cultural space' at home and carefully

tended it so that his sons would grow in an environment that would ideally lead them to becoming doctors.

Therefore, when Owen received his acceptance into med school, his father was euphoric. From his perspective, the fact that his son was safely on the path to becoming a doctor was proof that university was what he dreamed it to be and proof that his investment in guiding his son paid off. But when Owen saw his father's euphoria over his medical school admittance, he was disappointed. For Owen, his education and his hard work belonged to him and stemmed from the pursuit of pure knowledge, rather than status. The fact that his parents were overjoyed was proof that although he worked hard to disprove the stereotype, his parents hadn't changed.

As a third party, Abelmann writes that the situation was a mix of both perspectives because "Owen's liberal project was also intimately tied to his father's history and imagination (Abelmann 2009, p141)." Owen's career trajectory was not uniquely his; it was a mesh of desires stemming from different purposes but ending in the same result. But not all children hold the same desires as their parents. For Catherine, another Han family member, being a girl with different goals than what was expected from her was unacceptable because she was female.

Catherine, a woman in her mid-thirties, wanted to be a musician but "her extended immigrant family would not hear of it...continued study was not appropriate for a *daughter* in her thirties... (Abelmann 2009, p145)." As a Korean woman, she was expected to prioritize caring for her family. As a member of a large extended immigrant family and as a first generation member, she additionally held responsibilities to care for family members and give up her personal goals for the sake of the family. Still, she went against her family's

wishes and returned to school to study music. Her extended family saw this as betrayal and blamed her nuclear family while also heaping shame onto her. Abelman muses that in fact Catherine was simply following a second-generation trajectory, and that perhaps the trajectory itself was inherently male and therefore scandalous if a woman followed.

Catherine explicitly rebelled against expectations that the Korean culture placed onto her as a woman in her mid-thirties. In a traditional Korean setting, she should have held her extended family's desires above her own and submitted to their needs rather than pursuing her own. Nobody imagined that she would become anything more than a mere wife helping with the family business. But even when she was in Korea, she harbored desires to study music abroad, even as her aunt claimed that Catherine wasn't the 'type' to study abroad and that her studying abroad would be "nothing more than an attempt on Catherine's part to escape familial responsibility (Abelman 2009, p146)." As Catherine watched her younger cousins succeed in education and advance from the family business, she built up the courage to eventually pursue her long held dream of studying music in spite of her family's expectations.

Questioning Parents' Faith

In an ideal Confucian family, children would not question or judge their parents. However, both Old Guard and New Guard scholars discuss how Korean immigrant children question their parents' religious beliefs. Korean immigrants are most often religious, usually being Protestant or Catholic. But what does this fact really mean? Min gives an example of how a Korean immigrant child wanted to become a pastor and how his parents discouraged him from dedicating his life to his faith, pushing him to attend a prestigious

university instead. Parents would ask their children to “stay at home to prepare for finals on Sunday instead of going to church (Min 1998, p81).”

In the new century, this critical view on Korean parents’ faith deepened to the point that Korean Americans “went to some lengths to distinguish their own practice from [their parents] ethnic one (Abelmann 2009, p56).” The most explicit manifestation of this is how in certain churches, Korean Americans desire to create their own congregation away from the majority Korean Ministry, or KM. In Young’s study of an EM, English Ministry, population within a larger Korean church, members of the EM are at odds with the KM because of cultural differences, namely that the EM wants to be democratic and less hierarchical and a theological difference that will be more discussed in the next section.

From an age perspective, the EM is younger than the KM. In fact, the Korean immigrants created the EM. From a Confucian perspective, this means that the KM is in a higher position than the EM and that the EM should submit to the desires of the KM. This was clearly shown in the differing desires for the new Promise Center; the KM wanted to use the space as a place to continue ethnic education for immigrant children, while the EM wanted to use the building “to achieve final and true independence from the KM and to overcome the ethnic limitations of the Korean church for a much broader multiethnic vision (Young 2012, p28)”. But seeing as the parties in question are comprised of large groups, the relationship between the two is harder to sever than the ones previously discussed between Catherine and her family. Families spanned the KM/EM categories and the EM members were human resources for the KM; cleaving from the KM would place the EM in a less stable financial situation and sour relationships between the ministries. Some church members did decide to leave when the EM didn’t fulfill the dream of a fully

autonomous Korean American church, but for the most part the EM continued to wrestle within the KM framework, picking battles to fight and pushing for autonomy.

But why do so many Korean immigrants flock to churches? Is it because they are inherently religious or does the statistic of Koreans attending church reflect a secular, cultural desire? Often Korean Americans are assumed to be some sort of Christian but the sources from the Old and New Guards show that this fact is not based on faith.

THEME 2: THE ETHNIC COMMUNITY (THE CHURCH?) Korean American=Christian?

According to the 2012 Asian-American survey by the Pew Research Center, 71% of Koreans were Christian (Pew Research 2012). This places Koreans second only to Filipinos and far ahead of the rest of the Asian American, with roughly 40% more than other Asian-American populations. Looking at the history of Korean immigrants, however, this is not a large surprise. What is more interesting to see the differences between generations of church attending Korean immigrants and their children. There is a sharp divide between the logic, or perhaps even need, to attend church between the time periods of the Old Guard and the New Guard.

Old Guard: The Church as a Haven

Ever since the beginning of Korean immigration to the United States, Korean immigrants were Christian. At first, Koreans came to the United States to work in Hawaii. American companies tried to appeal to potential Korean laborers by saying that they would learn English for free, that utilities would be covered by employers, and that Koreans would be paid the equivalent of sixty-seven won every month. This method was ineffective and American missionaries had to get involved. In particular, Reverend George H. Jones' sermon convinced some members of his congregation to board the first ship to Hawaii

(Hurh 1984, p45). This set apart the early Korean immigrants from other Asian immigrants in that before they came to America, they were already baptized Christians. This resulted in quick growth within the Korean Christian community where “[e]ventually almost every Korean in the Hawaiian Islands came to be identified with the Christian Faith (Hurh 1984, p47).”

However, the quick conversion rates in the Korean community did not fully stem from a religious background. Because there were so little Koreans in Hawaii and because a significant number were already Christian, the Korean ethnic church became more than a religious institution and “served the immigrant community as a social and cultural center as well as a religious center (Hurh 1984, p47).” Early on, the Korean immigrant identity became tied to the Christian faith.

And as immigration from Korea continued, so did its close affiliation with the Church. Hurh’s study reports that the “church participation of our respondents substantially increased after their arrival in the United States- an increase of 36% (Hurh 1984, p131).” Hurh traces this to the fact that “[a]mong immigrants, the social, psychological, and religious motives for attending the ethnic church are, therefore, intertwined because of their marginal existential conditions in the “strange land” (Hurh 1984, p134).” From being a member of a majority population to being a member of an undeniable minority population, Korean immigrants craved familiarity and the easiest option to find ethnic community was in the church. And even if Korean immigrants didn’t come to the Church when they first immigrated, Hurh states that eventually there was a high chance they would. As they tried to adjust to American culture, eventually Korean immigrants would realize “an immutable barrier (race) [which] blocks their way toward

structural assimilation and over which they have no control (Hurh 1984, p142).” This would result in an identity crisis that would result in either the individual joining an ethnic community, which was almost always the Korean ethnic church, or a passive acceptance of minority status. Therefore, perhaps in some ways it is inevitable that Korean immigrants will find their way to an ethnic community, which is most often the Korean ethnic church.

The Korean ethnic church served more than just a space to find comfort; it also gave Korean immigrants opportunities to “reclaim their power [that] they are deprived of political opportunities in American society (Young 2012, p38).” Hurh noted that Koreans were usually active in their church, with “one-third of them hold[ing] staff positions in the church (Hurh 1984, p131)” but didn’t equate it stemming from a lack of political power. This is perhaps because at the time when he wrote his monograph, in the early 1980s, research on the Korean immigrant population was relatively new and still finding its place in the American community.

From the New Guard perspective, however, it is easier to compare how Korean Americans act, or choose not to act, within American politics versus Korean ethnic church politics. Young speculates that Koreans are more active within their church “in order to compensate for politically marginalized feelings and to gain a sense of political empowerment (Young 2012, p38).” In Korean ethnic church settings, Korean immigrants momentarily get to become part of a majority population. It is not that Korean Americans don’t have opinions on American politics; more often than not, regardless of their opinions, Korean Americans rarely get involved with politics. On the contrary side, they are very invested in the politics of their church; they are more invested in choosing a lay leader of a

Korean church to the point where “competition is so high that candidates sometimes have conflicts with one another (Young 2012, p39).”

The Church also appeals to Korean immigrant families by providing services to teach children ethnic education and the Korean language. During the late nineties in New York, “[m]ost medium-sized and large Korean churches have established Korean language programs to attract more church members (Min 1998, p77).” When both parents work, the child is often sent to Korean churches to learn Korean mannerisms and the Korean language. In this way, the Korean ethnic church met the need of working Korean immigrant parents by providing a service that parents prioritized but were unable to provide themselves. This expanded the role of the Korean ethnic church to be religious, social, and ethnically educational.

But as Korean immigrant children attended church with their parents, they approached faith and ethnicity differently than them. Because the children attended the church because their parents did, they didn’t go to the church with the expectations of it filling certain needs. Therefore, because children came to the church without a specific agenda, they would come to define faith and ethnicity differently than their parents did. And especially because they spent their formative years as a minority, rather than their parents who immigrated from a circumstance where they were part of the majority, the Korean immigrant children arrived to a different conclusion about the Korean ethnic church and ethnicity than that of their parents.

New Guard: Legitimacy of Faith?

According to the Bible, Christians were supposed to “go to all the nations” and not just stay in the Korean community; but when Korean Americans looked around, there were

only Koreans in their church. Young's case study of the EM in the Grace Church exemplifies this through the tension between the EM and the KM. The EM desired to be multiethnic while the KM wanted to focus on serving the Korean community and passing down important Korean traditions to future Korean generations. For the EM, "strong attachment to ethnicity is spiritually unhealthy (Young 2012, p90)" and therefore an obstacle to achieving a spiritual goal. However, it wasn't easy to separate faith and ethnicity, since it is "a primary resource for differentiating themselves from Americans (Young 2012, p90)." The Church gave Korean Americans a way to make sense of their minority experience and the "non-discriminative messages of Christianity is a psychologically attractive theological statement to Korean Americans (Young 2012, p60)." The Christian worldview gave Korean Americans tools to cope with their experiences while also demanding that they step out of their ethnic fold.

But not all Korean Americans saw ethnicity and faith being mutually beneficial. Some thought that faith and ethnicity were impossible to hold simultaneously; one had to be dropped to most genuinely live out the other. At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), there is a formidable Korean American campus ministry which Abelmann refers to as AAC. Interestingly because of its Korean American background, it did not shy away by addressing the Korean culture, going so far in having "posited Koreanness against Christianity (Abelmann 2009, p57)."

College is often the first time that people live away from the context of their family and can decide for themselves if they want to follow their parents' faith, leave it, or find a new one. For Korean Americans, coming to college was a "crossroad where nominal Korean American Christians...faced a decision between being sincere, born again Christians or

Korean (Abelmann 2009, p57).” Korean Americans came to believe that their parents went to church for social and cultural reasons, using the church as an instrument as part of their overall goal of being successful. Therefore, being Korean was equated with desiring materialistic success while being Christian was living “an examined life, one not narrowly instrumental (Abelmann 2009, p58).”

However, from an outsider’s perspective, AAC enforced a new Korean American Christian identity, one that was exclusive and ironically was “hovering near the ethnic fold and the image and trajectory of the mainstream churched Korean American...(Abelmann 2009, p65)”. For Mary, a Korean American student coming from a poorer social-economic status than the typical AAC member, AAC was ‘artificial’ in how it claimed ‘Korean identity’ to exclude others. Mary saw herself apart from the Korean American mainstream at her university because she had racially diverse friends compared to an AAC member who spent most of their time with Korean Americans to uphold religious expectations like small group, bible study, and fellowship. For Min, an international student at UIUC, “he considered his status as a non-Christian to be his biggest barrier to being able to socialize with the Korean American mainstream (Abelmann 2009, p36)” and felt more comfortable with White students rather than Korean Americans. Because so many of the Korean American student population at UIUC were a part of AAC, he assumed that all Korean Americans were religious. Because he had no interest in Christianity, he avoided Korean Americans. This assumption brings up the question; who is Korean American? What makes up the Korean American identity and must it be defined?

THEME 3: WHO IS KOREAN AMERICAN ?
Korean to Korean American: To Claim Americanness

Of the Old Guard sources, only one source used the term Korean American rather than Korean immigrant: Abelman and Lie's book on the Los Angeles Riots. Kim's article, which was written in 1977, was to help educators work with Korean immigrant children. At the time of the article's publication, Korean immigration started to pick up again thanks to the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Law. From 1969 to 1976, within just eight years Koreans increased from being 0.7 percent of the American population to being 3.8 percent (Hurh 1984, p53). Though there were Koreans from earlier decades, now Koreans were more visible and seen as foreigners. Indeed, the early Korean immigrants also thought of themselves as foreigners.

The early Korean immigrants left a Korea that lost its autonomy. Regardless of their socio-economic status, they were united through a common core, "the nationalist activity channeled through the Korean American church and various political organizations (Abelman & Lie 1995, p55)." Even after Korean independence in 1945, Korean immigrants remained within their own world, rarely getting involved with politics, until something drastic happened: the Los Angeles Riots.

For many Koreans, the Los Angeles Riots were the end of the American dream. When Koreatown was most vulnerable, it was abandoned by local police and recognized belatedly by the National Guard days after the wreckage. Seventy-five percent of Korean American victims still did not recover ten months after the riots and less than 28% were able to reopen their businesses (Abelman & Lie 1995, p184). For the Korean immigrant community, this was a turning point of how they identified themselves. It was "a baptism into what it really means for a Korean to become American in the 1990s (Abelman & Lie 1995, p24) " and from some perspectives, perhaps what the community needed.

Before the riots, there was no organization among the Korean immigrant community. When the riots started, ironically, it was Radio Korea, which usually focused on Korean news, that became the medium for the community to communicate in the midst of the chaos. After the riots, Radio Korea found itself at “an ideological crossroads...over the balance of the division between South Korean and Korean American news (Abelmann & Lie 1995, p26).” The simple fact that Radio Korea was the only way for the community to communicate to each other blatantly showed that the community was too preoccupied with learning Korean news rather than situating themselves in America.

During the recovery, the Korean American Research Center was founded and intentionally chose to align themselves as Korean Americans rather than Koreans through their name. They used the Korean term *miju tongp'o sahoe*, which translates to “Korean American community” rather than the term *kyop'o*, which carries the meaning of “Koreans living abroad” or “Koreans in America” (Abelmann & Lie 1995, p25). The danger of identifying as *kyop'o*, according to the Korean American Research Center, was that it cultivated a “guest consciousness”, one where there was no obligation to interact with America. By shedding this perspective and claiming the position of a Korean American, identity became politicized and demanded action. Now being Korean American meant being “an agent of social and political change in the United States (Abelmann & Lie 1995, p25).” This had explicit implications in the aftermath of the riots and meant that Korean Americans would push for representation in the City Council and the media. By now desiring representation, Korean Americans claimed their position in America, rather than referring to themselves in relation to South Korea. However, when fast-forwarding to the age of the New Guard, where Korean Americans are more established, a new set of

questions emerge that are a far cry from the passionate politicized Korean Americans of the Los Angeles Riots.

Not 'That' Type of Korean American: Intra-Ethnic Othering

In Chicagoland, the Korean American community is established enough to afford different versions of Korean American: 'mainstream' Korean American and radiating periphery versions. The ethnically Korean population in the areas surrounding Chicago are all post-1965 immigrants and the majority are upper-middle class, educated, and Christian. This cultivates an image of the 'mainstream' Korean American: economically comfortable, raised in the suburbs, Christian and most likely to attend AAC if they attend UIUC.

For Mary, someone who wasn't 'mainstream' Korean American, Korean American identity was an "artificial way to claim "Korean identity" (Abelmann 2009, p81)." As someone who was in a lower socio-economic status and not Christian, she was excluded from the Korean American mainstream. She saw it as ironic that "a "bunch of Korean Americans that can't speak Korean" congregate in exclusively ethnic circles (Abelmann 2009, p81)" and exclude others. In this circumstance, being Korean American was not used to rally political activism, but was used to make friends and decide who couldn't be a friend. Outcasts like Mary and other students who were either not rich, not Christian, or both stated that they stayed away from Korean Americans, preferring to be with white students instead.

On the other extreme, within the mainstream Korean American community, there was a strong effort to in fact not be Korean. The very element that drew people together was continuously portrayed in a negative light. Within AAC, Korean Americans had to make a choice between being Korean or Christian. Owen, a Christian upper middle-class pre-med

student, continually told Abelman that he was not a typical Korean American. He kept emphasizing that he was in his major for idealistic reasons and not just materialistic, success-driven ones often seen as stereotypes of the Korean American community.

In this case, being Korean was more of a perception game, a space where expectations and stereotypes were maneuvered according to the individual. By placing the value of Koreanness on abstract notions, it is easier to find grounds to exclude others. But being Korean also means having a visible Korean body. By looking different, or by not having European features, Korean Americans experience America through a minority perspective. Perhaps, then, the undeniable fact of the Korean appearance qualifies an individual to the term Korean American. But what if someone's external truth clashes with their perception of his or herself?

Korean Exterior, White Interior: Korean Adoptees

Between the first Korean immigrants and the rush of the post 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Law, the largest group of Korean immigrants after the Korean War were adoptees. Korean adoptees came while Asian immigrants were prohibited through various laws. Through the onset of adoption, "advocacy for them as the children of White Americans [gave] them easy access to immigration and citizenship in comparison to most other immigrants (Nelson 2016, p1)." And when they came, they fit perfectly into supporting the image of America as an ethical savior while also feeding the ideology that an individual could make a difference. Newspapers followed the curious Korean adoptees like paparazzi, marveling that they loved hot dogs and played baseball. But soon enough, the adoptees realized they were different.

Korean adoptees were mostly adopted by White families and this meant that there was a stark difference between the racial realities of parent and child. Several interviewees shared experiences of their parents saying racial slurs, oblivious to their blatantly non-White child in front of them, or brushing off their children's racial encounters. Nelson writes that "The racial difference between Korean adoptee and White family can only be used to benefit the family, not as a grievance for the adoptee (Nelson 2016, p67)." Because adoption is seen as an ethical act, an adoptee complaining about racial harassment can be seen as ingratitude that parents adopted them. Therefore, many Korean adoptees learned to internalize their experiences or go so far to hide that they were adopted, preferring to be mistaken as just another Asian.

But even the Asian American community is ambivalent, if not worse. When Nelson addressed the National Association for Korean Schools and shared that Korean adoptees made up 10 percent of the Korean American population in the United States and 50 percent of the Korean American population in Minnesota, "an audible gasp of shock arose from the audience, most of whom had never realized that such a large number of Korean adoptees were in their midst (Nelson 2016, p96)." Even South Korea is pulling away from the children they sent out because of "shame that transnational adoption evokes among an increasingly wealthy South Korean populace (Nelson 2016, p191)". This leaves Korean adoptees in uncharted territory, as neither the Korean American community nor the Korean community accepts them.

Within the Korean adoptee community, there is what is called one's "journey" of awakening to a Korean adoptee identity. This often arises from a combination of realizing that they were treated differently than their White peers and feeling not Asian enough. The

participants of Nelson's study grew up in largely White neighborhoods as the only Korean; often they strove to fit in and believed that "it was necessary for adoptees to dissociate with Korea and Korean-ness in order to become American and fit into the White world (Nelson 2016, p134)." Once they have the epiphany of that they were Koreans, and therefore a minority, Korean adoptees tend to look for Asian communities. But even then, they feel uncertain because although they could "visually identify with other Asians...[they] didn't know anything about Asians, or what it meant for other Asians to be Asian (Nelson 2016, p107)." In this way, because Korean adoptees were raised in White environments that potentially did not acknowledge their Koreanness, they feel curious about Asians. One interviewee expressed that she felt weird that said curiosity, because she viewed Asians from an outsider, or non-Asian, perspective even though she had an Asian body.

Korean adoptees challenge the idea of the Korean American because of the dissonance between their outward appearance and their internalized sense of self. They fulfill the most bare definition of being Korean American, that is, being a person of Korean ethnicity and living in America, but they do not share the experience of the majority of Korean Americans because of their upbringing in White families. Because of this, they are an invisible minority of the Korean American community, even if they make up approximately half of that population in Minnesota.

In Minnesota, the state with the largest Korean adoptee population, the Korean adoptee community distinguishes themselves from the Korean American community. The significant Korean adoptee population in Minnesota has given rise to resources for families to the point that adopting a child from Korea while living in Minnesota could "connect them and their families with a growing community of adoptive families raising children from

Korea (Nelson 2016, p103).” Minnesota also became the home of organizations for adopted Koreans, some of which host their own conferences and panels on the topic of being an adopted Korean.

Does the distinction of a Korean adoptee population damage the unity of the Korean American identity or does it simply broaden it? And within this realm, what of the Korean Americans who aren’t ‘mainstream’, like Mary? As time progressed, the Korean immigrant community grew large enough to have room for different experiences and minorities. How then does one identify the Korean American identity? Nelson notes in the last chapter of her monograph a vocabulary detail in Korean that seems to iron out, or perhaps simplify, the question.

There are two names for Korea in Korean: *daehanminguk* or *uri nara*. The first is a formal term while the second is personal and exclusive, literally meaning ‘our land’. When Nelson, who is a Korean adoptee, went to Korea and was with her Korean national friend at a mall, someone asked where she was from in English, implying that the stranger thought she wasn’t Korean. Her friend quickly replied that she was from *uri nara*, as in the same country as her and the person who was asking. By using the phrase *uri nara*, the speaker “signifies a claim...to shared possession of the nation of Korea and its history- a claim of Korean-ness in the heart of the Korean motherland (Nelson 2016, p151).” Nelson was confused and troubled by this phrase; did she have the right to use the term *uri nara* and therefore claim possession to the country? And yet her Korean national friend used it without a second thought, and in doing so painted over the complexities of the Korean adoptee experience. Perhaps then from the Korean perspective, Korean Americans will

forever be part of the collective, an extension of *uri nara*, regardless of their attempts to distinguish themselves apart from it.

CONCLUSION: CREATING DISTANCE

Across the themes discussed in this thesis, there was one consistent movement happening between the Old Guard and the New Guard. As time passed and the Korean immigrant community built homes and had families in America, it retracted itself from its heritage country, South Korea. For the first theme of generational differences, Korean Americans challenged and rebelled against Korean traditional social structure rooted in Confucianism. Immigrating to America placed family members in situations that made them compromise the social hierarchy to survive. Children were also exposed to American values that are radically different than Korean values and took the American values with them into their homes. In the case of generational differences, the movement within the theme was due to the environment that immigrants were in.

For the second theme of ethnic community, movement was spurred by the second generation, or the Korean immigrants' children. The Korean ethnic church was founded so that Korean immigrants could stay close to Korean culture and other Koreans. Second generation Korean Americans challenged the legitimacy of their parents' faith. Their parents came to church expecting it to fulfill their social and cultural needs while their children came to church because their parents did. Because they tagged along and went to church as part of a routine, the children didn't go to church to be closer to Korean Americans and experienced it from a more religious perspective. Second generation Korean Americans were invested in the beliefs of the church itself, rather than what it could give them.

From a theological standpoint, second generation Korean Americans bristled within the Korean ethnic church structure as they felt like it didn't fulfill the Great Commission. For AAC, second generation Korean Americans felt they had to choose between their faith and their ethnicity. Because of the patterns of the first generation, being Korean meant being materialistic and with shallow faith; therefore to be a real Christian, one had to stop being Korean. In this case, the movement within the field was spurred by second generation Korean Americans engaging with faith independent of the expectations their parents had when they came to church.

Finally, the theme of who is Korean American moved away from South Korea due to circumstances. Korean immigrants first claimed Korean American identity in response to the Los Angeles riot. The devastating effects of the riots made Korean immigrants reorient their priority to activism in America rather than Korea. In the Chicago area, the Korean American population was established long enough that a clear 'mainstream' Korean American identity emerged as well as outsider Korean American identities. Here, the question was not the location of a person's identity, but the socio-economic markers of his or her identity. Socio-economic backgrounds as well as religion, or lack thereof, categorized Korean Americans into specific types, therefore creating more exclusions rather than an overall sense of unity. The socio-economic markers were seemingly more important than a common ethnicity. And for the Korean adoptee community, America was more internalized than Korea and there was even less solidarity. But from the perspective of Korean nationals, ultimately Korean Americans were simply that: Koreans from the same *uri nara* as Korean nationals but lived in America.

Moving forward, I believe that Korean Americans will continue to distance themselves from Koreans and South Korea. In general, I have noticed that across Asian American studies, there is an effort to draw the line between Asian versus Asian American. There is definitely an undeniable difference between the two, in that an Asian (national) lives as part of a majority while an Asian American lives as part of a minority, but I am curious to see the in between, the moment in which an Asian becomes an Asian American, especially now with many international students coming to study in the United States.

I personally have witnessed and been frustrated in how most Korean international students stay within their Korean international circles. I have some friends who are Korean nationals studying in America who gush about how I am their one Korean American friend and therefore their one English language practice friend. It always confuses me why someone would pay exorbitant amounts of money to study in the United States only to miss out on the chance of creating meaningful relationships with domestic American students. What then of these Korean international students who return to South Korea after getting a degree and still can't speak in English and don't leave any American friends behind? Are they Korean American? I do believe that their experience in America will affect them and inherently make them different than someone who didn't spend a couple of years in America, but to what degree? If someone surrounds themselves with Koreans who have strong ties and personal investments in Korea, are they any different than the first Korean immigrants who dreamed of their homeland and didn't engage with America? Or perhaps are they Korean American as well, by the nature of them being ethnically Korean living in America?

Additionally, I am curious to see how the impacts of Hallyu, or popular Korean culture, will affect Korean Americans and their relationship with Korea. As South Korean music, drama, fashion and skincare become increasingly popular around the world, will Korean Americans more strongly align to South Korea? How does Hallyu affect non-Korean perspectives of Korean Americans? There are also Korean Americans in the K-Pop, or Korean pop music, industry. What was their experience 'going back' to Korea?

I believe that the future of Korean American studies will be exciting to watch unravel as both Asian America and South Korea become more interesting. Korean Americans are now getting more media representation through pop culture celebrities like Eugene Lee Yang. South Korean boy band BTS is also (oddly?) contributing to more Asian representation in American media as they are constantly invited to perform at American TV shows and Award Ceremonies as their population explodes. South Korean President Moon and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un just signed to end the Korean War. North Korea will move back their clocks to South Korean time, uniting the peninsula under a common time. The Korean American studies field presently understands where it came from and with the unexpected nature of history and circumstance, moving forward it'll be interesting to see how Korean Americans react to the coming events.

EPILOGUE: CREATIVE FUEL

I must confess at the end of my thesis the purpose of doing this dissertation. It is not to be a warm up for more rigorous academic studies; instead, it is for creative fuel. As I mentioned before, I came to terms with my identity as a member of the Korean diaspora through writing, specifically experimental poetry. My coursework in Korean history, post-

colonial and diasporic studies, and anthropology gave me both a critical lens to apply pressure to certain concepts as well as interesting facts to explore in my creative work.

When I started on the journey of this thesis, it was with the mentality that it would contribute to a creative non-fiction book exploring the Korean diasporic experience. As I finish my thesis, I have been published locally for my poetry chapbook featuring my experimental poetry and have created an online anthology featuring works by Korean Americans. For now, I think that I will continue to use experimental poetry to explore and question identity. I'm more interested in translating academic work, of which I read for this thesis, into layman's terms for anyone to read. The majority of the people who picked up a copy of my chapbook were not Korean and mostly White and now, through reading my poetry, they will get a glimpse into a very different life. If my work was purely academic, it would not be read as much or be accessible; by having it be creative, I get to bring attention to the concerns and everyday life of Korean diaspora to anyone who is literate. I believe that especially for a field as personal and relatable as Korean American studies, it is important to be as accessible and understandable as possible, for the sake of the Korean American community and for others outside of it.

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