

Korea's Multicultural Dilemma : A Reflection from the Historical Experience of Koreans in the U.S

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Abstract

This paper examines the Korean migration experience to the United States and reviews the key moments in American history where race and ethnicity served as a proxy for difference and justified differential treatments. In discussing the trajectory of the U.S. immigration policies and debates, I hope to bring to light how and why the reasons for these changes may provide insight as to how Korea's dilemma of resolving issues around multiculturalism can be addressed. Currently, the topic of immigration in the U.S. is the most important issue, next to the ongoing news about the wars, and ideologically the debate is cast in a false dichotomy between assimilation and multiculturalism. I argue that it is important to strike a balance between the ideological extremes. This paper concludes with an observation about how the issues of assimilation and multiculturalism need not be necessarily paired as opposing ideas.

The year 2003 marked the 100th anniversary of Korean immigration to the United States. In commemorating the event, the Korean American United Foundation in Los Angeles published some 650-page book with a simple, non-descript title, *Miju Hanin Imin Baeknyunsa* (100Year History of Korean Immigration to America). This volume represents a cross-section of Korean American experience from the first immigrants, who sailed the Pacific Ocean aboard S.S. Gaelic on a wintry day in December 1902 en route to sugar plantations in Hawaii, to the new arrivals in the post-1965 immigration period. On one hand it symbolizes a triumph of the irrepressible Korean spirit inspired by the memories of suffering and tragedies, and yet it also signals the arrival of a new century filled with extravagant dreams and optimism for a better future, on the other. Betwixt and between the memories of the past, the optimism for the future and the magnificent energy of the present, Korean Americans indeed have made indelible mark on the American experience. In this momentous occasion, I am honored to participate in this conference that seeks to uncover the importance of people moving across national boundaries and its attendant consequences of social change. My paper is an attempt to provide a framework and a perspective on Korea's multiculturalism in light of the experiences of overseas Koreans, especially in the United States of America.

Several themes underscore the significance of Korean immigration and assimilation experience in the U.S.: a history of racial discrimination, a new rationale for and trajectory of race relations, and the on-going debate between multiculturalism and assimilation. First, Korean experience in the U.S. informs us that the early pioneers struggled to find a niche in America's economic as well as

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social and political spheres. Their trials and tribulations underscore the fact that ethnicity and race have served as important principles of social organization and, as such, they have profoundly affected the life chances of diverse groups of people on that basis. From citizenship policies to immigration restrictions, a string of social and economic policies, aimed at creating a second-class citizenry, legitimated mistreatment of minorities historically. The end results have been caste-like situations where people are segregated by housing, employment and social circles. These conditions, passed down from generation to generation, invariably affect the present patterns, even though people may not be explicitly trying to create, what sociologists call, “social distance” among the various ethnic populations. Korean experience in the U.S. can easily attest to the hardships created arbitrarily on the basis of ethnic and racial difference. As Korea struggles to deal effectively and humanely with the prospect of multiculturalism, it is my hope that Korean leaders ponder the experience of overseas Koreans in making appropriate decisions about Korea’s policies toward foreigners.

Second, in the mid-1950s and 1960s the U.S. Congress, the President and the Supreme Court of the U.S. struck down laws and practices that discriminate on the basis of race and ethnicity. A series of events from the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case to the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act established a new national consensus on the principle of equality and fairness that must be made a reality in practice rather than simply remain as lofty, yet hollow, ideals. This new pattern fundamentally changed the trajectory of America’s race relations, and these decisions are having profound impact on the lives of all Americans. Korean Americans have especially benefited from these historic changes as Korean immigration to the U.S. in the post-1965 period ranked among the top in the world. The lesson here is that some of the leading countries in the world have accepted the inevitability of international human migration and, consequently, broadened the concept of citizenship as a way of setting the pattern for and keeping up with the international standards for the treatment of migrants and their families. More importantly, the new consensus of the mid-twentieth century brings the democratic ideals in line with the promise of nondiscriminatory treatment, thereby reaffirming the inalienable right of people, including life, liberty, and equal protection under the law, regardless of social status and class. Korea’s supreme laws are modeled after the finest laws in the world, and the challenge is to uphold these laws unmoved by discriminatory habits and traditions.

Finally, embracing multiculturalism in this era of globalization does not necessarily mean that Korea cannot maintain its unique culture and cherished traditions. In the U.S. the debate is often cast in a false dichotomy between assimilation and multiculturalism, as though these are antithetical ideas. The question, instead, should be: how can the U.S. (or Korea) respect and appreciate multicultural traditions and define for itself some common cultural traditions, practices, and mores? Put differently, can foreigners learn to accept and follow Korean customs without losing their ancestral cultures? As William Greider poignantly put, “the manic logic of global capitalism” has engendered “creative destruction” in terms of human struggle: the presence of foreigners in Korea clearly poses a major challenge as cultural clashes will inevitably test the country’s ability to mediate differences of ideas and values, but it also represents an opportunity to develop and cultivate multicultural contexts for learning, sharing, and understanding. Social policies that promote a balance between multiculturalism and assimilation are difficult to realize, but the idea of building a community, whether it be local, national or international, out of diversity of ideas and people has been a hallmark of American credo, *e pluribus unum*.

Constructing Difference: A History of U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Policies

Even before the Koreans first set foot on the American soil, a blueprint for race relations was already drawn up during the formative years of the republic. In 1790, a few years after the ratification of Constitution, the U.S. Congress passed its first naturalization law that established the citizenship criteria based on race. The law stipulated that only “free white persons” would be eligible for naturalized citizenship. The differential treatment of people on the basis of race fundamentally challenged the seemingly egalitarian and democratic ideals of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. For some 175 years hence, the three branches of the U.S. government – the legislative, executive and judicial – tried to justify the contradiction between the noble principles of Constitution and the discriminatory practices. In the process, the social policy makers helped to create a hierarchy based on race, establishing a second-class citizenry that was clearly set apart from the rest of the population by mediating access to political and economic opportunities.

Numerous race-based social policies adversely impacted the Korean American community. To begin, immigration and naturalization policies severely curtailed the ability of Korean immigrants to form vibrant communities, to participate in the political process, and to integrate into the mainstream American society. There were several attempts by Asians who challenged the constitutionality of the 1790 Naturalization Act. In the first case, Easurk Emsen Charr appealed to the District Court in Missouri concerning his application for the U.S. citizenship through naturalization. Born in Korea, but a subject of Japan due to colonization, Charr served in the U.S. army and attended a local college in Missouri. The court acknowledged that Charr’s personal qualifications were not in question but decided based on the existing statute, which stated that “the provisions of this title [of naturalization] shall apply to aliens being free white persons, and to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent” (273 F. 207). Two similar cases followed in 1922 (*Ozawa v. U.S.*) and 1923 (*U.S. v. Thind*), which were both decided in the U.S. Supreme Court affirming the lower courts’ decision to prohibit naturalization of Asians. These decisions severely restricted Koreans and other Asians from enjoying the basic privileges associated with land ownership, employment, and voting. In fact, these court cases emerged in the context of their struggle for acceptance in all aspects of their lives. In 1913, for instance, California passed the Webb-Heney Act prohibiting “aliens ineligible to naturalized citizenship” from buying or leasing land. A number of states followed suit, including Arizona (1917), Washington, Missouri, and Arkansas (1921), and Utah and Wyoming (1942).

Second, consistent with the rationale that supported the racial segregation policies in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case, Koreans and other Asian Americans were effectively marginalized and segregated in housing, education, and other public accommodations. In 1879, California Constitutional Convention passed resolutions that enabled state officials to forcibly remove the Chinese, which by extension included other Asians, from desirable areas of the cities into other areas “thought to be prejudicial to the public health or comfort.” A few years later, in the *Tape v. Hurley* case (1885), the California Supreme Court deliberated on the question of whether or not a child of Chinese parentage would be permitted to attend a public school in his or her district. The court decided in favor of Tape, who was a Chinese descent, as the law did not specify ethnicity or race in its exclusionary provisions. It only stated that the board of trustees “shall have the power to exclude children of filthy or vicious habits, or children suffering from contagious or infectious diseases” (Political Code of CA). Immediately after this decision, the state school officials lobbied the legislature for a law establishing separate schools for children of “Mongolian or Chinese descent.” As a consequence, the first primary school for Chinese children opened in San Francisco’s Chinatown in 1885. In the context of rising anti-Chinese hysteria, the Supreme Court of California had decided a few decades earlier whether or not a Chinese and other similar “type” of “human species” would be allowed to “testify as a witness in any action in which a white person

is a party” (4 Cal. 399). The court’s ruling in this case rested on Section 394 of the Civil Practice Act and Section 14 of the Criminal Act, which provided that “No Black, or Mulatto person, or Indian shall be allowed to give evidence in favor of, or against a White man.” Chief Justice Murray concluded that “Chinese and all other peoples not white, are included in the prohibition from being witnesses against Whites,” because the words Indian, Negro, Black and White, are generic terms, designating race. As an ultimate defense against interracial mixing, California Supreme Court decided in the *Roldan v. Los Angeles County* (1933) case that Filipinos, who were technically of Malay race, were not covered in the antimiscegenation statute that proscribed marriage between whites and “negroes, mulattos, and Mongolians.” Shortly thereafter, the California Legislature amended the marriage law nullifying the Roldans’ marriage.

Finally, Korean immigration to the U.S. followed a unique, yet similar, pattern as other Asians. The difference lies in the fact that Korea had been a subject of Japan until its liberation in 1945. However, if it were not for the colonization experience, Korean immigration would have surely halted as were the case for the Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos and South Asians. In 1882, the Chinese became the first nationality to be denied entrance to the U.S. on the basis of nationality. It would take another sixty-one years before the U.S. opens its gates to the Chinese immigration with the passage of the 1943 Magnuson Act. Shortly after the exclusion of the Chinese, the Japanese immigrants were prohibited from entry under the seemingly cordial arrangement between Japan and the U.S., known as the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907. While the U.S.’ approach toward Japan appeared to be much more cautious, as Japan had shown its military prowess during the Sino- and Russo-Japanese wars, the policy objective was qualitatively no different from the Chinese Exclusion Act. A decade later, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917 in which immigrants were required to take the literacy test and added a range of people who were excluded from immigration: “persons of constitutional psychopathic inferiority, persons suffering from chronic alcoholism, vagrants, stowaways, and persons from an Asiatic barred zone,” which targeted the Asian Indians. In 1924, the new immigration act based on a quota system, known as the National Origins Act, was passed to curtail the flow of immigrants from the less desirable parts of Europe. This law’s intended target was the Eastern and Southern Europeans, such as the Jews, Italians, Poles and Russians, who were considered inassimilable by setting a 3 percent annual quota based on the 1890 census data. However, this law indirectly had a detrimental impact on all Asians because the number of Asians resident in the U.S. during the years preceding 1890 was quite small.

These social and political policies have profoundly affected the life chances of all Americans, but particularly for Korean Americans these laws reflected a national sentiment toward Asians as perpetual foreigners without regard for the basic rights of liberty, equality and the protection of law. The racial pattern of American social policies reverberated in all areas of their lives and established second-class outsiders who were structurally denied access to opportunities. In the process, the real and perceived separation of races has become a fundamental aspect of minority experience and identity. But, all along the way, politicians and law makers found excuses to treat people differently based on race and nationality, despite the lofty claims of the Declaration of Independence and the constitutional amendments that at least in principle secure, among many, the rights of speech, due process, equal protection, and not to be denied (to vote) on account of race. Legally, the U.S. government permitted such contradiction to pervade by establishing the “separate but equal” doctrine and by naturalizing the hierarchical social order based on race and ethnicity. But, American history would take a radical turn in the mid-twentieth century that gives us a semblance of hope about the future, irrespective of the challenges that still remain.

New Rationales of Equality: Desegregation, Civil Rights and Immigration

Decades after the U.S. Supreme Court adopted the “separate but equal” doctrine in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the nation’s highest court rendered its opinion for the second time on the constitutionality of racial segregation. This time, in 1954, the question that tested the ethical foundation of segregation in public accommodations centered on the public educational system. The Chief Justice Warren, in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, asked:

Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?

In short, the Court believed that it does. The reasons for their position are based on the belief that, irrespective of the quality of physical facilities and other tangible factors, segregation itself has a detrimental effect on public education. The Court made the following points: one, to separate the children solely on the basis of their race “generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (347 U.S. 483). Second, “segregation with the sanction of law,” Justice Warren argued, “has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in racially integrated school system.” For these reasons, the Court concluded, “that in the field of public education, the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place” and that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

By striking down the segregation policies, the U.S. Supreme Court established a new, moral high ground concerning equal access to public education specifically and other public accommodations generally. In response, there was intense backlash against the new ruling by the people who had most to lose. Segregation had been a tradition in the South, a way of life that defined for both races how to behave and interact in public settings. Throughout American history, there have been numerous examples of how scientists, religious figures, and politicians justified a stratified social order based on the idea that people are endowed differently according to races. These differences are perceived and legitimized as inherent, natural and unchangeable. When these age-old practices were suddenly disrupted and challenged, many people responded with anger, often exploding into violence and terror against those who threatened their way of life. But, what, after all, was the basic premise of racial segregation? It was rooted in the idea that different races are fundamentally and naturally different. Furthermore, meanings were ascribed to such differences, so that social distance between blacks and whites could not be bridged. This historic desegregation ruling was the first step toward establishing that bridge between races; that is to say, no tangible difference exists naturally between white, black and other races.

A decade after the historic desegregation ruling, the executive branch of the U.S. government initiated a civil rights bill that sought to stamp out racial discrimination in public facilities, and in government and employment sectors. Started in the Kennedy administration, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. This Act, though vehemently resisted by the staunch-segregationist politicians, successfully renewed the principles of equality and fair opportunity to all citizens by barring unequal application of voter registration requirements (Title I), prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations engaged in interstate commerce (Title II), empowering the U.S. Attorney General to file suits against the states that practice racial segregation (Title III), and preventing government agencies that receive federal funding from discrimination (Title VI). In addition, the

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prohibition against gender discrimination (Title VII) was added at the last minute in the House of Representatives. While the problems of discrimination persist in many of these areas, this Act revived the spirit of non-discrimination in social, economic and political dimensions of our lives that covered not just African Americans, but all Americans.

For Korean Americans, these civil rights provisions clearly demonstrated the willingness on the part of the U.S. government to overcome artificial barriers to opportunities. However, the number of Koreans in the U.S. during this time was quite small as compared to other immigrant populations. In fact, the Korean American population has never exceeded 10,000 up to the end of the Korean War. Today, the Census Bureau estimated that over 1 million Koreans reside in the U.S. Such a dramatic increase is largely due to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which eliminated the restrictive quota system of the 1924 National Origins Act and permitted professionals and their families to immigrate. These latter-day immigrants owe a great deal of gratitude to people who struggled to push for equality in employment, education and social accommodations, eliminate second-class citizenship based on race, and establish a non-discriminatory basis for allowing immigrants to enter the U.S.

Ironically, Korea is confronting similar issues concerning immigrants and minorities today. The issues are strikingly similar to other countries with long-standing history of immigration: one, Korea depends on the labor of immigrants from other countries; two, immigrants come from economically underdeveloped and politically unstable countries; three, immigrants bring with them seemingly different cultural values, customs, and ways of life; four, parts of Korean society are not ready to live side-by-side with such immigrants; five, Korea is concerned about social integration of immigrant populations. These are legitimate and important issues, and Korea must weigh carefully the costs and benefits associated with its immigration and integration policies. However, it must be remembered that when Korean emigrants become guests in the countries like the U.S. and elsewhere, they struggle for and demand basic civil rights. The expectation of equal treatment grows especially as immigrants become integrated structurally in the economy and social life, and the reference point for such equality is not based on some abstract, universal concept but is rooted in concrete experiences of immigrants in host countries. As a constitutional democracy, the Korean government bears the obligation to protect foreigners and to extend the rights to them as prescribed by international laws and treaties (Article VI). The challenge for Korea is whether or not the country can live up to the basic principles of society embedded in its Constitution by implementing policies that are consistent to it. Economic and political condition changes, but the principles that hold any society together must survive the whimsical nature of such conditions. Can Korea establish a framework of equality and fairness for foreigners that transcend the artificial barriers based on cultural and racial differences?

E Pluribus Unum: Resolving the Debate between Multiculturalism and Assimilation

For centuries, the United States of America grappled with the dilemma of a multicultural society. From the first encounter with the Native Americans to the recent immigrants to the country, the American political institution struggled to maintain a balance of interests. By devising a federal republic of individual states, the framers of the Constitution envisaged a “more perfect union” by establishing a system of checks-and-balances among the three branches of the government and by providing equal yet proportional representation of each state. This careful balancing of powers is captured well in a national motto engraved in the Great Seal, *e pluribus unum*. This phrase has new meaning and significance for people of the United States today, as immigrants from all over the world brought with them their old habits, cultures and ideas. The diversity of American society is unparalleled, but the challenge of uniting

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these diverse interests into one remains. In fact, this quintessentially *American Dilemma* about which a Swedish scholar, Gunnar Myrdal, wrote in 1944 is still relevant to us today because race has served as an important organizing principle of society. Moreover, the basic assumption behind the racial policies reflected either a rejection or assimilation of non-white populations. But, what exactly are the arguments for assimilation and how have the advocates of multiculturalism clashed? Is there a possible solution to the new American dilemma?

A basic premise of the assimilation paradigm is the idea that immigrants should adopt the culture of host society. Social scientists have differentiated between structural assimilation, that is, economic integration, and acculturation where immigrants adopt the values, beliefs, and norms of a new society. In popular media and political debates, it is often the issues around acculturation that becomes the subject of intense contestation. Symbolizing the independent or nonconforming status of immigrants, scholars and political pundits have pointed to the persistence of ethnicity as a form of “balkanization,” reflecting the ghettoized conditions of ethnic communities. Far from melting into the amorphous American pot of ethnicities, these groups have retained the cultures of their ancestors. One concrete example of the assimilationist thinking is the “English-Only Movement” as typified in California’s Proposition 227, which replaced bilingual education with English as the only language of instruction in public schools. This movement reflects the larger concern over the erosion of “American” values and ways of life as a result of over-foreignization of our communities through immigration. Often, the stated purpose behind such a movement is to unify the country, but it has done nothing but divide the diverse communities along ethnic, national and ideological lines. The utter failure of their articulated goal reflects the lack of cohesive force behind such measures.

On the other hand, the notion of multiculturalism is based on the belief that all cultures should be valued equally and no single culture can be said to be superior to others. In a way, the idea of multiculturalism in American society emerged in reaction to dominant, assimilation paradigm of race and ethnic relations. They consider ethnic communities, not as un-assimilating, therefore un-American, foreigners, but recognize such ethnic enclaves as an inevitable process in a free, democratic society. Most ethnic groups have gone through what the University of Chicago sociologist, Robert E. Park, describes as the race relations cycle in the U.S.: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. But, many multiculturalists diverge from Park in that some ethnic and racial groups had been structurally and systematically denied such opportunities to assimilate economically, culturally, politically, and socially. Because these groups have been denied opportunities for inclusion, especially in representing their experience as an integral part of American history and culture, they have argued that a greater understanding about different cultures and experiences is crucial in understanding the whole of American experience. Moreover, they point out the benefits of multiculturalism: understanding of diverse cultures, preparation for global work environment, and egalitarian representation of their interests.

While there are many points of divergence between these two ideological camps, the challenge is to find the areas where they converge. Toward this end, it is important to focus on core ideas, beliefs and values that represent the Korean society, rather than a particular form of social policy. Take, for instance, the assimilation policy that promotes a uniformity based on language. This, unfortunately, is an example of “superficial uniformity” because, as Robert E. Park showed, it is relatively easy for people to “take over the language, manners, the social ritual, and outward forms of adopted country.” “Likeness is,” Park argues, “a purely formal concept which of itself cannot hold anything together.” Conversely, multiculturalists who argue every culture should be respected for what it is misses an important point

about the need for a clearly articulated culture of any society. The argument for multiculturalism loses its meaning when there is no distinct culture that separates a Korean society from other societies. The important task, then, is to figure out what Korea should mean for people who are coming to the country. Rather than focusing on outer appearances, a society must focus on “the aims, the attitudes, sentiments and ideals” that gives substance and insures unity to the state. The former can be copied and used; the latter must be appreciated and understood.” How can Korea achieve unity out of diversity? The answer to this question depends on what kind of a society Korea wants to create for itself. Will it be based on outer appearances or internal ideals?

Koreans are not strangers to collective consciousness, as a history of trauma has shown, and combined with the high connectivity of Korea's modern media, issues surrounding multiculturalism are more readily absorbed by society when the national agenda is concerned. By analyzing 4 examples of multicultural issues in the Korean media, the dynamics of the multicultural voice, societal awareness, and emerging trends in multiculturalism can be explained. 4. Table of Contents. In the present post-modern era, Korea's growing multicultural population is becoming a prominent reality in the face of Korea's long standing notions of mono-ethnicity. I am a native Korean and my husband (nam-pyoen: husband) is an American. People say that it is normal for married couples to learn about their partner's peculiarities in the beginning of marriage (kyoel-hon: marriage). I started to realize that my husband and I often think and act quite differently, especially in social settings. Despite being married to someone from another culture for over a decade, there are parts of American culture that are still foreign to me. One of these is the culture of social interaction in America, such as engaging in small talk (han-dam: small talk), or smiling with si-sun-maht (si-sun-maht- "Tudor's Korea: The Impossible Country is a fascinating overview of daily life in Korea. Tudor's in-depth analysis is the one of an insider who has never lost sight of the view from the outside. His book helps you feel comfortable right from your first visit to Korea." David Syz, Swiss Secretary of State for Economic Affairs. "Tudor, Seoul correspondent for The Economist, provides a fairly perfunctory account of the 'miracle on the Han River,' which saw South Korea transformed from postwar ruin to prosperous democracy within four decades. The book's rea