Coming to America and Becoming American: 
Narration of Korean Immigrant Young Men

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Rescinding 1920s restrictive immigration laws, the liberal immigration law of the United States in 1965 encouraged a mass migration from Asian countries to America. As a result, the Asian American population increased five fold within two decades, from 1.5 million in 1970 to about 7.3 million in 1990 with Koreans comprising the third largest contribution of Asian immigrant waves. Researchers have suggested that the trans-Pacific migration of Asians had two dimensions: individual changes of the immigrants whose traditional customs, values, and other elements of lifestyle evolved as a result of immigration, and changes in American society in general as a result of Asian immigrants’ settlement. While migration primarily affects the individuals and their immediate families, the receiving society is also impacted in terms of economy, politics, education, culture, social services, and most importantly intergroup relations. This study, which focused on male Korean immigrant youths, explores their perceptions and expectations of their adopted country and their sense of identity.

Korean immigrants, ethnic identity, immigrant youth, Korean identity, education and immigration

INTRODUCTION

“Who am I?” The question is universal. We frame our own answers out of the uniqueness of our individual personalities and life experiences. But for most of us identity is more than this private sense of self. Identity has a communal, or group, dimension. (Seller, 1977, p1) Migrating to a foreign country is not an easy task even under the most amiable circumstances. There are many dilemmas to overcome, such as leaving friends, families, jobs, and familiar environments. In addition, upon arriving in the new country, one must adapt to new cultural norms, language and community systems, which add to the burden of newly arrived immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Many studies have explored the changing dynamics of immigrant culture in the United States, and these studies are important in that they help us understand the direction of past, present, and future social change. This study contributes to this literature by giving voice to some of the experiences and concerns of five young men who immigrated from Korean but have grown up in the USA.
Although Korean immigration to America has a brief history, there have been numerous studies undertaken to explore this issue. Yet, most of these have focused on the issues of the economic activities of Korean immigrants. For example, many studies explored new Korean immigrants’ business types and patterns (Kim, 1981; Kim & Hurh, 1985; Ha, 1991; Light & Bonacich, 1988; Min, 1984, 1989, 1992; Yoon, 1993) while others discussed settlement patterns (Min, 1993) and levels of assimilation (Chang, 1991; Hurh & Kim, 1984). Min and Kim (1999:11) correctly pointed out that past research tended to focus on the adjustment of first-generation immigrants and “neglected the children of not only Asian immigrants, but those of other post-1965 immigrants”. Only recently have “the new second generation” of immigrants gained scholastic attention (Gibson, 1988; Lee, 1996; Min & Kim, 1999; Olsen, 1997). However, most of these earlier studies tended to focus on Latin American or Caribbean immigrants.

This study focused on male, Korean immigrant youths who are commonly known as the 1.5 generation - those who accompanied their parents in their passage through immigration during the early stages of their lives. These youths were born in Korea; however, their formative experience has been in the USA. Their perceptions about the larger society and their expectations for the future are expected to add a new dimension to the understanding of immigrant culture among this emerging group. This study focused on questions such as, “Who are immigrant Korean youth?”, “Why did their families immigrate?”, “What issues are they currently experiencing?”, “How does this new experience affect Korean immigrant youth’s identity formation process”, and “How is this new experience affecting their higher education and career choices?” The experience of Korean youth’s adaptation to a new environment at the impressionable age of identity-formation is the central focus of this paper.

Research reveals that most new immigrants from Korea come from entrepreneurial and professional, urban, educated backgrounds (Min, 1984, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). This study revealed that in many cases recent Korean immigrants to the USA seek greater educational opportunities for their children while sacrificing their own careers and the comforts of home.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Koreans were among the new immigrant wave. Pyung Gap Min, a Korean-born American sociologist, whose work has focused on Asian-Americans, especially Korean immigrants, describes the characteristics of Korean immigrants as the following:

Koreans are a professional and business-oriented group of more recent vintage. Their main destination is Los Angeles, where an ethnic enclave economy has grown rapidly during the last decade. Koreans have also become prominent in produce retailing and other small businesses in East Coast cities. New York and Washington came next to Los Angeles as their places of destination in 1987; they were also the single largest foreign group arriving in large mid-Atlantic cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore (quoted in Portes and Rumbaut, 1990: 41).

Other studies also suggest that many Korean immigrants in America came from urban, Christian, educated backgrounds (Light & Bonacich, 1988) contrasting with the rural peasant background of European immigrants during the 19th century, upon which many Americans still base their beliefs about immigrants.

FRAMEWORK

Scholarly views vary in regard to defining ethnic identity. For example, primordialist scholars view ethnicity as a collective identity attached to primary groups. Min summarised the primordialist school view of ethnicity as “an extension of a premodern social bond, such as kin and tribal ties, based on commonalities in physical and cultural characteristics and
common historical experiences associated with the place of origin, often called ‘homeland’” (Min, 1999:17). Some scholars viewed such a primal bond as “more emotional than rational, [and] even ‘irrational’” (De Vos, 1995:28). Until the 1960s, the heterogeneous American society regarded attachments to ethnic identity as troublesome -- something to be contained. Emphasis was on assimilation to the dominant American culture by all ethnic minorities. Romanucci-Ross and De Vos note that in most cases, the territorial concept of “homeland” is “necessary to the maintenance of ethnic identity either in symbolic terms or in a literal sense. However, other definitions of ethnic uniqueness such as economic activities, religion, language, or other social activities are equally salient considerations for ethnic identity” (Min, 1999:20).

Unlike premodialists who emphasised the premodial ties, instrumentalist scholars such as William Yancy, Eugene Ericksen, and Richard Juliani, challenged premodialist concerns and “argued that the development and persistence of ethnicity is dependent upon structural conditions” (Min, 1999:21) such as occupational and residential concentration and access to the larger society. Furthermore, ethnicity is viewed as “flexible” and “negotiated across time and social situations, rather than received solely from group membership” (Davidson, Yu & Phelan, 1993:65-87). Extending cultural assimilation theory, Gordon distinguished between cultural assimilation and social assimilation. Gordon defined cultural assimilation as the degree to which immigrants and minority groups adopt the language, customs, and other cultural patterns of the host society; social assimilation is the level of entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions on the primary level of the host society. According to Gordon, minority groups could potentially achieve high levels of cultural assimilation without an equivalent level of social assimilation for the obvious reason that social assimilation requires a deeper level of acceptance by the dominant group (Gordon, 1964:77). Gordon’s distinction is important in understanding factors of ethnic attachment/identity and assimilation.

In his cultural ecology theory, Ogbu distinguished between voluntary minorities, such as immigrants, and involuntary minorities, who are absorbed into the society by force, generally through conquest or slavery (Ogbu, 1989:181-204). Ogbu asserted that immigrant minorities believe that the inequality they face is temporary and that their situation will improve over time. Education is often utilized as a vehicle for achieving the desired social mobility for these groups. Further, Gibson (1988) noted that as an adaptation strategy, immigrants selectively add new elements, thus, they can embrace “accommodation without assimilation” without evoking a sense of loss in regard to a past collective identity. Involuntary minorities, on the other hand, are more prone to reflect their negative contact with mainstream society through historical memories of rejection from the prevailing institutional infrastructure, especially education. This belief undergirds a sense of “oppositional identity” (Fordham, 1988).

According to Romanucci-Ross and De Vos (1995) individual commitment depends on one’s primary orientations -- past, present, or future. With the emphasis placed on present participation, a present-oriented person directs his or her primary loyalty toward the country of residence. “Here, survival of the nation is more important than personal survival” and patriotism kindles “a powerful emotion, making people willing to sacrifice their lives for the ‘fatherland’ or ‘motherland’” (Romanucci-Ross & De Vos, 1995:26). Occurring less often is identity through occupation or profession, which forms a present-oriented sense of belonging. Individuals who are dissatisfied with the past and the present may adopt a future orientation by identifying with a cause or revolutionary movement. Diverging from the present- or future-oriented sources of social identity, “ethnicity is oriented to special past
heritage”, regardless of congruency with present citizenship (Romanucci-Ross & De Vos, 1995:26).

Ethnicity comprises, for the most part, cultural distinctions such as language, dress, food, holidays, customs, values, and beliefs as opposed to race, class, and gender. In terms of ethnic identity, Richard Alba (1990) pointed out that ethnic groups generally define their uniqueness in regard to other ethnic groups largely through the medium of culture. As a part of the cultural medium, “language is the central component of culture, and as such it has the strongest effect on integrating members into a particular ethnic group” (Stevens, 1985:74-83). Researchers have established a high level of correlation between the use of a mother tongue and other elements of ethnicity. Nonetheless, language is the first component of the immigrant culture to deteriorate and fade over generations (Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990). David Lopez’ study based on 1990 census data is also noteworthy. While language loss of secondary generation Latino and Asian Americans is significant, Asian groups lose their first language more rapidly than their Latino counterparts (Lopez, 1997). Lopez posits that the availability of ethnic community support, which can enforce speaking native tongues, may be the deciding factor of first language retention: the larger the ethnic community, the more likely it is to maintain its native tongue.

Researchers have also noted that ethnic foods and ethnic holidays are often continued by ethnic groups long after the language disappears (Alba, 1990), without practising ethnic culture or partaking in ethnic networks (Gans, 1997). However, religion sustains ethnicity by maintaining ethnic cultural traditions through supporting group members within a congregation (Yinger, 1980; Rosenberg, 1985; Tomasi & Engel, 1970).

In Stacy Lee’s (1996) book, which focused on how ethnic Asians have developed their identity in American society, Lee asserts that most Korean students who are 1.5 generation [those who immigrated as a child with their parents] attempt to maintain a distinct Korean identity from other Asians and Americans. She interprets this as a social distinction driven by the superior social class that Koreans in general achieved through economic means. Although Lee’s interpretation may be partially correct, Korean immigrants typically experienced middle class economic status before their migration; therefore, this desire for social distinction may generate from an additional desire for social uniqueness. Further, she argues that Korean students have a clear social consciousness that motivates them to emulate the middle class white American mode of living. However, at the same time, Lee observed that behaviours such as attempting to maintain a distinct Korean identity and distancing themselves from other minority groups are apparent among Korean youth. She suggests that in the process of socialisation, some of these youth have assumed a dual identity: “American” in outward expressions while internally maintaining Korean traditions and connections with Koreans.

In an effort to better understand young, Korean immigrants’ sense of identity, we prepared a set of questions to draw out the respondents’ views on a number of topics related to their lives in Korea and in the USA, with particular emphasis on how they see themselves in the American cultural landscape. The respondents included five Korean male 1.5-generation immigrant young adults ranging from age 18 to 24 attending a large public university on the East Coast of the United States. We anticipated that the first-hand accounts of the informants’ perspective during this juncture of their lives would be particularly interesting and relevant in understanding the modern immigrant developing in the USA. Some of the interviewees for this study were acquaintances of the first author and others were introduced by friends. When the appointments were made for an interview, the respondents were told what questions would be asked of them and a particular date was set for the interview. Each interview lasted between 90 minutes to 2 hours on the arranged date. The interviews were
tape recorded and then coded by hand and transcribed. Then, the information was coded and sorted on a computer using the “Ethnography” software program.

LIMITATIONS

This is a pilot study. A sample of responses from five male students from an East Coast research university is not a broad representation of Korean immigrants throughout the United States and, therefore, should not be generalised. In addition, college students in a large research institute may have provided a different social reality, as this population may not represent the general immigrant Korean population in America. Also, the absence of female respondents does suggest the potential for gender bias that is typical of the Korean culture that traditionally tends to be a male dominated society in terms of social and family ethos.

Further, the first author acknowledges that her own experience as a Korean student in an American university who later became a first generation immigrant has influenced her relationship with the informants. While this “insider” status may have helped in the understanding of the issues and enhanced her rapport with the interviewees, several issues may have been overlooked that are critical to readers who do not have a similar background. However, this study can provide groundwork for further comprehensive and illuminating studies.

DISCUSSION

Family Backgrounds

As stated earlier, demographic characteristics of Korean immigrants during the 1970s and 1980s can be summarised as a professional, business-oriented group with strong educational backgrounds (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990:41). Questions regarding the respondents’ family background, their economic status, and social position prior to coming to America concur with previous studies: all of the informants indicated their urban background with a relatively high level of parent socio-economic level. Out of five informants, two had parents whose education exceeded a college level, two had a college-educated father and high school graduated mother. Only one said that his parents completed only primary levels of schooling. All of the informants’ parents, with one exception, had either entrepreneurial or professional backgrounds and resided in the urban area from their initial country of residence and where they are currently located in the United States.

Brian is a 23 year old and a first year graduate student from Long Island. He plans to complete his MBA and engage in trading business with Korea. He came to the US when he was seven and is fluent in the English language. Brian feels his bilingual and bicultural knowledge will be beneficial for such an endeavour. His parents had professional occupations prior to their immigration.

Brian: My father was a high school English teacher and my mom taught in a college. Financially we had everything [in Korea].

David is 21 years old and a premed student. He came to the US in the 7th grade and speaks English with a slight accent.

David: My father had a business. International trading business. So he travelled a lot. My father visited the US quite often. I think we did better than middle class. Upper middle perhaps. . . We had a nice house and all. . . We weren’t really rich but we were really well off.

Derek is 21 years old and his family also originally emigrated from Seoul. He came to the US when he was nine years old and he completed third grade prior to immigration. He
mentioned that he repeated third grade in the US due to his inefficient English at that time. He also said that he did very well in American schools in all academic subjects except English when he arrived. He added that he thinks American schools are not as academically rigorous as Korean schools.

Derek: My father was a pilot in an international airline company [in Korea]. We moved a lot. Each time it was for a bigger house. I think we were quite well off [before we came to the USA]. We had things that my neighbours did not have.

Most of the informants, who are well educated, affluent, and from urban backgrounds prior to their immigration to America, had difficulties understanding their parents’ motivation to immigrate. They feel that they had “everything” in Korea without the hardship of initiation into American life. Consequently, these students feel that the price they paid for immigration was considerable, as Brian’s comment that “After coming to the United States, our parents didn’t have time for us” suggests. Many of these students suspect that their parents’ primary reason for immigration was for their education - to avoid the “examination hell” of the Korean education system and at the same time, giving them the edge of an English education, a lingua franca, in a globalising world.

Brian: I don’t know why we came here [the USA]. Maybe to educate us in an English-speaking environment. My parents own a couple of supermarkets in NYC now, convenience stores.

Derek: I am not sure why we came here. I heard the education system is tough there [Korea]. We have more freedom here [in the USA] about what we think and do. More choices. My parents own an electronic shop now.

Sunny, who is a 22-year-old art major student, is an exception. He came to America when he was seven. He said that his parents only completed elementary education and his family’s reason for immigration was clear to him.

Sunny: In Korea we were poor. My family moved around quite a bit because my parents didn’t have a steady occupation. We came to America for economic reasons. And I think we did it well. I say we are an upper middle class now - financially. My parents own two large dry cleaning businesses.

Because of their inadequate ability to communicate effectively in English, first generation Korean immigrants are, in general, confined to the ethnic community and are unable to find jobs in their trained professions even with their high levels of educational attainment. Therefore, they experience social/occupational downward mobility, which becomes a source of individual and family tension. Most of these immigrants become self-employed entrepreneurs in alternative blue-collar jobs, and their activities are generally limited to the Korean communities. Ethnic networks provide information about employment and sources of credit and support for entrepreneurial ventures (Min, 1990; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). The ethnic entrepreneurial communities have an additional advantage of being sources of information for outside jobs as well as sources of employment opportunities as ethnic businesses tend to hire and promote their own people. The experiences of these informants support this.

Conversation with Sunny confirms the findings of previous research. He indicated that his father had bought the grocery shop he was working in when the owner was moving into a gas station business and passed on the mortgage to his father. He added that without such an arrangement, his family could not have offered to buy the shop in America where they had no credit history. Past experiences and contacts with the Korean Community confirm Light & Bonachie’s (1988) claim that Koreans have established their own extended business network that provides start-up money for businesses. Within ten years of immigration, most informants express satisfaction at their economic achievement that either is equal to or better than it was in Korea. Portes and Rumbaut (1990) support the finding that Korean and
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Chinese groups have above average household incomes as a result of their entrepreneurial orientation.

However, this achievement did not come just by luck. Except for two cases where the mother worked part time, all the informants reported the anguish and loneliness of growing up alone in a land where language and customs are not familiar while all adults in the family were working. They understood the difficulty and sacrifice their parents were making, but nevertheless felt lonely and scared.

Sunny: We stayed with my uncle’s family several months after we came to America. The very next day after we got to the US, I woke up to find out the only adult in the house was my mom. All other adults had gone to work. About a week or so later, my mom began to work too. Eventually we moved to a poor Hispanic neighborhood where crime was a constant problem. My brother and I were left in the house all alone. We were scared .... I worried a lot. My parents worked long, long [emphasised] hours. I was afraid of things like what if they [my parents] get sick and if we will ever get out of here... I was always scared. Scared of the neighborhood, scared of the future, just plain scared. We had no one to talk to - alone, my brother and me.

My mom worked at a sweatshop. She worked long hours. My dad worked for a local grocery shop owned by a Korean. His job was stocking and delivering. Later, he bought that shop. Profit was good but it was long working hours - 6 a.m. to midnight. We [my brother and I] never got to see my parents and when we saw them they were tired. So they changed to the dry cleaning business. It is still long hours but much less than a grocery shop.

Brian, whose parents were professionals in Korea, again related heartbreaking experiences:

Brian: [After we came to America] My grandmother took care of us because my parents were working all the time. Grandmother doesn’t speak a word of English, so we spoke Korean to her. After we left for college, grandmother had no one to talk to. Now, she has lost her ability to talk. I blame my parents for my grandma’s illness. I resent my parents for bringing us here. We were very comfortable in Korea. I don’t know why we came here.

Therefore, it can be postulated that while every immigrant family worked hard and endured many hardships adjusting to American life, those who are from middle-class/professional backgrounds paid greater costs seeking the American dream.

Some of the informants turned to violence to overcome loneliness and frustration. We were informed that many Korean youth in urban areas turned to violence in the absence of their parents who are working long hours to survive in the new country. Alex is a 22-year-old political science major. His father came to America two years prior to the rest of the family who joined him later. Alex was seven at the time he came to the US and growing up alone, he thinks it was by God’s grace that he didn’t get deeper into the street world.

Alex: I was frustrated and angry [about my parents being absent]. When I was attending Stuyvesant high [the most elite public school in New York City], I had to commute a long distance. Then, I got involved with the club [referring to a street gang group] and I did many bad things. But we were also considerate. Koreans [gangs] are known for that. We always leave them [victims] with some money to go home.

Sunny: We will go down the street and meet someone coming this [my] way. If it is any other ethnic group, we don’t want to appear to be weak, so just for the heck of it we will get into fight.

Sunny mentioned that his parents moved out of the area because they were concerned about his association with gang members. Both Alex and Sunny informed us of the prevalence of Asian gang youth including Koreans in the metropolitan areas. Most of the gang youths were like Alex and Sunny who grew up in empty homes while their parents worked long hours to be successful.
Academic Experience

All the respondents showed a great desire to improve their academic and educational performance, especially in their response to the expectations of their parents, in addition to their own ambition. All of the interviewees expressed that education is the most important goal for them. The following passage by Kim (1993) expresses well the social pressure and stress that Korean immigrant youth experience as a result of high expectation toward academic achievement.

Korean immigrants consider money and prestige as the criteria for success. However, it is when one understands that, for Korean-American immigrant parents, prestige is synonymous to the academic achievement of their children that one begins to understand the relatively high academic achievement of Korean-American students and their disproportionate concentration on certain majors in college and in certain professional careers.

As stated earlier, except for Sunny who cited economic betterment as a reason for immigration, all others have cited education as a central motive for their family’s immigration to the US. This reflects the Korean reality of competitive entrance examinations often referred to as “examination hell” and antecedent gruelling preparation for entrance examinations. Without a college degree there exists no prospect for a prestigious job and social standing within the community. From the first author’s recollection, it is not uncommon for families to spend half of their income on expenses needed to supplement/complement schoolwork. Even then, there is no guarantee for admission to a good university in Korea.

As such, all the informants stated that it was the natural thing to attend a university. They did not consider any other option.

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Sunny: My parents didn’t have college education so they wanted us to get what they never got themselves.

Many of these informants are graduates from very prestigious elite public high schools in New York City or suburban schools near New York City. Although all the participants claimed that it was their independent decision, active parental involvement was apparent in the choice of both school and disciplines.

Sunny: My first love was studying art. My parents thought that I wouldn’t be able to make a living by studying art. They persuaded me to study business. [He added that for his parents being economically independent might have special meaning as his parents came to the USA after moving place to place looking for manual work in Korea]. So I gave it a try for the first two years. Didn’t work out. Now my parents feel bad and support me fully [studying of art].

David: Well, we are a minority in this country and my dad thought that I should have a good profession - the one with licence. I thought about law but my dad thought that I will be
disadvantaged when competing with white [American] and suggested that I should study medicine. ... I agree with him. Luckily I like biology and chemistry.

Ogbu (1988) noted that voluntary minorities believe in the connection between school and future success. Related to Ogbu’s cultural ecology theory, the informants also view education as a vehicle for social mobility. However, a marginalised position of Korean immigrants in American society is well reflected in David’s rationale for pursuing a career in science rather than law. David suggested that a career in a science related field is less dependent on perception of command of the English language by “Americans” and therefore there is a greater competitive chance than in careers in the areas of law or management.

However, one informant’s view was more optimistic.

Alex: I think in America, with hard work you can make your dream. My dad was a politician [in Korea] and I would like to become a judge … I want to be a judge because you can make a difference. … That’s how [through domination in legislative and judicial areas] white Americans gained power. Sure I will have difficulty. But I am willing to walk extra ten miles for achieving my goal.

Alex’s attitude corresponds to Ogbu’s (1988) assertion that immigrant minorities believe that the inequality they are facing is temporary and that their situation will improve over time. In this framework, immigrant minorities focus their effort toward education to improve their conditions. Although all of the informants agreed that Koreans are at a disadvantage in social mobility, they also believe that through hard work and education, and by choosing the right profession, they can improve their lot in the American society.

Learning English

“Language is the house of being” - Martin Heideger

All of the respondents reported that learning English was the most difficult part of adapting to their new environment. All of them have currently attained fluency in English; some speak like native speakers and some have developed their ability to speak correct, standard English, but with a slight accent. They recall schooling and associations with English speaking friends as the principle medium for learning English. In their attitude, all of them considered that their command of English would have an effect on their professional advancement and further emancipation in American society. All of the participants believed that the first generation immigrants might have to limit their goals to succeed and achieve peripheral success within the ethnic community because of their deficiency in English. The second-generation immigrant however, must go beyond the ethnic community into mainstream American society. To accomplish this task, English is the principal vehicle.

However, special attention is paid to the maintenance of the Korean language. Bilingualism was seen as ideal, and extended ethnic community forces such as the church utilise this function. All of our informants converse fluently in both languages and are proud of their abilities. However, they always speak in Korean when speaking with other Koreans. In fact, most of them preferred to speak Korean with the first author at other social events. Unanimously, they viewed speaking Korean as a prerequisite to being a Korean. Alex put it most eloquently.

Alex: You think with the language you speak. If one doesn’t speak Korean, then you don’t think the Korean way.

The informants pointed out other practical benefits of being bilingual, such as understanding both cultures and having greater access to jobs and information. Therefore, those who are weak in either language are seen as intellectually and culturally inferior and are looked down upon by others. In spite of the complexities of the Korean language as it distinguishes the
formal polite and informal polite, formal plain, and informal plain, most second generation Koreans displayed a remarkable command of the Korean language. First generation Korean immigrants with limited English skills almost always describe themselves as Korean with American citizenship. This is an interesting contrast to the 1.5 generation who consider themselves as Koreans first and their reference of American usually meant Americans of Caucasian ancestry while second generation Korean youth who are born in the US identify themselves as American with Korean ancestry and speak English primarily.

One of the first author’s friends, Jenny, was adopted by a European-American family when she was three. She has no recollection of Korea and, as she grew up, English was the only family language and, therefore, became her primary language. She earned a doctoral degree in English and currently teaches in a prestigious research university. She chuckles at the people who comment that she speaks English well or that some of her white students doubt her English abilities because of her Asian appearance.

**Culture**

In addition to speaking Korean, ethnic Korean food serves to assert Korean identity as a distinctive feature of ethnicity. It is understood as giving more consideration to a guest when the guest is served Korean dishes. To Koreans, a Korean meal represents Korean hospitality. Thus, Korean food is served at most ethnic gatherings including Sunday meetings at churches. Korean immigrants trust the US and believe they can participate in a potentially gratifying mainstream society. They view their dual identity as additive and complementary, not oppositional and conflicting. Becoming an American does not pose a conflict to most Korean immigrants. New elements of the American culture are selectively added without evoking any sense of loss to a past collective identity (Kim, 1993:230). Similarly, Koreans are adopting a pragmatic strategy of ‘accommodation without assimilation,’ which is common among immigrant minorities. These claims appear to be true among Koreans in two ways. First, Koreans admit the superiority of American technology but insist that Korean spiritual culture has greater importance. Many reasons are given to illustrate the American weaknesses - too much individualism, too much freedom, which leads to irresponsibility resulting in unwillingness to sacrifice for the greater good of the collective population. On the other hand, politeness and friendliness were points that Koreans wish to learn from their American counterparts.

The favourable economic conditions of Koreans in the US as well as their middle class experience in Korea, provides “cultural capital” which gives them confidence to assert themselves in America. All of the informants viewed their families’ economic position as equal to or better than that of most of their white peers. These second-generation immigrants are willing to adopt the best of both their Korean and American experiences while maintaining their Korean ethnic culture. Korean youth view Americans as very sociable but not developing close relationships. The latter are seen as more calculated in their friendships and other human relationships.

Derek: They [Americans] are too individualistic... They don’t hold arms together between friends. They think it is queer thing. ... They are polite but it’s so artificial. ... They don’t know the meaning of sacrificing for friends.

Alex: They are different. I don’t feel the depth of friendship with Americans even with those known for long time.

The informants refer to Americans as more emotionally immature, but the respondents also recognise the crudeness of Korean mannerism, which they affectionately termed as naiveté and innocence.
Identity Formation

All of the informants identify themselves first as Koreans. Some have accepted a hyphenated identity of Korean-American, adding to their American experience. Considering the fact that most of them are naturalized American citizens now, their responses were interesting. When asked whether it was conflicting for them as American citizens to assert themselves as Koreans first, they responded that there is no conflict. One aspect of that identity is, according to them, to be pragmatic and functional and the other to be spiritual—the Asian American is a combination of the spiritual and moral values of the East and the pragmatism of the West.

However, close conversations revealed that affiliations with Korean identity are stronger as a result of the American rejection of Asians in mainstream America.

Derek: German, English anybody can come here and next day they can call themselves an American and Americans will accept them. But not if you have an Asian face. ... My son will be called a Korean. ... So, you are rejected by Americans and if you are not Korean, then who are you? ... I will teach my son to be a proper Korean. ... We will always be Korean.

The first author echoed this feeling in some degree through her own experiences. Often she is asked to provide proof of citizenship at the border when she returns from Canada after the holidays while no such demands were made to her white friends. Therefore, it is possible to postulate that such shared experiences of discrimination mobilise ethnic identity. According to Takaki (1989) Asians are still regarded as “strangers from a different shore” in spite of more than 150 years presence in mainland USA.

However, while many have expressed the implicit discrimination practised by Americans against Koreans, all express the hope of overcoming it through hard work. While maintaining self-ethnic identity, learning their way and beating them at their own game was the dominant expression of Korean youth.

Brian: I expect discrimination in my professional pursuit. For the same qualification, white Americans will have an advantage. I have to do better in order to achieve same.

Alex: I believe that I can achieve what I set to become. I just have to go an extra 10 miles to achieve same and I am willing to do that... We should remember what happened to the Japanese during World War II and how Americans have treated Chinese. America as a nation feels guilty of what they did. When someone feels guilty, he doesn’t like the person who is making them feel guilty. That is how white America feels. Same time, they feel threatened by our success.

Lee (1995) argued that in the United States, the issue of race is framed in terms of blacks and whites. The Korean informants also were acutely aware of this and feel alienated in this society, thus Koreans have an increasing desire to get more involved in politics by sending more representatives to voice their presence.

Alex: Therefore, we [Asians] must unite. And if we cannot find a Korean to defend us then we should send at least another Asian [to Capital Hill].

Alex’s comment hints toward implicitly strong discrimination resulting in the marginalising of all Asians into a collective group, therefore eliminating ethnic uniqueness and encouraging a Pan-Asian identity.

Spouse Selection

In spouse selection, all of our respondents, with the exception of Sunny, who is in love with a Caucasian girl, prefer Korean spouses. Family appears to be a powerful force in shaping Korean youth’s attitudes. Interviewees seem to believe that there is a better understanding of
each other among Korean spouses especially with those who share American experiences. Some even believed that Koreans are more physically attractive than other ethnic groups.

Alex: I was dating a girl who was a mix of a European and Native American. I was in love and planned to get married. … My father opposed. … I am an only son and must carry the family name and tradition. That is my obligation. … My parents love me and supported me all these years. If that is their only wish, how can I possibly go against it? There will be many who will overcome that and marry anyone who they wish to marry. I have a duty to my family.

David: My mom said even within the same family, there are different personalities and problems and the same goes for ethnicity but the risk of difficult relationship is greater in an intercultural and interracial marriages. I happen to agree with her. She said as long as I am happy, she will accept whoever I choose but she will be happier to be able to speak to her daughter-in-law in her own language. I think it makes sense. I don’t think of any other possibility.

Derek: My own perception is that non-Korean’s are not attractive. My parents, I think are happy about that. Beside, I think it is less problematic to the child who will be born later. It will be less confusing to them. They will know who they are.

Brian: I think my parents are more open-minded about that issue but I definitely prefer Korean. I could marry anyone I want to. My parents cannot control me.

These informants’ comments may be typical of the Korean male immigrant population; however, they may not reflect those of the whole Korean immigrant population. Korean female immigrant may have different views on this issue as Korean traditional culture favours males and places females in a subservient role, which might result in dissatisfaction by female immigrant youths.

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed two interesting patterns of immigration by Koreans. The first follows the traditional patterns of economic migration, meaning immigrants of primarily working class backgrounds who come to the US for economic betterment. The second, newly emerging pattern consists of middle class entrepreneurial/professional immigrants. This latter category of immigrants propose an interesting new trend in which middle class Koreans are immigrating to the US for the education of their children so that they may avoid the “examination hell” of the Korean educational system and learn English. This reveals the problematic Korean educational system: without a diploma from a prestigious university, there is no prospect for entering into a good profession and little opportunity to gain social respect. Further, learning English is much desired among the middle class Koreans - a lingua franca, which will graft them into the global economy.

However, unlike economic immigrants, education immigrants appear to pay greater costs for their opportunities. Unable to find a job in a trained profession due to language barriers, these middle class immigrants appear to experience greater anxiety in addition to the problems experienced by immigration. The extraordinary burden caused by the social/occupational downward mobility of immigrant families has an evident psychological impact. Furthermore, the sacrifices that parents make and their subsequent high expectations for their children both motivate and add stress to young immigrants’ lives. Children want to live up to their parents’ expectations, but at the same time they struggle with the desire to embrace the American ideal of independence and self-determination. These socio-cultural conflicts are at the centre of these youths’ efforts to forge a sense of identity and place.

The participants in this study are successfully negotiating a place for themselves. They identify first as Koreans, indicating that their families, language and culture are an essential part of who they are. However, they also embrace aspects of what they perceive as American culture when it suits who they want to be. Yet conflict remains as they try to fight against discrimination and a feeling of alienation in their adopted country.
The informants expressed the hope of taking part in American society, but internal and external conflicts among race and ethnic relationships within society at large as well as within their families and themselves shape the 1.5 generation Korean identity in the US. The subtle discrimination Korean youths feel in their relationships with fellow “American” students must be examined. As a racial and linguistic minority, Korean youths feel they are disadvantaged and must “walk an extra ten miles” to overcome such discrimination, which points to the stress and unease that characterises the development of their identity and personality. These young men’s perceptions are important because they potentially become part of the cultural baggage of immigrant populations and can effect the way immigrants participate in American life. America is an immigrant country and if these findings were generalised, it would be an indicator of a growing social pattern of tension that must be addressed before it becomes a social explosion.

To better understand immigrant cultures and cultures made from immigrants, it is crucial to examine identity formation, especially that of youth, who are at an impressionable age. We emphasise the importance of this adolescent stage as this is indeed a time when people form their opinions and attitudes toward society, which will have a lasting impact on both the individual and also on the society.

How far is this Korean identity going to assert itself against the American backdrop? How far will American values and culture “drown” this identity and how can the two continue to coexist? These and other questions should continue to be pursued and explored to provide greater clarity toward understanding the issues that immigrants must overcome in their journey to becoming an American face in the pluralistic American society.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


