

# **Understanding Educational Experiences of Second-Generation Korean Americans**

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## **Abstract**

This article attempts to show how second-generation, Korean-American students have constructed their own meanings of pursuing education. By drawing on several Korean-American college students' life histories and commentaries about their educational experiences, I describe the attitudes about education held by a segment of second-generation Korean-American students. In order to reject conventional notions of Korean-American students' academic behavior (e.g., Korean Americans as science whizzes and high-score achievers), I focus on the process rather than the product of individual academic performances. Especially, I will illustrate how a female student called Sumi has coped with the social beliefs and narratives that have represented Korean-Americans' educational performances on the public and academics. As she has experienced conflicts between the representations and reality, she has transformed her attitudes about education. Her attitude change has been accompanied by her interpretations and reflections about her educational experiences situated in various contexts including family, neighborhood, and school conditions. These experiences have revolved around and against the taken-for-granted image of Korean Americans, that is, the "model minority" image and the concept of voluntary minorities as successful academic achievers.

Key words: second-generation Korean Americans, model minority, voluntary minority, educational performance

## **I. Introduction**

This article is a preliminary effort in constructing a framework for analyzing the educational experiences of second-generation Korean Americans. It strives to understand second-generation Korean Americans' perception of their social worlds and how they

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construct their meanings of academic pursuits. By drawing on several Korean-American college students' life histories and commentaries about their educational experiences, I describe the attitudes about education held by a segment of second-generation Korean-American students. Especially, I will illustrate how a female student called Sumi has coped with the social beliefs and narratives that represent, address, reduce, and distort Asian- or Korean-Americans' educational performances. As she has experienced conflicts between the representations and reality, she has transformed her attitudes about education. I argue that she is in the process of constituting her way of experiencing education. This continuous process occurs in tandem with the socio-historical trajectories that have brought her to the present and lead her to the future.

In order to place Sumi's understanding of her academic performance within the larger context of second-generation Korean Americans' experiences, we need to map out how Korean Americans as a subcategory of Asian Americans have been portrayed and conceptualized in the United States. The dominant, taken-for-granted image of Asian Americans is the "Model Minority" stereotype: a social portrait of Asian Americans as a successful minority both economically and academically. Similarly, in the field of educational research, there has been a general conceptualization about Asian-American students -- the "voluntary minority" concept -- which has defined Asian-American students as successful academic achievers (e.g., Lee, 1991; Kim, 1993; Ogbu, 1991).

I question to what extent these widespread social belief and conceptualization are relevant to understanding the experiences of second-generation Korean Americans. Neither the model minority image nor the voluntary minority concept is adequate explanatory frames for understanding the academic performances of second-generation Asian Americans including Korean Americans. This is because the image and concept were constructed based on the expectations and experiences of first-generation immigrants, their positioning in the host society, and the conditions and hegemonic discourses of the society when the immigrants arrived. As all of these elements have changed, new guidance is needed to understand the second-generation Asian Americans and their educational performances.

My research is significant on many levels. First, by drawing on the meaning-making process that evolves around Sumi's academic performances and guides her actions to come, I shed light on the subjective meaning-construction processes of academic performances, rather than on result- or outcome-oriented research interests. Objectified scores never reveal how students think and feel about their actions. Second, I can contribute to the body of research conducted about Asian-American college students. Few academic studies have focused on the educational concerns of Asian-American college students (Okutsu, 1989). In contrast to the dominant stereotypes about them, many Asian-American students do experience difficulties in college, partly because they are faced with some identity issues that are complicated by their cultural heritage (Toupin & Son, 1991). Third, this paper can suggest ways of understanding the

experiences of second-generation immigrants. As Portes (1994) points out, the literature on second-generation immigrants is sparse in the field of immigration studies because of the relative youth of the second generation of post-1965 immigrants and because of a shortage of census and official data.

## II. The "Model Minority" Image as a Macronarrative

I define the model minority image as a "macronarrative" it is a narrative which has been fabricated by the dominant public media (Appadurai, 1991, p.205). The media play a powerful role in spreading particular images and ideas -- some of which are not necessarily reality-based -- and provoking people's imaginations with partial information. It is dangerous if people think they know what a whole group is like from a few, unrepresentative examples. This can create a false reality.

The model minority image has been widespread since the mid 1960s in the public media. It portrays Asian Americans as academic and economic successes. The image of Asian Americans has fluctuated over time, depending on the vicissitudes of international relations, the nation's socioeconomic structure, the dominant group's cultural values, and the minority's adaptive capacities (Hurh & Kim, 1989). Before the current positive image of Asian Americans evolved, a negative image prevailed. According to Hurh and Kim (1989), federal and state legislation, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924, were actual consequences of the negative image of Asians held by a majority of Americans. Until 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited Chinese immigration to the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924, known as the Oriental Exclusion Act (Hurh & Kim, 1989), prohibited Japanese immigration (Takaki, 1989). In turn, discriminatory legislation reinforced the negative stereotype of Asian Americans (Takaki, 1989).

The popular press has played a role in creating and changing the image of Asian Americans. For example, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American newspapers often applied derogatory terms to Chinese or Japanese settlers, such as "an inferior race," "filthy beyond description," and "aliens whose presence is inimical to health and public morals" (Crystal, 1989, p. 406). In the mid-1960s, Asian-American success stories started to appear in the American popular press and scholarly publications (Hurh & Kim, 1989).<sup>1)</sup>

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1) Hurh and Kim (1989, p. 517) list some of these headlines. They include: "Success Story, Japanese American Style" (New York Times Magazine 1966), "Success Story of One Group in U.S." (U.S. News and World Report 1966), "Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites" (Newsweek 1971), "Japanese Outdo Horatio Alger" (Los Angeles Times 1977), "Korean Americans: In pursuit of Economic Success" (Washington Post 1978), "Asian Americans: A Model Minority" (Newsweek 1982), "To America with Skills: A Wave of Arrivals from the Far East Enriches the Country's Talent Pool" (Time 1985), and "Why Asians Are Going to the Head of the Class" (The New York Times 1986).

In 1982, the centennial year of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Newsweek published an article titled "Asian Americans: A 'Model Minority'" (Hurh & Kim, 1989, p. 513). It conveyed a positive image of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese citizens. Thus, the "unassimilable heathen" dramatically changed into "successful model minorities" in 100 years (Hurh & Kim, 1989, p.516) and the pendulum of public opinion swung dramatically from extremely negative to extremely positive.

What brought about this dramatic change? It is, perhaps, closely associated with the political and economic situation of the United States that Chun (1980/1995) describes:

It was in the 1960s -- the plight of Black Americans was occupying the nation's attention as it tried to cope with their assertive demands for racial equality -- that two of the nation's most influential print media presented to the American public a portrait of Asian Americans as a successful model minority. The portrait of Asian Americans as a successful model minority created a glowing image of a population that, despite past discrimination, has succeeded in becoming a hardworking, uncomplaining minority deserving to serve as a model for other minorities. (p. 96)

Since the revision of U.S. immigration law in 1965, the influx of college-educated immigrants from Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and India has reinforced the positive image of Asian Americans (Hurh & Kim, 1989). The dramatic increase of Korean immigrants is due primarily to the Nationality Act in 1965, which liberalized U.S. immigration laws. This law eliminated quota system based on nation of origin and which had been the cornerstone of the American immigration policy since 1924. Of all Korean Americans in the United States, 83.9% have arrived in the decade from 1970 to 1980 (Mangiafico, 1988).

Whether the stereotype of Asian Americans is positive or negative, its existence is problematic. For example, the success image has functioned to disguise and overlook the real problems and needs of Asian-American communities. Moreover, a successful image of one particular group is injurious to another group that has not achieved the same level of success. In the 1960s, by turning people's attention to the portrayal of Asian Americans as a successful minority, the nation seemed to attribute the failure of African Americans and other disadvantaged minorities to their own shortcomings rather than to unfair racial policies (Chun, 1980/1995; Crystal, 1989; Hurh & Kim, 1989).

Researchers have scrutinized how much Asian Americans have succeeded and to what extent the myth of the model minority is unrealistic (Barringer et al., 1990; Chun, 1980/1995; Hurh & Kim, 1989; Kim & Valadez, 1995; Suzuki, 1977/1995). They show that the high incomes of Asian-American families should be understood in comparison with other groups -- especially to the mainstream -- based on the number of wage earners, the number of hours worked, and the relationship between occupation and educational background. In this analysis, the incomes of Asian-American individuals are not higher than those of mainstream individuals (Hurh & Kim, 1989). Hurh and Kim (1989) also maintain that Asian Americans should not be considered an economically

homogeneous group due to huge variations in income levels, which depend on factors such as ethnicity, arrival period, generational difference, and residential area.

In terms of academic performance, there is also heterogeneity among Asian Americans, depending on time of arrival, generation, country of origin, socioeconomic status, and place of residence. Moreover, the statistical data report that the achievement scores of each ethnic group fluctuate in terms of subject matter (e.g., reading or math) or grade level (Escueta & O'Brien, 1991/1995; Hsia & Hirano-Nakanish, 1989/1995; Lee, 1994; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Kim & Valadez, 1995).

### **III. Explanations of Educational Performance of Asian-American Students**

According to Ogbu's cultural model<sup>2)</sup>, immigrant minorities such as Asian American students adopt pragmatic attitudes and strategies that one conceive to school success. That is, voluntary minorities see themselves as foreigners who must live by the host society's rules. They have a positive dual frame of reference that allows them to develop or maintain an optimistic view of their future possibilities. This frame of reference entails the comparison of their present situation with their former situation or with that of their peers in their home country. This comparison enables them to believe that host society offers better opportunities for themselves and for their children (Ogbu, 1991). Their interpretation of the migration experience has created a "folk epistemology" (Suarez-Orozco, 1991, p. 41) or a "folk theory of getting ahead" (Ogbu, 1991, p.11) in the host society. Shared folk knowledge guides the behaviors and understandings of people in the minority group.

However, Ogbu's theory contains a seed of self-contradiction. Even though he attempts to take account of variations among minorities, his portrait of Asian Americans is homogenizing and promotes the model minority stereotype (S. Lee, 1994). Although his typology can shed light on intergroup differences between immigrant and involuntary minorities, his categorization of immigrants as one group is problematic because there are huge variations among immigrants and among Asian Americans.

Also, explanations of immigrant minorities based on Ogbu's theory do not seem to consider the second generation's perspectives. Even though Ogbu attempts to include the subjective interpretations of a particular minority group, in explaining why this group is successful or not, he simply focuses on the perception and interpretation of the parents' generation. In the same vein as Ogbu, Schnieder and Lee (1990), and Kim

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2) According to Ogbu (1991), in the domain of education or schooling, the cultural model of each group exists to provide group members with a framework for interpreting educational events, situations, and experiences and for guiding behavior in the school context. Because different cultural models promote different behaviors, the cultural model of a particular group is connected, to some degree, with the relative academic success or failure of its members.

(1993) show the success model and adaptive strategies of the first-generation Korean Americans in the United States. These researchers concentrate on the cultural model of the parents' generation. Even when they try to analyze the second generation's accomplishments, they explain that children share the cultural values of their parents. Understanding second-generation immigrant children requires a new analytical frame (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Gans (1992) writes that "what immigrants want is not necessarily what their children do" (p.184). Research on the parents' generation offers only tentative guidance for the second generation because the outlook of this group can be very different from that of their immigrant parents, especially in terms of their perception of social discrimination (Portes, 1994). In order to understand the second generation, therefore, we need to be aware of its adaptive patterns that are situated and variable in relation to contextual change, including political and economic fluctuations of the host society. It is important to take account of second-generation immigrants' personal agency as they continuously negotiate their surrounding social circumstances.

#### **IV. Research Methods**

My paper is based primarily on Sumi's narratives and experiences. Sumi was a 21-year-old woman majoring in history at a midwest university. She was born and raised in Chicago. At one time her major was engineering. In order to contextualize her personal experiences, I refer to the narratives of three other interviewees. I met these four informants through different channels. I met Sumi by chance at the school cafeteria helping her Korean homework. I met a male student named Sung-Jin majoring in economics, through my friend teaching in the Korean class. Sung-jin could speak Korean relatively well but he had difficulty in writing. Once in a week I helped him understand the sentences in the Korean textbook. I met two more interviewees in an undergraduate class -- contemporary Korean culture and society -- which I was auditing. I asked these two female students named Soyoung and Yunhee directly if I could interview them and they agreed. I had four interview sessions with Soyoung, who is majoring in premed and three interview sessions with Yunhee, who is majoring in East Asian Languages and Cultures.

I tried to present myself to my informants as a person who is interested in their lives, not just a researcher but also personally. Three different styles of interaction emerged, however, thus influencing my feelings and involvement levels. With one informant, Sumi, I discussed my personal life much more than in other interviews. I talked about my daily life, personal feelings, and detailed family history. In these interactions, I was a researcher, tutor, and friend-like person. My meetings with this informant continued from August 1996 to May 1997. For other interviewees, I was a researcher and tutor or solely a researcher. I met with these informants during the fall semester of 1996.

Sometimes, I could identify myself as an "insider" with my interviewees and empathized with them, especially when they talked about "we Koreans." At the same time, the interviewees did not identify with me in regard to some explicitly defined categories: researcher - researched, graduate - undergraduate, Korean nationality - U.S. nationality, Korean grown-up - U.S. grown-up, Korean fluency - English fluency. For me, these often accentuated the distances between me and my informants and made me hesitant to interact with them. Sometimes, this distance triggered our interaction. For example, their curiosity about Korean society and my response to their questions often opened our conversations.

In my explanation of how Sumi knits together her life experiences in order to construct her own way of pursuing education, I will use the idea of "personal anthropology" (Pocock, 1994). This concept focuses on how people construct their own ways of doing things under the influence of the social contexts in which they are situated. Each social context or category has shared norms and values that are implicit and explicit. People react based on their specific experiences to socially taken-for-granted beliefs and values. Each person's particular way of responding to the social contexts results in a "unique complex" (Pocock, 1994, p. 12). That is, a person knits together various kinds of social experiences into a personal narrative. Accordingly, I will try to show how attitudes about academic pursuits are shaped and modified by influences of social contexts and personal experiences.

By representing Sumi's long navigation of her life-worlds and her long retrospective narratives in my short text, I need to be aware of how I have omitted, reduced, and transformed important points based on my own interests and subjectivity. Here, I am not trying to develop a generalization about second-generation Asian-American or Korean-American ways of pursuing academics. Also, I do not claim that Sumi is a typical second-generation Korean American. My goal is to show how an individual has been negotiating socio-historical trajectories to clarify her situatedness. This negotiating process can shed light on a segment of Korean- or Asian-American students' ways of pursuing academics.

## **V. Retrospective Narratives**

### **A. Early Educational Experiences**

In early school years, one's attitude toward academic achievement is closely related to experiences with family members. Interactions with parents, siblings, and other relatives shape children's educational aspirations and performance. In the Korean-American community, the particular values and norms that were brought by parents from Korea are emphasized by the parents to ensure their family's survival in the new situation and

to orient children's behavior patterns. As Zhou and Bankston (1994) point out, the existence of the poor environment compels immigrant parents to maintain or emphasize their ethnic traditions as social capital in order to prevent their children from assimilating into the lower social segment of the host society and to encourage their children to pursue "safe" professions (Kao, 1995). The authoritarian style of disciplining that is traditionally part of Confucian ideology is adopted and emphasized by immigrant parents to control their children's behaviors.

Even though the Asian-American parenting style is much more authoritarian than that of other groups (Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992), this strict discipline does not always favorably influence their children's academic orientation. Sometimes, the traditional Korean parenting style elicits unexpected reactions from their children. Sumi's narrative indicates how children react differently to parental discipline.

My brother didn't do so good. And...actually, I'll be completely frank with you- uh, my dad hit him a lot.... He [her dad] was ambitious. You know, and, uh, but that actually made the situation worse...that only made him do worse. All of my brother's friends were American. Their parents didn't do that. But I think my brother compared his home life to his friends' home life. It was so different. What my father was doing just made it worse, you know. He [her brother] didn't think he was doing so bad. He got Bs..... They really wanted straight As and wanted him to go to Harvard....I think, actually,...the only reason why I did so well when I was in school was because I was scared. [She laughs.]

Sumi's brother does not seem to accept his parents' emphasis on keeping good grades. According to Sumi, her brother is smart, has good communication skills, is a good athlete, and plays the piano and baseball very well. However, his father was not satisfied with her brother's academic performance because he did not concentrate solely on studying. By observing her brother's case, Sumi learned to avoid their parents' strict disciplining. Reflecting her father's emphasis, she oriented herself to getting good grades, which was easily accomplished in the "inner city regular school" she attended until third grade. She said that even though she did not try hard in this school, she got the best grades.

Her teachers' expectations also reinforced her orientation to getting good grades and being an academic high achiever: "When I was in that elementary school, the teacher always calls on me, saying, 'Sumi, I know you know the answer,' and I was, you know, the 'nerd',<sup>3)</sup> I guess, at that school." Her teachers' expectations might have been influenced by the model minority image of Asian-American students. Another interviewee, Soyoung, who is majoring in premed, relates a similar experience related to her teachers' expectations: " I think a lot of my teachers just gave me As if I was on

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3) This is a derogatory nickname for students who are unpopular, unathletic, and obsessed with studying.



border line A and B." Sumi's early educational experiences seemed to reflect model minority image. However, her experiences as a good academic achiever were bound with a specific context that included her attendance at an "inner city regular school" and her observations of the interactions between her brother and father. Sumi was transferred to a gifted school after third grade. In this different school context, her experience became more complicated. In this school, she felt a huge, self-imposed pressure to getting good grades.

Sumi: I was a messed-up kid. [She laughs.] I mean, I put so much pressure on myself, you know, when I was eight years old, I was thinking an A. [She laughs.]... One time when I was in the fourth grade, I got like an 85 on a math test or something, and I didn't get an 100. I ran away from home. [She laughs.] I ran away from home.... I was wandering around the block. But, you know, usually I come home at, like, 2:30 in the afternoon. I came home around 6 'cause I was hungry. [She laughs.]

H-Y: How was your mom at that time?

Sumi: They were worried. They called the police. But I was so ashamed to come home with an 85. That was a B.

During her elementary school years, Sumi oriented herself toward her parents' emphasis on hard work and good grades. As she was young, she was not concerned with how she was represented by her actions: her academic achievement was still driven primarily by her parents' emphasis. She wanted to be the "smartest person" all the time. She told me that she did not understand and cried because she could not get always As in this gifted school even though she tried hard.

## **B. Complexity of the Model Minority Stereotype**

In her high school years, Sumi struggled between her home life and school life because she experienced conflicts between what her parents expected and what she wanted to do. She did not want to be seen as a person who focused only on studying. Her desire to participate in many extracurricular activities, however, this resulted in conflict and tension with her parents.

When I was in high school, I was involved in a lot of activities....I was in the drama club and I was in orchestra and [pause] the international club and an Asian-American club....And I was on the tennis team. I would come home at six or seven at night, you know -- they just thought that I should come home at three o'clock and study all night....I had to quit the drama club. The other clubs, I didn't have to stay late after school. But drama club I did, so I had to quit.

She coped with the resulting tension by compromising: she followed father's request to

quit some activities. Her concentration on studying was superficial and focused on not making trouble with her father. Immigrant parents tend to emphasize hard work and academic achievement exclusively as a strategy for entering the dominant society. However, children do not simply internalize their parents' strategy. This creates parent-child conflicts.

One interviewee, Sung-jin, who is majoring in economics, said that he was not a "good son" in his high school years because he did not study hard. His main interest was sports. Most of his white American friends were football players and he did not want to appear to be an unathletic nerd. He hated the nerd stereotype of Korean-American students--a negative consequence of the model minority image. In most of his classes, he did not pay attention and slept. He just liked football. This student actively refused characterization as a nerd by acting like a sports player. This created conflict with his mother, who screamed at him because he did not study. She never did this to his brothers, however, because they worked hard.

Immigrant parents' educational expectations are not the same as their children's. Parents approach education instrumentally, whereas, for children, education is experienced as part of their experiential worlds, which contain various dimensions (e.g., extracurricular activities, peer culture, sports, etc.). Parents and children have different views about the extent of hard work and priority on school life. Because immigrant parents desire that their children achieve social mobility in the host society, they encourage their children to "make it" through educational achievement and "safe jobs." Getting into the dominant society is not only a goal of parents but also of their children. As children grow up, however, the use of education as a survival strategy is more strongly emphasized by parents. Parents' desire is often accompanied with strict discipline and control that are not common among their children's American friends. Immigrant parents want to control their children's study time and study habits. On the other hand, negative stigmatization of the model minority image -- that is, the nerd stereotype -- intervenes in Asian-American students' attitude about hard work. They do not want that they are shown as just "bookworms." This brings in conflicts between parents and children.

Sumi said she liked some subjects, such as math, chemistry, and physics in her high school years. She did well in these subjects. However, she could not find any meaning in some other subjects. Her alienation from academic pursuits was revealed in Anglo-American oriented subject matters, such as English and history, with great intensity. She felt that these subjects were too far from her life.

The model minority stereotype depicts Asian-American students as good achievers. This overlooks the hardship of academic pursuits and low achievement in some subject matters. In these subject matters, which require familiarity with American history and language Sumi felt distant and had difficulty understanding them. She could not find any connection between herself and these subject matters. There were no subjects in school that shed light on her present existence in the present in terms of her heritage.

Sumi's high school experiences do not enable her to keep the Asian-American model minority image. She went to a magnet school in Chicago. According to her, most of the students there studied hard. She did not perceive Asian-American students as the outstanding group through her high school experiences. She recognized that good academic achievers are from various ethnic backgrounds and that Asian Americans do not always excel in school. One interviewee, Yunhee talks about her perception of variations among Asian Americans as follows:

Among my friends or some people who I know, a man who is a Korean-American -- he doesn't speak Korean at all. He went to Art Institute, where the academic level is a little low. But I know this one Chinese American -- (he went to) Caltech. (They are) so different. The Korean student likes party, but this Chinese student is smart.

During her high school period, Sumi's adherence to her father's strong emphasis on academic achievement was weakened. Her parents got divorced and the complicated situations that resulted made her hesitant to continue school. However, a sense of obligation to repay her mother's sacrifices for the family encouraged her to go to college.

I didn't like to go to school right away. I wanted to take some time off to figure out what I want to do because when I was in high school, everything was so confusing, like my family -- it's going out with my family. My brother had a lot of problems. We had a lot of family problems. And I just didn't think that I was right in moving on to college, you know, but my mom, she just thought that's ridiculous -- "why don't you go to college?"-- so I just went along with that.

Without a break after high school, Sumi continued her education as a social routine. However, as she could not develop academic interests and her own drive to pursue higher education, she found herself in a trouble.

### **C. Examination of the Korean-American Cultural Model of Success**

She could not concentrate on studying in the freshmen and sophomore years because she followed one of the strategies provided by the Korean-American cultural model of success and chose engineering as her major. These strategies such as premed, prelaw, business and engineering majors guide Korean-American parents to advise their children to take certain majors for future professional careers. The strategies are taken for granted as an easy way to get to the dominant society. Suzuki (1986) points out that a disproportionate number of Asian Americans pursued degrees in the technical, scientific disciplines, such as engineering, accounting, and computer science. On the other hand, there is an under-representation of Asian Americans in such fields as the humanities

and social sciences.

Sumi's choice of major did not follow her own academic interests. She based this choice on her mother's hard work experience and sympathy for her mother, working as a nurse. At this time, Sumi accepted her education as a means of getting a future job. Her choice of an engineering major followed the taken-for-granted strategy of the Korean-American cultural model. However, her automatic acceptance of the Korean-American strategy made her feel uncomfortable with her chosen major. She did not work hard because she could not develop any interests.

Like Sumi, another interviewee, Yunhee, changed her major from engineering to EALC (East Asian Languages and Cultures). She originally chose an engineering major, because she thought that she had to take care of her parents because they have no sons (Korean tradition requires sons -- especially the first son -- to take care of their parents). She worried about her parents. She thought that an engineering major would allow her to find jobs and make money easily. Her grades were not good, however, and she found she could not continue this major. She called her mother and cried because her dream was frustrated. Her parents told her that she doesn't have to care for them and that she could do whatever she liked. Eventually, she found happiness with her changed major.

Sumi tried to challenge the Korean-American strategy by changing her major. As she took Korean language classes, she got interested in Koreanness and Korean history. This experience turned her life into new direction. She said, "After I changed my major, I felt liberated." But this decision brought conflict between her and her mother. Meanwhile, her effort to try hard in some classes such as Korean language and history moved her mother into a positive and supportive mood. She found that these subject matters are "meaningful" to her family in particular. Now, her mother always helps her with Korean and says, "O.K. This is good thing, I'm proud of you." Sumi's active and serious attitude toward academic performance in Korean language and history transformed her mother's attitude, too. She calls her mother whenever she has questions for her Korean language class homework. Her mother's support encourages her to keep going.

#### **D. Meaning of Academic Pursuits and Success**

The Korean language and history classes that Sumi took help her to construct her meaning of academic performance. These classes have made Sumi orient herself to fulfill the empty conjunctions of genealogy and history where she originated. In other words, she begins to try to know her family history in the context of Korean history through her academic performance. She tries to discover how her mother's life history is connected with Korean history at large, and how her mother's way of life is related to Korean culture. She thinks that this effort makes her understand her mother better.

When Sumi was young, the distance which she perceived between her and her parents was recognized as just a "generation gap." Now, the distance is understood as a missing

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link between her personal history and her parents' history embedded in Korean history. In this way, her academic pursuit builds a bridge for identifying and redefining herself in the context of her family, the country of origin, and her parents' transnational history.

In addition, learning Korean language influences Sumi's way of identifying with Koreanness. "I think it helps me identify with Korean culture, does not necessarily help me understand Korean culture better, but I would like to say that with other Korean, Korean-speaking people -- now we have a little common ground." Even though learning Korean is stressful for her because it has a lot of honorific forms and changeable verb endings, Sumi sensitized the difficult learning process as a kind of "disciplining" in approaching Korean identity. Now she feels the importance of schooling and enjoys reading and writing, even though she feels stressful sometimes. Sumi is creating her own meaning of academic pursuits. While majoring Korean history and studying Korean, her meaning is the process of situating herself in relation to transnational Korean socio-historical contexts. This process requires her to clarify the combination of genealogy and history that brought her in the present.

Future aspirations are shaped through her various perceptions, experiences, and interpretations meandering through her social worlds. For her, success does not mean just getting a prestigious job and making money. The Korean-American cultural model of success is not appreciated by her. Sumi says, "(If people are in an uncomfortable job) I think, it's worse -- if you do that, you can go crazy. When you are unhappy with your job, with what you're doing, you could be making a lot of money but hate what you do. That's no way to live your life."

She does not have the optimistic view of "equal opportunity" which has been regarded as Korean immigrants' perception of American society. She perceives the position of minorities in American society and how they tend to be discriminated against:

I don't think success is really a problem for Asians but to get to the very top CEO, President whatever, I think that's a problem, because most, companies are owned, run by, you know, white males, you know -- like in college, there's a long tradition of the fraternity system. And um, "You're always here. Oh, I hire my fraternity brother to work in my company." It's just like people that. ....it's almost like brotherhood at the top, you know, I mean everyone else can succeed too, but it's hard to get through the glass ceiling.

For Sumi, success in American society does not mean she must identify herself with American and throw away Koreanness: "I guess going into Korean studies is success for me. Even if I don't get paid a lot, at least I'll be happy." As such, her attitude about academic pursuits is transformed. It is changed from a simple performance of taking classes and getting good grades which enables one to get the jobs defined as prestigious in the Korean-American cultural model of success.

Her attitude about academic performance is becoming more complicated by including

her consciousness of identification, social position, and historical trajectories. Following social beliefs and taken-for-granted knowledge did not let her develop her personal meaning of academic performance. Her attitude of academic performance came to be active and serious through reactions to the taken-for-granted knowledge. Taking Korean language and history classes helped her to define how she was located in the present. She is interested in exploring her ethnic heritage and situating herself socio-historically. This becomes her meaning of academic performance: continuous negotiation with the historical trajectories of Korea and her parents' migration. Now, she hopes to continue graduate program in Korean history.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In order to reject conventional notions of Korean-American students' academic behavior (e.g., Korean Americans as science whizzes and high-score achievers), I tried to focus on the process rather than the product of individual academic performances. I wanted to show how one individual has faced and coped with the hardships, frustrations, and conflicts in her actual circumstances. These experiences help people to throw away the model minority stereotype and other simple understandings of Korean-American students.

As I discussed in the first part of this paper, the conventional frames for understanding Korean-American students have shortcomings. This taken-for-granted social image does not take into account various individual experiences which act and react against this stereotype. Rather, this image has homogenized and theorized Korean Americans (as a subcategory of Asian Americans) as a successful minority. The model minority macronarrative has homogenized Asian Americans as successful academic and economic achievers and disguised a complicated reality. Conceptualizations of immigrant (voluntary) minorities have also reduced Asian Americans to hard workers and good academic achievers. In the same vein, Korean-American cultural model of success describes Korean Americans as an immigrant voluntary minority that has a collective folk model of success which simply prioritizes money and prestige as success criteria. These conceptual frames never give a satisfactory explanation for college-level Korean-American students' academic performance. As they move out of their family and community boundaries and reflect on themselves, their perceptions are changed and their experiences are differently interpreted. It is important to capture what they think about their situatedness and their performances in their social worlds. Since most research has focused on academic success stories, we have not been informed about what is going on behind the scenes. There must be heterogeneity and multiplicity as various meaning making processes are taken by personal agencies.

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