

[특집]

# Caught in the In-Between: Negotiating Korean/American Identity in South Korea

*Brian Woohyun Kim*

(University of California, Los Angeles)

## Introduction

“I wanted to get out of LA to experience something different. Some people say, ‘Why, Seoul? You’re Korean. Why would you go to Seoul?’ It’s nice that I have family [in the United States] and I’m connected to my roots here [in South Korea] but at the same time I’m experiencing a city that’s completely different from L.A.”<sup>1)</sup>

Los Angeles is a global, multicultural city that boasts the largest Korean American community in the United States. Nearly 25 percent of the 1.5 million ethnic Koreans in the United States reside in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.<sup>2)</sup> With access to arguably the best

---

1) J.C. in discussion with the author, September 2010.

2) Korean American Coalition-Census Information Center in partnership with the Center for Korean American and Korean Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, “Table 18. Top 25 Counties for Korean Population in the United States, 2000,” 18 Jul. 2003, [http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/ckaks/census\\_tables.html](http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/ckaks/census_tables.html).

Korean cuisine and up-to-date popular culture in music, film, and trendy fashion, Korean Americans in Los Angeles have an unprecedented cultural closeness to contemporary South Korea.<sup>3)</sup> This cultural closeness has influenced some second generation Korean Americans to consider moving to South Korea. The aim of this paper is to explore why Korean Americans choose to relocate and how their perceptions of the United States and South Korea affect identity formation. It focuses on Korean Americans living in South Korea and how their American identities are shaped outside of the United States. Korean Americans navigate between ethnic identity in the United States and national identity in South Korea.

The first possible reason second generation Korean Americans move to South Korea is due to societal marginalization in the United States. Asian Americans, including Korean Americans, continue to be stereotyped as “model minorities” due to their socioeconomic success. Asian Americans are also simultaneously viewed as “perpetual foreigners,” less desirable or trustworthy than “true Americans.”<sup>4)</sup> As Min Zhou notes, the model minority label disregards U.S. history of racial discrimination, attributing “failure” to careless personal choices and inferior cultures. Particular expectations and standards placed on Asian Americans are different from those placed on the average American, reinforcing barriers to pursue careers outside of specific professions.<sup>5)</sup>

---

3) Kyonghwan Park and Youngmin Lee, “Rethinking Los Angeles Koreatown: Multi-scaled Geographic Transition since the Mid-1990s,” *Journal of the Korean Geographical Society* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2007): 198.

4) Matthew Yi and Ryan Kim, “Asian Americans seen negatively,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Apr. 27, 2001, accessed November 29, 2012, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Asian-Americans-seen-negatively-Results-of-2926815.php>

5) Min Zhou, “Are Asian Americans becoming White?” *Context* Vol. 3, No. 1 (2004).

For some U.S.-born Americans of Korean ancestry, these stereotypes and experiences have negatively influenced their identity and some of them look to South Korea for a sense of belonging.

A second possible reason for American-born citizens of Korean ethnicity to decide on moving to South Korea is the impact of Korean pop culture. *Hallyu*, or the Korean wave, is the spread of South Korean cultural exports including Korean popular music (K-pop), television dramas, movies and video games. The term *Hallyu* was first coined by Chinese journalists to describe the rising popularity of Korean entertainment in China.<sup>6)</sup> While second generation Korean Americans may find difficulty with the Korean language, many keep up with Korean pop culture through the Internet. Park writes, “By extensively and almost simultaneously consuming media images and formation from the “homeland,” most contemporary (im)migrants maintain tight connections with their ‘homelands’ and even become integrated into deterritorialized, pan-ethnic communities.”<sup>7)</sup> With the popularity of all things *Hallyu*, Korean pop music and dramas have also influenced an imagined closeness to South Korea for second generation Korean Americans. These positive images of the country as being advanced and industrialized may also influence a Korean American’s decision to seek work there.

The third possible reason is a result of globalization’s significant

---

6) Anthony Faiola, “Japanese Women catch the ‘Korean Wave,’” *Washington Post*, Aug. 31, 2006.

7) Jung-Sun Park, “Korean American Youths’ Consumption of Korean and Japanese TV Dramas and Its Implications,” in *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*, ed. Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 276.

impact on the world economy. The Great Recession, described as the world's "worst financial crisis in modern history,"<sup>8)</sup> began in the United States in 2007 and resulted in declining real estate values, rising gas prices, and high unemployment rates.<sup>9)</sup> In 2010, the American unemployment rate reached nearly 9.6 percent<sup>10)</sup> while South Korea's unemployment was 3.7 percent.<sup>11)</sup> However, Korean household spending on private education rose 4.3 percent to 13.6 billion dollars despite the economic downturn.<sup>12)</sup> It can be argued that education remains a priority for Koreans and there remains a demand for teachers.

With the advancement of technology, transportation, and communication, the possibilities of working abroad have become far more attainable, if not normal. As the U.S. job market remains bleak, Americans may consider looking for opportunities abroad. Jobless Korean Americans consider the "Korea option."<sup>13)</sup> Among Korean American college graduates and young professionals, teaching English in South Korea is a common

---

8) David Wessel, "Did 'Great Recession' Live Up to the Name?," *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 8, 2010.

9) Jim Rutenberg and Megan Thee-Brenan, "Nation's Mood at Lowest in Two Years, Poll Says," *New York Times*, Apr. 21, 2011.

10) Timothy R. Homan, "U.S. Unemployment May Rise Toward 10% on 'Feeble' Growth," *Bloomberg*, Sep. 8, 2010, accessed November 28, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-09-07/unemployment-in-u-s-may-rise-toward-10-on-feeble-growth.html>.

11) Eunkyung Seo and William Sim, "South Korea's Unemployment Rate Climbs From Lowest Level in Three Months," *Bloomberg*, Oct. 20, 2010, accessed November 28, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-10-19/south-korea-s-unemployment-rate-climbs-from-lowest-level-in-three-months.html>.

12) Jae-un Limb, "New plans to tack hagwon expenditure: Family spending on private tutoring rose last year despite bleak economy," *Korea Joongang Daily*, Feb. 28, 2009.

13) Jane Han, "'Gyopo' college graduates flock to Korea for jobs," *Korea Times*, Jun. 6, 2010.

topic of conversation. It is likely that most Korean Americans know at least one person who is currently back in the “motherland” working at a *hakwon*, a private academy or institute. Incentives to work in South Korea are appealing. English *hakwons* in Gangnam (south of the Han River) located in affluent Seoul neighborhoods have been popular choice areas for Korean Americans as they generally offer perks such as paid airfare, free housing and salaries higher than most entry-level positions in the United States. *Hakwon* teachers can earn anywhere from<sup>14)</sup> \$2,800 (2.8 million *won*)<sup>15)</sup> to \$4,000 (4 million *won*) a month.<sup>16)</sup> Additionally, many of the job descriptions also include a preference for *gyopos*, people of Korean ancestry living outside of Korea.<sup>17)</sup>

The combination of negative stereotypes and the lack of job opportunities in the United States are possible factors in influencing second generation Korean Americans to look towards South Korea to improve their chances. While there is no single motive for their decisions to move to South Korea, Korean Americans may be attracted to their ancestral homeland because of the need to understand their cultural heritage and ethnic identity. It is not just seeking an alternative means of making a living, it is also an experience to “get to know relatives, learn the Korean language and be exposed to

---

14) 1 U.S. dollar = 1,000 South Korean *won*.

15) “General Terms and Benefit,” Chung Dahm, accessed May 9, 2011, <http://www.teachinkorea.com/apply/General.aspx#salary>.

16) “Calling all Instructors,” The Princeton Review Korea, accessed May 9, 2011, <http://recruit.tpr.co.kr/html/news.html>.

17) “Gyopo Teachers Wanted/Seoul & Nationwide/Private & Public,” HiExpat.com, accessed May 9, 2011, [http://hiexpat.com/korea-teaching-job/detail\\_job/24583-gyopo-teachers-wanted--seoul-amp-nationwide--private-amp-public](http://hiexpat.com/korea-teaching-job/detail_job/24583-gyopo-teachers-wanted--seoul-amp-nationwide--private-amp-public).

Korean culture.”<sup>18)</sup>

This paper hopes to explore whether these factors affect identity formation. Limited research has been done on this population of Korean Americans living “abroad” in South Korea. Migration scholars have focused on the migration patterns of first generation immigrants and how they progress in their adopted countries. This growing trend is producing new trajectories of the immigration narrative and expands beyond the U.S. domestic-scope of second generation Korean American identity development.

## Literature Review

Literature discussing immigration to the United States and the consequential formation of American identity has provided a linear timeline of assimilation. While assimilation theory has been applied to European immigration, it has failed to address racial factors affecting non-white immigrants and communities in the United States. Although literature on identity formation in relation to race (racial hierarchy and marginalization) has been thoroughly discussed and has complicated the argument of assimilation, there remains a void in the literature on the present complexity of globalization. Scholarly works on Korean Americans have focused primarily on the first generation and to an extent the 1.5 generation. With limited information concentrating on the American-born, second generation, the 1.5 generation narrative

---

18) Yong-hee Joe, “Strangers in their parents’ homeland,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, Feb. 11, 2004, accessed November 29, 2012, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2095359>.

has sometimes been applied to the second generation experience. This is problematic as the 1.5 generation is described as foreign-born, despite immigrating to the United States at a young age. I seek to correct this gap in the literature by arguing that the second generation Korean American experience is different from precedent generations and that the identity formations characterizing it are influenced domestically by racial as well as global factors- specifically, the impact of Korean culture in the United States and ways in which South Korean society creates opportunities for actual transnational activities.

### **Assimilation Theory**

Immigration and identity formation in the United States has been traditionally examined according to Milton Gordon's framework of assimilation to understand the arrival of European immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gordon termed the phrase "structural" assimilation in which he described entry of ethnic group members and eventual relations with the majority group. Gordon defined the eventual outcome of acculturation as the "middle-class cultural patterns of, largely white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins," and that acculturation was largely a one-way process.<sup>19)</sup> This narrative indicated that the further one was from immigration according to the family generational succession, the more assimilated one would become to American culture. Richard Alba and Victor Nee have argued that assimilation theory should not

---

19) Richard Alba and Victor Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration," *International Migration Review* Vol. 31, No. 4 (1997), 829-830.

be disregarded, as the definition has been used to understand the experiences of European Americans, and should serve as a reference when looking at contemporary immigration.<sup>20)</sup> However, this view is problematic when referring to minority identity formation, or the development and process of an ethnic/cultural identity. Minority identity formation cannot be rendered according to a straight-line assimilation model and is in fact much more complex. Identity formation is not based solely on losing ethnic identity according to generational succession in the United States. Extensive literature has critiqued assimilation theory and has also indicated the importance of race. Factors including an existing racial hierarchy, experienced marginalization or stereotypes, and ethnic formations in the United States must not be discounted.

### **Racial Hierarchy**

With the contemporary arrival of non-white immigrants, additional groups positioned in racial hierarchy have complicated the historical black-white paradigm. According to *Reinventing the Color Line: Immigration and America's New Racial/Ethnic Divide* by Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, new waves of immigration, the rise in the rates of racial/ ethnic intermarriage, and growing multiracial identity challenge the black/white color line. New immigrants and their second generation may not necessarily see themselves as either black or white. Social scientists argue that race has been socially constructed and not biological. Lee and Bean also indicate that straight-line assimilation is not a valid way of discussing present immigration.

---

20) Ibid.



Immigrants choose methods of “selective acculturation” and “accommodation without assimilation” in settling patterns.<sup>21)</sup>

### **Experienced Marginalization and Stereotypes**

The second racial factor of experienced marginalization and stereotypes in the United States has also shaped Korean American identity. According to Min Zhou’s *Are Asian Americans becoming White?*, the Asian American “honorary white” image is juxtaposed with the “forever foreigner” image. Public officials tend to put Asian Americans into the same category as European-origin Americans because of their similar socioeconomic characteristics, and separate them from Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans. However, despite their career and financial success, with many moving next to or even marrying whites, Asian Americans “remain culturally distinct, and suspect in a white society.”<sup>22)</sup> As a result, the model minority myth is problematic for Asian Americans. The model minority myth serves to downplay the U.S. history of racial discrimination and suggest that success is based on personal choices and superior cultures. It places particular expectations and standards on Asian Americans that are different from those placed on average Americans, and, as a result, it introduces barriers to the pursuit of careers outside of specific professions. Additionally, distinguishing Asian Americans apart from whites shows that the image of Asian Americans as “foreign” remains common to the public opinion of Americans. Being American-born, second generation

---

21) Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, “Reinventing the Color Line: Immigration and America’s New Racial/Ethnic Divide,” *Annual Review of Sociology* (2004), 227.

22) Zhou, 1.

Asian Americans believe that they should fundamentally have equal opportunities in career advancement as their white counterparts. Due to the existing model minority myth, discrepancies with Affirmative Action and Asian Americans in employment have been ignored.<sup>23)</sup> Despite being “more highly educated than Whites, Asian Americans are more often unemployed, occupying positions lower than would be indicated by their education and training.”<sup>24)</sup>

### **Ethnic Formation**

Immigration has initially been examined using the straight-line assimilation process; that is, a gradual “Americanization” of values and morals to mainstream society and losing of ethnic identity in the process. While this theory may have been appropriate for understanding European Americans, it does not reflect the adaptation of Asian and Latino Americans. In *The Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants*, Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou argue that contemporary second generation experience diverse outcomes towards adaptation. Due to changes in global economies, there is a widening gap between menial jobs that immigrants often take and the professional jobs that require college degrees and native elites most likely occupy. The authors also argued that for some groups, by failing to assimilate, there may be a better chance for educational and economic mobility utilizing resources found within the ethnic community.<sup>25)</sup>

---

23) Myrtle P. Bell, David A. Harrison and Mary E. McLaughlin, “Asian American Attitudes toward Affirmative Action in Employment: Implications for the Model Minority Myth,” *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* Vol. 33, No. 3 (1997).

24) *Ibid.*, 362.

### **Cultural Influences**

As people of color are marginalized and perceived as outsiders from the mainstream society, connection to ethnic heritage becomes integral to the shaping of their identities. Through consumption of ethnic-specific food and participation in ethnic-specific institutions, ethnic minorities understand their identities through cultural influences. Anthony Giddens writes that culture is not static, but ongoing. In the post-traditional order, people continue to maintain and revise biographic narratives, social roles, and lifestyles and can choose who they want to be and how they want to define themselves.<sup>26)</sup> The influences of “Korean culture” create a different definition of Korean American identity between first and second generations. While first generation Korean culture culminates from immigrants experiences in South Korea prior to immigration, the second generation’s understanding of Korean culture is based on exposure to it within the United States and this generation’s ongoing interpretation of what is defined as “Korean culture.” The second generation is less concerned with precedents set by the previous generation.

### **Negotiating Identification**

As ethnic minorities accept their position in the racial hierarchy, they begin to negotiate their identifications as Americans and search for a connection to their parents’ homelands. The second generation arguably believes that opportunities and acceptance are far more promising

---

25) Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, “The Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants,” *ANNALS, AAPSS* (1993), 86.

26) Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

beyond the United States. As Vivian Louie notes, when ethnic Americans compare themselves to their counterparts in the homeland, this is subject to assimilation and transnationalism: “Members of the second generation...need to have enough bilingual fluency and enough interaction with the parental homeland to engage in transnational practices.”<sup>27)</sup> She also observes that the creation of ancestral motherlands functions through “stories told through their [second generation Asian Americans’] parents.”<sup>28)</sup>

This is arguably not the case with second generation Korean Americans as they are able to engage in transnational consumption of Korean pop culture through the Internet. Additionally, they are physically moving to South Korea using their English fluency to seek opportunities. Louie also argues that the creation of ancestral motherlands is based on parental stories. However, second generation Korean Americans are creating “homelands” through the influence of youth culture by drawing on transnational products such as pop music.

### **Nation Building and Global Capitalism**

Nation building is no longer limited to a country’s national borders, as labor and services are now created overseas. Global economic structuring and the results for cheap labor affect people on the move.<sup>29)</sup> Transnational migration are based on the conditions of global

---

27) Vivian Louie, “Second-Generation Pessimism and Optimism: How Chinese and Dominicans Understand Education and Mobility Through Ethnic and Transnational Orientations,” *International Migration Review* Vol. 40, No. 3 (2006), 541.

28) *Ibid.*, 542.

29) Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

capitalism and analyzed in global relations between capital and labor.<sup>30)</sup> In the United States, immigrants do not necessarily move due to unfavorable socioeconomic conditions in other countries. It is important to take into the account U.S. economic needs and broader international economic conditions. Flows of capital, goods, services and information created a link between industrial and developing countries and served as a bridge for international migration.

American identity formed on the basis of a linear, assimilation theory provides a limited explanation in addressing non-white American identity formation. Becoming American is not just a result of succeeding generations identifying with one monolithic identity. Domestic factors including racial hierarchy, experienced marginalization or stereotypes, and ethnic formations in the United States must also be addressed. Literature critiquing the linear model of assimilation argues that race, gender and nation issues, as well as the intersections of these issues are all at work in identity formation. However, there is a lack of literature addressing how American identities are also shaped outside of national borders as a result of globalization. My research provides information on Korean culture's impact on the United States (creating transnational flows of goods and ideas) and how Korean society creates opportunities in South Korea (encouraging transnational migration). Domestic and global factors are simultaneously shaping Korean American identity.

---

30) Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 43.

## Research Questions

The central research question I pose in this paper is: How do Korean Americans form and negotiate their identity according to cultural exposures and national context? The process of identity is complex and a process of constant negotiation. “Korean American Identity” has a fluid definition determined by several factors. Determinants include 1) marginalization, 2) exposure to culture, and 3) economic factors. According to Anthony Giddens’ theory on self-identity, it is imperative to integrate external events and to sort them into self-narratives.<sup>31)</sup> As people are capable of defining themselves, they are less concerned with precedents established by previous generations. Marginalization can be defined according to national contexts between the United States and South Korea, as well as American and Korean cultural perspectives in influencing Korean American identities. In the United States, Korean American identity is defined according to ethnicity as a result of the historical foundation that “American” is equivalent to white. As this notion is projected in American society, Korean Americans cannot help but connect and identify “Korean American identity” to their ethnicity. In South Korea, while physically similar to their Korean national counterparts, Korean Americans identify with their “Korean American identity” not due to their ethnicity, but because they are culturally American. Second generation Korean Americans are defining their national identities according to their present locations. It can also be argued that the process of

---

31) Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

Korean American identification is influenced by ways of dis-identification—a result of normative conceptions of “American-ness” by virtue of racialization in the United States as well as dis-identification from Koreans while in South Korea.

Transnationalism has created an altogether “new condition of neighborliness, even with those most distant··[and] communities with ‘no sense of place.’”<sup>32)</sup> I raise questions pertaining to Korean Americans’ exposure to culture-imaginaries of home and ways they practice their “Korean-ness.” How has the consumption and access to Korean pop culture influenced negotiations of identity between the United States and South Korea? For Korean Americans, doing “Korean things” was based on finite activities such as eating Korean food or going to *norebang* (karaoke singing rooms) and other activities perceived as “Korean.” However, this process of wanting to be “Korean” or practicing “Korean-ness” can arguably be described as “Korean American” due to aspirations of being associated with being “Korean.” As Korean Americans try to distinguish what counts as “Korean,” Korean nationals probably do not think this way. While Appadurai’s view on transnationalism highlights connections as a result of flows and advancements in technology and transportation, it is also important to note that the United States and South Korea have a geopolitical relationship as a result of the military occupation and the Korean War in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a way, transnationalism is a contemporary manifestation of a phenomenon that has historical influences. As a result, both American and Korean cultures are influenced by each other.

---

32) Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 29.

According to Benedict Anderson’s theory on imagined communities, people perceive themselves as being part of a group or national society.<sup>33)</sup> I explore economic factors (constraints versus opportunities) that shape Korean American identity. For some Korean Americans, the variable of moving to South Korea is necessary in understanding their identities. I examine Korean Americans who do consider the “Korea option” and I address the role of Korean Americans in South Korea’s nation building process. In this process, Korean Americans living in Korea are simultaneously associating themselves with Korean nationals according to collectivity and similarity, but also disassociating themselves from culturally American citizens. See Figure 1.

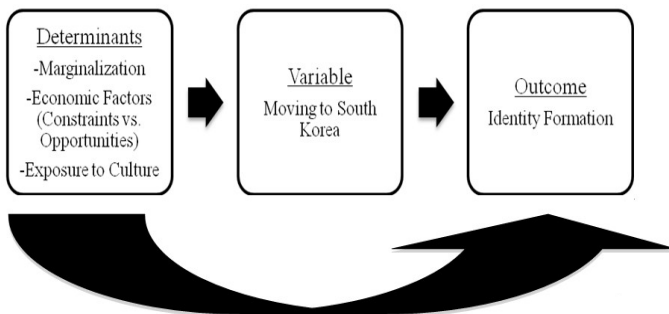


Figure 1. Process of Korean American Identity Formation.

I propose that despite being American culturally and by birth, second generation Korean Americans are influenced by the stereotypes of being model minorities and perpetual foreigners and by being racially marginalized due to their physical appearance. Limited

33) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6.



sociocultural membership and marginalization persuade Korean Americans to look for alternatives abroad, specifically South Korea. Korean culture through food, products, and institutions are accessible to Korean Americans and thus create a perceived familiarity to South Korea. With the popularity and accessibility to all things *Hallyu*, or the Korean wave, Korean pop music and dramas have created an imagined closeness to South Korea particularly for second generation Korean Americans. The positive images of the country as being advanced, industrialized and cosmopolitan may influence a Korean American's decision to seek work there. The decisions for Korean Americans to live in South Korea are not based solely on their journey for identity and community. Migration is strongly influenced by life chances of survivability. For second generation Korean Americans, this is defined by economic survivability and the pursuit of financial success.

## **Methodology**

Through June 2010 to September 2010, I conducted five interviews (three male informants and two female informants) with second generation Korean Americans living in Seoul. Issues examined were reasons for moving to South Korea, impressions of the country and Korean society, identity and identification, feelings of belonging and integration, and language ability. Using the snowball sampling method, most of my informants were contacted by myself or introduced through mutual friends. All interviewees were American-born and

grew up in suburbs located in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Speaking to these Korean Americans, I inquired about their motives of moving to Seoul and their identities while living in South Korea. While most of the Korean Americans interviewed were currently working at *hakwons*, those who have lived longer in Seoul were former *hakwon* teachers who transitioned into other jobs including an English lecturer at a university and a broadcast reporter for an English radio program.

Research methods employed were primarily qualitative-based and covered four general areas: 1) early experiences, i.e. describing their neighborhood and high school, childhood exposure to Korean culture, previous visits to South Korea and to what capacity; 2) current occupation and lifestyle, present Korean practices and exposure; 3) questions concerning identity, i.e. identification in South Korea, adaptation to South Korea, issues with language; and 4) future goals, i.e. including work, the possibility of residing in Korea for an extended duration, eventual return to the United States. Most questions were open-ended to encourage thoughtful reflection, rather than quick responses. See Table 1.

Table 1.

Informant	Age	Sex	Hometown	Years in Korea
K.C.	27	F	Fullerton, CA	2
M.I.	35	M	Cerritos, CA	1
C.D.	28	M	Torrance, CA	4
J.K.	22	F	Glendale, CA	1
J.C.	21	M	Buena Park, CA	1

## Results

### **Korean Americans Living in South Korea: Life in the ‘Burbs’**

Los Angeles is home to the largest Korean American community in the United States. Most of the community can be identified as post-65 immigrants; that is, they arrived after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Although Koreatown has been considered the initial settlement for recently arrived Koreans, many relocated to the suburbs as soon as they could afford to do so.<sup>34)</sup> Movement to the suburbs was accelerated following the LA Riots in 1992 and the Northridge earthquake in 1994.<sup>35)</sup> With the high percentage of foreign-born Koreans in parts of Orange County, it can be presumed that many immigrants leapfrog Koreatown altogether and settle directly into well-kept suburban neighborhoods.<sup>36)</sup> While many settle into traditionally white, middle, and upper class neighborhoods, Korean Americans have created “slightly skewed [areas of] Asianization of the once largely white suburbs they moved to.”<sup>37)</sup> Often identified as an ethnoburb, Wei Li defines this as:

...suburban ethnic clusters of residential areas and business districts in

---

34) Kyeyoung Park and Jessica Kim, “The Contested Nexus of Los Angeles Koreatown: Capital Restructuring, Gentrification, and Displacement,” *Amerasia Journal* 34:3(2008): 130.

35) Youngmin Lee and Kyonghwan Park, “Negotiating hybridity: transnational reconstruction of migrant subjectivity in Koreatown, Los Angeles,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* Vol. 25, No. 3(2008): 250.

36) Angie Y. Chung, *Legacies of Struggle: Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 45.

37) Nancy Abelmann, *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 27.

large metropolitan areas. The local context of the ethnoburb is characterized by both vibrant ethnic economies, due to the presence of large number of ethnic people, and strong ties to a globalizing economy, revealing their role as outposts in the emerging international economic system.<sup>38)</sup>

Suburbs/ethnoburbs with high concentrations of Korean Americans include La Crescenta, La Canada, Glendale located north of Los Angeles; San Fernando Valley; Hacienda Heights, Rowland Heights, and Diamond Bar in San Gabriel Valley; Gardena and Torrance in South Bay; and Cerritos, Fullerton, Garden Grove, Irvine in Orange County.<sup>39)</sup>

Since first generation Korean Americans settled into the suburbs, I was interested in what it was like for their second generation children growing up. U.S.-born Korean Americans make up about 30 percent of the Korean population.<sup>40)</sup> Many of the second generation Korean Americans interviewed were raised in areas with a significant number of co-ethnics. What do these communities look like? K.C., who grew up in Southern California explained,

I grew up in Fullerton, California which is in Orange County. I don't know percentage but yeah, there were a lot of Koreans in my neighborhood—both Korean Americans and Korean immigrants, like recent immigrants. Like for example at my high school, 40 percent of the student body was Korean or Korean American.<sup>41)</sup>

- 
- 38) Wei Li, "Anatomy of a New Ethnic Settlement: The Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles," *Urban Studies* Vol. 35, No. 3 (1993): 482.  
 39) Park and Jessica, "The Contested Nexus" 130.  
 40) Kyeyoung Park, "I Really Do Feel Like I'm 1.5!: The Construction of Self and Community by Young Korean Americans," *Amerasia Journal* 25:1 (1999): 141.  
 41) K.C. in discussion with the author, September 2010.

Fullerton was once a white bedroom community located in northern Orange County. In addition to mainstream stores such as Target and Albertsons, Korean businesses such as travel agencies and restaurants selling Korean tofu stew are also readily available. In neighborhoods such as Amerige Heights, more than half of the residents are of Korean descent.<sup>42)</sup> K.C. attended Sunny Hills High School, a school with a positive reputation among Korean American parents. Asian Americans make up half of the school population and Korean parents have even started a Korean PTA at Sunny Hills High School.<sup>43)</sup> While Fullerton has a diverse population, K.C. explained that her neighborhood in particular was nearly 30 to 40 percent Korean and Chinese with the rest being white.

### **Racial Marginalization in the United States**

Zhou writes that second generation Asian Americans are aware of the simultaneous identifications of “model minority” and “forever foreigner” and “cynically agree that ‘white’ is synonymous with ‘American.’”<sup>44)</sup> Whether by choice or by American society’s perceptions, Asian Americans identify with their ethnicity. J.K. shared sentiments of not feeling “American” due to her physical appearance and the assumption that “American” meant “white”:

I feel like ethnicity, or heritage overpowers nationality. So even though I was born and raised in the United States, how I look. I look Korean. I look

---

42) My-Thuan Tran, “Koreans find a good fit in Fullerton,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 2008.

43) Ibid.

44) Zhou, *Are Asian Americans*, 25.

Asian. I've been surrounded by Korean culture. I don't know what factors have influenced this but sometimes I feel like I can't legitimately say I'm American, even though I am more Americanized than Koreanized.<sup>45)</sup>

According to Lee and Bean, several factors influence second generation children to adopt a nonwhite identity. This includes language maintenance, neighborhood context, and exposure to the minority parent's culture.<sup>46)</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, neighborhood context had an impact on Korean Americans. Simply looking at population numbers, the ethnoburbs that these Korean Americans were brought up in impacted the way they identified with their nonwhite identity. For Korean Americans like C.D., exposure to Korean culture was based on observing his mother's daily activities such as, "eating *kimchi* with rice or hearing her talk on the phone in Korean."<sup>47)</sup>

### **Accessing South Korea via Hallyu**

Korean Americans are not limited to "traditional" Korean culture in shaping ethnic identity. Modern Korean culture and society has had a significant impact on Korean American identity. Some Korean Americans grew up watching Korean dramas and listening to Korean pop music (K-Pop) as a way to improve their Korean language proficiency. Watching Korean dramas and listening to Korean pop music was also a source of inquiring more about South Korea. During adolescence, J.K. described how modern Korean culture influenced the shaping of

---

45) J.K., interview.

46) Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, "Reinventing the Color Line: Immigration and America's New Racial/Ethnic Divide," *Annual Reviews Sociology* (2004): 230.

47) C.D., interview.

her Korean identity,

I got more into Korean culture when I started listening to Korean music in middle school. You know, like the teenybopper phase. That was when I was like, ‘Oh, Korean culture is fun-more like Korean pop culture.’ That’s when I wanted to know more and go to Korea more often. I think growing up, maturing, made me embrace my Korean side more.<sup>48)</sup>

While Korean pop culture was accessible to Korean Americans by way of their parents’ consumption of Korean TV shows, these cultural products became increasingly popular among non-Koreans beginning in 2000. *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave is the popularity of South Korean pop culture around the world. Beijing journalists originally coined the term in 1999 to explain the growing popularity of Korean entertainment in China. The influences of K-Pop (Korean pop music) and Korean dramas have portrayed South Korea as a modern nation. As the rise of capitalism began to grow in Asia, Korean dramas portrayed hyper-modern lifestyles, South Korea’s economic power, well-plotted storylines and the physical attractiveness of actors and actresses. K-Pop’s catchy beats and synchronized dance performances created interest in the styles and fashion of Korean singers and idol groups. For some second generation Korean Americans, the positive images of South Korea influenced their decisions to move to South Korea. In describing why he moved to Seoul, J.C. a recent college graduate explained,

---

48) J.K., interview.

I'm attracted to the lifestyle. It's so different from L.A. I just love Seoul. I'm proud that Korea could develop so quickly, technology wise. While my extended family is really rooted in South Korea, the dramas showed me a sort of hip side to Korea and I wanted to be a part of it."<sup>49)</sup>

Second generation Korean Americans are no longer limited to programs available in the Korean video stores, but can easily access Korean shows and information on pop culture through the Internet. Choosing the types of programming and music they want to listen to, second generation Korean Americans are creating an ethnic, transnational identity.

According to Giddens, self-identity is reflexive and "a series of [integrated] events which occur in the external world, and [sorted] into the ongoing 'story' about the self."<sup>50)</sup> The self is less concerned with precedents set by previous generations. Through pop culture consumption, second generation Korean Americans are choosing how they want to define themselves. They are not following the precedents of immigrants assimilating in the United States and are instead choosing to create their own representations of transnationalism.

Second generation Korean Americans serve a crucial role in the "trans-Pacific cross-fertilization of culture."<sup>51)</sup> By consuming "homeland" pop culture, the second generation is constructing a new kind of transnational community based on shared imagination and consumption.<sup>52)</sup> To consume Korean pop culture, it is assumed that Korean Americans

---

49) J.C., interview.

50) Giddens, *Modernity*, 54.

51) Jung-Sun Park, "Korean American Youth and Transnational Flows of Popular Culture Across the Pacific," *Amerasia Journal* Vol. 30 No. 1 (2004): 149.

52) Ibid.



need a certain level of proficiency and knowledge of the language. However, in recent years, the Internet has been an important medium in distributing Korean pop culture. With *Hallyu* becoming a worldwide phenomenon, ethnic Koreans overseas, including Korean Americans, as well as non-Koreans have access to Korean dramas and music. Websites such as mysoju.com offer up-to-date Korean soap operas to users, regardless of Korean proficiency. Shortly after popular dramas are aired in South Korea, users upload streaming versions that include English subtitles, among other languages. Hulu.com, a site popular for American television shows and movies now offers Korean dramas and movies in high definition and subtitles as well. While Hulu.com has become a popular platform in exposing the American mainstream to Korean films and television shows, I argue that unofficial sites uploaded by Internet users such as mysoju.com, are far more influential to Korean Americans. Sites such as Hulu.com establish official licensing with the major Korean broadcasting companies. As a result, even the newest dramas on Hulu are available months after they have aired in South Korea. On unofficial sites like mysoju.com, shows are uploaded instantaneously, allowing Korean American to be as up-to-date on pop culture as their Korean counterparts in South Korea.

Additionally, the latest K-Pop music videos are readily available on video sites such as YouTube. Similar to mysoju.com, members upload these music videos almost simultaneously as they are released in South Korea. Members request other members proficient in Korean to translate. As a “service,” users often encode English subtitles to the lyrics of these songs. “In and through these collective experiences

of what Benedict Anderson calls ‘print capitalism’ and what others increasingly see as ‘electronic capitalism,’ such as television and cinema, citizens *imagine* themselves to belong to a national society.”<sup>53)</sup> Americans of Korean ancestry are creating transnational lives different from their first generation immigrant parents. They are participating in what they imagine Korean society to be through the consumption of Korean pop culture. By engaging with other Internet users, they are creating an imagined community of transnational Korean Americans.

### **Help Wanted: Gyopos Encouraged to Apply!**

The decisions for Korean Americans to live in South Korea are not based solely on their journeys for identity and community. Migration is strongly influenced by life chances of survivability. For second generation Korean Americans, this is defined by economic survivability and pursuits of financial success. According to Brodtkin, social stratification stemming from slavery has created a strong correlation between labor and race. Historically, immigrants were “treated as racially not quite white by American law, social practice and civic discourses.”<sup>54)</sup> Kim explains that for Korean Americans, “no amount of money, flashy materialism, Ivy League diplomas, and white-collar promotions could erase their ‘race,’ its significant foreignness, and its alibi of the ‘foreign model minority.’”<sup>55)</sup> As a result of historical foundations, racial classification has marginalized Korean

---

53) Ibid.

54) Karen Brodtkin, “Global Capitalism: What’s Race Got To Do With It?,” *American Ethnologist* Vol. 27 No. 2 (2000): 243.

55) Nadia Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 231.

Americans in the United States and has resulted in a lack of economic opportunities and job degradation. C.D., a Korean American who has been living in South Korea for four years explained why he left the United States,

After going to college in Oberlin, Ohio and living in Hamburg, Germany, I wanted a break from white people. I didn't expect people in Korea to welcome me with open arms. But at the very least, the problems here would be different-it wouldn't be about my race.<sup>56)</sup>

Korean Americans, despite their American nativity continue to be identified by their race and perceived as a “foreign model minorities.” Due to feelings of having a lack of economic opportunities appropriate to their qualifications, Korean Americans seek opportunities abroad in South Korea.

Linda Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc argue, “Transnational migration is inextricably linked to the changing conditions of global capitalism and must be analyzed within the context of global relations between capital and labor.”<sup>57)</sup> Foreign capitalized companies have moved from home countries to overseas in search of lower labor costs. The movement of jobs overseas has had a similar effect at the individual level. Global economic dislocations have displaced many workers, forcing themselves to go to where jobs are available. The Great Recession of 2007 resulted in devaluing of homes and

---

56) C.D., interview.

57) Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 22.

high levels of unemployment in the United States.<sup>58)</sup> While the U.S. economy seemed bleak, South Korea's education industry saw growth. In the same year, South Korea's household spending on education rose 4.3 percent to 13.6 billions dollars despite economic downturn.<sup>59)</sup> It can be argued that education spending remains a necessity and allows a demand for teachers. K.C. explained that the main reason she moved to South Korea was economical, "I think the number one reason why I came was because the economy [in the United States] was so bad right when I graduated. It's not like I didn't have options but I think coming to Korea was the *best* option financially."<sup>60)</sup>

South Korea is often perceived as a country obsessed with the English language. "Many people, from teenagers applying to selective secondary schools to adults applying for jobs-even jobs with no obvious need for fluency in English-must submit TOEFL scores."<sup>61)</sup> As native-born English speakers, Korean American college graduates and young professionals are viable candidates to teach English in South Korea. HiExpat.com is an online website that provides general information on living in South Korea and an extensive job database updated daily. A recent job posting for a *hakwon* teacher described the following:

---

58) Rutenberg and Thee-Brenan, Jim Rutenberg and Megan Thee-Brenan, "Nation's Mood at Lowest in Two Years, Poll Says."

59) Limb, "New plans to tack hagwon expenditure: Family spending on private tutoring rose last year despite bleak economy."

60) K.C., interview.

61) Su-Hyun Lee, "High demand causes 'Toefl crisis' in South Korea," *New York Times*, May 14, 2007.

Job Description

A. Job Information

-School Type: Private

-Job Type: Both Full(1yr)/Part Time

-Location: Daechi, Gangnam, Seoul

-Preferred Teachers: US Top ranking schools preferred (Korean Gyopos or Koreans preferred)

-Weekly Teaching Hours: 30hours (under salary option)

-Payment Options

1. Salary Option: 3.5Mil. KRW (120hrs)

2. Hourly Option: 35,000KRW~40,000KRW (increase by 1,000 every 3 months up to 40,000KRW)

-Housing: Provided (if taken, salary and hourly rate will be adjusted with deduction)

-Airfare: Provided (Round)

-Yearly Vacation: 18 days

\* Previous teaching experience will be highly appreciated

C. QUALIFICATIONS

-Anyone who recently graduated from one of the TOP ranking universities in the US.

-F-4 visa holders (Korean Gyopos) and IVY Leaguer are highly valued!

-No prior teaching experience required, but must have passion for teaching.<sup>62)</sup>

According to Basch, Schiller and Blanc,

By living their lives across borders, transmigrants find themselves confronted with and engaged in the nation building processes of two or more nation-states. Their identities and practices are configured by hegemonic categories such as race and ethnicity that are deeply embedded in the nation building processes of these nation states.<sup>63)</sup>

---

62) “[Gangnam Seoul; Part/Full] SAT/AP Statistics of Biology,” HiExpat.com, accessed Feb. 14, 2011, [http://hiexpat.com/esl-resume/detail\\_job/21136-gangnam-seoul-partfull-satap-statistics-or-biology](http://hiexpat.com/esl-resume/detail_job/21136-gangnam-seoul-partfull-satap-statistics-or-biology).

63) Basch, Glick, and Blanc, *Nations Unbound*, 34.

Political units in nation states have tried to unify groups using shared past experiences to validate commonality of purpose and national interest. Through the F-4 visa program, the South Korean government is soliciting select overseas Korean populations towards nation-building efforts.

On December 3, 1999, the South Korean National Assembly passed the Act on Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans. As an attempt to connect overseas Koreans to the South Korean nation-building process, the law granted quasi-citizenship rights to selected overseas Korean groups including Korean Americans.<sup>64)</sup> Economic motives included recruiting English-speaking professionals from the overseas population. As part of the Overseas Korean Act, the F-4 visa is a special immigration status issued to naturalized Korean Americans and any of their immediate relatives and descendants. It provides unique privileges including the ability to work extensively in South Korea for two years with little or no restriction and the possibility of renewing at any local immigration office. The status essentially grants *gyopos* all the rights of a Korean citizen such as employment eligibility, healthcare access and pension.

### **Fluid Identity: From American to Ethnic to American**

Nazli Kibria writes that “in sharp contrast to the symbolic ethnicity of white ethnics, for racial minorities, racial identity powerfully marks and constrains the process of defining their ethnic affiliations.”<sup>65)</sup>

---

64) Jung-Sun Park and Paul T. Chang, “Contention in the Construction of a Global Korean Community: The Case of the Overseas Korean Act.” *The Journal of Korean Studies* Vol. 10 No. 1 (2005): 2.

65) Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-generation Chinese and Korean*

Second generation Korean Americans may identify as Americans, but as non-white minorities living in the United States, they are defined by their ethnicity.

M.I. described himself as a typical “American kid,” growing up. Around the age of ten, he began to experience people pointing out his physical differences. Throughout his life, M.I. has thought about his identity many times.

At times I feel like I’m Korean, like my mannerisms or the way I think. But other times I feel like it doesn’t coincide with Korean culture or my parents. I understand that I’m not fully American or not accepted. I can’t go to any state or city without looking over my shoulder due to my race. You know you’re not truly American or you’re not truly Korean. Kind of like in between. I guess I would say I’m Korean American, however you want to define that, but kind of like a hybrid.<sup>66)</sup>

However, in South Korea, M.I. still identified as Korean American but felt more attached to his nationality and being culturally “American.” While living in South Korea, he realized that he paid less attention to his ethnic identity.

I definitely identify as Korean American here, more than I ever did. I would say I’m not 100 percent Korean due to language. I was brought up in a different culture than the culture that my parents raised me in. I understand where they’re coming from but I grew up exposed to a different culture outside of the home like through [American] TV shows. So there is a difference. I don’t think about [ethnicity] much, especially in Korea

---

*American identities* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 69.  
66) M.I., interview.

because 99 percent of the people here are Korean. I feel like there's no difference between them and me until I have to speak or express myself. Then there's a division.<sup>67)</sup>

Korean Americans in South Korea like M.I. acknowledged that he was not fully Korean due to language limitations. Although he felt more inclined to feeling "Korean" in the United States, in South Korea he emphasized being "brought up in a different (American) culture" and categorized himself as separate from Korean citizens.

The length of stay in South Korea only confirmed his Korean American identity as being culturally more American. Having lived in South Korea for over four years, C.D. realized more each year that he did not fit societal expectations of what it means to be Korean. It became progressively more difficult to find cultural similarities between American and Korean.

Everything I do is American-the way I walk, the way I *insa* (Korean way of greeting someone), the way I do things incorrectly still...the way I say what I'm thinking. Obviously my Korean doesn't sound natural. I still do jobs that require English somehow.<sup>68)</sup>

Although Americans of Korean descent living in the United States initially felt that they were American, a level of marginalization and identification as outsiders influenced their identities as ethnic (Korean) Americans. Being constantly identified as Korean in the United States, Korean Americans move to South Korea assuming that they

---

67) M.I., interview.

68) C.D., interview.



will feel a sense of belonging in their motherland. However, upon living in South Korea, they realize that while they physically look Korean, they are culturally American, and therefore outsiders again. In private, Korean Americans identify with this term to emphasize their cultural differences from Korean nationals. In South Korea, Korean American is not identified according to ethnicity, rather culturally and nationality.

**Transmigrants maintaining ties to the United States:**

**“Korea is not forever.”**

While living in the United States, second generation Korean Americans initially created transnational ties to South Korea through the imagined longing to their “motherland.” Marginalization in American society and the influence of “electronic consumption” through Korean pop culture entice Korean Americans to consider the “Korea option.” Through their lived experiences in South Korea, Korean Americans realize they are culturally foreign, reaffirming their American identity. Korean Americans can be defined as transmigrants, maintaining ties to the United States.

According to Schiller, Basch, and Blanc,

Transmigrants are immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnection through international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state. They are not sojourners because they settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country in which they reside. However, at the very same time, they are engaged elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build

institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries in which they emigrated.<sup>69)</sup>

While this definition of transmigrant focuses on the transnational practices of the first generation immigrant parents in the United States and their maintaining of ties to their native homelands, this definition is also relevant in the second generation Korean American context. As Americans living abroad, Korean Americans are incorporated into the “patterns of daily life” in South Korea while still “maintaining connections” to the United States. With the advancement of communication technology, Korean Americans remain connected to their family and friends living in the United States. Additionally, they are up-to-date with “local and national events” including the news, entertainment and culture. J.K. maintains ties with the United States daily.

I probably speak to my family and close friends probably every day even if it's for a few seconds through the phone, facebook, twitter, all the social networking sites and chatting... I want to keep up with what they're doing with their lives. We just talk about regular stuff-school, family life, what I'm doing with my life and my experiences in Korea. Stuff like that. I've been pretty active, or interested in American sports and TV shows through the Internet.<sup>70)</sup>

The Internet has served as an important source of communication in maintaining transnational ties between the United States and South

---

69) Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc, “From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration,” *Anthropological Quarterly* Vol. 68, No. 1 (1995): 48.

70) J.K., interview.

Korea. Maintaining ties to the United States goes beyond simply keeping in touch with friends and family. While my informants were unsure about their length of stay in South Korea, they ultimately wanted to return to the United States. C.D. explained,

I'm in Korea and I have to be here and if I choose to leave, it would take some time. Of course, they [my friends and family] make me miss America, like the diversity they experience is unparalleled here. Here, it's great to live in Korea, be exposed to Korean culture but you're just missing so much.<sup>71)</sup>

Moving to South Korea was not a one-way migration for second generation Korean Americans. Although Korean Americans initially came to South Korea due to their search for belonging or for economic purposes, their experiences while living in the country made them realize that there were indeed cultural differences that set them apart from Korean nationals. Korean Americans realize they are indeed American both culturally and by birth, and come to this conclusion after their experiences living abroad. They are American citizens residing in a foreign country. Living in South Korea is only temporary; however long that may be, and home is the United States.

### **Future Research: Korean Americans returning “home” to the United States**

As mentioned earlier, Korean Americans presently living in South Korea understand that their move to the homeland is not permanent. In analyzing the experiences of Korean Americans presently in South

---

71) C.D., interview.

Korea, personal blogs have been essential in providing colorful narrations of everyday life in a foreign country or “motherland.” Lia, a Korean American I met in Seoul, returned to her home in New York City. On May 4, 2011, she posted her last entry reflecting on her time in South Korea and concluded,

If I can sum up my entire experience, I could say my experience in Seoul has been as a happy outsider. I thought I would move to Korea and feel like I belonged because I would be surrounded by people who looked like me. Growing up as a minority American, you never really feel like you belong in your own home. I realized in Korea, as a *gyopo*, I am more of an outsider in my motherland than I am in my adopted home. I did look different by the way I dressed. I could not speak the language even though I should. My tolerance for spicy food is not as high as previously thought (no really, try the *bibimnengmyun* [spicy noodles] in Seoul and regardless how many times you had it in Flushing, you prob will in fact, die). But that is the beauty of being Asian American. You don't really fit in anywhere. And you learn to come to terms with it. And one day you realize maybe that's OK. <sup>72)</sup>

Opportunities for future research include examining the identities of Korean Americans upon returning to the United States. Lia identified as Asian American but defined this as not belonging anywhere, and accepting it. Do Korean Americans no longer feel at home in South Korea *and* the United States?

---

72) Lia Joo, “Final Post,” *Lia on Korea: NYC Gyopo Moves to Seoul and Adventures* *Ense* (blog), May 4, 2011 (7:39 a.m.), <http://liaonkorea.blogspot.com/>

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the Korean American identification process. In the United States, it is a process of becoming “Korean” whereas in South Korea, it is a process of becoming “American.” The terms “Korean” and “American” are used interchangeably to describe identity according to national contexts. In the United States, Korean Americans identify as “Korean” to acknowledge their ethnicity and to dis-identify with the white American mainstream. However, while living in South Korea, Korean Americans describe themselves as “American” according to their nationality and perceived cultural differences with Korean nationals. As such, it is evident that the process by which Korean Americans identify themselves is a result of dis-identification from the majority population or culture of the country in which they reside.

Second generation Korean Americans continue to move to South Korea in the hopes of understanding their identity and for economic purposes. Understanding their identity is a complex process shaped by formative years in the United States and their latter experiences while living in South Korea. As mentioned earlier, engaging in ethnic practices and interacting with co-ethnics initially shape Korean American identity. Ethnic culture is defined as both “traditional” and “modern” practices. As Korean Americans become adults, experiences of marginalization as ethnic minorities in the United States influence some Korean Americans to seek a sense of belonging; they believe that South Korea can provide this due to their perceived cultural closeness to the nation. Practicing “Modern” Korean culture can be

indirectly related to the consumption of Korean pop culture.

With the growing popularity of *Hallyu*, the image of South Korea as a modern and cosmopolitan country in Korean dramas and K-Pop have attracted Korean Americans to consider moving there. Despite limitations in Korean language fluency, the Internet has served as a significant resource in providing up-to-date programming and music available with English subtitles. “Electronic consumption” through Korean media is creating an imagined closeness to South Korea, serving as a possible key factor for Korean Americans to establish transnational lives unique to the second generation. It is also important to acknowledge that movement and communication between the United States and South Korea are not just the result of transnationalism. U.S.-South Korea relations are a historical consequence of the Korean War. The presence of U.S. military personnel on the Korean peninsula and the recently signed U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement demonstrate this geopolitical alliance. South Korea, once a poverty-stricken country receiving aid assistance from the United States has emerged into one of the largest economies in the world. The current U.S. economic recession and lower job availability have resulted in Korean Americans to consider the “Korea option” in search of economic opportunities.

In South Korea, the demand for English education and teachers remains high despite economic downturn. Korean Americans equipped with English fluency and perceived Korean cultural sensitivities are ideal candidates to supply this demand. The South Korean government has made a conscientious effort to reach out to *gyopos* by providing a unique visa status with rights essentially equivalent to Korean

nationals. By moving to South Korea as English teachers, Korean Americans are part of South Korea's nation building process.

Upon arrival in South Korea, these Americans of Korean-descent are shaping their American identities abroad. Although Korean Americans initially come to South Korea due to their search for belonging, their experiences while living in their perceived "motherland" make them realize that cultural differences set them apart from Korean nationals. Korean Americans, despite stereotypes in the United States as "forever foreigners," realize that they are indeed American both culturally and natively while in South Korea. They are American citizens residing in a foreign country and membership into South Korean society goes beyond physical similarities.

This paper hopes to challenge the linear process of immigration to assimilation. For Korean Americans, ethnic culture was not disregarded in the second generation, but was rather reinterpreted to incorporate "traditional" and "modern" cultural practices. This challenges the notion that preceding generations fully assimilate into a white monolithic American culture. It is also necessary to address whether globalization of the economy is potentially erasing the larger geopolitical relationships of countries. In the case of Korean Americans moving to South Korea, movement of labor is not in the direction of developing country to the developed. Rather, we see movement between developed countries and mobility based on culture-in this case, Korean pop culture. This mobility is not exploitation of the lower class as indicative of the college-educated professionals moving to South Korea. This transnational phenomenon asks us to question the older ethnic studies paradigm that sees people of color in the United States

as oppressed and marginalized.

As there is limited research done on second generation Korean Americans, this study encourages further research to be conducted in addressing this group. This project has some demographic and geographic limitations. Socioeconomic background and geography influence an individual's identity formation to an extent. The informants described themselves as middle class Korean Americans and do not reflect all second generation Korean Americans. I also focused on Korean Americans taking jobs at *hakwons* and do not address Korean American working in other areas such as Korean or multinational corporations or those pursuing acting and singing careers in South Korea. The age range of my informants was between early twenties and mid-thirties. As some see this age group as a developmental stage, having minimal commitments and responsibilities, my research does not reflect Korean Americans who may have moved to South Korea at a later age. Additionally, my informants grew up in various suburbs/ethnoburbs surrounding Los Angeles and may not represent the experiences of other Korean Americans growing up in the same suburbs or Korean Americans living in other parts of the United States. In South Korea, all informants interviewed were based in urban Seoul. The experiences of Korean Americans based in other parts of South Korea, both urban and rural, may be completely different from my interview sample.

My findings raise the question of whether the phenomenon of identity formation abroad can also be found at work in other ethnic Americans. China will eventually surpass the United States as the largest economy in the world. As the country encourages foreign



investment to fuel its rapid modernization, perhaps this will call for Chinese Americans to return to their “homeland,” ultimately shaping their identity developmental process.

I conclude this paper by addressing Lia’s final blog entry once again. Lia enjoyed her time in South Korea but realized that she was an outsider. Through her experience of living in Seoul, she has accepted her identity as a Korean American and realizes that feeling different is okay. This raises the question of how identity is changed or challenged upon return to the United States. Do Korean Americans fall back to feeling ethnic? Do they now identify as American? It is my hope that further research is conducted on Korean Americans returning from South Korea and how their self-realized American identity is shaped and challenged again back “home” in the United States.

- 논문 투고일자: 2012. 10. 25
- 심사(수정)일자: 2012. 11. 11
- 게재 확정일자: 2012. 11. 22

## Abstract

# Caught in the In-Between: Negotiating Korean/American Identity in South Korea

Brian Woohyun Kim

(University of California, Los Angeles)

This paper examines how second-generation Korean Americans' perceptions of the United States and South Korea affect their identity formation. It focuses primarily on Korean Americans working at *hakwons* in South Korea and how their American identities are shaped outside of the United States. Many Korean Americans move to South Korea in the hope of understanding their identities and for economic purposes. Through interviews with Korean Americans living in South Korea, this paper evaluates the complex process of a "Korean American" identity shaped by Korean Americans' formative years in the United States and their latter experiences in South Korea. In the United States, Korean Americans identify as "Korean" to acknowledge their ethnicity and to dis-identify with the white American mainstream. While living in South Korea, they describe themselves as "American" according to their nationality and perceived cultural differences with Korean nationals. As such, the process by which Korean Americans identify themselves is a result of dis-identification with the majority population or the culture of the country they reside in.

## Key Words

Korean American, Identity, Transnationalism, Migration