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### The Korean American Dream

Hannah Yu

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## The Korean American Dream

### **The Korean American Dream**

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December 14, 2020

The Korean American Dream

“The American dream.” A ubiquitous phrase that, over time, has morphed into various connotations. A phrase that, depending on who you speak to, holds differing meanings. As a 27-year-old Korean American woman living in 2020, the idea of “the American dream” can feel disheartening at times. A divisive election in 2016 revealed the anger and unrest that exists outside of my safe, suburban, and liberal upbringing. 2020 unveiled the ugly truths that underpin the inherently flawed system that is America; namely pandemic repercussions, economic turmoil and racism. However, through all of this, an important conversation has risen- one that my parents never sat me down to discuss growing up. To them, they were committed to raising their children the all-American way. By assimilating effectively, it would not only support us but also protect us to blend in.

Racism and its pervasive nature is so ingrained in us, that even as people of color, we fail to acknowledge its presence sometimes. Over the years, I’ve brushed aside microaggressions and racially-based jokes as excuses for not knowing, and this is coming from someone who was raised in a predominantly progressive area. Now, imagine being a non-white immigrant. All you

want for you and your family is a “better life.” This simple statement is what every member of my family responded with when asked why they moved to the United States (U.S.). They were told in America, the land of the free, you can get just that if you work really hard, but based on your immigrant status and the color of your skin, you have to work extra hard to earn your seat at the table. But for my grandparents and parent’s generation, this “American dream” meant prosperity and boundless opportunities, so the setbacks were worth it. Because of this, they encouraged us as children to really lean into that American identity, so we wouldn’t have to work as hard to catch up.

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What unfortunately manifested was my resistance towards this Korean identity I possessed. It’s interesting, though. In elementary and middle school, I was primarily friends with the small crowd of Asian students that attended, but once I began high school, something changed. I suddenly had this constant feeling of “other.” Coupled with my tendency to appease people, I found accumulating ways to fit in with my white counterparts. I gradually shifted friend groups and through reflection I realize, quite frankly, that I was unintentionally trying to act more “white.” If anything, I quite enjoyed my role as the “token Asian girl”, maybe because in part, it made me feel special and inclusive in some odd way rather than an outsider. Maybe it’s because 99% of the time, I felt foreign, despite being born here. This carried into college, where I paid no attention to what really makes me unique; my Korean identity.

It wasn’t until a few years ago where I truly started to admire my ethnic and cultural background. This has fueled a voracious curiosity into who I am, but more importantly, how I got here; this is where my capstone journey began. The goal I intended to achieve was to learn the historical significance of the Korean-immigrant experience in order to better understand my own ethnic and cultural identity, which, despite my previous resistance, encompasses a massive

part of who I am. I selected this goal because I believe self-exploration will help me become a better occupational therapy (OT) practitioner by improving my understanding of future clients, their experiences and related communities to best serve their needs as people of color and/or immigrants.

In approaching this project, I first gathered my resources. I wanted a combination of videos, journal articles and books. Fortunately, I was able to find all of those and learned a lot about

Korean-Immigration history, the Korean-American experience, demographic trends throughout the U.S., and more. Since my parents never talked to my brother and me about

these

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topics, not to mention, never learning any of this in school, I wanted to maintain a journal of how I felt before and after each learning resource. Since this is information directly relevant to my identity, I thought it would be beneficial to document my sentiments towards these formal vessels of knowledge. In addition, I found it pertinent to include anecdotal evidence from family members through an administered questionnaire revolving around their immigrant experience, as well as how they acclimated into the U.S. once they arrived. The most powerful notion of this data collection was how novel all of the information they provided to me was. Despite being directly related to all of them, I found myself undeniably intrigued by the personal narratives they provided; a product of growing up without ever asking questions. I initially felt disappointed in myself, having lived all this life without ever inquiring. But I realized that this was simply a product of assimilating well into American culture that I unknowingly forgot to ask anything. I've been so focused on growing up "normally" that I was remiss to look back and relish all of these beautiful stories. My parents blame themselves for not teaching us more about our Korean heritage, but I fiercely refute that notion. Their immigration experience is one of bravery, work

ethic and honor. The doors they have opened up for me through their commendable efforts is what gives me the privilege to not have to immigrate for a “better life,” just as they did.

When I first wrote my proposal, I didn't have a clue as to what the time commitment would entail for this project. The learning and data collection process altogether summated to about 29.5 hours, while the actual project manifestation, including this paper, took about 15 hours. As I was logging my hours throughout the experience, it shocked me how long it turned out to be because over the course of this project, it certainly didn't feel like that. Every aspect of learning about my Korean background has been both engaging and enlightening. Although I am

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a bit embarrassed it took until my first graduate school capstone project to push me to ask questions of my own identity, I am also grateful for the opportunity.

So where did I end up in this journey? As we've learned in this class, cultural humility is a lifelong process. Growing up, I would say I grew up American first, then self-discovered my Korean side. Learning about the historical significance of what brought me here today (i.e., immigration) has fostered a great understanding of my own identity. Most empowering, the questionnaire answers provided by family members the ability to fill in those gaps of where our family stands today and how we currently exist in society. Learning about the immigration experience has also deepened my empathy towards that demographic. The barriers and hurdles immigrants must endure in order to simply survive is something I never had to endure. All of my family members emphasized the importance of having translators available, especially in healthcare. As a future OT practitioner, this has discerned an important facet of client-centered care, and how to truly achieve that. By learning about the Korean-immigration history and experience, I feel I am more aware and empathetic to the daunting nature of being in a totally new environment, let alone country. I will espouse these sentiments as I push forward as an OT

student and eventual practitioner. These feelings of awareness need to remain staunch within me so I can better serve communities of color and immigrant clients.

Although I've learned a significant amount through this capstone experience, I know I have far more to glean, hence the touch on cultural humility. Despite Korean being part of my ethnic identity - what people see me as, that certainly doesn't mean I know everything. This project has encouraged me to start learning how to speak Korean and continue asking questions about my ethnic and cultural background. Now, my mother and I send each other voice messages practicing phrases, pronunciation, and correct translation. Turns out, google translate does not

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fare well between Korean and English - it takes more than just a "copy and paste." This capstone journey has shed light onto what the future may hold for me. When I have children, I want to be able to tell them about their family history and, of course, supplement that with my very own experience navigating America as a true Korean American.