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A Divergent Path: Korean American Politics in an Age of Globalization

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Abstract

In a globalizing world, Korean Americans political participation is being increasingly shaped not only by their demand for empowerment in the United States—the nation of their citizenship—but also by their desire to manage their increasingly transnational lives and to fully maximize economic opportunities on the other side of the Pacific. While finding meaningful political power in the diverse and contentious American society has been a slow process, Korean Americans have found much more success in the interstitial political space of globalization and transnationalism. Within the past two decades, Korean Americans have been wooed by the South Korean government and the U.S. Departments of State and Commerce for various political and policy objectives. More specifically, this paper examines three specific laws and policies that demonstrate this transpacific turn in Korean American politics: 1) Overseas Korean Act (1999); 2) Visa Waiver Program (2008); and 3) Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement (2012). This shift in the political orientation of Korean Americans signals the increasing importance of transnational dynamics in ethnic political incorporation.

Keywords

Korean Americans, ethnic politics, transnationalism. Overseas Korean Act, Visa Waiver Program, United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS)

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AN OVERVIEW OF KOREAN AMERICAN POLITICS

Throughout its history, politics has played an outsized role in shaping the Korean American experience. Beginning in the early 1900s, Korean immigrants viewed themselves first and foremost as political exiles who willingly carried the burden of fighting Japanese colonialism in their homeland. This struggle defined central features of the early Korean American community that included raising funds to support the Korean Independence Movement and mobilizing young men to join military training camps from Hastings, Nebraska to Los Angeles, California (Kim 2011). Once World War II came to an end, Korean Americans found themselves as citizens and residents of the world's greatest military and political power and played a much more direct role in the politics of South Korea. After his 40-year sojourn in the United States, Syngman Rhee would become the first President of South Korea in 1948. He was joined by many other American-educated Korean Americans who attempted to participate in the political, economic, and educational life of the new republic. The failure of the Rhee presidency and the steady departure of Korean Americans back to the United States brought an inglorious end to this impassioned chapter of Korean American politics (Choy 1979).

Within the United States, the politics of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement ushered in dramatic changes for Korean Americans. With the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, the Congress removed the racial barrier for Korean immigrants to become naturalized American citizens. Over a decade later, the Congress finally passed the Immigration Act of 1965 and removed the notorious national origins system that discriminated against Asian immigrants. By the early 1970s, South Koreans took full advantage of these legal changes and sent over 560,000 immigrants from 1970 to 1990 (Min 1996). The politics of Korean Americans during this time reflected their status as new immigrants with strong connections to the troubled politics of South Korea. Korean American channeled much of their political efforts into supporting or opposing military-led authoritarian regimes. Moreover, Korean American progressive organizations played active roles in the politics of reconciliation between North and South Korea—activities that were seen as an anathema to the South Korean government. With the backdrop of the Cold War, the South Korean government responded to these movements through the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) to monitor and influence the political activities of the Korean American community (Chang 1988). Additionally, the South Korean government actively recruited individual Korean Americans to influence American elected leaders: The infamous

“Koreagate” in 1976 exposed these activities when Tongsun Park was arrested for acting as a KCIA agent and bribing members of U.S. Congress to keep American troops in South Korea (Lee 2006).

By 1985, the population of the Korean American community approached 700,000 with the majority of the population concentrated in a handful of nation’s largest cities. Confronted with language and cultural barriers and trapped in low-wage jobs, newly arrived Korean Americans became heavily concentrated in small businesses and began to dominate certain niches in urban economies. Two of the most visible and politically consequential niches were greengrocers in New York and liquor stores in Los Angeles. Over two years, Korean American grocers in New York experiences two protracted and high-profile boycotts and protests—the Tropic Market incident in 1988 and the Family Red Apple boycott in 1990—that pitted Korean American shop owners with African American residents (Kim 1999). The Black-Korean conflict exploded in 1991 when a Korean American shop keeper, Soon Ja Du, shot and killed an African American student, Latasha Harlins, at the Emperor Liquor Store in Los Angeles in a mistaken case of shoplifting that escalated into a physical confrontation. The intense media coverage that worked to fuse the incident with the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 made the Black-Korean conflict a metonymy for the new American urban racial crisis (Chang 1999). As Pyong Gap Min (1996) observed, Korean Americans were caught in the middle—in between the dominant white society that funneled Korean merchants into neglected and dangerous inner-cities and the angry and hostile African American community who saw Koreans as another outsider willing to economically exploit their community.

Against this backdrop, the middlemen minority thesis has played a central role in understanding Korean American politics since the 1990s. In *Caught in the Middle* (1996), Pyong Gap Min focused on the political activities of Korean Americans through trade associations and professional groups in the aftermath of racially charged political crises in New York and Los Angeles. These activities sought to directly address their middlemen position by seeking better terms from their suppliers and vendors, by improving race relations with community relations efforts, and by raising their political access and visibility through campaign donations to elected politicians. In this effort, they relied on traditional *ethnic* solidarity—appealing to the Korean American sense of common fate in their new country and mobilizing ethnically-based institutions. In *Bitter Fruit* (2000), Claire Jean Kim took a more explicit *racial* account of Korean Americans and their position in the traditional Black and White binary of American big-city politics. By using the provocative concept of “racial triangulation,” she argued that Korean Americans—like other Asian Americans—are

simultaneously valorized as model minorities in the economic sphere while dismissed as perpetual foreigners from the American body politic. For Kim, Korean American politics can be redemptive and empowering when Korean Americans join other Asian Americans and racial minorities to shatter their invisibility and powerlessness, reject the zero-sum politics of divide-and-conquer, and claim their rightful place in American politics.

In *Ethnic Peace in the American City* (1999), Edward Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades examined the multiracial coalition-building before and after the Los Angeles Civil Unrest in 1992 to generate lessons on the difficult but necessary project of bridging institutional ties between racial minorities. The book simultaneously called on Korean Americans to organize their politics through the progressive racial justice movement and on the movement itself to confront and effectively address the realities of multiethnic and multiracial America. In *Legacies of Struggle* (2007), Angie Chung extended Chang and Diaz-Veizades's work by examining how Korean American community leaders and political activists pursued politics in Los Angeles. She argued that in places like Los Angeles that were characterized by high levels of institutional development, community-based organizations played a decisive role in shaping and channeling Korean American politics. While these organizations competed and vied for members and influence, within the political crisis generated by the Los Angeles Civil Unrest, the main priority of these groups was to bring additional economic resources to the community, hold elected politicians more accountable to the priorities of the community, and ensure the necessary institutional foundation for Korean American politics. In Los Angeles, the long-term struggle to find political representation was rewarded with the unexpected election of David Ryu to the Los Angeles City Council in 2015. Representing Council District 4 that includes a slice of Koreatown along with Hollywood and San Fernando Valley, Ryu became the first Korean American City Councilmember in the history of Los Angeles.

Yet, Korean Americans have found the American political system difficult to penetrate. Compared to other ethnic groups, Korean Americans tend to be more geographically dispersed, more divided in terms of partisanship and ideology, and less likely to be registered to vote. For the time being, all of these factors conspire to make Korean American political representation in American society more of a dream for the future than a current reality (Lien and Esteban 2018). Against this backdrop of political frustration, three inter-related and overlapping developments opened a new path for Korean American political engagement and mobilization. These developments positioned Korean Americans not only as an American ethnic group but also as a transnational subject. Beginning with the Overseas Korean Act of 1999, the Visa Waiver Program of 2008, and the Korea-United States Free

Trade Agreement of 2012, Korean Americans found themselves at the center of government efforts from both Seoul and Washington D.C. that envisioned Korean Americans as a source of financial and human capital, brokers of business and investments, and as a potent political interest group. For Korean Americans, this turn of events represents a new pathway for political participation. While the specifics of this transnational path are unique, Korean Americans are hardly alone. In this age of globalization, transnational politics had become a *de rigueur* of American ethnic political formation (Ong 1999; Portes, Escobar, and Arana 2008).

A DIVERGENT PATH

Overseas Korean Act

While Korean Americans were working to find American political representation in American city halls, statehouses, and Washington D.C. in the 1990s, the South Korean government was debating the terms of a complex law that would define the rights and the privileges of ethnic Koreans living overseas. In this effort, the South Korean government was following the leads of Japan and the People's Republic of China that passes numerous legislations that legally defined the relationship between the nation and the members of the diaspora. In Japan, the legislation focused on attracting low-wage workers from the large *Nikkei* population in countries like Brazil and Peru (Brody 2001). In contrast, China enacted laws that provided favorable treatment to highly educated and wealthy ethnic Chinese who could contribute to the next stage of China's economic development (Wong 1993). In the run-up to the Overseas Korean Act, the expectation was that the South Korean government would take a "middle path" that would view the overseas Korean population through the egalitarian lens of globalized ethnic Korean community rather than a source of labor, talent, or capital. Based on this idea, the Kim Young-Sam administration established the Act on Overseas Koreans Foundation in 1997 (Park and Chang 2005: 2).

However, when the Kim Dae-Jung signed the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans (or the "Overseas Korean Act") on December 3, 1999, he drew a hard distinction between Koreans who hold citizenship from advanced-industrial countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan and others who possess citizenship from less developed countries such as China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics of former Soviet

Union (Kim 2013). Koreans from favored nations were granted quasi-citizenship status in Korea with the right to work, liberal terms and conditions of stay, and property ownership rights. In contrast, their compatriots from China, Russia, and Central Asia faced limits that consigned them to low-wage and temporary work, to strictly defined conditions and durations of stay, and a ban on real estate ownership. Despite rounds of modifications, the realities of these divisions remain intact. Indeed, the Overseas Korean Act was designed from the very beginning to appeal to Korean Americans: in addition to their economic and linguistic assets, the South Korean government viewed Korean Americans as an essential part of strengthening the political relationship between these two countries (Park and Chang 2005). Since its passage, the number of Korean Americans living and working in Korea has grown dramatically. According to the Korean Immigration Service, 35,822 Korean Americans made up 7.5 percent of the overseas Koreans living in South Korea in 2010 (Oh et al. 2012: 54).

For Korean Americans, the passage of the Overseas Korean Act came as a huge boon to their economic and occupational opportunities. This was especially true given the tremendous push in South Korea to globalize its economic and educational institution in light of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. Companies from Samsung to Hyundai hired thousands of foreign executives, managers, engineers, and marketing experts to increase their global competitiveness, with Korean Americans already working for U.S. multinationals leading the pack. For instance, within the high technology industry, Samsung recruited high profile executives from IBM and Microsoft respectively to build their notebook computer and software divisions (Park 2009).

In addition to corporate talent, Korean American academics also benefitted from this international push that mandated the English curriculum throughout the Korean educational system. The Ministry of Education mandated minimal coursework in English for most college degree programs and lowered the mandatory English language instruction in public schools to third grade. The ensuing shortage has resulted in an influx of English teachers who now make up the largest single category of foreigners legally working in Korea. Under the Overseas Korean Act, Korean Americans have unfettered access to this booming English-based labor market. As long as initial employment is approved, the qualifying Korean American employee and their derived beneficiaries (members of the immediate household) can live in Korea indefinitely as long as the qualifying person holds qualifying employment, send children to public schools, access government-supported health care, and own real and business property (Park and Chang 2005).

In addition to the economic windfall, the Overseas Korean Act provided a much-needed

solution to a vexing political problem of dual citizenship. By affording Korean Americans generous access to employment and business opportunities, the law dramatically lessened the economic necessity of holding onto both the United States and South Korean citizenship. While the United States government requires anyone undergoing naturalization to renounce all other citizenship, it has declined to strictly enforce the policy. In South Korea, dual citizenship has been an acutely controversial issue due in large part to the public perception that dual citizenship makes it easier to evade mandatory military service while facilitating political and economic corruption. Revelations of dual citizenship have put to stop multiple political careers. Given this backdrop, many Korean American dual citizens could finally renounce their South Korean citizenship without jeopardizing their economic interests and conduct their transnational affairs openly (Kim 2013). While this dilemma for dual citizens was not mentioned at all in the debate surrounding the Overseas Korean Act, the law had the most direct impact on Korean dual citizens from United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan who no longer had to juggle multiple passports and legal identities.

Visa Waiver Program

On November 17, 2008, less than a decade after the South Korean government passed the Overseas Korean Act, the U.S. Department of State in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security added South Korea into the Visa Waiver Program. Passed by Congress in 1986, the Visa Waiver Program was designed to allow foreign nationals from economically wealthy and politically allied countries to enter the United States as tourists and short-term business people without having to secure visas from American embassies. The first nations to be included in the program were Great Britain and Japan in 1988 followed by France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and West Germany in 1989. Ostensibly, the entry into the Visa Waiver Program is determined by the rate of visa refusal in the country of application combined with the rate of visa violation in the United States. However, the decision is ultimately a political and administrative one made by the Departments of State and Homeland Security. Given this wide-ranging administrative discretion, the entry into the program has been viewed first and foremost as a political decision that signifies the nation's economic and political importance in the eyes of the U.S. government. To date, only 38 nations are included in the Visa Waiver Program, and any admission to the program is a source of major news and national pride for the country (Hu 2013).

In the run-up to South Korea's admission into the Visa Waiver Program, Korean Americans actively mobilized to support the policy change. Leading the mobilization were Korean American businesses that catered to Korean tourists. Motivated by the possibility of tens of thousands of new South Korean tourists who would use Koreatowns from Los Angeles to New York as gateways to guided tours to Las Vegas, Grand Canyon, and Niagara Falls, Koreatown travel agencies, tour groups, hotels, and restaurants organized to lobby their local members of Congress and other decision-makers in Washington D.C. In Los Angeles, Korean American organizations such as the Korean American Grocers Association and the Korean American Coalition that were bitterly divided in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Civil Unrest came together to push for the Visa Waiver Program that was seen as a much-needed boost to the Koreatown economy. In Honolulu, Korean Americans saw Korea's entry into the program as a source of homeland pride that would finally put South Korea on equal footing with Japan and boost their segment of the tourist industry. Austin Kang, a co-chair of the Korean Visa Waiver Committee, that worked with Governor Linda Lingle and the Hawaii Tourism Authority was ebullient as he predicted doubling and then tripling of South Korean tourists to the Aloha State and revitalizing the Koreatown in Honolulu (Gladden 2008).

Apart from the tourist industry, a host of other groups have benefitted from South Korea's entry into the Visa Waiver Program. They include a growing number of families with multiple legal statuses—typically families with South Korean national parents without permanent residency and U.S.-born citizen children. The children of these families constitute a significant segment of the “parachute kids” who reside with relatives or family friends, or in some cases, alone in the United States to attend American schools (Park and Abelmann 2004). For these families, the Visa Waiver Program has made a profound difference by allowing them to move back-and-forth without presenting themselves in person and securing an entry visa from the U.S. Embassy. Additionally, the Visa Waiver Program has allowed a host of potential students, workers, and investors to come to the United States and explore opportunities during their 90-day stay. This ability has dramatically lessened the uncertainty and risk associated with formally applying for more extended temporary visas that often required making uncertain commitments to schools, employers, and investments. In these ways, South Korea's entry into the Visa Waiver Program has provided great relief to legal and administrative barriers between Korea and Korean America and has brought these two entities even closer economically and sociologically. In Los Angeles Koreatown, the impact of all this is unmistakable with over a dozen hotels and hundreds of new luxury condominium units catering to wealthy South Korean buying their vacation homes across the

Pacific (Adelman 2007).

The Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement

After six grueling years of negotiation, the Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) went into effect in March 2012. The scale and the scope of the KORUS FTA are unprecedented in several important ways. In addition to the traditional reduction of tariffs and trade barriers that cover commodity trade and manufactured goods, KORUS FTA also includes a range of professional services, including financial and legal services (John 2012). Since the service sector accounts for the majority of GDP in advanced economies, KORUS FTA has been seen as a new model for bi- and multi-national free trade agreements. The impact of the agreement has been dramatic as it expanded the bilateral trade from \$100 billion to \$115 billion from 2011 to 2015. The agreement has made South Korea now the sixth-largest trading partner with the United States—placing South Korea between Germany and Great Britain (Scott 2016).

Only two years into KORUS FTA negotiations, the Great Recession of 2008 gripped the United States. As the priorities of the U.S. government shifted to protecting its beleaguered labor market, the responsibility of lobbying for KORUS FTA fell mostly to the South Korean government. Elected as a proponent of global trade and economic reform, President Lee Myung-bak made KORUS FTA a centerpiece of his agenda. Initially, the Lee Administration relied on elite politics funded by the financial resources of the South Korean government. It fell on two respective ambassadors—Alexander Vershbow and Lee Tae-sik—to take the lead, and much of their time and energy was poured into lobbying members of the U.S. Congress and organizing high-profile events that would garner favorable media attention. Their signature effort was to go on a tour over a dozen major American cities in late-2007 and early-2008 to sway American elected leaders and public opinion in support of the agreement. In their joint appearances, both ambassadors underscored the historical and strategic ties between the two nations. To illustrate the point, they made sure that every event included the participation of the local Korean War Veterans Association (Alvis and Cunico 2008).

More significantly, as the 2008 U.S. presidential election heated up, then-candidate Barak Obama took a firm stand against all FTA's including the KORUS FTA. Obama saw his opposition to FTA's as one of the most significant points of contrast against Hillary Clinton, his main opponent in the Democratic primaries. With Obama rising in polls, KORUS FTA

negotiations within U.S. Congress came to a grinding halt. Under this dire circumstance, the South Korean government had to recalibrate and formulate a new strategy. Working with K-Street lobbying firms and Washington-based think tanks, the South Korean government decided to fully mobilize the Korean American community and use them as a “secret weapon” (Roth 2011). By mobilizing Korean Americans, the South Korean government hoped to give the effort a more grassroots and bottom-up appearance as well as to leverage the fact that Korean Americans are U.S. citizens and therefore their lobbying on behalf of KORUS FTA would not be seen as peddling foreign influence. In a similar vein, Derek Mitchell, the Director for Asia at the influential Center for Strategic and International Studies, advised the South Korean government to leverage the “K-Factor”—the large number of highly educated Korean Americans who would look to advocating on behalf of KORUS FTA as a “good opportunity to bridge gaps between the Korean government and the community” and, in the process, take the first steps in their inclusion into “American body politic” (Jung 2008). Based on this advice, the South Korean government played a lead role in the creation of the Union of Korean Americans to Support Korea-United States FTA. However, the direct role of the South Korean government organizing American citizens to lobby on its behalf attracted the attention of American law enforcement and the Union was dissolved.¹⁾

Outside of the South Korean government’s direct control, a parallel effort was taking place within the Korean American community. Headed by Korean Americans with key economic interests in South Korea, they viewed KORUS FTA largely as a way to expand their professional opportunities in an increasingly transnational world. In California, Hobin Kim, the CEO of Seevider and the president of the Silicon Valley Korean American Federation, argued that Korean Americans would directly and disproportionately benefit as American exporters. He cited his own company as an example—as a Korean American-owned parking guidance company that could leverage their intimate knowledge of the Korean real estate development and land use to sell their services (Kim 2011). Grace Parke Fremlin, a board member of the Korean American Bar Association of Washington D.C., was just as enthusiastic about the new opportunities for Korean American lawyers who would be in high demand in both sides of the Pacific as their “language abilities, cultural understandings, and professional expertise” would allow them to thrive in both American and Korean law firms (U.S. Korea Connect 2018). This vision for KORUS FTA—namely that this Free Trade Agreement has a direct and concrete economic impact on Korean American professionals—

1) Dong-A Ilbo, 15 February 2008.

gained tractions within the Korean American community. By 2011, political advocacy of KORUS FTA within the Korean American community fell largely to Korean American organizations with the Korean American Coalition and the Korean American Bar Association playing the most visible role. Except for progressive community-based organizations such as the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Advocates and the Korean Policy Institute that lamented additional trade policies that threatened jobs and workers' rights on both sides of the Pacific, KORUS FTA received wide-spread support in the community in a way that few other issues have over the past two decades.²⁾ KORUS FTA would pass both houses of Congress in the United States and entered into effect in March 2012 when the newly elected President Obama had a change of heart and signed it into law. As expected, and to the great satisfaction of Korean American professionals, U.S. exports of services grew at a robust rate under KORUS FTA. In 2018, the U.S. export of services was valued at \$22.3 billion, a growth of 33.8 percent from 2011 (pre-FTA).³⁾

CONCLUSION

In a globalizing world, Korean American political participation is being increasingly shaped not only by their demand for empowerment in the United States—the nation of their citizenship—but also by their desire to manage their increasingly transnational lives and to maximize their economic opportunities in South Korea. While finding meaningful representation in the diverse and contentious arena of American electoral politics has been a long and tough slog, Korean Americans have found much more success in the interstitial political space of globalization and transnationalism. As citizens of the most economically and politically powerful nation, Korean Americans have been wooed by the South Korean government for multiple and complicated reasons. As the South Korean economy becomes ever more globalized and advanced, Korean Americans are viewed as the most attractive source of professional and managerial talent who share similar values and outlook as South Koreans (Park and Chang 2005: 12). Additionally, the South Korean government views Korean Americans as an important source support for its political agenda. In addition to the highly organized and coordinated effort to support the KORUS FTA, the South Korean government have urged the Korean American community to rally around issues ranging from

2) Korea Times, 26 March 2008.

3) Office of the United States Trade Representative. 2018. 'U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement', Viewed 5 April 2020.

the North Korean nuclear program to the controversy surrounding “comfort women.” Likewise, Korean Americans have become invaluable allies for various parts of the U.S. government as they seek to advance their policy objectives. From Department of Commerce to the Department of State, Korean Americans can serve as both a reservoir of talent and a motivated constituency as they seek to solve problems and capitalize on opportunities in an increasingly complex and multipolar world. For some Korean Americans who have the requisite skills and motivations, these dynamics add new paths and opportunities for their political life.

Within the broader context of the Korean American experience, this new path of political participation is both familiar and new. As mentioned, Korean Americans have always participated in homeland politics either directly within the South Korean or through the U.S. government. Until Korean immigrants could secure naturalized U.S. citizenship in 1952, this was the only form of politics available to the majority of Koreans living in the United States. Indeed, what has given Korean Americans their political value on both sides of the Pacific is precisely their American citizenship. In the politics of the Overseas Korean Act and the KORUS FTA, American citizenship conferred prestige and legitimacy on Korean Americans that, in turn, gave them legal privileges and political access. Additionally, when President Barak Obama appointed Sung Kim as the first Korean American to serve as the U.S. ambassador to South Korea in 2011—followed by the appointment of Gary Locke as the first Chinese American to serve as U.S. ambassador to the People Republic of China—a subtle but important racial barrier was removed for Asian Americans and American government service (Calder 2014).

The three laws and policies discussed in this article are having a very visible impact on both sides of the Pacific. Overseas Korean Act has attracted Korean American retirees who are buying affordable condominiums in planned communities in the outskirts of Seoul. The Visa Waiver Program is creating a real estate boom on the other side of the Pacific in Koreatowns of Los Angeles, California, and Bergen County, New Jersey, that keeps Korean American real estate agents and mortgage brokers busy (Adelman 2007). The KORUS FTA has resulted in major American law firms such as Baker McKinsey and Latham & Watkins opening and expanding their offices in Seoul, and the American Bar Association has convened conferences in the city that use to be considered off-limits to non-Korean lawyers.

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