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The Political Formation of Korean Americans, 1992-2019: From Ethnic Politics to Managing Transnational Lives – An Interview with Professor Edward Park

Edward J.W. Park[†]

Editorial Disclaimer: The interview transcript below is based upon, but does not exactly reflect, an interview of the author. All editorial changes have been reviewed and approved by the author.

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INTRODUCTION

In his landmark book, Bill Ong Hing (1993) observed that US laws and policies “made and remade” the Asian American experience.¹ Defined as “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” Asian immigrants were especially

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1. See BILL ONG HING, MAKING AND REMAKING ASIAN AMERICA THROUGH IMMIGRATION POLICY, 1850–1990, 190 (1993).

vulnerable to various laws and policies that sought to exclude them from immigration, economic opportunities, and political participation.² Even for those Asian Americans with birthright citizenship, laws, and policies routinely prevented various Asian American ethnic groups from equality of opportunities in education, housing, and marriage. The culmination of anti-Asian American sentiments resulted in the forced relocation and the imprisonment of Japanese Americans—immigrants and citizens alike—during World War II. Like other racial minorities, the rights and privileges of Asian Americans have come less from their “inalienable right” and more from their collective struggle against various levels of the US government that were determined to withhold them. Indeed, Asian Americans would gain their formal rights incrementally from the 1940s to the 1960s as they mobilized for laws and policies to gain their rights ranging from naturalized citizenship to equal rights in the housing market.³ As many Asian American scholars have pointed out, the role of laws and policies remaking the Asian American experience did not end with the extension of *de jure* equality in the 1960s. Since then, a long list of laws and policies including those dealing with bilingual education, immigration, affirmative action, among many others have altered Asian American lives.⁴

This transcript reflects the central premise that laws and policies continue to make and remake the contemporary Korean American experience. In particular, three themes raised in the transcript can be grounded in three sets of laws and policies. First, in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 (*Sa-I-Gu* in Korean), the City of Los Angeles found that 200 liquor stores were destroyed and that Korean Americans owned 175 of them. A group of mostly African American activists who viewed liquor stores in inner-city communities as a locus of social problems launched the “Campaign to Rebuild South Central [Los Angeles] Without Liquor Stores” and successfully lobbied Los Angeles City Council to impose strict and costly conditions for reopening the stores. In response, the Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO) worked with then Assemblyman Paul Horcher (R-60)—a white conservative Republican from East San Gabriel Valley—to introduce Assembly Bill 1974 (“AB1974”) that would have preempted the conditional variance process in Los Angeles and allowed the liquor stores to open immediately. AB1974 died in committee on a straight partisan vote, and only ten of the 175 stores reopened two years later.⁵ For the Korean American community, *Sa-I-Gu* became a complicated

2. See SUCHENG CHAN, *ASIAN AMERICANS: AN INTERPRETIVE HISTORY* 193–97 (1991).

3. See BILL ONG HING, *supra* note 1, at 37; WILLOW S. LUNG-AMAM, *TRESPASSERS?: ASIAN AMERICANS AND THE BATTLE FOR SUBURBIA* 30 (2017).

4. See ANGELO N. ANCHETA, *RACE, RIGHTS, AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* 13–15 (2006) (identifying laws and court cases that include *Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974), California’s Proposition 187, and *Adarand Constructors, Inc v. Peña*, 515 U.S. 200 (1995) to demonstrate the continuing importance of law in shaping the Asian American experience).

5. See Edward J.W. Park, *Competing Visions: Political Formation of Korean Americans in Los*

yet powerful source of lessons on racial, electoral, and partisan politics and state and local laws and policies.⁶

Second, since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, multiple immigration laws have changed the character of the Korean American community. In particular, the Immigration Act of 1990, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (“PRWORA”), and the American Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act of 1998 (“ACWIA”) altered the class background of Korean immigrants and the terms in which Korean nationals can legally live and work in the country.⁷ The Immigration Act of 1990 favored highly skilled and educated immigrants over immigrants with more modest backgrounds entering the country under family reunification, and the law greatly expanded the category of investors and temporary workers who could enter the United States under various visa programs.⁸ PRWORA imposed an income test and an affidavit for financial support for a sponsoring relative to discourage poor immigrants while ACWIA dramatically increased the H-1B work visas for specialty occupations.⁹ In both cases, investors and skilled temporary workers can adjust their temporary status into permanent residency and then naturalized citizenship if they make qualifying investments or secure employer sponsorships. The large numbers of investors and workers on temporary visas are transforming Korean American communities from “immigrant neighborhoods” into “transnational spaces” where the fate of the community has less to do with the integration of Korean Americans into mainstream American society and more to do with the vagaries of transpacific investment and trade. This is especially true in the largest Korean American communities in Southern California and Greater New York where Korean transnational corporations and trading companies bring tens of thousands of Korean nationals under temporary visa programs, far surpassing the number of traditional immigrants entering the United States as permanent residents.

Third, in addition to US immigration legislation, Korean immigration laws, US administrative policies, and trade agreements have had a major impact on the Korean American experience. Although Korean Americans have struggled to find success in US electoral politics, the South Korean government was eager to meet the political interests of Korean Americans through the Overseas Korean Act of 1999.¹⁰ Under this law, the Korean

Angeles, 1992-1997, 24 *AMERASIA J.* 41, 51 (1998).

6. *See id.* at 44.

7. *See* EDWARD J.W. PARK AND JOHN S.W. PARK, *PROBATIONARY AMERICANS: CONTEMPORARY IMMIGRATION POLICIES AND THE SHAPING OF ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES* 65–73 (2005).

8. *See id.* at 17–23.

9. *Id.* at 89–91.

10. *See* JANE YEONJAE LEE, *TRANSNATIONAL RETURN MIGRATION OF 1.5 GENERATION KOREAN NEW ZEALANDERS* 48 (2018).

government drew a hard distinction between Koreans who hold citizenship in advanced-industrialized countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan and others who hold citizenship in less developed countries such as China, Russia, and former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Koreans from favored nations were granted quasi-citizenship status with the right to work, liberal terms for stay, and property ownership rights: all privileges that other overseas Koreans did not have.¹¹ Just as the South Korean government conferred these new privileges, the US State Department added South Korea to the Visa Waiver Program on November 17, 2008. Signed into law in 1986, the Visa Waiver Program allows a select group of foreign nationals to enter the United States—for a period up to ninety days—without having to secure an entry visa from an American embassy. The program began with Great Britain and Japan in 1988 and, to date, only thirty-eight nations are included in the program. For South Koreans and Korean Americans with family and business in both countries, this administrative decision deeply transformed their lives by removing a major bureaucratic hassle for managing their transpacific life and work.¹² Lastly, the Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) was implemented in March 2012. During the negotiations, the Korean American community played a key role on both sides of the Pacific, lobbying both governments in support of the agreement. Korean American professionals such as lawyers and engineers were especially motivated to finalize the agreement as the KORUS FTA was one of the first free trade agreements to include professional services.¹³ Taken together, the Overseas Korean Act, the Visa Waiver Program, and KORUS FTA signal an important shift in Korean American politics toward pursuing laws and policies to effectively manage their transnational lives in a globalizing world.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Personal History

My name is Edward Park, and I teach in the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. For nearly thirty years, I have been interested in the impact of immigrants on American politics, especially American urban politics in traditional immigrant gateway cities. The Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 and its political impact on both the Korean American community and the broader city have been an important part of my research and writing.

11. See Dong-Hoon Seol and John D. Skrentny, *Ethnic Return Migration and Hierarchical Nationhood*, 9 ETHNICITIES 148, 152–53 (2009).

12. See Xiaochu Hu, *Economic Benefits Associated with the Visa Waiver Program - A Difference-in-Difference Approach*, 7 GLOBAL J. OF BUS. RES. 81, 84–85 (2013).

13. See Hobin Kim, *U.S.-Korea Trade Pact Is Very Different from NAFTA*, THE MERCURY NEWS (Sept. 29, 2011), <https://www.mercurynews.com/2011/09/29/hobin-kim-u-s-korea-trade-pact-is-very-different-from-nafta> [https://perma.cc/N79D-A3HA].

There is a bit of a personal story behind my interest in this topic. Before I became interested in race and ethnicity, the Asian American experience, and urban studies, I had a brief career as a material science engineer in Orange County, California. While I left my career as an engineer in conservative Orange County for a new life as a progressive social scientist at Berkeley, I was still fascinated by the high numbers of Asian Americans in science and engineering. At the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, I chose to write my Ph.D. dissertation on the economic incorporation of Asian Americans in Silicon Valley's high technology industry. After my qualifying examination, I was lucky enough to win a dissertation award at the Department of Asian American Studies at UC Santa Barbara during the 1991–1992 academic year.

When the Los Angeles Civil Unrest took place in April and May of 1992, I found myself driving down to Los Angeles every week at the request of Korean American community-based organizations that desperately needed bilingual community members who could represent them in important meetings related to the rebuilding efforts. The meetings, the discussions, and the politics were so fascinating that I decided to make immigrant political incorporation one of the primary areas of my research interests. That is how I got involved in doing this. And, lucky enough, my entire career as a professor has been in Los Angeles, so I have been able to work on the topic continuously since 1992.

The Demographics of Los Angeles

Even though it may sound strange, Los Angeles was thought of as a biracial city right until the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992. Indeed, the most important book on Los Angeles politics, written by Raphael Sonenshein, was titled *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, 1993)¹⁴ If electoral politics of the city could be imagined as black and white, the demographics and the economics could not. By 1990, two decades of massive immigration from Asia, Mexico, and Central America remade Los Angeles into a multiracial city. As the city's population grew and the economy boomed, Los Angeles became a world city with an enviable quality of life that was made possible by immigrant workers and entrepreneurs. With the benefit of hindsight, what I see in the Los Angeles Civil Unrest in 1992 is American society's failure to politically incorporate Latinos and Asian Americans into the black and white political structure. Because of this lack of political incorporation, the political system was ill-equipped to handle the growing racial tension between African American residents and Korean American liquor store owners or the displacement of African American residents in South Central Los Angeles in light of Latinos moving into the area. In many ways, the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992

14. RAPHAEL J. SONENSHEIN, *POLITICS IN BLACK AND WHITE: RACE AND POWER IN LOS ANGELES* (1993).

was the result of decades-long economic and demographic changes. The idea that this was an unexpected crisis is simply a measure of the disconnect between urban politics and urban realities.

Korean Americans, African Americans, and Latinos

During the Los Angeles Civil Unrest in 1992, the Korean American and African American relationship was one between merchants and customers made difficult by the urban crisis of that time. Apart from the laudable efforts of the Black-Korean Alliance that sought to build common ground, I think it is fair to say that these two communities shared little in common. With the relationship between Korean Americans and Latinos, the story is more complicated. As immigrants, both groups find themselves as strangers in American society, desperately trying to find an economic foothold in Los Angeles. However, given the dramatic differences in their class backgrounds, their relationship is often that of employers and employees. Korean American business owners in Los Angeles rely heavily on Latinos as low-skilled, low-wage workers. Immigrant ethnic labor markets are notoriously harsh, and Latino employees who do not have legal status are especially vulnerable to exploitation. At the same time, there is interdependence and mutual respect in the relationship. In Los Angeles, organizations such as the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) have successfully organized Korean American and Latino workers under a class-based coalition model.

The Middlemen Minority Position

The middlemen minority position refers to the functional role in the middle of the economy where groups like Korean Americans play a brokering role. They run small businesses that cater to African Americans. Yet, they're utterly dependent on white suppliers who provide them with goods to sell and the real estate in which to conduct their business. Historically, middlemen minorities are useful because it allows the dominant society to not have to deal with people who are most oppressed in that society. In the case of colonial Indonesia, recruiting Chinese to play the middlemen minority role meant that the Dutch would never have to directly deal with Indonesians. If there were tension and conflict, it would be the ethnic Chinese who would be the target of Indonesian hostility and not the Dutch. Under this model, Koreans are the classic middlemen minority in South Central Los Angeles. Before Korean Americans, middlemen minorities in South Central Los Angeles were Jewish Americans. Today, most Korean Americans have left the liquor stores, and they have been replaced by South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants. Another significant quality of middlemen minority is that they do not live in the community in which they run their businesses. This is part and parcel of maintaining the social distance that lies at the heart of the middlemen minority thesis. From the point of view of African Americans, the Korean

Americans—along with other groups that precede and succeed them—are outsiders who took resources out of the community but without the intention of becoming a part of the community.

The American Dream

When I immigrated to the United States in 1975, Koreans who were immigrating to the United States were seen as the luckiest Koreans alive. The assumption was that these people would go to America, and surely, they would become fabulously wealthy and realize the American Dream, defined through material and financial success. By the time the Los Angeles Civil Unrest happened in 1992, Koreans had a dramatically different take on leaving their country. In 1988, South Korea hosted the Seoul Olympics, and it marked South Korea's new prosperity and new confidence. And by 1992, the era of massive immigration of Koreans to the United States was over. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, only 8,000 Korean immigrants were coming to the United States every year. And this was a group that was annually sending more than 30,000 just a decade prior. Many of us who were studying Korean immigration thought the age of large-scale Korean immigration would be over. So when the Los Angeles Civil Unrest happened in 1992, it marked the end of the American Dream for South Koreans, or at least the uncomplicated version of it.

The Naming of Sa-I-Gu

Koreans the world over call the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 *Sa-I-Gu*, meaning 4-2-9. The naming of this event with the date follows the Korean tradition that you name the most momentous events through the dates. The naming of any event through the days of the date is a singularly important and powerful gesture. It just goes to show how important the event is to the Korean diaspora. For many, it encapsulates the sense that the American Dream turned into an American nightmare where hundreds of Korean Americans lost their livelihoods.

Korean Americans in LA during 1992

Koreans alone sustained half of all the economic damage during the Los Angeles Civil Unrest. Korean Americans who lived in Los Angeles during that time had family members or friends who were directly impacted by the Civil Unrest, and it became a defining moment. I think many people just felt utterly betrayed and abandoned by mainstream society. Many wondered why their American citizenship and their American taxes were not enough for the police to protect their property and their livelihoods. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil Unrest, this sense of abandonment was strong.

Korean Americans felt that they were not only scapegoated but also that Koreatown became a sacrificial lamb where people could take out their anger and frustration with impunity. It is no wonder that many Korean Americans

in Los Angeles still suffer from painful memories and relive their trauma during the anniversary of the Civil Unrest.

The Mass Media—the Model Minority Image

In the run-up to and during the Civil Unrest, the mass media was not interested in representing immigrant communities with all of their nuances and complexities. They are much more comfortable reducing their complexities to fit their simple storylines.

The model minority image is problematic for multiple reasons and one of them is that it represents Asian American communities in a monolithic way. It also pits Asian Americans against other racial minority groups. The very term “model minority” is suggesting to other racial minorities—why can’t you be like Asian Americans who are modeling these ideal values and practices for success and mobility? The other function is that by depriving the diversity of the Korean American community to render all of them as small business owners, it made invisible all the important work that progressive Korean American activists undertook to build coalitions with the African American community to reduce racial tensions.

Media Portrayal of the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest

Unfortunately, the mainstream media focused on the conflict part of the equation but said nothing about all the efforts that tried to ameliorate this tension. In the media coverage of the Los Angeles Civil Unrest, every Korean American was represented as liquor store owners in South Central Los Angeles even though they made up less than 5 percent of the Korean American population in the city. Likewise, the vast majority of African Americans in Los Angeles have never been to a Korean-owned liquor store in their lives. Yet, once the media found Black-Korean conflict as the storyline to interpret the Civil Unrest storyline, every Korean became a liquor store owner and every African American became their customer.

During the Civil Unrest, K.W. Lee, one of the pioneering Korean American journalists who covered the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s, argued that Korean Americans and African Americans were pitted against each other as if they were gladiators. He charged the media for conjuring up this spectacle to distract Americans from more complex issues such as racial inequality in policing or class conflict in the inner city that could have potentially put Korean Americans and African Americans on the same side in the long political struggle for racial justice in American society. The constant broadcasting of the grainy video footage of Soon Ja Du shooting Latasha Harlins at the Empire Liquor Store with the footage of armed Korean men standing on the rooftops of their stores shooting at the looters below depicted Korean Americans through the lens of violence and vigilante justice. What the media did not show was how Los Angeles Police Department made the conscious effort to protect the financial district, University of Southern California, and wealthy neighborhoods like Hancock

Park, but it did not protect adjacent communities like South Central Los Angeles, Pico-Union, and Koreatown. These neighborhoods were left to their own devices. When the Los Angeles Police Department characterized the destruction of these communities as a “tragedy,” Korean Americans felt it more as a conscious betrayal and abandonment.

Additionally, the media representation of Korean Americans contributed to the existing stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners who are just interested in their economic survival. While they take economic resources from American society, they are unwilling or unable to contribute to the collective good. For Asian Americans, this perception lies at the heart of their exclusion from immigration and naturalized citizenship. For many Asian American scholars, the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 showed the shallowness of Asian American belonging in American society.

Lack of Korean American Representation in Social Institutions

Korean Americans immediately made the connection between their lack of political representation and their unfair treatment. Many argued that if there was a high-ranking Korean American member in the Los Angeles Police Department, the outcome would have been very different. Likewise, the Los Angeles Times did not have a single Korean American journalist. If we had a Korean American City Council member, that too would have made a world of difference. What I would say is that one of the silver linings of the Civil Unrest is that we would eventually have all of those things. It took a long time for Korean Americans to elect a Korean American to the Los Angeles City Council, and it was a monumental moment when David Ryu was elected in 2015. There are now several Korean American high-ranking officers and administrators in the Los Angeles Police Department. Just a year after the Civil Unrest, the Los Angeles Times made a big splash by hiring K. Connie Kang to report on the Korean American community. And now, there are well over a dozen Korean American journalists at the Los Angeles Times and other major media outlets in Southern California.

Lessons From the 1992 Civil Unrest

I think there are two big lessons for me. First is that the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 served as a wake-up call for the Korean American community, and that wake-up call said that Korean Americans don't live on an ethnic island. Korean Americans could not just benefit from the city but somehow be insulated from all its ills and problems. Like everyone else, they have a responsibility to participate in the city's political life, and they have the responsibility to represent themselves in all facets of the city's life. And I think Korean Americans have very admirably answered that wake-up call. The second lesson is that the Civil Unrest served as a wake-up call to the city as a whole. It told the city leadership that you cannot have large segments of your population who are cut out of important decision-making processes. If those people are left to fend for themselves, then it creates situations that

fester. And some of those festering sores could turn into malignant tumors. And I think in that regard too, the city has also responded positively. Everybody understands now the consequences of having a large part of your city rendered silent and invisible: there's going to be a price to be paid sooner or later. I think an important responsibility of political leadership is to do their utmost to give all people a voice because ultimately everybody is going to have their say one way or another.

I think that's the greatest challenge for places like Los Angeles and London. These cities have benefited from immigrants who perform incredibly valuable roles. In addition to reaping the benefits from their labor, their creativity, and their energy, these cities have an affirmative responsibility to include them in myriads of ways that are political, economic, cultural, and social. I would argue that if these cities do not take inclusion into account, they will have to reckon with an eventual crisis. In that sense, affirmative focus on immigrant inclusion is part and parcel of effective governance.

The Korean American Community is Not Monolithic

I think my contribution to the study of immigrant political formation has been to show that the Korean American community was not, and is not, monolithic. The Korean American community itself was very much divided on how they saw their role in South Central Los Angeles and what the Los Angeles Civil Unrest ought to mean politically for the Korean American community. There was a group of very progressive Korean Americans who felt that the Civil Unrest was a product of the exploitive role that Korean Americans were playing in impoverished African American communities. For them, they saw the Civil Unrest as an opportunity for Korean Americans to leave the middlemen minority niche and to participate more progressively in Los Angeles politics.

On the other hand, Korean American conservatives saw the Los Angeles Civil Unrest as the culmination of the African American resentment and hostility toward Korean American shopkeepers. They saw the Civil Unrest as an opportunity to rally Korean Americans toward the Republican Party that had emphasized law and order and economic freedom.

Partisan Politics in the Korean American Community Becomes Acute for the Very First Time

After the Civil Unrest, partisan politics in the Korean American community became acute for the first time. Before, partisan politics played a secondary role to that of ethnic unity. The idea was that Korean Americans must come together first before they can achieve political visibility and representation. But after the riots, the community clearly understood that different Korean Americans had different political ideologies, values, and interests. Whether to rebuild the liquor stores destroyed during the Civil Unrest or how to divide up the relief money that poured in from South Korea

among merchants and workers dramatized the partisan split within the Korean American community. To the disappointment of many, Korean Americans established explicit partisan organizations to pursue their political activities. However, many others, including myself, thought this was a positive political development that traded in a vague responsibility of ethnic solidarity for a more familiar and established path of political mobilization.

Korean American Racialization

The idea of racialization remains one of the most important elements in making the transition from a Korean to a Korean American. I think the classic formulation of racialization is to think about how non-Asian Americans view Asian Americans. Every Asian immigrant has a story of being mistaken for the wrong ethnic group. I think the initial impulse is to correct someone who mistakenly thinks that you're Chinese and say, "Excuse me, but I'm not Chinese—I'm Korean." However, you quickly realize that for some people, or most people, this does not matter. By "Chinese," they simply mean "Asian." As a ten-year-old immigrant Korean who went to an elementary school in a white suburb in 1975, a lot of the terms that were thrown at me were not very nice, and any correction would simply invite even more racist and elaborate epithets. At the core of the Korean American identity is the understanding that this lumping is an essential part of living in America as an Asian racial subject. This could be an empowering recognition if being Asian can be transformed from a marker of social marginality into a source for political power.

Biracial Theorizing

The idea of two nations was originally articulated in the Kerner Report. The Kerner Report was commissioned by President Lyndon Baines Johnson after a long list of race riots in the 1960s. The most relevant quote in the report states that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."¹⁵ Andrew Hacker, in 1992, the same year that the Los Angeles Civil Unrest took place in Los Angeles, wrote a book called *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (Scribner, 1992)¹⁶ Andrew Hacker argued that America fundamentally remains a black and white nation and that new groups like Asian Americans and Latinos are merely spectators to this more basic drama, and they will have to wait for Blacks and Whites to figure out their relationship before they could meaningfully participate in American racial politics. If nothing else, the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 exploded that notion. Millions of Asian

15. NAT'L ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIV. DISORDERS, REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS I (1968).

16. ANDREW HACKER, *TWO NATIONS: BLACK AND WHITE, SEPARATE, HOSTILE, UNEQUAL* (1992).

Americans and Latinos in American society were not merely spectators in 1992 nor are they merely spectators now. And in certain cases, like immigration, they are central and defining players in American racial politics.

Yet, the idea of two nations remains compelling in interviews I have conducted on Korean Americans on the issue of partisan politics. Some Korean Americans argue that Korean Americans are just a slightly darker shade of white. They argue that Korean Americans are highly educated, hold professional jobs, and live in affluent suburbs. They believe that the Korean Americans are also socially conservative, owing to either Confucian culture or Christianity, and that all of this makes them politically similar to conservative whites. Other Korean Americans think of themselves as similar to Blacks. They argue that Korean Americans were victims of longstanding American racism. Like other Asian Americans, Korean Americans faced exclusion from naturalized citizenship and immigration. Various states, including California, passed laws that subjected Korean Americans to anti-miscegenation laws and residential segregation. And, so they argue Korean Americans should work with groups like African Americans and Latinos. In both cases, Korean American conservatives and progressives rely on their understanding of white and black to make sense of their partisan politics.

Transnational Ties

One important way Korean Americans are not “honorary whites” nor “just like Blacks” is the powerful role transnational dynamics impact their lives. In a world where globalization is stitching the world together in ever greater and surprising ways, Korean Americans are finding new avenues for political mobilization that are strikingly different from traditional ethnic politics in America. This newest round of transnational ties occupies yet another dimension of Korean American politics.

For the past decade, my work has inventoried, described, and identified how significant groups of Korean Americans engage in political activities that facilitate the pursuit of transpacific life. For instance, one of the political issues that captivated the Korean American population in the entire country was the Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement (signed in June 2007 and implemented in 2012) (hereinafter Agreement). The reason this captivated Korean Americans had a lot to do with how many Korean Americans have personal and economic stakes in both countries. Some of the most enthusiastic proponents of the Agreement were second-generation Korean American lawyers, engineers, and doctors who correctly viewed the agreement as a source of new opportunities.

To backtrack a little bit, I think a lot of Korean American professionals have felt the effects of the bamboo ceiling. It began with Asian American engineers in the high technology industry who felt they could not break into management. Famously, these frustrated Asian American engineers left their employers and established major companies. In more recent times, the

bamboo ceiling has been used to describe the limited mobility of Asian Americans in law, finance, and other areas of corporate America where the stereotype of Asian Americans as “good followers but not good leaders” has renewed concerns over professional advancement.

One of the unique elements of the Agreement was that it singled out professional services as the key area of trade liberalization. Since Korea typically runs a high trade surplus in goods trade, the expectation was that Korea would liberalize restrictions on professional services and that Korean American professionals, in particular, would reap huge benefits. Indeed, Korean American political support played a crucial role in the passage of the Agreement, and Korean American professionals have found unprecedented opportunities in both Korea and the United States.

In addition to economic interests implicated in the Agreement, the Korean government passed the Overseas Korean Act (1997) that has allowed Korean Americans and other Koreans from advanced, industrialized countries to live and work in Korea with minimal restrictions. It has been fascinating to see how Korean Americans in two different life stages have taken advantage of this opportunity. On one hand, with the benefit of this law, there are now thousands of young Korean Americans who live in South Korea to teach English, to explore their Korean ethnic heritage, or to learn the Korean language. This has become an important experience for an increasing number of college-educated Korean Americans. On the other hand, tens of thousands of Korean Americans who have retired in the United States have returned to Korea to live in retirement communities called “silver towns.” Many of them are going back and forth between the United States and Korea, fully taking advantage of this transnational life. The scale of Korean American retirees has become so large that the Korean government had to hold public debates on whether or not Korean American retirees can access Korea’s health care system.

The thought that Korean Americans are returning to Korea to seek economic opportunities or to retire and benefit from excellent health care was just unimaginable a few decades ago. When I immigrated to the United States in 1975, Koreans who were immigrating to the United States were seen as the luckiest Koreans alive. It was assumed that these people would go to America and live out the American Dream of material abundance and financial success. Back then, the international section of Gimpo Airport was a sea of tears. The assumption was that these Koreans would be lost to their family and friends forever, since immigration was seen as a passage through a one-way door. Why would they look back? Today, of course, flying out of Incheon International Airport to the United States shows that immigration is a revolving door with people coming back and forth at a dizzying pace. For some Korean Americans, an important site of politics is in the transnational space that impacts their movements not only horizontally between the United States and Korea but also vertically as they manage their professional opportunities and personal lives.

