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Korean Americans and Multiculturalism: Beyond the Demographics

Gabrielle Kim

In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel P. Huntington claims that different religious and ethnic identities will bring about the bulk of any conflicts in the post-Cold War world. Any interactions among the different groups would only clash together, further distinguishing the different identities from one another. Though this seems like the case for situations such as the relationship between Islamic fundamentalist groups and the West, Huntington's claim does not acknowledge the existence of any harmony in interactions. His theory, then, claims also that the word "multiculturalism" only refers to the existence of more than one culture. There is no hybridization among the different cultures. The theory of the political good exemplifies Huntington's claim well. It asserts that the nation-state should be the center of what constitutes the proper form of the political good and the interpretations of its nature. Such a solid political community would be bounded within the territory of the nation and stay within those boundaries only.

This claim, however, fails to see the diversity of political communities and that individuals can appreciate various associations at different levels and for different purposes. For example, it is possible for an individual to be involved in a transnational social movement (such as human rights) without being disloyal to more local political communities. It is becoming increasingly difficult for a state to maintain one political identity due to phenomena such as migration and globalization. Therefore, such a claim also fails to acknowledge the globalization phenomenon, which is not a novel occurrence¹. Successful political communities must work with more diverse groups of people, not against them. "Multiculturalism, not national culture, is

¹ Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 216; Susanne Lachenicht and Kirsten Heinsohn, *Diaspora Identities: Exile, Nationalism, and Cosmopolitanism in Past and Present* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2009), 9.

increasingly the norm².” Though tensions do exist between certain groups, Huntington’s claim is very biased. Multiculturalism is not just a source of conflict, but is a phenomenon that can harmoniously exist within one entity, becoming an identity itself.

This paper will focus on the development of multiculturalism and how Koreans in America (particularly in Los Angeles) have come to integrate both nations into one identity. The process was one that included much hardship and there are members in the Korean-American community today that still struggle to define themselves as one (Korean) or the other (American). There is, however, an increase in the number of Korean-Americans who acknowledge that they can and do belong to both groups. Before exploring this specific case, I will first look at the debates that surround the theories that concern multiculturalism, especially in the public sphere. Then I will apply this concept to Korean-Americans, their history, conflicts, and how they have come to identify themselves as such through these events.

A Definition of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is most evident in civic nations. While ethnic nations hold to a specific ethnic core, civic nations do not. One prime example of multiculturalism in a civic nation is the United States. Since the beginning of the nation’s history, the people of the United States have come from many different nations. (The only peoples in the country that are considered indigenous to the land are the Native Americans, who never came together to form a nation-state). Thus, the name, “American,” does not constitute a particular race, but really the nation itself. This does not mean, however, that an American culture does not exist. Many Americans today can be described as “hyphenated” Americans, meaning that they have an identifiable ethnic background along with their American identity. In the past, a person could only identify

² David Held, “Culture and Political Community – National, Global and Cosmopolitan,” *Nations and Nationalism* (2002): 322.

with one specific group whereas today, a person can identify with one more than one ethnic group.

Cultural cosmopolitanism can be defined by such identification. It is the idea of being a “global citizen”—belonging to the world³. It is similar to universalism in that both ideas encompass a global acceptance of human morality that should be protected in international law. However, there is a significant difference between the two ideas as cultural cosmopolitanism acknowledges the existence of different cultures and embraces the fact that political communities are becoming more diverse, both in the ways that the communities are connected and the groups that make up those communities⁴. It is difficult for a person today to identify with only one ethnic or political group, and cultural cosmopolitanism acknowledges this fact.

Public vs. Private Spheres

Yet multiculturalism is not without fault. Most of the debate concerning multiculturalism consists of distinguishing between public and private spheres, and it is in the public sphere that multiculturalism is most controversial⁵. In the private sphere, different ethnic groups are allowed to practice their linguistic, religious and moral customs without government interference and are at times encouraged to do so. Though diversity is increasingly looked upon as something to be praised, some wonder if public institutions (such as government agencies and universities) should specifically acknowledge the various cultures. Since public institutions concern issues that apply to all citizens (health care and education, for example), some also believe that these institutions should not acknowledge particular groups and their differences and remain neutral

³ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, 218.

⁴ Held, “Culture and Political Community,” 326.

⁵ A.J. Motyl, “Multiculturalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001), 351; Amy Gutmann, *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition,”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 4.

towards them. This lack of recognition in the public sphere, however, as Charles Taylor (1992) points out in “The Politics of Recognition,” can actually be a form of oppression.

The Significance of Identity

Here is where we must make a distinction between culture and identity. Demographically speaking, multiculturalism is apparent in the United States⁶. Even though many “hyphenated” Americans are leaning more towards the American part of their identity and living less in communities of people who share the same ethnic descent⁷, no single ethnic group is dominant in the country. The country is still composed of many different ethnic groups. So the reason why multiculturalism still brings about debate is because the real issue lies in the process of identification⁸. One can be racially composed of more than one culture, but identify with only one of those groups, when it is perfectly possible to identify with all of the components; and the way in which we come to identify ourselves is “dialogical”—being influenced by our interactions with others through dialogue and our relationships with them. Having these dialogues and relationships is crucial to how we identify ourselves, so the public sphere must provide a means for these relationships to prosper and discussion of the aspects that we share with other citizens⁹. Multiculturalism, therefore, must be recognized in both the private and public spheres.

History of Koreans in America

We can take these views of multiculturalism and apply them to Korean-Americans. Though the physical size of the country is significantly smaller compared to its neighbors, Korea

⁶ Robert Eddy, *Reflections on Multiculturalism* (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1996), 1.

⁷ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition,”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 7; Eddy, *Reflections on Multiculturalism*, 199.

became a battleground for Japan and China to settle their conflicts¹⁰. Its geographical position gave way to this occurrence and many innocent Koreans suffered from this domination. Despite this period of uncertainty, the Korean government was able to send the first Koreans to America in 1903. These Koreans were brought to work on sugar plantations in Hawaii, but when Japan made Korea its protectorate, immigration of Koreans to America stopped. No one is sure why it ended so abruptly, but since the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association wanted to hire Korean laborers instead of Japanese, it is most likely that the Japanese government wanted to end this immigration. However, the Korean government might have also faced opposition against the emigration program from the public so it is hard to say that the Japanese government had the sole decisive power over this end to immigration.

When Korea was no longer an annexed state of Japan and after the Korean War ended, a second wave of immigration to America occurred. This second wave consisted mostly of Korean women who had married U.S. soldiers during America's occupation of Korea as a result of the War, so a more steady influx of Korean immigrants to the U.S. did not start until 1968, when the Immigration Act of 1965 went into effect. 1975 was when there was a more voluntary movement of Koreans to America, seeking better economic and education opportunities. After immigrating to Hawaii, more Koreans started to move to California. Now California holds the largest Korean diaspora community. Though there are other areas in the United States that have a significant number of Korean-Americans, I will focus mostly on Korean-Americans in Los Angeles, California.

When Koreans first immigrated to America, their main goal was to have a job, no matter how small the income amounted to be. Westernizing and assimilating to the American culture

¹⁰ Hyung-chan Kim, *The Korean Diaspora: Historical and Sociological Studies of Korean Immigration and Assimilation in North America* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1977), 4.

was not on their minds at all. What was more immediately important for these immigrants was the political state of their homeland: first the annexation, then the Korean War. It was not until after these political events were over that the immigrants were able to think about permanent residence and its consequences. Unlike the first wave of Korean immigrants who came to the United States as laborers, those of the second wave and onward had previous educations and came to America with professions as well. Many entered professions in science, academia, engineering, and others, but most entered into small businesses (these were the Koreans that gained attention in the early nineties and will be mentioned again later).

Koreans' Identity in America

At this point in the Korean-American history, the immigrants only identified themselves as Korean. Therefore, it was also important for these immigrants to find a way to maintain their Korean culture while living in a foreign country. In order to do this, the immigrants needed a place to gather together. Once gathered, they could eat Korean food, practice other Korean traditional customs, and be with people who understood what it was like to work and live in a foreign country¹¹. This place was the church¹². Many of the immigrants had converted to Christianity before leaving Korea¹³, and those who had not would still find a Korean community in the nearest Korean church. While it is important to maintain the heritage that one is from,

¹¹ These gatherings helped Koreans to maintain their heritage, but they did not do much to make their culture known to the surrounding community. In the 1970s, Chul Soo Lee, a Korean immigrant was indicted for taking part in a gang homicide in San Francisco's Chinatown. K.W. Lee, the first Asian immigrant journalist to work for a daily publication in the U.S., found discrepancies in this charge and after writing many articles on the issue, Chul Soo Lee was released. Recently, at a conference, K.W. Lee talked to the attendees about this event and told us how the prosecutor pointed to Chul Soo Lee saying, "this Chinese man." No one made an objection.

¹² Christianity has made a great impact in the country of South Korea. This can be seen in the fact that the largest church in the world is located there. It is also very common to see Korean churches in the U.S., but these churches, especially in the youth of the church, constitute a whole other culture, not found in the youth groups in South Korea.

¹³ Kim, *The Korean Diaspora*, 6.

staying only within that circle will bring suspicion from those who are not a part of it. This is exactly what happened during the L.A. riots in 1992.

As mentioned before, many Korean immigrants came to the United States and began small businesses. What is interesting about these small businesses, however, is that they are concentrated in low-income African-American and Hispanic neighborhoods¹⁴. There are several reasons for this, one being that few chain grocery stores exist in such neighborhoods. Due to high crime rates and vandalism, large chain grocery stores have not been willing to build their stores in such areas. This provides Korean immigrants with little to no competition, and less starting capital is required to start a business in these neighborhoods¹⁵. Though owning a small business in a low-income neighborhood has these advantages, there was (and is) one major problem that kept (and still keeps) Koreans in conflict with the surrounding African-American community: language.

Before looking at the events that led up to the 1992 riots, it is important to see the environment from both sides. The Korean immigrants started their small businesses because they had no choice. Though many of these store owners had another profession in Korea, the language barrier kept them from doing much else when they came to the United States. As a result, they ran small businesses in an area already high in crime, selling their products to customers with whom they cannot communicate. The residents, on the other hand, also had reason for some confusion. Before the influx of Koreans into the neighborhood, the stores were owned predominately by second or third generation Jewish-Americans—people who could speak English. After having gone through the Watts riots in 1965, the Jewish-Americans left to leave

¹⁴ Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 46; Edward T. Chang and Russell Leong, *Los Angeles: Struggles Toward Multiethnic Community: Asian-American, African-American & Latino Perspectives* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁵ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 67.

room for an ethnic group totally different from the previous business owners. They could not speak English very well, and often were rude to customers. Considering all of these factors, it would not have been normal for this transition to go smoothly.

As mentioned, before Korean immigrants dominated these areas of business, Jewish-Americans owned small businesses there. These Jewish-Americans were also victims of riots in Los Angeles, so they moved out of the area and suggested that the Koreans do the same. Even though the Jewish-Americans could actually converse with their customers, a riot erupted. Tensions had existed between the Jewish-Americans and African-Americans of Los Angeles, so tensions would also exist between the newcomers and the residents. However, the murder of Latasha Harlins—the specific event that led to the 1992 riots—could have been prevented if the language barrier did not exist¹⁶. Since the Jewish-Americans could speak English, they could find jobs elsewhere, but this was not the case for the Korean immigrants¹⁷.

Private and Public Spheres of Multiculturalism Applied

Here we see an example of the private and public spheres of multiculturalism at work. The Korean immigrants were able to practice their customs freely with no government interference, thus defining the private sphere. What became the issue for these immigrants was the public sphere. As Taylor mentions in his essay, *The Politics of Recognition*, identities are dialogically formed, and the Korean immigrants lacked this dialogue with others. He also mentions that the language with which we converse does not only constitute the words that we speak, but also the language of the arts, gesture, and others¹⁸. The Koreans in this case, however, lacked the actual spoken words. Without this, it was not possible for them to receive the critical

¹⁶ This conflict entered the media not only through the news, but also through famous singers and their song lyrics (e.g. “Black Korea” by Ice Cube).

¹⁷ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 70.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Politics of Recognition*, 32.

public recognition of their ethnic identity. The beginning of Korean immigrant history was characterized by self-exclusion, which led to an unnecessary cultural conflict¹⁹, only providing support for Huntington's claim that hybridization of different cultures is not possible.

Fortunately, this changed for the second generation Korean-Americans. Instead of living in such a self-exclusive community, the children of this generation are encouraged to pursue a higher education and discouraged from following in their parents' footsteps. A higher education is crucial to a more secure and solid future, but this desire can lead to two different scenarios. The first is more confusion of one's cultural identity, and the second is an easier acceptance of both cultures. In the first, a pair of Korean immigrant parents decides that their children should speak English only, fearing that their children will not be able to fit in if they are first taught their mother tongue²⁰. The children learn English naturally, but as they grow older, there is less of an opportunity for them to learn their parents' language. Though the parents know enough English to get by on a normal day, Korean is still their first language and is more comfortable for them. Their children, on the other hand, are more comfortable with English, not able to speak the language with which their parents are more comfortable. Sadly, a language barrier forms within the household, making it harder for the children to identify with both the Korean and American cultures.

In the second scenario, the parents decide to teach their children Korean first, for English is a language that they will naturally come to learn as they attend school. The parents continuously speak Korean to their children and it is always spoken in the home. As a result of this continued use of the language, the children are able to speak both languages fluently as they grow older. No language barrier exists and since language is the way through which one can

¹⁹ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 139.

²⁰ This trend is not limited to Korean-American families.

understand the corresponding culture, it becomes much easier for the second-generation children in this scenario to understand their cultural background and the culture into which they were born. It is not, however, impossible for those in the first scenario to come to accept both cultures. It is just that they will try to choose one over the other, when it is possible to identify with both.

There are efforts being made to help Korean-American students of this generation to come to this conclusion. One of them is an annual conference called KASCON (Korean-American Student Conference). It is the largest ethnic minority conference in the United States and the main goal is for attendees (high school and college students) to network with fellow Korean-Americans that have careers in politics, non-profit, medicine, and others. The first two scenarios that were described before concern the private sphere of multiculturalism. This conference concerns the public sphere, helping students to realize that their identity as Korean-Americans does not have to and should not hinder their future careers. It also promotes the dialogical identification that Taylor mentions in his essay. KASCON is held at different universities every year. Even though the host schools are not directly involved with the conference, the fact that the schools are allowing such a conference to be held on the campus demonstrates how a public institution can make room for this dialogical method.

Conclusion

When looking back at the history of Koreans in America, Samuel Huntington's claim that different ethnic identities will only clash together seems to fit very well. The relationship between Koreans and African-Americans was one of the most violent relationships that the United States has witnessed. However, hope lies in the current and future generations of Korean-Americans. To continue applying Huntington's theory to this situation would be to deny the efforts of second generation Korean-Americans to reconcile their relationships with African-

Americans in Los Angeles. Whereas the first generation immigrants blamed African-Americans themselves for the violence and atrocities that occurred, the younger generations are better able to see that that is not the case.

The Korean-American example does demonstrate one thing about Huntington's claim. Koreans, by nature, are an exclusive people. The country is sometimes even called the "Hermit Country." If Korean-Americans continue to bring this characteristic along to the United States, racial prejudice will continue to persist. Exclusivity is what makes Huntington's theory a reality. In order to prevent this from occurring, multiculturalism must be present in both the private and public spheres: privately, by encouraging different cultural practices and publicly by making sure public institutions recognize that cultural differences exist and are essential to its citizens' identities. Though Korean-American history includes violent conflicts, there has been an increase in awareness of Korean-American culture, not as two different cultures to choose from, but a combination to become a separate culture.

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