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Edward Taehan Chang

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Boycott of Korean grocers in New York City, 1990.

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"As Los Angeles Burned, Korean America was Born"
Community in the Twenty-first Century

Edward Taehan Chang

Scholars, activists, and community leaders such as K.W. Lee and Angela Oh have often remarked that as Los Angeles burned, Korean America was born—or reborn—on April 29, 1992. They label the Los Angeles Rebellion/Riots of 1992 as the most important historical event, a "turning point," "watershed event," or "wake-up call" during one hundred years of Korean American history. Sa-I-Gu profoundly altered the Korean American discourse, igniting debates and dialogue in search of new directions which continue today.

The Korean American community was not alone in being devastated by looting, burning, and violence during the riots. Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and whites who lived in the inner city were also afflicted. And yet, for Korean Americans, the riots served as a catalyst to critically examine what it meant to be Korean American in relation to multicultural politics and race, economics and ideology. Korean immigrants, in pursuit of the American dream, had been depicted as narrowly focused on economic success to the exclusion of the society, culture, and politics of which they were a part.

Indeed, in the aftermath of 1992, political empowerment has become one of the most important goals for the Korean American community. Preoccupied with Korean homeland politics, many Korean immigrants had traditionally shown little interest in politics in America, until they were confronted with the agonizing reality of their lives during and after the riots. The Los Angeles riots, and the media attention focused on Korean Americans, made them the most visible Asian American group in the U.S. during that time. Yet, the Korean immigrant community lacked the critical resources and grassroots and political organizations to

Edward Taehan Chang is Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Riverside.

assume this new role as an Asian American community grounded in the realities of post-1992, multiracial Los Angeles. Korean Americans were not even linked well with other Asian American media, political, or educational groups headed by Chinese or Japanese Americans, much less linked with African American and Latino groups. As a consequence, 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans began to assert leadership within their own community. The children of Sa-I-Gu, as journalist K.W. Lee puts it, must learn from the lessons of history: the Black Power Movement, Redress and Reparations for Japanese Americans, and Holocaust survivors.

During the past three decades, the profile of the Korean American community in terms of generation, gender, nativity, and class has changed, becoming multiple and complex. While there has been a turn toward a renewed concern for first-generation and homeland Korean issues, other approaches to looking at the Korean American experience are as necessary. For example, until recently Korean immigrants have primarily identified themselves as Korean, therefore ignoring and neglecting issues facing second-generation Korean Americans, adoptees, and military brides. The reality, however, is that these groups are an important part of the Korean American experience and contribute to the transnational dimension of Korean American immigrant history.

Transnational linkages have always been closely related to the self-perception of Korean Americans as well as others' perceptions of them. The easing of political, economic, and cultural barriers in the past decade has resulted from globalizing trends as well as the increased accessibility of news and information technology. With the Internet's ability to reach into any corner of the world, we can globalize any locale and localize the globe in our efforts to unite in our diversity. As such, Korean American self-identity has changed over time, not only depending on mainstream American views of Korea alone, but also upon the complex, multileveled interaction of Koreans themselves within the global community.

Hesung Chun Koh has noted that during the Korean War, Americans saw Korea as a poor, war-ravaged country. During the 1970s, Korean Americans tried to disassociate themselves from "Koreagate" and the Unification Church because these were regarded as embarrassments. In the aftermath of the 1988 Seoul Olympics and South Korean economic success, however,

Korea enjoyed a period of positive publicity in the United States. But only four years later, the 1992 Los Angeles riots again cast Korean Americans in a negative light, this time as money-grubbing, gun-toting vigilantes who were hostile toward their African American neighbors. Across these different time periods, Korean Americans have been affected by the mainstream culture's opinion of Korea, both favorable and unfavorable.

The clash of competing groups and interests along with change in value system and consciousness within the Korean American community created a pluralistic mosaic but without clear direction and vision. In *Amerasia Journal*'s first volume on Korean Americans (29:3), we focused on the Korean diaspora and the historical construction of Korean America. This second volume reflects generational change within Korean American scholarship as emerging young scholars and writers examine contemporary Korean American issues: youth, identity, community, generation, interethnic relations, cyberspace, and women. I hope that the essays and articles included within these two volumes serve as basis to critically examine what it means to be Korean American today, both as a part of and apart from the past.

As the Korean American community rebuilt itself from the ashes of Sa-I-Gu, so our community must also continue to rebuild the political consciousness and awareness of itself as a vital and contributing entity involved within a larger society. Afterall, we are not new women and men here: we are part of field and factory, of country and city, and of the despair and dream of America.