

# Black-Korean Alliance rates media coverage

## LA Times accused of pitting one race against another

By **Sophia Kyung Kim**  
Korea Times

*The Los Angeles Times* — the only major daily in town — covers black-Korean tensions from the perspective of a third-party, often resulting in pitting the two communities against each other.

That is the startling assessment of a specialist in black-Korean relations who has authored numerous articles on the subject.

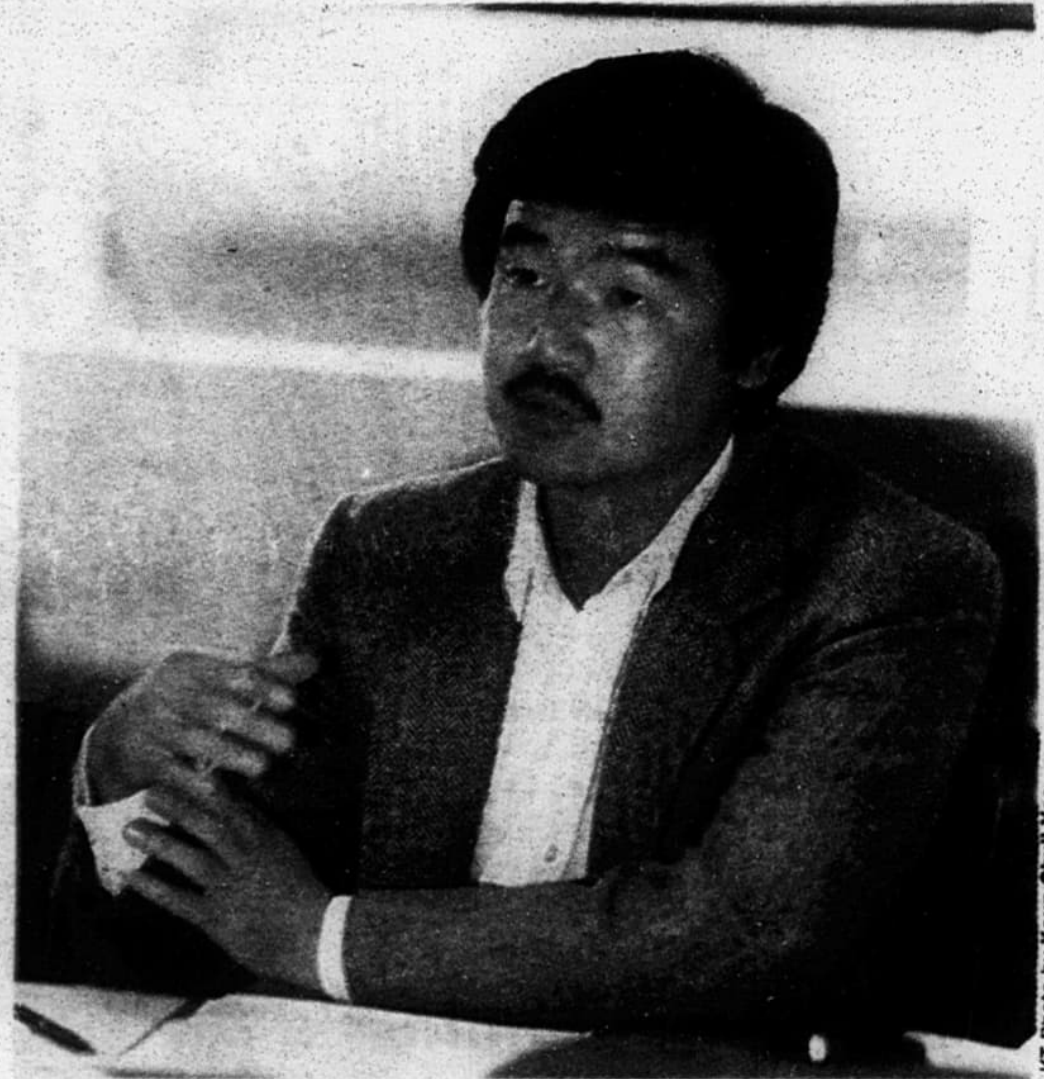
"I believe (the *L.A. Times*) should cover the (problem) as if it were a Los Angeles story, as if it

involves all Angelenos rather than just between Korean immigrants and underclass blacks," said Edward Chang, assistant professor of ethnic and women's studies at Cal Poly Pomona.

In a presentation before a Black-Korean Alliance meeting Nov. 14, Chang evaluated how the mainstream, Korean and black press have been covering the controversy. The BKA meeting in downtown Los Angeles was held to stimulate dialogue between its members and print reporters on how to insure more accurate and positive coverage of interethnic tension.

The mainstream media serves the public interest of the white

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**Edward Chang**, assistant professor of ethnic and women's studies at Cal Poly Pomona, critiques coverage of the *LA Times*

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middle-class, while Koreans and blacks are shut off from the "most influential medium of communication," which negatively stereotypes them, Chang said.

"Freedom of expression has become the issue of who has access to the medium of freedom of expression," he said. "People of color have limited access."

The *L.A. Times* articles may be "well-intentioned," but too often they focus on negative aspects such as boycotts and conflicts. But the media — as a corporate business — must attract readership and generate income by writing about "hot-topical issues," Chang said.

John Lee, a Korean American reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*, said it is sometimes difficult for mainstream editors and reporters to admit their prejudices.

"I think that is a big hurdle for a lot of editors," said Lee. "There is a lot of denial. If you confront them, they are going to be very defensive."

Part of the problem is that editors who define what is news don't live in all parts of the city or frequent them. "The only person they have to rely on are their reporters," said Lee.

When he was sent to cover the boycott in Brooklyn's Flatbush district, his editors had already concluded that Koreans were the victims based on the sensationalized articles they read in the New York tabloids.

African American activists have been boycotting two Korean-owned stores in Flatbush for almost a year, after one of the owners allegedly assaulted a black woman customer.

Chang said he believed the New York media helped prolong the Flatbush boycott by siding with Korean merchants and condemn-

ing boycott organizer Sonny Carson as a racist.

The black organizers felt they had no choice but to continue the boycott. "If they (ended it), they lose their power and influence in the black community," Chang said.

If there's one lesson interethnic conflict mediators could learn from the Flatbush boycott, Chang said, it is to not take sides.

Chang did not let the black and Korean-language media off the hook either. The Korean media was often guilty of ignorance and cultural insensitivity in the late 1970s, he said.

But their reporting has improved considerably over the years. That can be attributed to the two communities' growing recognition of the need for racial harmony, he said.

When the Korean media began writing about blacks more than a decade ago, many of their reporters "didn't know anything about race ... (they) were insensitive," Chang said.

Many of the articles were about black men committing crime, accompanied by such sensational headlines as, "Young Black Male Suspect."

But after the Korean media began re-evaluating how they should cover the topic, "I think they've gotten a lot better," Chang said. Informative articles on how merchants should conduct business in the African American community began appearing.

The Korean media began tackling the subject more seriously after the Flatbush boycott. They feared that "it could explode any moment if Korean Americans do not take proper measures to prevent its escalation," he said.

The Korean English-language newspapers' coverage, on the whole, has been "very good," said Chang. The reporters are personally interested in the issue and have

been culturally sensitized.

But like everyone else, they too have been guilty of ethnocentrism, he added.

The black newspapers' coverage has also been upgraded since 1983 when James Cleaver, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* editor, first ran a series of "very confrontational" editorials about Korean merchants, said Chang.

"Explosive terms" were used to describe the immigrant merchants' entry into the black community, such as "They are ripping us off" and "the invasion of the foreigners."

It was around this time that local African American activists began adopting those terms in their anti-Korean business campaigns, Chang said.

Both the black and Korean media have, however, begun to embrace the importance of racial co-existence and are writing about more positive activities, he said.

"But I think the major problem is there is still too much emphasis on negative aspects," Chang said.

Marsha Mitchell, a *Los Angeles Sentinel* reporter, said her publication's coverage depends on who's the editor.

Her current editor, Ron Dungee, is "not an agitator," and he specifically assigned her to attend the meeting to "get some positive press out there in terms of black-Korean relations," she said.

Before the meeting ended, the reporters agreed to continue holding dialogues with the BKA.

Chang suggested that maybe black and Korean reporters could co-write articles about each other's communities. But there needs to be "a strong commitment on part of the editors to promote mutual understanding," he emphasized.

The BKA was formed in 1986 under the auspices of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission.