

Fire next time?

Edward Chang reflects on the black-Korean conflict

Interview by K.W. Lee, editor

These are fearful times. Across the murderous inner cities of America, thousands of Korean merchants are putting their lives on the line to eke out a precarious living for the future of their children.

To their helpless outrage, the established media, like vultures, thrive on black Korean disputes, turning these isolated incidents into screaming racial headlines and soundbites.

What if another Latasha Harlins tragedy hit the headlines?

Are the non-English-speaking Korean settlements across the land prepared for another media-fanned racial fire?

These volatile hours cry out for the best available resources the Korean community can mobilize to reverse the tide of fear and alienation and to build bridges of goodwill with the African American community.

Yet the Korean American community continues to remain fragmented and isolated—without a consensus or direction.

Throughout the country, there are thousands of American-educated professionals pursuing their careers in law, medicine, finance, education, science, art and government sectors, but only a few of them have volunteered to contribute to the inter-ethnic bridge-building process critical to the very survival of the emerging immigrant community.

Assistant Professor Edward Chang of Cal Poly Pomona is one of the precious few who are out in the urban trenches to help douse the fire of ignorance and hatred.

Chang has been a steady and effective voice in the Black-Korean Alliance since it was established in the aftermath of the murders of four Korean merchants in April 1986.

A vanguard of the 1.5 generation, he came to America with his family at age 18 and joined the U.S. Army and served three years stationed in Germany.

He attended local colleges here, then transferred to UC Berkeley, where he received a bachelor's degree in sociology. He obtained a master's degree in Asian American studies at UCLA, then returned to Berkeley to earn his Ph.D. in ethnic studies.

Q: When did you first encounter the Black American experience?

A: When I was in the U.S. Army. The first time I was in the Army I knew immediately that this country was not what I envisioned. Why? Because there was a separation between whites and blacks. It was very clear. I had black drill sergeants. Many of the drill sergeants were black, but in basic training, you don't look at it racially. It's all pain and survival. My roommates were whites, blacks, Asians and Chicanos. That was my first encounter with blacks and other groups.

Q: How did you start developing an interest in the black and Korean relationship?

A: I thought this was an issue that the Korean American community must address—whether they like it or not because it is directly linked to community survival. Especially with the number of Korean merchants doing businesses in the black communities and at the same time, Latino communities.

So it's something we need to deal with on a community level, not on an individual level.



Edward Chang

A lot of the attitudes of Korean merchants—those who don't do business in black communities—get upset about all these issues because they don't deal with this issue directly. So I think there is a lot of misconceptions and a need to deal with this directly. I thought I could contribute by teaching about history.

I've been researching (community history and black-Korean relations) since 1984, collecting newspaper articles on the matter and so forth. I am also interested in Korean and Latino relations.

Q: You have been involved with the Black-Korean Alliance for three years. Looking back, any changes about the organization between then and now?

A: The membership has changed completely. Different people come and go all the time. The number of members goes up and down depending on whether we have an issue or not. Like the Latasha Harlins' case. All of a sudden we had 30, 40 people showing up, whereas before, there were 8 to 10 from both communities.

Q: Tell us about some African Americans whom you've come to know well while working with them?

A: Larry Aubry, I think, is a very good spokesperson for the African American community. He's a professional and understands the issues very well.

I haven't known him for too long, but Leo Terrell, who is the co-chair of the BKA, is on the right track. He's different from other African American persons whom I dealt with.

Another person who seems to be very honest is Dennis Westbrook, who is the director of the Martin Luther King Dispute Resolution Center. He's a very honest and sincere guy.

Most of the people who have participated in the BKA were more middle-class—they were professionals. So I haven't had any direct contact with the people who live in the community, and I would like to talk to them. We have to start reaching them.

That has been one of the major weaknesses of the BKA. We haven't had any direct participation from the community level. By the same token, we had very few Korean merchants participating. We need a firmer structure, but in order for that to happen, we need funding, office space...a focal point.

But, for now, we at least have a communication channel, which is a thousand times better than nothing. If something happens, you can call them and take an active measure right away.

In the New York case, they lacked any kind of

formal and informal communication channel between the two communities. The media was able to manipulate the two communities, pitting one against the other.

Q: Why do you think the media does that?

A: In the case of New York, it's very clear because New York City was boiling over with race conflicts between white and black communities.

The media tried alleviating black-white conflicts. But the African Americans came out as the racists. By accusing the blacks as racists, they seem to be saying "We are not the only racists, you are racists."

In the case of Koreans, they were hoisted up as a model minority—the hard-working, honest people. This escalated blacks' frustration and the case remains unresolved. The media took the side of Korean merchants. The blacks could not back out and some of the leaders could not make a deal because if you make a deal, that means you are selling out.

Q: This is because New York lacked the "mechanism" that Los Angeles has?

A: Oh yeah, they didn't have a communication channel and the media was able to play.

Q: In regard to the Latasha Harlins aftermath, has this incident brought out any prejudices among African Americans?

A: I think both blacks and Koreans hold prejudices against each other. The lack of information and false information contributed greatly to this.

Q: Why is this nativism against foreign-born people resurging?

A: Well, it's the "We've been here longer, you bunch of foreigners" type of attitude. It's related to a combination of the rise of Asia, the decline of U.S. economy, and the success of indoor swap meet stores.

Q: Is the Korean community different from others?

A: The Korean community is no different from any other community. We are a bimodal community. We have class differences. We have generational differences. We have religious differences. All communities encompass all of those.

A lot of the Korean merchants tend to be more Republican oriented. It's because they believe in immigrant ideology—"You can make it, anybody

can make it," and they blame blacks for their own oppression.

They say, "It's your own fault. You are the ones not willing to work. While we are putting 12 to 16 hours a day, we are trying to make a living. We are sending our kids to universities, and we are moving up. But you want to be on welfare. You don't want to work." I think they have this strong conviction.

Q: Tell us some of the fears of Korean merchants.

A: It depends on the locations. Many Korean merchants believe it or not, get along fine. I think the majority are. Because their clientele is in the surrounding blocks, they know everybody.

The first year is the most crucial period. If you survive the first year, then you can do business. The locals test you. They come in and create problems to see how you respond.

If you go over that first year, then you can do business. Several people said they were very fearful in the beginning, and now a lot of people say that they feel much closer to blacks than whites. It's their life now. They lose that color distinction. They become sort of color blind.

Q: So it's the constant contact with the customers that does this?

A: Not just contact. It's the quality of contact. For example, we can meet everyday but our relationship may not improve. But if our relationship is based on mutual trust and friendship—like getting to know you on a first name basis or getting to know about your family, knowing about funerals—this quality of contact does increase your friendship.

Q: If the majority of Korean merchants are getting along well, why this recurring conflict?

A: The economic frustration. If you go to one of these stores, there are no employment opportunities. There is strong resentment toward outsiders coming in. So there is a sense of hopelessness, despair, oppression among the blacks. Sometimes, Korean merchants are seen as oppressors because they are taking money out of the community.

(Next week: Second of two parts)
Peter Park provided the transcription.

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THANKS, MR. EVANS.

MY NAME IS AMY LEE, AND I WANNA BE YOUR CLASS PRESIDENT.

