

# Fire next time?

## Failure of selfish Korean elite



Interview by K.W. Lee  
Korea Times editor

**Q: On the subject of disrespect, what percentage of Korean merchants, would you say, are disrespectful? How?**

**A:** As far as I was able to observe, there are some people who are very rude. I mean if you are trying to sell an item, at least in terms of your expression, you'd want to have a smile. You want to show that you want to sell this product. A lot of times, their attitude is like this...a bit contemptuous.

My argument is that many Korean merchants are rude to me, too. I think the recent immigrants who have not learned the customs here, they are the ones causing the problem. But if you've been here, let's say five-10 years, they learn right away.

**Q: But it seems like a no-win situation to the ones who have established themselves when the new Korean merchants come and start problems for all of them. How does that work?**

**A:** Well, the problem here is that after four or five years of getting to know the community, they sell the stores.

So it starts all over. Then what happens is that the residents feel betrayed, and they start asking how long will you stay.

**Q: Should new merchants go into a black neighborhood when it is clear that they are not wanted?**

**A:** Not really. One solution is increased African American entrepreneurs. Right now, it's a disproportionate number. For example, among 100 liquor stores, 70 to 80 of them are run by Koreans. The rest are run by blacks, Middle Easterners and other Asians.

**Q: Why do you think first-generation Korean professionals educated in America stay away when critical issues involving Koreans come up?**

**A:** I think they are too Americanized. This means they only care about themselves. They only want to take care of their immediate values and they don't want to branch out to help the community.

I think it goes hand in hand with their Christian values, too. Many churches, all they care about is their own church, their own congregation, and nothing else.

I think it is very individualistic and we have learned too well about American individualism.

The Korean community seriously needs overhaul. We need to redefine our goal. Are we here to make money or are we making money for a decent quality of life—not for ourselves only.

Some are literally living for themselves. They are abandoning and neglecting their children. You talk to [Korean] college students, they are angry. They feel neglected, they feel they cannot talk to their parents' generation—these guys are lost. Particularly, 1.5 generation and second-generation kids.

We need to make a transition and we don't want to make the same mistake Isseis and Niseis have. I mean, in the camps, the Niseis

simply took over Isseis, you know, and they stepped on them. No respect for the elders. And the Isseis were virtually abandoned.

If this keeps on going, when the second-generation Koreans become the majority or in leadership positions, they may completely untie their relationship with the first generation.

**Q: But doesn't the first generation realize that?**

**A:** I don't think they care. They may have some sort of sense about it, but their priority is in material gains.

**Q: We have virtually thousands of Korean American professionals. Why don't they get involved?**

**A:** I think the reason why they go into those disciplines, first of all, is because they want to make money.

Let's take for example, if you become a lawyer, you have a choice whether to go into civil rights law area or corporate area. They are looking for an opportunity to make money. Medical doctors, they are the ones taking all the profits from the community and yet they are the least visible when it comes to these issues.

I have never run into one doctor at any of these community events. I ran into one

lawyer, briefly. But no CPAs, engineers, or professors.

Most feel like "Why should I participate?" They are afraid of African Americans and they don't want to deal with them. When I tell my students and other people that I'm going to South Central L.A. to a meeting, they think I'm crazy.

**Q: So the past 20 to 30 years of the Korean American experience demonstrates that one cannot expect the sacrifice or leadership from the best-educated or the best-situated in the community?**

**A:** Right. Until recently, we were too homeland-politics oriented. We cared about what was going on back in Korea. So the politics of the Korean community was pretty much determined by the Korean consulate and how the [Korean] media ran it. Our orientation was totally over there and we didn't really care much about here.

Also, most of the professionals are dispersed. They have very little contact with the physical Koreatown or Korean community.

**Q: But surely there are hundreds of professionals within reach of Koreatown?**

**A:** I think you are right to say that [it is unrealistic to expect the sacrifice from the best-educated or best-qualified]. This is the fact in case, not only here, but in Korea also. If you look at the graduates from Seoul National University, look at what they do.

**Q: How about the Koreans here? Do we also lack a value system?**

**A:** I think that's for sure. We need to develop it. We don't have a sense of direction...Korean American direction. We need to establish what it



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means to be a Korean American? I think that's a very important question as we look to the future.

**Q: So, who is going to lead the future? Who is going to "frame" our priorities?**

**A:** We cannot do it without the help of the [Korean] church. They have to play an important role, but they are not. The people in leadership positions are not doing it.

I think, for the future, real leadership has to come from young Korean American pioneers. The signs are good. Many of the students are struggling and out of this struggle, some will come out with visions that the Korean American community needs. It's going to take probably another 10 to 15 years.

I think we'll have to struggle. Even 10 to 15 years won't come automatically. It will come after struggle after struggle. In the meantime, we should direct all our attentions to the search of whatever that is.

**Q: Realistically, who can take over community functions, such as black and Korean functions, in the near future?**

**A:** It has to be the 1.5 generation. The second generation, right now, does not speak the language.

The problem here is that we don't have that many 1.5 generation. We always talk about the 1.5 generation, but there are very few who can speak Korean and English very fluently.

I am finding out at school that most of the students who call themselves 1.5 are neither fluent in Korean nor in English. Many of them aren't and it's a tragedy.