

## Preface

THE TASK OF LEARNING AND WRITING about Korean American politics is not an easy one to say the least. Among other things, it requires an honest discussion of the internal problems that beset different generations of leaders and organizations in trying to service and empower the Koreatown community without undermining the contributions they make in areas where American society has failed them. What my time in the field has taught me is that we must learn to explore internal divisions in order to find our way to unity. I have tried to emphasize the importance of looking at all facets of identity and interest, including race, ethnicity, nativity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, in order to provide a more complex picture of ethnic political solidarity in the post-1965 era. Although acknowledging the multiple problems that leaders face today, I dispute the general perception of ethnic organizations within the Korean American community as overridden by conflict and corruption and instead view the community as struggling to define itself and produce diverse forms of political leadership to meet the needs of different constituencies amid mainstream indifference, internal inequality, and intergenerational conflicts. This is certainly an admirable feat in an era in which community-based organizations must increasingly compete for limited resources and juggle conflicting loyalties and interests, all of which do not always accommodate easily to one another.

I would like to emphasize the fact that my investigation of hierarchies within ethnic politics is certainly not an attempt to claim that certain groups within the Korean American community have been fully empowered by their class or gender privilege. Instead, my use of the term “ethnic elite” is meant to imply that this privilege is only relative to others within the community

yet still marginal in respect to White elite powerholders in the United States. I suggest that in some ways the unequal distribution of power and resources within the ethnic community may be partly attributed to larger mainstream hierarchies and cultural perceptions. As such, this book is an effort to broaden current understandings of empowerment based on the differential access of indigenous groups to valued networks, resources, and institutions within both the ethnic community and mainstream society.

No matter what type of organization they work in, how many benefits they derive from this line of work, or how they are situated within this political hierarchy, individuals who have participated in such organizations have played a role in contributing to the betterment of the broader community in some way. My in-depth observations of board, staff, and volunteers within two such organizations have demonstrated to me the extraordinary level of commitment, humanitarianism, and effort that goes into nonprofit work, even at the expense of emotional, physical, and financial well-being. Nor is this type of dedication regularly rewarded. Interviewees have related to me the struggles they've encountered from a media culture that sensationalizes the troubles of the community, other leaders who question their personal motives and political loyalties, and even family and community members who pressure them about pursuing more higher-paying, prestigious occupations.

Having said this, I cannot even begin to express my gratitude to organizational clients, members, and leaders I have interviewed for assisting me with my research despite time limitations and personal conflicts. I am especially indebted to the staff of the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) and the Korean Youth and Community Center (KYCC) for not only allowing me access into their personal lives and experiences but also for teaching me the importance of giving back to the community. Although I cannot refer to them by name, I owe a special debt of gratitude to those interviewees who were willing to open up old wounds or relate to me private stories in order to contribute to this research and the community at large. I can only hope that I have done some justice to the sacrifices they've made and have made my own contribution to the Korean American community.

Taking this into consideration, I've tried my best to publicize the political concerns, personal hardships, and unheard voices of internally marginalized groups within the Korean American community while protecting the confidentiality of my interviewees and recognizing the great work that both first and 1.5/second generation organizations have achieved. I also want to

avoid the danger of characterizing these incidents as individual- or organization-specific weaknesses, but clarify the relevance of such issues to other community-based organizations both within and outside the Korean American community. For this reason, readers may note that parts of chapters may refer to specific incidents and controversies in a somewhat broad and ambiguous manner. I use pseudonyms for all my interviewees, but as I've warned them, certain figures may be easily recognizable to those even remotely familiar with the Korean American community. I did make two exceptions by including the names of select academics to give them appropriate credit for their insights and KIWA's and KYCC's former and current executive directors (with their permission), because it seemed that their prominent status made both their views and actions well known to the general public. To get some organizational feedback, I also consulted with a few interviewees and the past and present executive directors of KIWA and KYCC, who were gracious enough to read draft chapters.

I refrain from describing this book as a completely balanced and comprehensive overview of Korean American politics in the United States but instead as an effort to look beyond the generational divide. As a second generation Korean American striving to think like a 1.5 generation one, I have had to overcome a number of obstacles in order to understand the needs and perspectives of both generations, including language, cultural, budget, and time limitations. For one, the bulk of interview data was collected during my graduate school years. My position as a relatively young, second generation female graduate student proved to be an impediment in trying to solicit interviews from some immigrant leaders, some of whom were used to communicating on the basis of social status. Like most second generation community workers, I tried my best to balance my respect for and understanding of Korean immigrant culture with the need to assert my worthiness to those with whom I interacted. Of course, I must also recognize those other first generation leaders who were more than eager and willing to help me as a fellow Korean American. With my intermediate-level Korean, I made an extra effort to conduct interviews whenever I could and relied on student translators when I could not. However, these limitations prevented me from getting a comprehensive perspective on the views of immigrant leaders on certain issues.

Lastly, I'd like to point out how much I've learned by reengaging in volunteer work and conducting research in Los Angeles from both a personal and political standpoint. As one friend reminded me, both students and professors

alike have a tendency to lose sight of their own role within the communities they study and fall into the dangerous habit of exploiting such communities for their own academic needs. Long after the project is over, scholars should use this kind of opportunity to reconsider their own position within the communities they study and reengage themselves within the communities they live. I'm the last one to say that I've resolved all the internal conflicts and contradictions that this study has raised for me, but it is exactly this that I would like to convey through this research—the constant “personal-slash-political” process through which we confront our own privilege and how we can use that to change the world around us. It is the recognition that no one has found the one answer to social liberation, but it is this experience of challenging ourselves, as well as working toward the greater good (however that may be defined) that can be valuable in itself. Neither the quest for solidarity nor the valor of dissent should be devalued since both contribute to our individual and collective empowerment. If anything, I think that is one of the lessons that we have learned since the devastations of *sa-i-gu* (or 4-29) when the rioting first erupted and changed the course of Korean American politics.

I should note at this juncture that I use “Los Angeles civil unrest” and “Los Angeles riots” interchangeably throughout the book in order to recognize the two conflicting meanings that *sa-i-gu* has held for its victims and participants. On the one hand, there are those who claim that poor minorities took to the streets as a form of political protest against the conditions of poverty and discrimination that ravaged their communities—in other words, downplaying the chaos, irrationality, and lawlessness that the term *riot* implies. But then, there are others who adamantly maintain there could be no other word to express the tragedy and destruction the looters and arsonists spread by preying on powerless Korean immigrant merchants, who had little control over crime and poverty in urban areas and were being scapegoated for society's ills. I believe both sides represent some of the contradictions that emerge from social inequality in American cities today and are in that sense both legitimate despite their opposing claims.<sup>1</sup>

It is said that the topic we choose to study oftentimes reflects something that is near and dear to our personal histories, and this book has been no different in that respect. This study represents the culmination of all the years I have spent trying to understand my own ethnic identity and experiences, as well as those of family members and close friends. As such, I see those who have been gracious enough to allow me insight into their lives, to offer ideas

and critiques on my manuscript, or to help alleviate some of the emotional anguishes of writing a dissertation as having shared not only in the research processes but a part of me as well.

My study was most formatively shaped by the intellectual and spiritual guidance of my dissertation advisors and lifetime mentors, Min Zhou and Walter Allen, who have enriched my personal and academic development with their unending support, intellectual insights, and perceptive analysis of life experiences. Min's unbounded knowledge, caring guardianship of her students, and individual success as an Asian American female professor have given me much to emulate in my academic career. Although all have benefited from his endless wisdom and kindness, I have come to believe that Walter is the ideal mentor for students of color who have lost their way in the maze of graduate life, and I can only wish that everyone has the fortune to find someone as spiritually supportive and intellectually inspiring as he has been to me.

I would also like to express gratitude to my other two committee members, John Horton and Edward Park, for having put so much faith in my work and adding their own wisdom to the dissertation. As one of the top specialists and activists in Korean American politics, Edward Park graciously shared his knowledge, insights, and resources on the organizations discussed in this book and also commented on draft chapters from this study. A long-time mentor and a dear friend from my undergraduate years, Edward T. Chang, has also read and commented on parts of my dissertation and has indirectly helped me through the academic process with much-needed advice and support. Both were as much a part of these communities I studied as they were brilliant scholars, so they also teach by example.

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