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The Dawn of a New Generation: The Historical Evolution of Inter-Generational Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Organizational Politics

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It may be argued that one compelling issue to arise out of scholarly research on contemporary Asian and Latino immigration concerns the fate of those immigrants and their children who are no longer spatially isolated in traditional urban enclaves. In respect to today's immigrant communities, there has been an abundance of literature written on adaptation processes within the past couple of decades but a relative scarcity of material that has looked at the political transitions that these communities have been experiencing as new generations of leadership emerge and people begin to rapidly mobilize out of their respective enclaves into suburban communities.

The same applies to research on Koreans in America, which has been dominated by studies on immigrant entrepreneurship and to some extent, immigration adaptation processes with little attention to the political and organizational development of Koreatown. Although several works have touched on the structure of business-related associations (Min 1996; Park 1997), contemporary works on the impact of inter-generational relations on community-based organizations and Korean American political structures is still relatively sparse. However, earlier works by Ilsoo Kim (Kim 1981) and Bong Youn Choy (Choy 1979) and more recent studies by 1.5 generation scholars like Edward T. Chang (Chang 1988; Chang 1999) and Edward J.W. Park (Park 1998; Park 1999a) have contributed to our current understandings of ethnic politics by focusing on different aspects of Korean and Korean American leadership.

Drawing on these previous works and my own research data, the purpose of this article is to trace the historical evolution of Korean American organizations in Los Angeles within the context of ethnic power structures and to explore the various dimensions of inter-organizational conflict and cooperation as

they have affected community politics in the post-1992 Los Angeles Riots era. While I argue that ethnic

political structures in Koreatown have been formatively shaped by a variety of cultural, structural, and

historical forces, my work emphasizes the central presence of what I call the traditional "ethnic elite"[2] in

influencing community discourse and determining the lines of conflict and cooperation in ethnic politics.

In this study, "ethnic elite" refers to individuals and groups that occupy a higher status within the political

infrastructures of an ethnic community because of their greater access to the human, financial, and/or

social capital resources[3] of that community.

My own research draws on multiple methodological techniques, including ethnographic

fieldwork, face-to-face interviews, participant observation, small-scale surveys, and analyses of secondary

data.[4] The interview sample includes a total of 60 interviewees, including affiliates of two 1.5/ 2nd

generation Korean American organizations[5], as well as a variety of other organizational representatives,

church leaders, academics, youth, and immigrant businessowners from various generational backgrounds.

Although my research includes interviews with 1st generation leadership and studies by

immigrant scholars, the data relies heavily on the voices of newer generations of leadership among the 1.5

and 2nd generation. However, the hopes of this author is to contribute to the current dialogue on the

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[2] My investigation of hierarchies within ethnic communities is certainly not an attempt to claim that certain groups within the Korean American community have been completely 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 marginalized in respect to white elite powerholders of the U.S. Indeed, in some ways, the differential distribution of power and resources within the ethnic community may be partly attributed to larger mainstream hierarchies. As such, I attempt 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.

[3] Social capital refers to the resources and benefits to which individuals and groups have access by being part of an ethnic-based social network.

[5] The organizations are the Korean Youth and Community Center (KYCC) and the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA). KYCC is a non-profit social service agency assisting economically disadvantaged youths and their families, as well as a variety of other health, advocacy, community, business, housing, and employment-related services. KIWA has worked to organize, empower, and advocate for workers in the Koreatown community through legal assistance, protest demonstrations, educational seminars, and other political activities.

political emergence of 1.5/ 2nd generation ethnic organizations by maintaining a balanced understanding of both the old and new waves of political leadership that have come to shape Korean American politics today.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES IN KOREATOWN

Koreatown politics in the early years of its formation offer many parallels with that of other Asian immigrant enclaves in terms of its autonomous development from the rest of American society. Within the context of cultural and political isolation, Korean immigrants were able to build the foundations for ethnic political solidarity around their common experiences as immigrants, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s when the relatively small population was struggling with similar language and cultural disadvantages, marginal ethnic status in American society, spatial isolation in urban neighborhoods, and a common political cause directed against Japanese colonialism of Korea (1910-1943) (Choy 1979; Kim 1981; Takaki 1989; Yang 1982). Yet even beyond the immigration experience, the collective consciousness of the Korean immigrant community had been formatively shaped by a fierce sense of nationalistic pride and unity (as well as a deeply-seated suspicion of outsiders), stemming from a long history of oppression under colonial rule and foreign occupation in the homeland (*Ibid.*).

Whereas other immigrant populations like the Chinese community have built their political loyalties around native regional and linguistic differences, Korean immigrants in the U.S. have been bonded by the relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity of their native country. Instead, political power has been organized around other interests. In the case of Los Angeles, the development of community power structures has rested in the hands of three general elite groups – namely, church leaders, business owners, and several Seoul government-linked organizations (i.e. Korean Federation) – whose position have been strengthened and legitimated by key institutions like the Korean media and the General Consulate (Chang 1999; Park 1998). Although other groups have been instrumental behind the scenes,

the upper ranks of organizational hierarchies have been generally dominated by older immigrant males from middle-class backgrounds.

Korean newspapers are replete with reports of political conflicts and alleged misconduct among the ranks of community leadership even today – a by-product of internal struggles for individual status and prestige ("Problems of the Korean American..." 1992a; "Problems of the Korean American..." 1992b). Based on my research and interviews, I attribute this quality of Korean immigrant politics to several external factors. First, the underlying influence of Confucianism with its emphasis on individual status and hierarchies as well as Korea's short historical experience with democratic rule has been pivotal in intensifying tensions over organizational control and individual competition for presidential positions. Culturally and politically isolated from mainstream America, community-based organizations have also relied heavily on financial resources garnered from within the Korean immigrant community, which aggravates internal resource competition and makes accountability for individual expenditures more difficult to monitor.

In his works on Korean American church leadership, Pyong Gap Min (Min 2000) offers another compelling explanation for internal conflicts based on structural inequalities that middle- to upper-class Koreans encounter upon immigrating to the U.S. According to Min, presidential titles take on particular significance for Korean immigrants from privileged backgrounds, who while able to compensate for downward income and occupational mobility through small enterprise, are unable to recover their high social status through American organizations as a result of language/ cultural barriers and discrimination. As one 2nd generation male put it, "[With] the first generation, their status is tied to a title. If Dr. _____ didn't have that title, he's just like any other doctor." Thus, leadership positions in ethnic institutions like churches and political organizations help such members to make up for lost status upon immigration.

Despite these tensions, the overall level of ethnic political solidarity in the early stages of Korean immigrant settlement may be considered relatively strong and stable, particularly when we compare it to Korean American politics today. Aside from personal struggles for leadership status, overt political conflicts among Korean immigrant institutions during this early period were minimized in the interests of

mutual assistance, solidarity against mainstream indifference, and ethnic immigrant-based needs. Furthermore, the virtually uncontested concentration of power among the three aforementioned branches of the ethnic elite provided a stabilizing, albeit hegemonic, force over the political development of the ethnic community. Members of the ethnic elite generally dominated community discourse, leaving little room for major political dissent by internally marginalized groups like women and immigrant workers.

While the ethnic elite have been able to maintain relative control over Koreatown politics, a combination of structural and demographic changes in recent decades have laid the foundations for major changes within the political infrastructures of the Los Angeles Korean American community that have significantly weakened their uncontested stronghold over local affairs. For one, although the community did not fully emerge until after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, the Korean American population has since expanded and experienced rapid upward mobility and residential dispersal into outlying suburban neighborhoods of Los Angeles and Orange Counties, such as Fullerton, Garden Grove, and Glendale, despite the continuing presence of Korean-owned businesses and other ethnic institutions in Koreatown. Reflecting broader trends throughout Los Angeles County and California more generally, this outward movement has been accompanied by the massive influx of Latino residents and workers into the traditional ethnic enclave of Koreatown, which has transformed the neighborhood into a multi-ethnic community. Moreover, as the population matures, younger generations of leadership with new visions of political empowerment have emerged to contest the traditional values of the old ethnic elite. The leadership has been further inspired by political events in Korea, including the rise of anti-government student/ labor movements in the past few decades and more recent interest in North Korea-South Korea reunification.

The combined effects of residential dispersal, class divisions, racial diversification, and generational shifts have prompted structural and ideological transformations that set the stages for major political upheavals within the community. In particular, contemporary studies have focused on three specific events throughout the 1980s and 1990s as playing pivotal roles in shaking the foundations of traditional ethnic power structures in Koreatown and re-shaping the dynamics of inter-organizational

conflict and cooperation. These events include the 1980 Kwangju rebellions in South Korea (Chang 1988)[6], the Korean-Black conflicts of the 1980s (Chang 1996; Cheng and Espiritu 1989; Freer 1994; Park 1996; Yoon 1997) and early 1990s[7], and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots (Baldassare 1994; Cho 1993; Kim 1993). The first two events were critical in planting the seeds of ideological dissent against the pro-Seoul and pro-U.S. ethnic elite and setting in motion a generational shift in power that would shape the community's response to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. However, it was the climactic eruption of the 1992 Riots that had the most far-reaching effects because of its profound sentimental and financial consequences on the Korean American communities in Los Angeles and across the nation.

Sparked by the acquittal of police officers accused of beating up a Black motorist, the 1992 Los Angeles Riots involved five days of rioting among mostly disempowered Blacks and Latinos, which among other things, resulted in the massive destruction of Korean-owned small businesses throughout Koreatown and South Central (Hazen 1992; Ong and Hee 1993; "Riots Effects...." 1996). The Riots inflicted severe psychological and financial ruins on the immigrant businessowners and workers of Koreatown, who lost their lifetime investments and/ or sole means of livelihood in a matter of days. Furthermore, the victims were left to recover on their own as a result of language and cultural barriers that prevented them from effectively drawing on mainstream institutional support (Korean American Inter-Agency Council 1993). Because the event has received relatively wide coverage in current scholarly literature, I will limit the details of my discussion to four major consequences of the 1992 Riots on ethnic political solidarity.

United by a collective sense of loss, helplessness, and abandonment from American powerholders, the 1992 Los Angeles Riots was initially formative in strengthening a sense of ethnic consciousness among future generations of leadership and in rekindling political solidarity among Koreans in the U.S., regardless of their status, location, or background (Chang 1999; Kim 1993; Min

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[6] The Kwangju rebellions began as a major uprising among pro-democratic student leaders against military dictatorship in Korea in May of 1980 and ended as "one of the bloodiest struggles in modern Korean history."

1996). Secondly, the L.A. Riots conferred greater power to those who were best situated to seek outside financial support in the rebuilding process and to communicate the grievances and perspectives of Korean Americans to mainstream society – namely, native-born and native-reared Korean American leaders (Park 1998; Park 1999a). At the same time, this new leadership also brought with it new politically liberal and Americanized ideologies about the situation of the Korean American community in the U.S. that oftentimes clashed with those of the traditional ethnic elite, leading to periods of conflict amidst ethnic solidarity (*Ibid.*). Finally, by placing the Korean American community in the public spotlight, the 1992 Riots helped to unleash an influx of outside resources and institutional networks, which substantially expanded the outreach of more established 1.5/ 2nd generation organizations and provided internally marginalized ethnic organizations the opportunity to build a progressive base within the ethnic community. As I will discuss, these four developments would restructure the dynamics of inter-group opposition and cooperation among Korean American organizations in Los Angeles.

THE VARIOUS DIMENSIONS OF INTER-GENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN KOREAN AMERICAN POLITICS

Based on current scholarly literature and interviews with different generations of leadership, I find that the roots of inter-generational tensions in Korean American community politics may be attributed to several factors related to the divergent cultural values of the leadership, dissimilarities in organizational structures, language barriers, differential sources of empowerment and larger structural constraints faced by the community as a whole. These factors shape almost every aspect of political life—from day-to-day interactions among community leaders to organizational strategies on various political issues to more large-scale collective efforts within the ethnic community.

The most obvious area of conflict arises from incongruities between the traditional Korean belief systems of 1st generation leadership and the more Americanized perspectives of 2nd generation leaders.

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[7] The Korean-Black conflicts refer to tensions that arose between Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and African American patrons and activists regarding their treatment of minority customers in Los Angeles and other major cities across the nation.

As mentioned earlier, immigrant politics have been formatively shaped by Confucianist values that place greater emphasis on the importance of hierarchy in inter-personal relationships. Until the 20th century, Korean society was organized around a caste-like hierarchy between the "yangban (upper-class elite")" and "ssangnom (lower-class)," in which age, education, gender and social status dictated the nature of social roles and interaction – elements of which have carried over into Korean immigrant politics today. In this light, newer immigrant leaders interpret the assertive, critical, or informal mannerisms of younger, native-born Americans toward older immigrants as signs of insolence or at best, ignorance about their cultural roots and cherished value systems. Driven by both Confucianist ideals and the middle-class "American Dream," the values of the ethnic elite are firmly based on the belief that money determines control and legitimacy in the political arena (Chung 2001). At the same time, immigrant leaders have criticized younger generations of leadership for compromising or sacrificing the interests of Korean immigrants in order to further their own political agendas in America ("A Cause for Korean American..." 1994; Park 1999a).

In stark contrast, the Americanized values of younger, native-born/ native-reared Korean Americans are generally centered on concepts of democratic rule and equal opportunity (although how this plays out in the individual political perspectives and actions of liberal and conservative leadership varies considerably). More informed interviewees have expressed disdain or disillusionment with the alleged nepotistic and corrupt practices of the ethnic elite leadership, which they hear about or read about in ethnic newspapers. Furthermore, most do not subscribe to the deferential values of Korean immigrants, arguing that immigrant leaders are easy to criticize the hard work of 2nd generation leaders while actually doing little of the grunt work themselves. As such, one female interviewee pointed out that in America, respect is earned and not automatically given. More liberal factions also criticize such beliefs as legitimizing the marginalization and subordination of women and other racial minorities. While capitalism is certainly an underlying part of conservative American values, some argue from the pragmatic stance that preoccupation with financial interests demonstrates lack of understanding of political processes in the U.S.

In this respect, one should not underestimate the significance of language barriers not only in stifling the lines of communication that might help to mediate cultural clashes between generations of leadership, but also, in shaping the power dynamics of inter-generational relationships in different contexts. To explain, language may act as an important medium through which groups are able to protect their specific interests – from something as simple as understanding information passed in public proceedings to acquiring political legitimacy or representation within specific settings to gaining general access to ethnic or mainstream institutions. An ideal example of the power of language is demonstrated in my case study on a multi-ethnic public safety coalition called the Koreatown and West Adams Public Safety Association (Chung 2001). [8]   In this particular case, I documented how 1.5 generation Korean leaders began to wield greater political influence within KOWAPSA upon incorporating non-Korean-speaking leaders into the organization, while non-English-speaking Korean immigrants were inadvertently phased out of the organization because of language barriers. Although this particular situation suggests otherwise, my interviews nevertheless indicate that 1.5 generation leaders have generally played a critical role in bridging the cultural gap and mediating power struggles between different generations of leadership because of their bilingual skills and bi-cultural orientations.

Incompatible cultural systems may also help to explain the difficulties Korean/ Korean American organizations and inter-generational coalitions have experienced in either incorporating leaders of different generational status or working with others on collaborative projects. Despite efforts to enhance inter-generational solidarity in the aftermath of the riots, the absence of an institutional infrastructure that can involve younger generations on an equal level have been a major hindrance in the formation of ethnic political solidarity (Chang 1999). Chang (1999) makes a clear distinction between 1st and 2nd generation Korean American organizational structures with the former being based on a more autocratic and hierarchical style of leadership and the latter on a more democratic model of organization-building. He

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[8] KOWAPSA was initially established in March, 1994 by first-generation Korean leaders from the Koreatown community, who after a series of lengthy negotiations, incorporated upwardly-mobile African American and Anglo residents of the West Adams neighborhood associations. The official purpose of the organization is to oversee the construction of a new community policing substation between the borders of West Adams and Koreatown.

argues that immigrant organizations have largely failed in their efforts to include native-born generations in the post-Riot era, because they often relegate such members to menial tasks within the organization. My interviews confirm that individual interactions and coalitional efforts between both parties are often strained by such incompatibilities in organizational style. For instance, a common complaint among younger, more Americanized interviewees was that immigrant leaders tended to join projects in order to enjoy the public spotlight while assigning the brunt of the workload to younger members. As one 2nd generation activist complained, "How do you work with the 1st generation organizations where their understanding of 'let's work together' means 'I will work the whole thing and you just do the work for me?'"

Aside from simple value differences, these cultural conflicts are also indicative of larger inequalities in the social structures of both the ethnic community and mainstream society. One of the main sources of inter-generational conflict stems from intensified competition for resources and political representation within both ethnic and mainstream societies. The origins of this conflict are two-fold: For one, the politics of ethnic solidarity in the U.S. operates in such a manner that regardless of internal differences, Korean Americans – and in many cases, Asian Americans in general – must compete with each other for the same limited resources and political representation, because of the way many mainstream resources are oftentimes allocated through the lens of race and/ or ethnicity.

Second, the differential empowerment of 1st generation immigrants and 2nd generation Korean Americans suggests not only that each side has something that the other side doesn't, but also, that each side *lacks* something that the other has. Such inequality is indicative of the marginal social status of Korean Americans in different strata of ethnic and mainstream social structures. In the case of 1st generation immigrants, lower nativity status in addition to language and cultural barriers prevents them from developing valuable social and institutional ties with mainstream institutions – thus, excluding them from the benefits of political representation, mainstream resources, and outside institutional support. Although certainly empowered by their access to these very networks particularly in the post-Riots era, 2nd generation leaders do not have the same capacity to mobilize the abundant resources and networks of

the ethnic community, which continue to maintain substantial value in a society that places limitations on what ethnic organizations can do.

All in all, the origins of political and ideological tensions between the 1st generation and the 2nd generation arise from both pragmatic and sentimental attachments to different imagined ethnic communities – one based on a homeland-oriented construction of the ethnic community and the other straddling the boundaries of both ethnic-America and American citizenship. From a pragmatic perspective, each side is best situated to represent different constituencies within the larger community but is most empowered within his or her respective political sphere. For instance, Korean immigrants would not tend to fare as well in a political arena in which English is the dominant language, social networks with American institutions are vital to daily operations, and prestige is determined by American norms of leadership. The same can be said for 2nd generation leaders situated within a homeland-based ethnic power structure. Furthermore, intense disagreements about where Korean Americans should direct their time, money, and attention (i.e. homeland politics or American politics) also stem from strong emotional and psychological connections to these different imagined communities. Depending on how ethnic politics is spatially conceptualized, Korean American leaders have utilized different strategies for participating in U.S. politics, empowering the Korean American community, and relating to other racial minority groups, among other things (Chang 1996; Park 1999a).

THE COMPLEXITIES OF "NEW" KOREAN AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS IN POST-1992 LOS ANGELES

Although inter-generational relations has certainly been a defining feature of contemporary community politics, the lines of inter-organizational conflict and cooperation are not always based on generational status. Differential empowerment may create the conditions not only for inter-generational conflict, but also, inter-generational dependency, such that some 1.5/ 2nd generation organizations must still work within the constraints of immigrant power structures. Even organizations like KIWA that have drawn negative attention from the ethnic elite and the Korean media have built a visible base of support

within the broader immigrant population.[9] Furthermore, relations *among* 1.5 and 2nd generation leaders –

although more stable than relations with 1st generation leaders – are still subject to the fragmentary effects

of ideological dissonance and resource competition. If anything, it is more useful to conceptualize the

foundations of political loyalties as being organized around relations with the traditional ethnic elite

leadership as partly determined by the organization's political agenda.

My research shows that as opposed to simply supplanting one ethnic power structure with

another, generational transitions in the political leadership of the ethnic community have resulted in the

diversification of ethnic organizational structures that continue to operate in relation to traditional

immigrant hierarchies – whether it be in a cooperative or oppositional manner. In the aftermath of the

1992 Riots, two specific types of 1.5/ 2nd generation organizations have assumed positions of prominence

and played critical roles within Korean American politics – namely, social service agencies and political

advocacy groups. The few works that have been done on contemporary organizations in Koreatown have

noted the rise of several 1.5/ 2nd generation organizations, including political organizations, such as the

Korean American Coalition (KAC), the Korean American Democratic Committee (KADC), and the

Korean American Republican Association (KARA); social service agencies like the Korean Youth and

Community Center (KYCC), the Korean Health, Education, Information, and Research Center (KHEIR),

and the Korean American Family Service Center (KAFSC); and advocacy groups, such as the Korean

Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) (Chang 1999; Park 1998). Korean American leaders have also

become involved with important alliances, such as the Multi-Cultural Collaborative (MCC) and the Asian

Pacific Americans for a New Los Angeles (APANLA). Relative to immigrant organizations of the past,

1.5 and 2nd generation Korean American organizations have become more heterogeneous in terms of

internal structure, service provision, political visions and ideologies, support networks and their

relationship with the traditional ethnic elite, partly as a result of greater access to resources and

heightened political visibility after the 1992 Riots.

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[9] In the case of KIWA, this base of immigrant support is primarily composed of immigrant workers and progressive activists.

At the crossroads of inter-generational conflict and cooperation, 1.5/ 2nd generation ethnic organizations have situated themselves in different positions within the organizational structures of Koreatown, depending on how they have negotiated their relations with traditional immigrant powerholders. In general, my study (Chung Forthcoming) has found that most 1.5/ 2nd generation Korean American organizations fall somewhere in a continuum between two ideal types of ethnic community-based organizations. On the one hand are those organizations that have established relatively stable (albeit not conflict-free) relations with immigrant elite groups, partly because they share certain fundamental eth-class values (e.g. middle-class American Dream) and also rely on them to a certain degree for political legitimacy, resources and other kinds of support from the immigrant-based population. On the other hand, we have also witnessed the recent emergence of more progressive and ideologically driven organizations whose values are more oppositional than coinciding with those of the ethnic elite and who must therefore draw on stronger networks outside the ethnic community, including transnational, Asian American, or labor-based organizations.

While they have certainly made inroads in terms of enhancing generational solidarity through intra-generational coalitions like the Korean American Inter-Agency Council (KAIAC)[10], more subtle power differentials continue to play out even among 1.5/ 2nd generation ethnic organizations. Part of this difference has to do with where these organizations primarily derive their resources and support within the ethnic community and mainstream society. An organization's main base of support is determined by its leadership (including the executive director and governing board), the political agenda of the organization, the historical origins of its emergence, and the population on which it relies for most of its programs. Those who have stronger networks with the ethnic elite leadership as well as mainstream corporations and governmental institutions have tended to wield greater influence over political affairs than do those with weaker networks in these areas. My observation of alliances and political interactions among different 1.5/ 2nd generation organizational leaders indicates that how resources are distributed and

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[10] KAIAC is a coalition of 1.5/ 2nd generation Korean American organizations that was established in the aftermath of the 1992 Riots in an effort to coordinate collective resources and prevent conflict over future "turf issues."

collaborative strategies are formulated depend largely on who has the strongest influence over these types of intra-generational efforts. Of course, other features, such as the strength of the organization's leadership (i.e. the executive director), also factor into the power equation, but nevertheless, organizational support networks lay the foundations for determining status in ethnic hierarchies.

I would like to add a note that other ethnic communities have also played an increasingly crucial role in the development of Korean American politics, especially in light of the demographic shifts and political events mentioned earlier that opened the doors of the community to the outside world. In particular, as new generations of leadership arise, ethnic community politics is more likely to be influenced by the growing presence of Latinos from the local neighborhoods of Koreatown to the larger governmental structures of Los Angeles and even California. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Latinos constitute more than half of Koreatown's residential population – a demographic trend that has had variable impact on newly emerging Korean American organizations. Among the current generation, organizational responses have varied with some groups maintaining minimal contact with the Latino population, others establishing inter-organizational linkages and coalitions with other Latino groups, and still others incorporating Latinos as clientele and staff members. As of yet, however, the overall influence of the Latino community on the power structures of the Korean American community may still be considered negligible, because of their language barriers, vulnerabilities as "non-citizens," insufficient socioeconomic resources, and minimal capacity to organize politically, among other obstacles.

CONCLUSION

As the tragedies of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots begin to fade into the distant memories of our past, our community may either choose to forget the mistakes that led up to this key turning point in Korean American history or find ways to grow as a collectivity from what we have learned. In particular, we must ask ourselves how we can change in order to find greater political empowerment both as a community in itself as well as a community embedded within the broader American society. In many

respects, both generations of leadership have made significant headway, yet history shows how this progress has been riddled with periods of conflict amidst cooperation and inequality amidst solidarity.

In the earlier years of its political formation, the ethnic power structures of Koreatown were governed by the three branches of the ethnic elite – namely, church leaders, businessowners, and certain homeland-linked organizational presidents – whose authority both ensured stability and stifled opposition from marginalized groups. Within the context of various structural and demographic shifts, the Kwangju Rebellions, the Korean-Black conflicts, and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots opened the doors of opportunity by challenging the pro-Seoul, pro-U.S. ideologies of the ethnic elite, increasing representation among 1.5 and 2nd generation organizations, and opening the doors to mainstream society and its abundant resources. This transformation brought about a significant shift in community power structures that ultimately heightened inter-generational conflict and introduced new forms of internal inequality based on traditional hierarchies and organizational partisanship. At the same time, new ethnic organizations have shown significant resilience and dynamism by adapting their political strategies to these internal hierarchies and drawing on alternative sources of support. Hence, ethnic politics in Koreatown is shown to be characterized by fluctuating periods of inter-group tension as well as ethnic solidarity.

What are the implications of these findings on current literature? Traditional studies on assimilation argue that immigrant adaptation is a uni-directional straight-line process, whereby immigrants begin on the peripheries of the ethnic enclave economy but are eventually able to achieve full cultural and socioeconomic integration into mainstream social structures over generations by foregoing most ethnic affiliations (Gordon 1964). From the perspective of ethnic politics, this would be manifested by the simple transferal of power from the 1st generation to the 2nd generation, the increasing fragmentation of political leadership, and eventually, the dissolution of ethnic politics as we know it (Abelmann and Lie 1995). Instead, my research finds that ethnic ties are still critical to the political development and individual progress of Korean Americans by consolidating crucial resources and networks that each generation lacks but the other has. In simplest terms, the 1st generation is best able to

mobilize the resources and networks of the immigrant population, whereas the 1.5 and 2nd generation are well situated to tap into non-co-ethnic networks and mainstream institutions.

At the same time, ethnic politics is much more complex in that it is characterized by significant heterogeneity and inequality both within and across different generations of political leadership. On one hand, one may argue that it is this diversity of political perspectives that makes for a rich and fruitful dialogue in the political arena by bringing a voice to both the empowered and the marginalized. At the same time, I would contend that the ultimate goal would be not only to negotiate the vast cultural differences that divide our political leadership but also, to find a way to maximize the effective use of our ethnic and mainstream resources in such a way that power is granted to all groups within the ethnic community and not only its powerholders, both new and old. Only in this way can the Korean American community rightfully begin to demand full equality and respect within the broader American society.

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