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Elderly Korean Women in Little Tokyo Towers:
Dispelling the Myth of Homogeneity

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

By

Jane Lee

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Elderly Korean Women in Little Tokyo Towers:
Dispelling the Myth of Homogeneity

By

Jane Lee

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Valerie Matsumoto, Chair

This ethnographic, sociological, and historical project explores the underrepresented diversity of experiences of elderly first-generation Korean women living in Little Tokyo Towers, and critically analyzes how gender, class, age, and homeland experience have impacted the ways that they navigate their relationships with their Japanese American neighbors, as well as within their own Korean community. Through my collection of oral histories, this project opens a window into examining an array of issues that challenge popular assumptions about the elderly, inter-ethnic relations, and community formation.

The Thesis of Jane Lee is approved.

Namhee Lee

David K. Yoo

Valerie Matsumoto, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Ki Deuk Lee,
for her prayers, love and encouragement, and our weekly Sunday lunches.

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Elderly Korean Women in Little Tokyo Towers: Dispelling the Myth of Homogeneity

INTRODUCTION

It is an unseasonably hot October afternoon in Los Angeles and the sun is shining brightly outside Young Shin Park's tidy fifteenth story apartment. Park has just come home from her daily morning swim at the Downtown YMCA before meeting me for our interview. At 86, her short hair is completely white but her skin is glowing and her eyes are bright. Past her lush little patio garden is a clear uninterrupted view of East L.A. We are sitting at a small square wood dining table and Park is describing her experience of moving into Little Tokyo Towers in 1996 when the doorbell rings. She opens the door and greets her Japanese neighbor who is dropping by to share some Asian pears with her. They exchange a few friendly words in Japanese before Park closes the door and eagerly heads into the kitchen to cut a pear for us to eat as we continue our interview.

Within the past five years, the Little Tokyo Towers senior home has attracted the attention of media news outlets including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Rafu Shimpo* in their coverage of Little Tokyo's recent demographic shifts, namely the influx of Korean residents and shop owners.¹ Social dynamics between elderly Japanese and Korean residents of Little Tokyo Towers are particularly intriguing given that many of the Koreans like Young Shin Park grew up

¹ Julie Ha, "Neighborhood Watch," *The Rafu Shimpo – Los Angeles Japanese Daily News*. September 13, 2008. <http://www.rafu.com/en/2008/0913/feature.html> (Accessed 16 January 2012); Teresa Watanabe, "Japanese and Koreans learn to live together in harmony in L.A.'s Little Tokyo" *Los Angeles Times*. February 23, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-korjapan23-2009feb23,0,2634061.story> (Accessed 16 January 2012); Ryoko Ohnishi, "Little Tokyo Seniors Gather to Promote Harmony: Friendship party brings together Japanese and Korean seniors," *The Rafu Shimpo – Los Angeles Japanese Daily News*. October 14, 2010. <http://www.rafu.com/2010/10/little-tokyo-seniors-gather-to-promote-harmony/> (Accessed 16 January 2012).

under Japanese occupation from 1910-1945, and are the last generation to experience it first-hand. A prominent theme in these news articles is the efforts of Korean seniors to be “good neighbors,” organizing activities and events to build community with Japanese residents. While several Korean men were highlighted in these news stories, very little attention has been paid to the experiences of first-generation Korean immigrant women

My research explores the experiences of elderly Korean women through the collection of oral histories to reveal a much more complex picture of how histories of war have shaped contemporary community dynamics. In doing research among women living in Little Tokyo Towers, this project opens a window into examining an array of issues that challenge popular assumptions about the elderly, inter-ethnic relations, and community formation. These findings are striking because they produce a counterpoint to the depiction of inter-ethnic relations disseminated by both the ethnic media and mass media. For the most part, gender and class have been left out of these accounts. Through my collection of oral histories, gender and class become foregrounded, revealing a diversity of experiences and startling differences in their perceptions of their daily lives.

This ethnographic, sociological, and historical project looks at the ways that elderly immigrant Korean women living in Little Tokyo Towers deal with difficult historical legacies of Japanese colonization and war, and navigate their relationships with their Japanese and Japanese American neighbors, as well as within their own Korean community. I investigate key sites including age cohort, socio-economic class differences, social networks, and social services to examine individual perceptions of what it means for these women to be a “good neighbor” as relative newcomers in a historically Japanese American ethnic enclave. Contrary to previous assumptions that these characteristics would be evaluated by Japanese residents, my research

reveals that it is actually Koreans who are surveilling and attempting to regulate the behaviors and attitudes of Korean newcomers. This surveillance is deeply imbedded in what I discern as internalized colonial values of what constitutes a “good citizen” or, in this case, a “good neighbor.”

This project highlights the underrepresented diversity of experiences of elderly Korean women, and critically analyzes how gender has shaped their role in the public and private spheres. My research explores how gendered assumptions, mechanisms of social control, and expectations relating to family, caretaking, propriety, and work impact the ways in which women relate to their neighbors and their levels of engagement in the broader community. A key aspect of my study is examining how historical memory affects these women, informing the choices they make when they are confronted by reminders of past grievances in their everyday life as residents of Little Tokyo Towers.

In order to better understand the experiences of elderly Korean women living in America, it is important to recognize the cultural values and expectations regarding aging in Korea that have inevitably impacted perceptions of their own experiences of aging. According to customary ethics of filial piety, children owe their parents absolute obedience and support in their old age, and elders occupy a place of respect and authority in the extended family. Given the widely accepted principle of primogeniture in Korea, the burden of caring for elderly parents has rested mostly upon the eldest son.² In their study on living arrangements of contemporary elderly Koreans, social scientists Min-Ah Lee and Margaret J. Weber assert that although the traditional extended family still remains the most common arrangement for seniors in Korea, the rapid

² Gyoung Hae Han, “Tradition and Modernity in the Culture of Aging in Korea,” *Korea Journal of Population and Development*, Vol. 25, No. 1, July 1996, p. 43.

industrialization and urbanization of Korean society has prompted a shift in people's values around family and filial piety.³ As Korea becomes increasingly Westernized, adopting ideals of individualism and independence, more elders are choosing to live alone even at the cost of loneliness and isolation, not wishing to be thought of as "useless or burdensome."⁴

A 2009 survey conducted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) indicated that there were 927,560 elders aged 65 and over living in Seoul, up 26.8% from 731,350 in 2005. Of those seniors, 203,100 were found to be living alone, constituting 22% of Seoul's total elderly population. This is a 63% increase from 2005 when studies showed that 124,900 seniors were living alone. In a 2010 *Korea Times* article, Kim Myong-yong of the Seoul Senior Welfare Department stated that while many seniors living alone suffered from financial instability and health-related problems, their top concerns were loneliness and safety.⁵ Despite these concerns, however, the SMG survey found that only 27.9% of elderly citizens expressed that they wanted to live with their children. The remaining 72.1% sought to support themselves while living in close proximity to their children or professional elder care.

While the number of aging Korean senior citizens in the United States who migrated post-1965 continues to grow rapidly, they are often overlooked or neglected by society as well as within academic scholarship. In the field of Asian American Studies, there is very little scholarship that focuses specifically on the elderly. My research will add to increasing the diversity and understanding of the category of Asian Americans, and provide new insight into the valuable experiences of elderly first-generation Korean women who have been directly

³ Min-Ah Lee and Margaret J. Weber, "The Effects of Elderly Koreans' Individual Characteristics on Living Arrangements," *Journal of the American Association of Housing Educators*. 27:2 (2000), p. 46.

⁴ Han, "Tradition and Modernity in the Culture of Aging in Korea," 45.

⁵ Mee-Yoo Kwon, "1 in 5 senior citizens live alone in Seoul," *The Korea Times*, 2010 May 5. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/05/117_65423.html (Accessed 28 May 2013).

impacted by occupation, war, and displacement while exhibiting tremendous resilience and tenacity.

LITTLE TOKYO TOWERS: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

The Little Tokyo Towers subsidized senior-housing complex was launched in 1975 by community activists to prevent elderly Japanese American residents from being displaced by aggressive redevelopment backed by overseas interests from Japan.⁶ Although the Little Tokyo Towers community within the sixteen story, 300-unit building has historically been predominantly ethnic Japanese, over the past ten years there has been a noticeable shift in the population as a growing number of Korean residents have moved in, seeking alternatives to overcrowded senior facilities in Los Angeles's neighboring Koreatown. Now it is estimated that Koreans constitute almost half of the current residents living in the housing complex with the majority of residents being women, many of whom are widowed and living alone.⁷ Given the general predominance of women outliving their husbands thus resulting in lowered retirement income, it is not surprising that women comprise the majority of the Little Tokyo Towers resident population.⁸

According to a recent survey of Little Tokyo Towers residents conducted by the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) in Spring 2012, the ethnic breakdown is roughly 54% Japanese, 43% Korean, 3% Chinese, and 1% Other. What I found particularly interesting were findings on

⁶ Jan Lin, *The Power of Urban Ethnic Places: Cultural Heritage and Community Life*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p. 41.

⁷ Yasue Clark, "Spring 2012 Little Tokyo Tower Survey," (Los Angeles, CA: Little Tokyo Service Center, 2012) p. 1.

⁸ "Senior Apartments," *As You Age*. http://www.asyouage.com/Senior_Apartments.html.

primary language spoken – of the 203 respondents, 108 indicated Japanese as their spoken language, 84 Korean, 8 Chinese, 1 English, 2 Other (Tagalog and Italian). The overwhelming number of Japanese-speakers was an unexpected revelation upon embarking on this research endeavor. Given the long history of Japanese Americans in the United States, I had expected most Japanese residents to be English-speaking Nisei. However, as LTSC community organizer Yasue Clark pointed out, most Japanese residents are in fact Kibei Nisei – American-born Nisei who have spent a significant part of their formative years being educated and raised in Japan.⁹ The survey also included a breakdown of age among Little Tokyo Towers residents – 3% in their 60s, 41% in their 70s, 48% in their 80s, and 10% in their 90s. The average age of residents by ethnicity ranged from 82 for Chinese residents, 81 for Japanese, and 79 for Koreans.¹⁰

A previous LTSC survey of specifically Korean residents conducted in 2005 revealed that more Koreans were moving to Little Tokyo because senior facilities in Koreatown are overcrowded, and “despite historical tensions with Japanese, Koreans feel more comfortable in an Asian environment than a white or Latino one.”¹¹ Among their reasons for moving to Little Tokyo Towers, Korean seniors were attracted to the quality of housing and affordability, along with the desire to live with other Asians. In this case, race becomes an axis of connection that

⁹ *Kibei* literally translates to “returned to the United States.” According to sociologist Jane Yamashiro, many Issei immigrant families in the 1920s and 1930s struggled to maintain economic stability and support their children. For those who already had the intention of returning to Japan as soon as they saved enough money to take back with them, it made sense to have their children educated in Japan until their eventual return. Also, given the political climate, some Issei immigrants who were planting roots in America anticipated that Nisei would face racial discrimination and believed that a Japanese education would offer their children additional options should opportunities in the United States become too limited. As a result, Kibei Nisei often have native or near-native Japanese language skills, in contrast to Nisei, who were raised in the United States and have more limited Japanese language skills. - Jane Yamashiro, “Nisei” from *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Society*, ed. Richard T. Schaefer. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 987.

¹⁰ Yasue Clark, “Spring 2012 Little Tokyo Tower Survey,” (Los Angeles, CA: Little Tokyo Service Center, 2012).

¹¹ Teresa Watanabe, “Japanese and Koreans learn to live together in harmony in L.A.'s Little Tokyo” *Los Angeles Times*. February 23, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-korjapan23-2009feb23.0.2634061.story> (Accessed 16 January 2012).

trumps ethnic contentions between Japanese and Korean communities who have historically found moral and material support from ethnic enclaves in the face of alienation and exclusion from the mainstream society.¹²

However, as the visibility of Koreans in Little Tokyo's senior housing increased over the past ten years, so did the complaints. Hongsun Kim, a Korean social worker at LTSC recalled how the subject of the Korean influx would come up repeatedly in monthly meetings with the Little Tokyo Towers leadership. There were many complaints about Korean residents failing to follow the rules of the building, but this was rooted in the fact that apartment regulations and announcements were posted exclusively in Japanese and English.¹³ From the Korean side, Kim began hearing complaints that Japanese residents were "cold" and "snobby." One such incident involved a Korean resident who greeted a Japanese neighbor in the elevator, and became upset when the Japanese man did not respond. Kim explained, "The Korean person got very angry and offended, but later we found out that the Japanese man just had a severe hearing problem. He didn't hear him saying hello, but the Korean resident assumed it was because he was Korean."¹⁴

In order to address these types of conflicts and complaints, a group of Korean residents formed the Good Neighbors Club in 2005 to promote understanding and congenial relations with their Japanese neighbors in Little Tokyo Towers. The Good Neighbors Club's community-building initiatives drew the attention of the local news media, which heralded their efforts as a model of "containing cultural conflict and building cohesion" for ethnic communities

¹² Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, "Transforming Asian America: Globalization and Contemporary Immigration to the United States." In *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2nd Ed. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, eds. (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2007), p. 125.

¹³ Hongsun Kim. Personal Interview with author. Torrance, CA. 24 January 2012.

¹⁴ Ibid.

experiencing similar demographic shifts of new populations joining long-settled ones.¹⁵ This was particularly significant as increasing anxieties and fears of a purported “Korean take-over” were surfacing within the broader Little Tokyo community.¹⁶

While Kim attributes much of the tension and conflict between Korean and Japanese residents to the contentious historic relationship between the two nations, my research suggests a much more complex dynamic of inter-ethnic relations stemming from the heterogeneity of the elderly Korean population and their varied experiences across age cohorts, socio-economic class, and changing social and cultural contexts. Through conducting oral histories with five elderly Korean and one Japanese American Kibei Nisei woman living in Little Tokyo Towers, I explore gendered perceptions of inter-ethnic relations, community, and family. As residents and community members work toward reconciling historical grievances and cultural differences, the politics of memory that are performed in everyday social, political, and economic practices become a critical site of analysis. For Japanese Americans, Little Tokyo is a symbolic site of remembrance and cultural preservation for their community that was systematically displaced and incarcerated by the U.S. government on the basis of their ethnicity and Japanese heritage during World War II. For elderly Koreans who now call Little Tokyo home, it becomes a site of remembrance of a dark colonial past that has had profound impacts on their identity formation and the trajectory of their individual as well as collective life histories.

Despite their majority presence in Little Tokyo Towers, women have been absent from leadership positions within the organizations that have formed to promote understanding and friendship between Japanese and Korean residents. Simon Yoon, a first-generation Korean

¹⁵ Watanabe, “Japanese and Koreans learn to live together in harmony in L.A.’s Little Tokyo” *Los Angeles Times*. February 23, 2009.

¹⁶ Simon Yoon. Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 27 February 2012.

immigrant born in 1922, has emerged as a prominent leader in the Good Neighbors Club, and has been a key public figure in the efforts for reconciliation between Korean and Japanese residents. Yoon has become an informal spokesperson on behalf of Korean residents, and has been featured in several newspaper and magazine articles. Korean women's voices are largely missing from these accounts. Young Shin Park, who has also been involved with the Good Neighbors Club since its inception, explained how she liked to take more behind-the-scenes roles, taking care of registration or organizing logistics for food at their events.¹⁷ This research project will highlight the overlooked experiences of women who may be involved in less visible and public ways, and center their voices in the narrative of inter-ethnic engagement and shifting community dynamics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In choosing to focus on Korean immigrant women, I approach my research project with a framework of gendered postcoloniality. Drawing on historian Takashi Fujitani's conception of "double oppression" experienced by colonized Korean women as both Korean and as women, I pay particular attention to the ways that their narratives have been obscured by male-focused discourses of decolonization and national identity.¹⁸ In addition to oppression from the Japanese during the colonial period, women were made to bear the burden placed upon them by Korean nationalists to be "mothers of the nation," tasked with maintaining the boundaries of

¹⁷ Young Shin Park, Personal Interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

¹⁸ Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as American during World War II*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2012), p. 373.

ethnic/national groups, transmitting culture, acting as signifiers of national difference, and upholding Korean tradition and solidarity.¹⁹

My interviewees revealed shared experiences that emerged given the internal and external pressures to be obedient daughters, wives, and mothers; these pressures were exacerbated by tumultuous times of occupation, war, and displacement. The centrality of women to the family unit has also played a large part in their decisions to move to the United States from Korea. Among their reasons for immigrating to the United States were to further their children's education in order to ensure greater economic opportunities in the future, to help take care of their grandchildren so that their children could pursue the "American dream," and to follow their husbands in their own pursuit of prosperity and economic advancement.

In doing this research, it was also important for me to employ feminist theory that privileges the lived experiences of marginalized immigrant women. Feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty has criticized Western feminist studies scholars for using a paternalistic Western-centric ideology that attempts to essentialize the "third world woman" as the oppressed victim, while in the process stripping them of historical and political agency.²⁰ With this in mind, I aim to craft a non-colonial approach to the historical narratives of elderly Korean migrant women that highlights the social and political complexities of the context in which they live, as well as their differing political interests, social classes, and cultures. In my examination of Little Tokyo Towers residents, I seek to dismantle larger assumptions of a cohesive monolith of elderly

¹⁹ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation" in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20:3 (1991), p. 377.

²⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 19.

Korean immigrant women by highlighting the distinctions that shape the ways that they choose to engage with their surroundings.

Lastly, in examining the inter- and intra-ethnic dynamics within Little Tokyo Towers, I employ historian Todd A. Henry's elucidation of "affective racism" in Japanese-occupied Korea, which he defines as "the insidious practices of differential incorporation that relied upon ethnic proximity and the lure of cultural assimilation as the basis for temporarily, if not permanently, marking the inherently porous boundaries between model Japanese subjects and colonized Korean others."²¹ Henry argues that affective racism worked to bridge the gap between assimilation and discrimination by encouraging Koreans to embody a set of cultural sensibilities and characteristics which was perceived to form "Japaneseness," or the "*Yamato* spirit." Henry demonstrates the complexities and challenges that arise when trying to racialize and culturally differentiate communities against such arbitrary and ambiguous criteria. This becomes particularly complicated when communities live in close proximity that fosters constant cultural exchange, as in the case of the Koreans and Japanese settlers in Korea who shared physical similarities as well as shared historical and cultural roots according to Japanese colonial discourse. Henry asserts that language and terminology were utilized as ways to "create, mark, and patrol the less visible, cultural boundaries" separating the Japanese from Koreans.

I argue that this practice of affective racism has played a large role in shaping the ways in which first-generation Korean women engage with and perceive one another within the particular social context of Little Tokyo Towers. The marking and patrolling of cultural boundaries continues to be enacted; however, it is not the Japanese residents who are culturally differentiating themselves from Koreans, but the older generation of Korean elders who are

²¹ Todd A. Henry, "Assimilation's Racializing Sensibilities: Colonized Koreans as Yobos and the "Yobo-ization" of Expatriate Japanese," Forthcoming in *Positions: East Asia Culture Critiques* (2013), p. 4.

distinguishing themselves from younger generations of Korean newcomers in Little Tokyo Towers, based on internalized colonial values of what constitutes a “good citizen” and in this context, what it means to be a “good neighbor.”

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study relies primarily on analysis of data obtained from semi-structured interviews with five Korean women and one Kibei Nisei Japanese American woman living in Little Tokyo Towers. I used the life-history methodology of compiling data from individual interviews to reveal aspects of their lived experiences that are otherwise lacking in history. Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. The help of an interpreter was essential in guaranteeing the accuracy of the data from the interview with my Japanese-speaking subject. All interviews were digitally recorded, and the actual names of interviewees have been coded in order to protect their privacy.

I contacted participants by phone and once I received consent that the subject would agree to be a participant, then I scheduled the first interview in a location in which the participant was most comfortable. The interviews were conducted in “friendly spaces,” e.g. their homes, common spaces in Little Tokyo Towers without friends or family members present, or a private room. After making sure the participant understood that this study was for research purposes only and that they could withdraw from my study at any time, I asked permission to record the interview through a digital voice recorder. After the interviews were conducted, I followed up with each interviewee and offered the opportunity to review the interview transcript. This was done in order to modify any inaccurate or inconsistent data in the transcription according to the participants' request.

Qualitative interviewing allows for greater flexibility to delve deeper into topics that are important to the individual interviewee and enables spontaneous questions that may be applied in the thesis or inspire new ideas for further exploration. This methodology gives agency to the subjects of my project by allowing their voices to shape the direction of the research, as well as enabling a less hierarchical relationship of reciprocity where they have opportunities to ask questions of me and engage in a two-way dialogue. Through the collection of oral histories, I hope to re-center their voices and provide space for their personal stories to be heard and preserved.

Historian Alice Yang Murray argues that oral history is a process and not a product.²² In doing my research on elderly Korean women, it was important for me to approach oral history as a form of memory, taking into account the critical role of perception and interpretation of history, as well as the probability that a single individual could present different interpretations of history as the context of the interview changes. The oral history process allowed me to analyze why individuals remember and recount their histories in particular ways at particular times. At times, it also allowed me to observe some of their daily interactions when interviews were interrupted by phone calls or an unexpected visit from a neighbor.

A major factor to acknowledge in my analysis of the oral history research I have collected is my positionality as a relatively young Korean American woman studying at UCLA. It was important to take into account age as a factor that may have affected the types of answers

²² Alice Yang Murray, "Oral history Research, Theory, and Asian American studies." *Amerasia Journal* 26:1 (2000), p. 106.

my interviewees gave me, and what kinds of information they felt were important to share.²³ Many of the Korean interviewees and I fell into a familial dynamic where my interviewees treated me like a granddaughter, offering to feed me and making sure I would be warm enough when I left the apartment. Gender also undoubtedly played a large role in shaping the direction of my interviews with the women and the types of responses that they gave based on an assumed understanding of a shared experience as women.

The process of oral history methodology has been critical in shaping the direction of my research and has provided important lessons on the value of flexibility and self-reflexivity, taking into account important factors such as timing, location, attitudes, personality, and expectations that may have impacted my interviews. Murray states that oral history researchers “can explore the possible meaning of silence, inconsistencies, revelations, and omissions in a way few archival scholars can even imagine.”²⁴ The personal contact I had with my research subjects allowed for a deeper insight in my analysis of their responses and observations.

Due to the recent nature of the events explored through this project I gathered much of my primary research from newspaper articles from the *Los Angeles Times* and *Rafu Shimpo* covering issues stemming from the recent demographic shifts in Little Tokyo and, more specifically, the Little Tokyo Towers. I also conducted earlier oral history interviews with two male leaders: Little Tokyo Towers resident Simon Yoon, a well-known leader in the community and president of the Good Neighbors Club, and Hongsun Kim. Having worked at LTSC since 1999, Kim has intimate knowledge of the evolving demographics and group interactions at Little Tokyo Towers as well as the broader Little Tokyo community. He has been instrumental in

²³ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 64

²⁴ Murray, "Oral history Research, Theory, and Asian American studies," 114.

conducting needs-assessment surveys of Korean residents in Little Tokyo Towers and has played a key role in expanding community-building efforts working with the Good Neighbors Club.

The task of finding research participants was challenging due to the large number of Little Tokyo Towers residents dealing with differing degrees of dementia, particularly those who were born before 1935, my original target demographic. LTSC social workers like Hongsun Kim, K.J. Suh, and Jessica Kanai who have been supporting the needs of Little Tokyo Towers residents played a key role in helping me locate potential interviewees who were lucid and in relatively good health. Suh and Kanai were placed at Little Tokyo Towers in 2011 to provide direct social services to Korean and Japanese residents, and generously offered their support in setting up interviews and providing space in their office to conduct my research.

According to their website, LTSC was established in 1979 with the primary objective of providing social services to the Japanese-speaking Issei living in Little Tokyo, assisting them in daily life activities like transportation, paying utility bills, as well as offering guidance in navigating government services.²⁵ As the community has changed, LTSC has also made changes to meet the needs of the growing number of Korean seniors in Little Tokyo. Hongsun Kim and K.J. Suh are both trilingual in Korean, Japanese, and English. This skill stems from their historical experiences as Koreans who were born in Korea but raised in Japan, equipping them with a unique understanding of both communities. They both went on to seek higher education in the United States to enter the social work field. Despite challenges navigating this positionality, Kim and Suh both recognize that their mere presence as ethnically Korean social workers at

²⁵ “LTSC Programs: Social Services,” Little Tokyo Service Center website. <http://www.ltsc.org/index.php/ltsc-programs/social-services> (Accessed 15 April 2013).

LTSC, an organization founded primarily to serve the needs of Japanese Americans, meant a great deal to Korean residents in Little Tokyo.²⁶

My goal was to conduct research on the lived experiences of elderly women residents of Little Tokyo Towers that would enable organizations like LTSC to bring about real change and transformation. With these objectives in mind, I met with LTSC staff like Hongsun Kim, K.J. Suh, and Yasue Clark to think together about my work and what could be useful to their efforts to continue building congenial relations among Little Tokyo Towers residents, taking into consideration their insights and expertise in shaping the direction of my project.

A. Profile of Interviewees

Interviews with six women living in Little Tokyo Towers took place between October 2012 and April 2013. My initial goal was to interview only women born before 1935, but after initial conversations, I found that there were perceived generational differences between seniors born before and after 1935 that impacted the ways that they engaged with their Japanese-speaking neighbors. Therefore I interviewed three women born before 1935 and three women born after to compare their experiences. I also interviewed a longtime Japanese resident born in 1915 who has lived in Little Tokyo Towers since 1997 to get a perspective from the “other side.” Given the results of LTSC’s 2012 survey of LTT residents demonstrating that the vast majority of Japanese residents are Japanese-speaking, Yukiko Yamanaka’s experience as a Kibei Nisei provides an insightful representation of the larger Japanese American population living in Little Tokyo Towers.

The first person that Hongsun Kim connected me with was Young Shin Park (87) who he got to know through his involvement with the Good Neighbors Club. Park was born in

²⁶ Hongsun Kim. Personal Interview with author. Torrance, CA. 24 January 2012.

Hamheung, a city in current-day North Korea, in 1926 and has been living in Little Tokyo Towers since 1996, the longest of all my interviewees. Park in turn introduced me to Myung Ja Kim (83), her neighbor across the hall, who is a *Zainichi* Korean born in Japan in 1930 as Yumi Kitayama, and who later moved to Korea following World War II. She has been living in Little Tokyo Towers since 1998. The remaining four women whom I interviewed were introduced to me by K.J. Suh and Jessica Kanai of LTSC. Min Jung Choi (86) was born in Seoul, Korea in 1927 and has been living in Little Tokyo Towers since 2000. Sung Mi Lee (78) was born in Taejon, Korea in 1934, and has only lived in Little Tokyo Towers since early 2012. Born in 1942, Kyung Sook Kim (70) was the youngest of my interviewees and moved into Little Tokyo Towers in 2010. The last interview was held with Yukiko Yamanaka (97), a Kibei Nisei who was born in Los Angeles in 1915 but raised in Japan for most of her early life; she first moved into Little Tokyo Towers in 1997.

Of the six women, three are widowed, one is divorced, and two have husbands whom they are living with. They all have children and grandchildren, and common reasons for migrating to the United States was for their children's education and to help take care of grandchildren. Yamanaka returned to Los Angeles from Japan to further her own education and escape increasing pressures from her family to get married. Another reason for migrating from Korea to the United States that emerged was the desire to escape the oppressive regime of Park Chung Hee, who took control of the South Korean government from 1961 until his assassination in 1979. All six of my interviewees found out about Little Tokyo Towers through word of mouth from friends already living in Little Tokyo Towers or living in nearby retirement homes.

Among this relatively small sample of women, a great diversity of experiences was represented. In order to understand their individual positionality within Little Tokyo Towers, it is

important to understand the larger historical context of the Japanese occupation of Korea, World War II, and the Korean War as these particular moments in history have had a major impact in shaping the identity and perceptions of each interviewee.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A. Japanese Occupation of Korea

Japan's engagement in Korea dates back to the late 19th century as Japan turned from domestic modernization to imperialistic international expansion. Japan's victories in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 resulted in Korea's occupation and designation as a Japanese "protectorate."²⁷ Korea was formally annexed as a colony five years later in 1910. To rationalize their position in Korea, the Japanese government argued that Korea's "backwardness" justified Japanese annexation. The Japanese government also invoked the notion of cultural linkage, asserting that the annexation of Korea represented a return to a close relationship between Japan and Korea, as had existed in ancient times when the Korean peninsula served as a conduit through which continental cultural influences poured into the Japanese archipelago. In practice, however, Korea was regarded as a colonial possession and its people as culturally and politically inferior to the Japanese.²⁸

With the annexation of 1910, Japan imposed severe control over Korea, with the tactic of cultural genocide as a primary component in subsuming Koreans in the larger imperial project. During the Japanese colonial period between 1910 and 1945, a complete system of "Japanization" was imposed as exemplified by the aggressive assimilationist *kominka* policy of

²⁷ John Lie, *Multiethnic Japan*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 104.

²⁸ Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*. (Korean Studies of the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), p. 83.

the late 1930s, which was intended to turn Koreans into the emperor's people, or *komin*.

Kominka demanded of colonized subjects complete loyalty to the Japanese Showa emperor and was implemented in the military, educational, and household registration arenas. It also involved imposing the Japanese language, Japanese names, and an exclusively Japanese education.²⁹ Min Jung Choi spoke about her experience growing up in Japanese schools:

...we studied under Japanese people - Japanese principal, Japanese teachers. There were some Korean teachers, but they all had to speak Japanese. In those days you had to speak Japanese. You had to speak it wherever you went. In the home you could speak Korean, but at school, in the park, in the city, you had to speak Japanese.³⁰

Choi brings up an important distinction in her discussion of language as a mechanism of social control, noting the exception of the home as a space where Koreans were free to speak Korean, away from the surveillance of Japanese officials and citizens, as well as other Koreans who believed in strictly following Japanese colonial policies regarding language.

As Japan mobilized for World War II, the imperial government intensified efforts to accelerate the assimilation of Koreans to mobilize the Korean population to support its military, economic, and political campaigns.³¹ These programs implied the necessity of eradicating Korean cultural identity in order to ensure “total obedience and enthusiastic participation” under the slogans of *Nai-sen ittai* (Japan and Korea as one body) and *Nissen yuwa* (harmony between Japan and Korea).³² According to historian Carter Eckert, “the forceful assimilation of Korea

²⁹ Carter Eckert, et. al. *Korea Old and New: A History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 314.

³⁰ Min Jung Choi, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 23 January 2013.

³¹ Eckert, et. al. *Korea Old and New*, 314.

³² *Ibid*, 316.

was only part of the grand plan to bring all of East Asia together under the benevolent blanket of Japanese rule.”³³

In tandem with Japan’s aggressive efforts to create loyal imperial subjects, Koreans experienced ongoing discrimination and exploitation as the Japanese maintained their privileged position. This was particularly important for many Japanese settlers who wanted to protect their status in the colony, understanding the potential impact that full assimilation of Koreans would have on Japanese-Korean relations.³⁴ Min Jung Choi explained that while growing up in Seoul, many of her neighbors were Japanese expatriates as well as Koreans “who pretended to be Japanese.”³⁵ In order to ensure that Koreans couldn’t “pass” as Japanese, measures were taken to create markers of ethnic difference. For example, although Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names, nationality distinctions were made on public records including school and job applications which required two sets of names, Korean and Japanese.³⁶

When Myung Ja Kim was born in Shizuoka, Japan in 1930, she was given a Japanese name, Yumi Kitayama, as was the practice for all Korean colonial subjects. Although Kim was able to pass as Japanese, she remembered a clear shift in how she was treated by her Japanese peers once they discovered that she was Korean:

We lived in a place where you could see Fuji Mountain and I had a lot of Japanese friends from the neighborhood. People who saw me and knew my name would think I was Japanese. Only when they saw my parents they knew I was Korean. And after they would treat me a little differently.³⁷

³³ Eckert, et. al. *Korea Old and New*, 314.

³⁴ Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea*, 85.

³⁵ Min Jung Choi, Personal Interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 23 January 2013.

³⁶ Eckert, et. al. *Korea Old and New*, p. 318.

³⁷ Myung Ja Kim, Personal Interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 28 October 2012.

It wasn't until she moved to Korea after World War II and married her husband in Seoul that Kim's father-in-law gave her a Korean name before she could enter the family registry. Despite her continued difficulty with the Korean language, Kim has chosen to use her Korean name ever since.³⁸ Research has shown that an overwhelming majority of *Zainichi* Koreans in Japan today use only their Japanese names to avoid the stigma that goes along with having a Korean name. The decision for the remaining 8% of *Zainichi* Koreans to publicly use a Korean name is closely tied to the desire to maintain a strong ethnic consciousness and pride in one's heritage in the face of potential discrimination.³⁹ Kim's position as a *Zainichi* woman in post-World War II Korea undoubtedly impacted her decision to use her Korean name and avoid being mistaken as ethnically Japanese during a time when anti-Japanese sentiment was especially high.

For Korean women, colonialism both opened up new possibilities and subjugated them as colonial subjects. Despite women's growing participation in the labor force during the 35 years of colonial rule, there were underlying pressures particularly for mothers to be the "heart of the family."⁴⁰ Historian Theodore Yoo notes that "In the eyes of Korean nationalists, the role of the Korean woman was Korean teacher at home to undermine the controls established by the colonial power."⁴¹ The conventional role of mothers as cultural transmitters became even more critical to preserving Korean identity in the private sphere of the home where families could be relatively free from surveillance and government control. According to Yoo, women's happiness in marriage and family life was made an essential feature of early Korean nationalist and

³⁸ Myung Ja Kim, Personal Interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 28 October 2012.

³⁹ Vivien Kim Thorp, "I Am Zainichi," *KoreAm Journal*, February 2012. <http://iamkoream.com/february-issue-i-am-zainichi/> (Accessed May 13, 2013).

⁴⁰ Theodore Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945* (University of California Press, 2008), p. 196.

⁴¹ Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea*, 197.

resistance movements against Japanese colonialism. Thus the ideal of the Korean woman was not only closely tied to notions of domesticity, morality, and motherhood, but also to the acceptance and enjoyment of those designated roles. This ideal echoed over and over again in the interviews I conducted in the pressures women faced regarding marriage and motherhood, and in the decisions they chose to make around education, work, parenting, and grandparenting.

Many of my Korean interviewees shared deep and painful memories of a particularly harrowing part of Korea's history under Japanese occupation that speaks to the added pressures of being women during war time – the forced sexual slavery of tens of thousands of young women to “serve” soldiers on the front lines of the Japanese imperial army. These so-called “comfort women,” a term derived from a translation of the Japanese euphemism, *ianfu*, were systematically rounded up and imprisoned in “comfort stations” throughout Asia and the South Pacific.⁴² The estimated number of women who were forced to serve as comfort women ranges from 80,000 to 200,000 depending on the source, with approximately 80 percent of these young women being Korean.⁴³ For two of my interviewees who were in their late teens during World War II, Young Shin Park and Min Jung Choi, the fear of being taken away as comfort women was a major motivating factor in getting married and/or finding work in urban areas. Young Shin Park described the impact that this had on the women of her generation:

...many teenage girls were being taken away. At the time I was 18, so the girls my age were all being taken away. I was living in a big city so it wasn't so bad, but in the countryside, all the girls were being taken away. So at the time, people were marrying their daughters off to anyone they could, even to poor households. People believed that marriage was better than being taken away by the Japanese soldiers.

⁴² Yoshimi Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 1.

⁴³ Margaret Stetz and Bonnie B.C. Oh, eds. *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*. (New York: M.S. Sharpe, Inc., 2001), p. 3

The girls who weren't married would be taken away.⁴⁴

Min Jung Choi commented on the unresolved nature of this war atrocity: "They took these innocent girls from the countryside and made them into comfort women. Even to this day there's not one word of apology from the Japanese government. Japanese people don't know how to apologize." This lack of official apology continues to be a cause of diplomatic tensions between Japan and Korea.⁴⁵

B. Korean War

With the end of World War II in 1945, Korea was liberated on August 15. For Koreans, 8/15⁴⁶ was a moment of liberation from Japanese colonization, but it also heralded the beginning of an era of ongoing U.S. military occupation of the southern half of the peninsula.⁴⁷ The first three decades of post-colonial life for Koreans in Japan were dominated by Cold War tensions. For the Soviet Union, Korea had been an area of strategic interest since the late 19th century due to its geography. The two nations shared a ten-mile border near the mouth of the Tumen River, in close proximity to the Soviet naval port.⁴⁸ The United States anticipated attempts by the Soviet

⁴⁴ Young Shin Park, Personal Interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012; Kyung Sook Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 11 April 2013.

⁴⁵ This ongoing tension is exemplified in a May 13, 2013 Japan Daily Press news article entitled, "Osaka's Toru Hashimoto says 'comfort women' were necessary part of war" about the mayor's recent controversial statement: <http://japandailynews.com/osakas-toru-hashimoto-says-comfort-women-were-necessary-part-of-war-1328758> (Accessed 13 May 2013.)

⁴⁶ Many Koreans refer to historic moments by their numerical date, in this case 8/15, which translates to "*pal eel oh*" in Korean.

⁴⁷ Grace Cho. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 8

⁴⁸ Eckert, et. al. *Korea Old and New*, 333.

Union to control the peninsula and also recognized the strategic position that Korea occupied in America's growing interests for power and control in East Asia.⁴⁹

For Young Shin Park, having been born and raised in Hamheung, a major city in current-day North Korea, the post-war years were ones of tremendous loss:

At the time, we heard on the radio that Japan had lost the war, and we were shocked. So then everyone rushed out to the streets and started yelling "Manseh!" But after that the Soviet soldiers came in and it became a mess. It got a lot worse... The soldiers took away people's land, everything. They took away people's inheritances. We fled after 8/15 to cross the 38th parallel secretly.⁵⁰

For Myung Ja Kim, a *Zainichi* Korean woman born and raised in Japan, the liberation of Korea endangered her and her family due to accusations that Koreans in Japan had worked in collusion with the U.S. military:

When Korea was liberated they broadcasted it on the radio, and immediately Japanese people started accusing Koreans in Japan of being spies for the U.S. So there planes in the sky shooting at neighborhoods they believed Koreans lived in. So we felt like we had to leave right away.⁵¹

Both stories demonstrate the volatile nature of the interwar period for Koreans both in Korea and Japan, and the enormous challenges and dangers they faced due to conflicting imperialist projects.

The Korean War erupted in 1950 after years of mounting tension between the Soviet-occupied North and the U.S-occupied South. All of my interviewees had memories of fleeing to

⁴⁹ Eckert, et. al. *Korea Old and New*, 335.

⁵⁰ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

⁵¹ Myung Ja Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 28 October 2012.

Southern cities in Korea such as Pusan and Taejon in order to escape escalating combat and violence. Both Young Shin Park and Kyung Sook Kim remembered riding on top of a train in near freezing temperatures for days to flee from Seoul to Pusan because the trains were already completely filled.⁵² At the time, Young Shin Park was already a married woman in her mid-twenties while Kyung Sook Kim was only in elementary school. Although both women had differing perceptions of their experiences of war due in large part to their age difference, they both shared a sentiment of deep loss, fear, and uncertainty.

Regardless of age, war brought hardship for each of my interviewees. For Park, war time as a childless married woman meant forced manual labor by the North Korean military, transporting ammunition across Seoul every night.⁵³ For Kyung Sook Kim, the most vivid memories that she had of the war were of her mother having to make difficult decisions to provide for her family: “I remember my mom only gave lunch to my younger brother. Since we had fled, our mom was just a housewife in Seoul so we didn't have that much money. So she only fed my brother lunch.”⁵⁴ Although Kim recognized the necessity of sacrifice during times of war, she also felt resentful that only her brother was given lunch while she and her older sister went hungry:

For my mother and grandmother, he was the only son since my two older brothers passed away. So they gave him so much attention. They gave him lunch and even though there was only a four year difference between me and him I didn't get lunch. It was like that. In Korea that's the way it was. Sons

⁵² Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012; Kyung Sook Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 11 April 2013.

⁵³ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

⁵⁴ Kyung Sook Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 11 April 2013.

were revered. I was also just the second daughter so they didn't really pay attention to me. I remember that.⁵⁵

Kim's account provides a tangible example of the ways that sons were privileged over daughters during this time of turmoil, and the possible psychological impact this may have had on young women growing up in such an environment.

The three years of fighting during the Korean War resulted in the deaths of over three million Korean civilians, the decimation of Korea's natural and social infrastructure, and the division of the nation which separated nearly ten million people from their family members.⁵⁶ The Korean peninsula remains divided, and the war continues. It remains stalemated in an armistice agreement signed by the United States, China, and North Korea. As of June 2013, no peace treaty has been signed nor has normalization of relations been achieved. The prospects of renewed conflict continue to weigh heavily on the Korean nation as well as diasporic Koreans throughout the world. Kyung Sook Park expressed her concerns about the current tensions between North Korea, the United States, and South Korea:

For me, I can't separate America and Korea. I belong to both places. Right now, Korea seems vulnerable. I'd like to see that end. I would like to see a more peaceful world. It's a little worrisome don't you think? People who have been through war, they know. I don't really know much, but I know how chaotic it was having to flee on the trains, and having to leave our home while other people tried to take over our property, then not even being fed lunch... the way it was during the war... I still have family that live in Korea... As long as there is no unification in Korea, there will always be the threat of war.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Kyung Sook Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 11 April 2013.

⁵⁶ Ramsay Liem, "History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans," *Amerasia Journal*, 29:3 (2003/2004), p. 114.

⁵⁷ Kyung Sook Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 11 April 2013.

Despite the magnitude of losses experienced in the war and the pivotal role that it played in shaping U.S. domestic and foreign policy, the Korean War is known in the United States as “the Forgotten War” due to the general lack of public awareness of the conflict.⁵⁸ Historians have attributed the silence surrounding the war to multiple factors. While the existing scholarship widely acknowledges that a large wave of Koreans arrived in the United States as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, the often omitted aspect of the story is that U.S. imperialism and Washington’s role in the Korean War set Korean migration into motion.⁵⁹

C. Little Tokyo

In order to understand the positionality of Korean residents in Little Tokyo Towers, it is important to understand not only the larger historical context of Japanese colonial occupation of Korea and the Korean War, but also the history of Little Tokyo and its significance as a site of memory making through the construction of place and space. Little Tokyo is a district in downtown Los Angeles that has been home to Japanese Americans since the late 19th century.⁶⁰ Over time, smaller Japanese American communities developed in Boyle Heights, West Los Angeles, Hollywood, and Gardena, but “Little Tokyo was the center that pulled these residents together, a place for community and connection.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Clay Blair, Jr. *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953*. (New York: Times Books, 1987), p. 1.

⁵⁹ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 12.

⁶⁰ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 211.

⁶¹ Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 214.

At its peak, before World War II, Little Tokyo was home to about 30,000 ethnic Japanese residents.⁶² However, the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans authorized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942 as a reaction to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor emptied Little Tokyo, making way for other communities, particularly African Americans, who had migrated to Los Angeles in search of wartime jobs in defense industries.⁶³ Yukiko Yamanaka was 26 years old when Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor. After the attacks there were rumors within the Japanese American community in Los Angeles that all the young Japanese people were going to be "rounded up and put away."⁶⁴ The turbulent and uncertain times propelled Yamanaka to rush into marriage with a Japanese American man whom she had met through her church community at Centenary United Methodist Church in order to ensure a sense of stability and protection. They were incarcerated shortly after and taken with Yamanaka's in-laws to the Jerome Camp in southeastern Arkansas.⁶⁵

Yamanaka returned to Los Angeles in 1955 after spending eight years living at Seabrook Farms in New Jersey, one of the largest producers of frozen vegetables, where an estimated 2,500 Japanese American incarcerated were recruited to work between 1944 and 1947. The company had experienced a labor shortage due to the war and had a history of hiring minorities to work in their fields and factories.⁶⁶ Once he had the means, Yamanaka's husband traveled on his own to Los Angeles to find work before she and her daughter took a five-day train ride to

⁶² Watanabe, "Japanese and Koreans learn to live together in harmony in L.A.'s Little Tokyo" *Los Angeles Times*. February 23, 2009.

⁶³ Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 216.

⁶⁴ Yukiko Yamanaka, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 7 February 2013.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ J. Burton, M. Farrell, F. Lord, and R. Lord, "Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites," *National Park Services*. http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/anthropology74/ce3j.htm (Accessed May 2, 2013)

join him. She stated that their main reason for moving back to California was the better weather.⁶⁷

Although many Japanese Americans returned to Southern California after the war, many of the pre-war businesses had been devastated. The strong sense of community that had been cultivated in Little Tokyo had been greatly damaged.⁶⁸ Younger Japanese Americans seeking work were forced to look elsewhere for jobs, and families soon dispersed to various suburbs in the greater Los Angeles area. Urban Studies scholars Dean S. Toji and Karen Umemoto have attributed the swift post-World War II dispersal of Japanese Americans to the coming of age of the Nisei generation and the industrial and economic boom in Los Angeles. Those with greater mobility tended to migrate outward to areas such as Monterey Park, Crenshaw, Gardena, and Orange County.⁶⁹

Subsequently during the 1970s and 80s, redevelopment projects backed by overseas interests from Japan resulted in higher rents that forced many small shops to close and poorer tenants to move.⁷⁰ Because of its proximity to the downtown financial and commercial district, Little Tokyo residents and small businesses came under increasing threat of displacement by corporate interests and local government urban renewal efforts.⁷¹ It was during this time that community activists organized to fight for the construction of senior housing for aging Issei, Nisei, and Kibei that were in danger of displacement or relocation due to redevelopment. As a

⁶⁷ Yukiko Yamanaka, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 7 February 2013.

⁶⁸ Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 211.

⁶⁹ Dean S. Toji and Karen Umemoto, "The Paradox of Dispersal: Ethnic Continuity & Community Development Among Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo," *AAPI Nexus Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Summer/Fall 2003): pp. 24.

⁷⁰ Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 216.

⁷¹ Michael Liu and Kim Geron, "Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice," *Azine: Asian American Movement Ezine* July 31, 2009. <http://www.apimovement.com/history/changing-neighborhood-ethnic-enclaves-and-struggle-social-justice> (Accessed December 2, 2012)

result, the Little Tokyo Towers were completed in 1975. Non-profit sponsorship by community organizations made financing the project possible under a program of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the property is now managed by Royal Property Management.⁷²

During the 1990s, a combination of local and global social and economic factors led to a significant drop in the tourist economy of Little Tokyo. Locally, many community members pointed to the 1992 L.A. riots as a major reason why people felt less safe visiting Little Tokyo. Internationally, the Asian economic crisis had hit Japan, directly impacting the capacity of Japanese visitors to travel to Los Angeles and their willingness to spend significant amounts of money patronizing Little Tokyo businesses.⁷³ According to a 1998 *Los Angeles Times* article, numerous Japanese American-owned businesses had already closed, including Tokyo Kaikan, one of Little Tokyo's largest restaurants, and Beverly's, a long-standing combination post office and stationery store.⁷⁴ These changes left vacant storefronts and businesses, and made way for new tenants to move in, namely Korean business-owners and Korea-backed investors.

A specific example of this ongoing trend is the 2010 opening of Korean supermarket chain Woori Market in place of Mitsuwa Market in the historic Little Tokyo Shopping Center. This has been one of the most visible markers of change and a source of deep anxiety for those invested in preserving the cultural identity of the historic heart of the Japanese American community. The Little Tokyo Shopping Center was established in 1985 as the "largest indoor

⁷² "Little Tokyo Towers," Royal Property Management website.
<http://www.royalpropertymgmt.com/Royal/Properties/TokyoTowers.html> (Accessed 12 February 2013).

⁷³ K. Connie Kang, "Little Tokyo Feeling Pinch of Japan's Economic Woes: Tourism: Hundreds still visit, but shopping habits have changed and crime worries persist." *Los Angeles Times*. August 20, 1998.
<http://articles.latimes.com/1998/aug/20/local/me-14829>

⁷⁴ Kang, "Little Tokyo Feeling Pinch of Japan's Economic Woes," *Los Angeles Times*. August 20, 1998.

Japanese shopping mall in the country,”⁷⁵ with Mitsuwa Market as the flagship of the shopping center during its 24 years in business, standing as a symbol of Little Tokyo's boom times and a key social space for the Japanese American community to engage with one another. However, with the increasingly unfavorable economic conditions and decline in big-spending Japanese tourists traveling to Little Tokyo, the number of patrons shopping at Mitsuwa along with the rest of the shops in the Little Tokyo Shopping Center dwindled considerably.⁷⁶ It was under these circumstances that a Japanese lender sold the shopping center to a Cuban American Los Angeles developer, Richard Meruelo, for less than \$20 million in 2000; Meruelo then sold the complex to Korean American investors in 2008 for \$35.5 million.⁷⁷

Although the business prospects in the Little Tokyo Shopping Center were “not so good” at the time of Woori’s grand opening, Brian Min, the president of Woori Market, saw much potential and hoped to revive business in the area: “It’s going to take time, but a lot of redevelopment is going on, we feel we came in at the right time.”⁷⁸ My Korean interviewees would all agree, as Woori Market has become their primary destination for shopping. Previously, my interviewees spoke of having to take a 30-minute bus ride or find a ride to get Korean groceries and goods in Koreatown located a little over four miles away.

⁷⁵ Roger Vincent. “Big mall sold in Little Tokyo: The Korean American buyers contemplate sweeping changes.” *Los Angeles Times*. May 31, 2008. <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/may/31/business/fi-mall31> (Accessed December 8, 2012).

⁷⁶ Vincent, “Big mall sold in Little Tokyo,” *L.A. Times*, May 31, 2008.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Gwen Muranaka, “Woori Supermarket Opens in Little Tokyo: New owners say emphasis is on quality and value; stress importance of Japanese customer base.” *The Rafu Shimpo – Los Angeles Japanese Daily News*. October 19, 2010, <http://www.rafu.com/2010/10/woori-supermarket-lt/>.

D. Situating Little Tokyo Towers

In order to gain a clearer picture of the daily lived realities of my research subjects, it is important to situate Little Tokyo Towers and recognize its significance in the community. Little Tokyo Towers is located in a relatively quiet part of Little Tokyo on Third Street between San Pablo and Central, sandwiched between the historic Union Church of Los Angeles and Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple, and standing directly south of the large sprawling Japanese American Cultural & Community Center Plaza. Centenary United Methodist Church is also less than a block away, and next to Centenary stands the Little Tokyo Shopping Center with the flagship Woori Market, just a 5-minute walk away for LTT residents. Notably, the Little Tokyo Service Center is located less than two blocks west on Third Street. One block north of the housing complex is the iconic Japanese Village Plaza bustling with stores, markets, and restaurants catering to a growing number of young professionals working, residing, and socializing in the neighborhood.

When walking up to the front entrance of the building, one sees several outdoor benches and a peaceful garden where seniors can sit. An online advertisement for Little Tokyo Towers stresses the safety and professional security services, and assures potential residents that access into the building is only possible by use of an electronic device using telephone command initiated by residents.⁷⁹ Upon entering the building, a security guard greets residents while intercepting visitors to make sure they sign in before they can enter past the foyer. On the first floor there are several common areas with tables, couches, and chairs where mostly male residents can be found playing Asian board games or reading the newspaper. Also on the first

⁷⁹ “Little Tokyo Towers,” Royal Property Management website.
<http://www.royalpropertymgmt.com/Royal/Properties/TokyoTowers.html> (Accessed 12 February 2013).

floor is Little Tokyo Tower's in-house restaurant that provides nutritional food services and serves meals to residents. This is also where many of the residents hold community events and holiday parties where they enjoy singing karaoke and playing bingo.

The LTSC office on the second floor is where social workers are stationed to provide social support or translation services during designated hours. Several of the women I interviewed asked if they could be interviewed in the LTSC office. To me this demonstrated the amount of trust these women had built with LTSC staff, the sense of safety they felt in the private office. Many expressed deep gratitude for the work that the social workers did to assist them with such things as translating mail and navigating complicated government systems.

Listening to the experiences and perspectives of women living in Little Tokyo Towers has challenged the common assumptions of Korean homogeneity propagated by popular media accounts of a dichotomized "Koreans versus Japanese" narrative. My interviews reveal a much more complicated picture of Korean society during the occupation, which has translated into diverging attitudes about contemporary community dynamics and inter-ethnic relations.

ANALYSIS

In this section, I will present the findings from my oral history research by highlighting five arenas of daily life that have greatly impacted perceptions of group and interpersonal engagements within Little Tokyo Towers: generational divisions, class, inter-ethnic relations, social networks, and social services. Close analysis of these key themes offers new ways of looking at gendered and classed experiences of aging as well as inter- and intra-ethnic solidarity and divisions that stem from differing social and historical contexts.

A. Generational Divisions

While news coverage has framed inter-ethnic relations between Korean and Japanese residents in Little Tokyo Towers within the context of the history of the Japanese Occupation of Korea from 1910-1945, oral history interviews with current residents reveal a much more nuanced understanding of why certain tensions have arisen. Although the memory of Japanese colonial rule is still very vivid for those who lived through it, many women attribute the tensions to individual misunderstandings and cultural differences. For example, 87-year-old resident Young Shin Park who has been living in Little Tokyo Towers since 1996, blames divisions within the first generation and cultural differences for existing tensions:

It's the younger generation - in their 70s or 65 and up. They can't really speak Japanese so there are the culture differences. For us, we were raised with Japanese education. We don't experience that as much. But for them, they don't come out to a lot of the joint events like birthday celebrations because they can't communicate with people. There are less and less people that attend those events.⁸⁰

Park points out a crucial distinction between older Koreans living in Little Tokyo Towers and those of a younger generation moving in. There is a significant cultural difference between Koreans born early enough to receive a compulsory Japanese education under the colonial regime and those born during the last years of the occupation.

My research has shown that an age gap as small as seven years could have an enormous impact on the type of social and political climate one grew up in during this turbulent time in history. For example, Min Jung Choi was born in Seoul in 1927 and Sung Mi Lee was born in Taejon in 1934. Choi recalled that growing up, "...if you didn't speak Japanese you would get

⁸⁰ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

into big trouble. Especially during the Second World War, if you didn't speak Japanese you would get into serious trouble. They were trying to get rid of the Korean language.”⁸¹ Sung Mi Lee, who was born only seven years later, shared her frustration at being unable to communicate with her Japanese neighbors:

Because I don't know much Japanese, it causes me stress. If I were with Korean people I could say whatever I wanted, but I can't say what's on my mind and on my heart... I can't express myself properly. It's stressful.⁸²

Going hand in hand with intra-generational differences, older Koreans who grew up during the occupation asserted that the language barrier between Japanese and more recent Korean residents was a major cause of conflict and misunderstanding.⁸³

These experiences demonstrate how the age category broadly defined as “senior” is in fact a collection of successive age cohorts that have arrived at old age with differing historical experiences, life styles, and resources, causing varied attitudes and behaviors in relation to their current social and political environment. However, due to the particularly volatile nature of Korean history, these differences are exacerbated by the drastically shifting cultural contexts between the Japanese Occupation, World War II, liberation, and the Korean War.

B. Class

In addition to language differences, interviewees often referred to class distinctions between older and younger generations of elders coming into Little Tokyo Towers. A common

⁸¹ Min Jung Choi, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 23 January 2013.

⁸² Sung Mi Lee, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 29 January 2013.

⁸³ Sentiments shared by both Min Jung Choi and Young Shin Park.

sentiment among older Korean residents was that the quality of life in Little Tokyo Towers has declined in recent years. Young Shin Park observed:

When I first came in, I felt that there were some Japanese people who would look down on me because I was Korean. I was extremely careful not to be seen as being inferior. I was really good so my neighbors here really liked me. But the women now aren't like that. They're loud and make a lot of noise. Right now there are a lot of people in their 70s that have come in, right? They're so loud. The Japanese women are not that loud. Korean women are loud. But the Japanese women, too, I think their status is lower than the women who used to live here. When I first came in, the women who lived here had mostly gone to college. The women back then were more high-class than the women coming in now.⁸⁴

Park indicated loudness as a marker of class. Based on her perceptions, the public conduct of many of the younger women moving in imply that they were less cultured and of lower status than the women living in Little Tokyo Towers when she first moved in. Incidentally, newer residents like Kyung Sook Kim and Sung Mi Lee are both from working class families;⁸⁵ however, there is a lack of comprehensive data on the socio-economic backgrounds of Little Tokyo Towers residents to confirm whether these broader assumptions around a declining level of status are indeed valid.

The negative connotations expressed in Park's evaluation of "loud" Korean women as compared to quieter Japanese women can be traced to highly classed colonialist expectations of propriety and civility. Historian Carter Eckert offers insight into the psyche of the Korean bourgeoisie during the Japanese occupation who had internalized colonialist values and beliefs,

⁸⁴ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

⁸⁵ Kyung Sook Kim and Sung Mi Lee both spent most of their adult years working alongside their husbands to help support their families. Kim worked in an import/export factory in Bolivia, and Lee was a small business-owner of a jewelry shop in Koreatown.

“a mentality deeply conditioned by the experience of colonialism.”⁸⁶ In this instance, Todd Henry’s conception of affective racism is mobilized in Park’s perceptions of racialized class differences.

Park’s upper-class background and urban location shaped her experiences with Japanese colonization and thus, her memories of Japanese people:

Our house was on the wealthier side so we didn’t suffer that much. We had money so things weren’t too bad. My memories of Japanese people as a child are not that bad. Because we lived in a city and not the countryside, Hamheung was a big city at the time, since we lived there I didn’t have that many bad memories.⁸⁷

The lack of economic hardship during the occupation that Park describes was a common experience for the Korean elite and middle class. Eckert explains that despite relative physical and economic security, the Korean elite faced the difficult prospect of being perceived as traitors or collaborators: “To remain completely faithful to one’s Korean identity and to refuse to accept Japanese ways in all things limited one’s life chances. But to actively assimilate meant to implicitly accept the colonizer’s debased view of the value of one’s own culture and heritage.”⁸⁸ Most opportunities for upward mobility lay in Japanese-dominated institutions, requiring acceptance of and participation in Japanese power structures. Well-to-do Koreans often felt there was more at stake for themselves and their families, and in order to protect their livelihood chose not to openly defy the system.

Park’s personal narrative and Eckert’s assessment complicate the picture of Korean existence under Japanese colonization, revealing the diversity of experiences for Koreans of

⁸⁶ Eckert, Carter J. *Offspring of Empire: The Koch’ang Kims and the Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism, 1876-1945*. Seattle: University of Washington, 1991), p. 228.

⁸⁷ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

⁸⁸ Eckert, et. al. *Korea Old and New*, 319-320.

different class backgrounds and complicating nationalist Korean historiography that perpetuates national myths that everyone resisted Japanese occupation.⁸⁹ These class distinctions have played a large part in shaping my subjects' perception of their experiences of occupation as well as their interpersonal engagements with Japanese people. It is noteworthy that both Young Shin Park and Min Jing Choi, two of my older interviewees who grew up in Korea during the occupation came from upper-middle-class families, and were among the first Koreans to move into Little Tokyo Towers in 1996 and 2000 respectively. In thinking about the type of Korean who would choose to live in Little Tokyo during a time when there were hardly any other Korean residents or businesses, it is important to consider socio-economic background as a major factor in this decision.

C. Inter-ethnic Relations

Young Shin Park first moved from Vista Towers senior housing in Koreatown to Little Tokyo Towers in 1996 because of the perception that Little Tokyo was safer than Koreatown, and the quality of living was better. She said that during that time there were hardly any Koreans and that at first, she had initial doubts about her decision to move:

When I first came I wondered if I made a mistake in coming because I thought they [Japanese residents] were two-faced where they would act one way in front of you and another way behind your back. But then after a while I realized that Koreans are worse than Japanese.⁹⁰

After having lived in Little Tokyo Towers for over sixteen years, Park shared sentiments of nostalgia and longing for the days before other Koreans began moving in:

⁸⁹ Bruce Cumings, "The Legacy of Japanese Colonialism in Korea," in *The Japanese Colonial Empire*, (Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 482.

⁹⁰ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

Before my neighbors were all Japanese and we were close, we would share food and get along very well. We would share roasted seaweed with one another. But now that so many Koreans have come in they talk a lot. They gossip a lot so I don't really get too close to people now. Except for the woman across the hall and my church friends I don't hang out with the other women who live here. They talk so much. I just stay home and do computer. Before it was good and I got along well with my neighbors. But now Korean people they talk a lot. I don't know why.⁹¹

Park explained that as many older Japanese residents living in Little Tokyo Towers have passed away, younger Koreans have moved in to take their place. This deeply felt sense of loss is noteworthy as it debunks existing assumptions and challenges popular portrayals of the changes in Little Tokyo as primarily pitting Koreans against Japanese. In this case, rather than ethnicity, it is shared historical experiences, cultural similarities, and also personality that facilitate genuine connections between individuals in Little Tokyo Towers.

In contrast to Park's initial feelings of uncertainty of how she would be received by her neighbors, Yukiko Yamanaka already had a strong social network upon moving into the building. Yamanaka moved into Little Tokyo Towers in 1997 to join her friends who were already living there. She also desired to live closer to her church, Centenary United Methodist Church located less than a block away, where she has been a member since childhood. Regarding the recent changes in the community, Yamanaka said that where she lives on the seventh floor there are currently more Korean residents than Japanese. When asked how she felt about this dramatic shift, she immediately responded, "They are so friendly. So nice."⁹² She went on to explain that she just says hello and asks how they are doing because if she talked too much, they would not

⁹¹ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

⁹² Yukiko Yamanaka, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 7 February 2013.

be able to follow her Japanese.⁹³ Yamanaka appeared to have a genuine enthusiasm about her Korean neighbors, but kept her interactions at a superficial level for fear of miscommunication and misunderstanding.

For someone like Myung Ja Kim, a *Zainichi* Korean born and raised in Japan during the colonial period, this issue of inter-ethnic relations is complicated by her experience of feeling marginalized within the Korean and Japanese as well as U.S. societies. According to sociologist Yasunori Fukuoka, the term *Zainichi*, which literally translates to "residing in Japan," was adopted to describe the nature of their experience of being "neither fully Japanese nor fully Korean."⁹⁴ As a result of Japan's severe colonial policies during Japan's official annexation of Korea from 1910-1945, many Koreans migrated to Japan in search of jobs to escape the poverty at home. Meanwhile, following World War I, Japan itself was experiencing unprecedented industrial growth tied to imperial expansions in Asia and the Pacific, causing recruiters to look to Korea's depressed agrarian regions as a source of cheap labor.⁹⁵ Those Korean migrants and their descendants constitute today's diasporic *Zainichi* Korean community.

It is unclear why Myung Ja Kim's parents were living in Japan, but she suspects that it is because her mother had limited opportunities in Korea:

I think my mother was poor at the time so she never got to go to school, so even when she passed away she couldn't read. I think she met my father in Japan. My mother went to Japan when she was twenty-one through a Japanese person. I don't really know the whole story.⁹⁶

⁹³ Yukiko Yamanaka, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 7 February 2013.

⁹⁴ Yasunori Fukuoka. *Lives of Young Koreans in Japan*. (Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press, 2000), p. xxxviii.

⁹⁵ Fukuoka, *Lives of Young Koreans in Japan*, 4.

⁹⁶ Myung Ja Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 28 October 2012.

According to existing accounts of *Zainichi* Korean history, it was rare for single Korean women to migrate to Japan on their own during the early colonial period unless they were being taken as sex workers. This may explain the silences surrounding Kim's mother's story.

Kim recounted her experiences of discrimination growing up in Japan. She recalled, "When I was young, they would make fun of me and say I smelled like garlic. In Japanese garlic is *ninniku* and they would call me *ninniku kusai* and *chosenjin* (Korean) a lot."⁹⁷ She described how upon Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945, Koreans in Japan were immediately accused of being spies for the United States, and she remembered "planes in the sky shooting at neighborhoods they believed Koreans lived in." Kim's family had already experienced having their village bombed by the American military during World War II, and now had to flee from Japanese attacks:

We had to escape Japan after Korea was liberated. At 11:00 or 12:00 in the evening we left and fled for the mountains... Later my parents came to meet us. I don't know how it was for Koreans in places like Osaka, but for us where there were very few of us we felt like we had to flee.⁹⁸

Kim and her family eventually moved to Korea in 1946 where she met her Korean husband. Although she spent much of her adult life living in Korea, she still feels more comfortable speaking Japanese and gets along better with Japanese people due to language.⁹⁹ This has also limited her participation in Korean clubs and organizations that have formed in Little Tokyo Towers, namely the Good Neighbors Club.

⁹⁷ Myung Ja Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 28 October 2012.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

These complex experiences with inter-ethnic engagement within Little Tokyo Towers are important to consider when examining the development of community networks that have historically played a vital role in strengthening and maintaining cultural ties among immigrant groups with limited access to resources and information. My analysis of social networks reveals surprising trends among Korean residents in Little Tokyo Towers that have been profoundly shaped by gendered forms of social control.

D. Social Networks

Women's traditional association with the home as their designated domain has created a dynamic where women's identities become defined by their role as wife and/or mother. This confinement to the private sphere has often resulted in women being hidden from other women, leaving them with a sense of isolation and limited sources of support, effectively devaluing their activities and their self-worth.¹⁰⁰ Given the preponderance of widowed women living alone in Little Tokyo Towers with shared experiences as Koreans aging in America, I anticipated this pattern to be disrupted as responsibilities and expectations as wife and mother inevitably diminished.

However, while one might assume that the Korean women living in Little Tokyo Towers would naturally gravitate to one another to form community, particularly within a space where they might be seen as outsiders, this was not the case. In fact, all five of my Korean interviewees expressed anxieties about gossip among Korean residents and fears of rumors being spread about them as exemplified in Young Shin Park's quote in the previous section: "...now that so many Koreans have come in they talk a lot. They gossip a lot so I don't really get too close to people

¹⁰⁰ Robyn Ryle, *Questioning Gender: A Sociological Exploration*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE/Pine Forge Press, 2012), pp. 342-43.

now.”¹⁰¹ For Sung Mi Lee, this fear was exacerbated by the stigma of being a divorcée. She explained why she chose to keep to herself: “I’m not the type of person to make friends easily. There has to be someone who I feel like I can trust in order to become friends, or else there would probably be strange rumors spread about me.”¹⁰² The other women I spoke with across age cohorts and socio-economic class all communicated similar sentiments of wariness about socializing with other Korean residents in Little Tokyo Towers.

Young Shin Park made the observation that as the number of Koreans moving into Little Tokyo Towers increased, so did their propensity to gossip.¹⁰³ The connection between the growth of Korean residents and the increase in intra-ethnic gossip is logical, but the reasons for the recurring statement that Koreans “talk a lot” are less clear. In contrast, my maternal 93-year-old grandmother, Ki Deuk Lee, who has lived in a subsidized senior home in Koreatown since 1988, described a much more congenial atmosphere among her neighbors: “Most of the residents are Korean and almost all of them go to church. The atmosphere is good and they greet each other and care about each other.”¹⁰⁴ When asked why she thought other Koreans “talked so much,” Myung Ja Kim responded, “I think they’re just bored. Or they just like talking about other people.”¹⁰⁵ While it may be a common experience for many seniors with more time on their hands to gossip, I believe that this aversion to deeper social engagement with other Koreans in Little Tokyo Towers is tied to larger social pressures for women to perform a particular

¹⁰¹ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

¹⁰² Sung Mi Lee, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 29 January 2013.

¹⁰³ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Ki Deuk Lee, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 13 November 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Myung Ja Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 28 October 2012.

“Korean identity” that has become exacerbated when residing in a majority Japanese American community like Little Tokyo.

Historically, the myth of a homogenous Korean identity has been perpetuated as being key to a sense of unity and national security in the face of occupation and division. Political scientist Roland Bleiker argues that an underlying force in the propagation of this myth is “a strong cultural fear of the notion of outsiders”; any deviation from the norm would disrupt in-group solidarity.¹⁰⁶ Gossip, then, is an often gendered form of social control to regulate what is considered acceptable behavior and promote a culture of conformity to the “norms” of a particular group. In the specific cultural context of Little Tokyo Towers, it appears that elderly Korean women are policing themselves by circumventing social situations where they might be vulnerable to the scrutiny of their Korean neighbors. It is this self-policing that can be tied back to larger anxieties of creating a sense of community during often fraught moments of occupation and war.

The desire to evade gossip and/or becoming the subject of gossip has incited a tendency among my interviewees to avoid socializing with other Korean women and to keep their interactions at a superficial level of saying hello and smiling. Min Jung Choi explained:

You can't really become friends with the people living in the apartment, unless they're your church friends. If you see them in the hallway you say hello but you don't really become close friends with people here...when you get old it's hard to make new friends that are close.¹⁰⁷

Choi's observation reflects how, though residents' engagement with other women in the apartment building varied, their primary social networks were found either through work or faith

¹⁰⁶ Roland Bleiker, *Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), p. xxxi.

¹⁰⁷ Min Jung Choi, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 23 January 2013.

institutions. With the exception of Kyung Sook Kim,¹⁰⁸ who finds support among her old co-workers from Bolivia where she lived for over 18 years before moving to the United States, all of my interviewees found their primary source of community support in the church.¹⁰⁹

Faith and community have been clearly linked for Korean immigrants in the United States. Religious Studies scholar Rudy Busto notes that “any account of Korean history... would be incomprehensible without acknowledging Christianity’s essential role in the formation of the modern state.”¹¹⁰ Protestant missionaries from the United States introduced Christianity to Korea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and ultimately helped to give rise to Korean and Korean American resistance to colonial rule during its thirty-five years of annexation by Japan.¹¹¹ Historian David Yoo observes that, although women comprise the majority of the Korean American church population, they are often overlooked even in studies that focus on race/ethnicity and gender.¹¹²

The impact that Christianity has historically had on women has often been a paradoxical one where the church has simultaneously been a site of oppression and liberation.¹¹³ The Korean

¹⁰⁸ Kyung Sook Kim was raised in a Buddhist family but she herself does not practice any religion, so she finds support and friendship among her old co-workers from Bolivia where she had lived for 18 years before moving to the United States in 1995. She remarked that many of the people she lived in community with in Bolivia have since also moved to Los Angeles, and she and her husband see them on a weekly basis.

¹⁰⁹ Denominations of churches people attended varied from Catholic, United Methodist, Jehovah’s Witness, and Presbyterian.

¹¹⁰ Rudy V. Busto, “The Gospel According to the Model Minority?: Hazardous Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students,” in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, David K. Yoo, Ed. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 174.

¹¹¹ David K. Yoo, “Introduction: Reframing the U.S. Religious Landscape,” in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, David K. Yoo, Ed. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 10.

¹¹² David K. Yoo, “Searching for Self and Soul,” in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, David K. Yoo, Ed. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 168.

¹¹³ Jung Ha Kim, “The Labor of Compassion: Voices of Churched Korean American Women,” in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, David K. Yoo, Ed. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p.

American church as an ethnic institution has been a source of support and connection for marginalized Korean migrant communities and succeeding generations, but has called upon women to sacrifice their interests as a gender group within their church “in order to reaffirm their sense of loyalty to racial and ethnic identities as a minority group in the United States.”¹¹⁴ In the context of the Korean church as a deeply gendered and highly ethnicity-conscious institution, women have often recognized that their own church relegates them to secondary status and excludes them from public recognition.¹¹⁵

The church may reinforce patriarchal power structures by upholding Confucian conceptions of household in which women exist primarily to serve men, but it also encourages Confucian ideals that place the elderly in positions of honor, respect, and deference. Shifts in the power dynamics between elderly Korean men and women may occur as they age, as shown in my interview with Min Jung Choi who has become the primary caretaker of her ailing husband,¹¹⁶ but these power shifts are still confined to the private feminized sphere of home and family, not extending to the masculinized public sphere.¹¹⁷

E. Social Services

After reading newspaper articles about the highly publicized community-building efforts by seniors living in Little Tokyo Towers, I had come into this research project with the assumption that all Korean residents were involved with, or at least aware of, organizations like

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¹¹⁴ Kim, “The Labor of Compassion,” 208.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 207.

¹¹⁶ Min Jung Choi, Personal Interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 23 January 2013.

¹¹⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, “It’s All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation,” in *Hypatia*, 13:3 (Summer 1998), p. 67.

the Good Neighbors Club meant to foster understanding between Japanese and Korean residents. However, I found that newer residents were completely unaware that such an organization existed. A possible reason for this surprising outcome is the recent placement of LTSC social workers at Little Tokyo Towers in 2011. Young Shin Park offered a brief historical overview of Good Neighbors Club to help explain the current state of the organization:

At the time we didn't have a social worker and there were a lot of Koreans coming in. We had community meetings where people would come together to discuss any problems or things they wanted to bring up with the manager. We had those types of gatherings. But when Koreans came in they couldn't speak Japanese or English, so we made the Good Neighbors Club, to help them speak Japanese. But now we have a social worker so even though people think we should get rid of the Good Neighbors Club we haven't. Now for Chuseok and New Years we organize celebrations. At first, we created the club to help Koreans who couldn't speak Japanese. That was Good Neighbors. But now that we have a social worker they don't need our help.¹¹⁸

Given my previous perception that the primary purpose of Good Neighbors Club was to promote inter-ethnic cooperation and build community, it was striking to hear Park's perspective that the organization was formed specifically to help Koreans speak Japanese. Again, language was identified as a key factor in being able to get along with their Japanese neighbors, with the onus placed on Koreans to learn Japanese in order to adapt to their new environment.

According to my two youngest interviewees and the most recent residents to move into Little Tokyo Towers, Sung Mi Lee (78) and Kyung Sook Kim (70), when asked if they knew about the Good Neighbors Club, both had never heard of it. Kim responded, "No I don't know about that. I've only been here for three years. But from my understanding, if you want to know about Korean-Japanese relations you should ask the older grandfathers and grandmothers.

¹¹⁸ Young Shin Park, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 25 October 2012.

They'll know. I don't know anything.”¹¹⁹ Kim also confirmed Park’s speculations that new Korean residents are not getting involved with the Good Neighbors Club because there are now LTSC social workers who provide direct social services: “I really love that I can come here [LTSC office] whenever I need help with anything. Since I don't know English, I can bring my mail here, and they do everything for me.”¹²⁰

Through listening to perspectives of women across varied age cohorts, it became evident that values, understandings, and even the sense of urgency to be a “good neighbor” have shifted according to each individual’s socio-economic and historical context. For Korean women who were born and raised during the occupation, spending their formative years in an atmosphere of increasingly aggressive assimilation efforts to eradicate markers of Koreanness, their conception of building community and getting along with their Japanese neighbors has been shaped by these classed and gendered paradigms of what was considered proper behavior as colonial Korean subjects and as women.

For women of the younger generation, there seemed to be a sense of indifference about building relationships with their Japanese neighbors. Kyung Sook Kim explained, “The Japanese people here they are very quiet and they just smile back and we greet each other like that. That's the extent. We can't communicate with words but we get along fine.”¹²¹ In addition to the language barrier, the apparent lack of interest in or desire for deeper engagements with her Japanese neighbors may be due to the already large presence of Korean residents living in the complex, as well as the support services for Koreans provided by organizations like LTSC in

¹¹⁹ Kyung Sook Kim, Personal interview with author. Los Angeles, CA. 11 April 2013.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

more recent years. In addition to social services, the influx of Korean businesses has made living in Little Tokyo considerably more comfortable and convenient for Little Tokyo Towers' Korean residents.¹²²

CONCLUSION

The growth of support systems and resources for Koreans in Little Tokyo coupled with the ongoing overcrowding in Koreatown senior housing has caused many community members to anticipate a continued increase in the number of Koreans moving into Little Tokyo Towers. This will undoubtedly pose interesting challenges and new opportunities to think about the porous boundaries of ethnic enclaves, what it means to preserve and protect those boundaries in an ever-shifting global metropolis like Los Angeles, and the everyday impact that this has on the people who live and work in those neighborhoods.

My collection of oral histories has provided insights into first-generation Korean women's highly gendered and classed experiences and perceptions of contemporary community dynamics that challenge popular assumptions about elderly Korean women and how they relate to one another. While many of my interviewees shared common experiences of war and migration and often faced similar pressures as women, they represented a wide range of views regarding their current social, political, and cultural context as Koreans living in Little Tokyo Towers. Their stories shed light on the enduring ramifications of imperialism and war, and the ongoing impact of these historical legacies on the daily lived realities of immigrant communities.

It is important to recognize the limitations of this study and the implications that these limitations have for future research. In order to gain a more representative and complete

¹²² With the exception of *Zainichi* Korean resident Myung Ja Kim, when asked what businesses they frequent in Little Tokyo, all my Korean interviewees indicated Woori Market as being their primary destination for shopping.

understanding of the gendered experiences of elderly Korean first-generation women living in Little Tokyo Towers, it would be necessary to use a larger, more representative sampling method and design a longitudinal study incorporating the experiences of Korean men as well as the growing number of Chinese residents who also share a common history as Japanese colonial subjects. I would like to explore further how aging impacts changing notions of Asian American family and community, and the role that Christianity has played in the reconciliation of historical grievances within the Little Tokyo Towers community. Lastly, I am interested in doing a more in-depth analysis of gossip as a form of social control, specifically in the Korean community, and how that is tied to age, gender, class, and national identity. Questions for future research include how certain aspects of gossip are gendered, where the pervasive fear of gossip among women in Little Tokyo Towers stems from, who they are afraid of, and what is really at stake for those being gossiped about.

My research has demonstrated the profound impacts that generational divisions and varying socio-economic backgrounds have had on elderly Korean women in Little Tokyo Towers, and their capacity as well as their desire to relate to their Japanese neighbors and to one another. Older Koreans in their late 80s and 90s such as Young Shin Park and Min Jung Choi who grew up under Japanese colonial rule and received an exclusively Japanese education are able to communicate and build meaningful relationships with their Kibei Nisei Japanese American neighbors like Yukiko Yamanaka. However, younger Koreans in their 60s and 70s like Sung Mi Lee and Kyung Sook Kim born at the tail-end of the occupation or after World War II lack the same language skills and cultural understanding, thus limiting their interpersonal engagements with their Japanese neighbors. Myung Ja Kim's experiences as a second-generation *Zainichi* Korean born and raised in Japan during the Japanese occupation also reveal fascinating

complexities within the Korean diaspora, and illuminate the unique challenges that *Zainichi* women face when negotiating conceptions of Korean identity, inter-ethnic relations, and community.

This study has shown the important role that class has played in shaping individual experiences of the Japanese occupation and subsequently influencing perceptions of their Japanese and Korean neighbors. Social and economic status also became a distinguishing factor between different age cohorts of Korean elders, as there was a common perception among older residents that newcomers were of a lower class, thus diminishing the overall quality of living. For older Koreans like Young Shin Park, Min Jung Choi, and Myung Ja Kim, who have lived in Little Tokyo towers for thirteen years or more, this emphasis on making class distinctions can be tied to internalized colonialist values and beliefs regarding Japanese superiority and Korean inferiority promulgated during the occupation.

While differing experiences of the Japanese occupation impacted the ability of Koreans to connect with their Japanese neighbors as well as their understandings of what it meant to be a “good neighbor,” the pervasive fear of gossip and increasing access to culturally competent social services in Little Tokyo have greatly influenced the ways that Koreans engage with one another. Both of these factors align to create an environment where Korean women living in Little Tokyo Towers appear to be relying less on one another for social support, thus diminishing their desire to create genuine community with one another. Instead, this support is often found in faith institutions and/or past work relationships.

Regardless of age or class, the Korean War marked a time of devastating loss, fear, and instability for all my interviewees, and continues to weigh heavily on their minds as the war continues and their homeland remains divided. The national upheaval caused by the Japanese

occupation and the ensuing Korean War, fought between competing Soviet, Chinese, and U.S. interests, created conditions of poverty and political instability that prompted many of my interviewees to migrate abroad to seek better futures for themselves and their families. While most women I spoke to expressed little regret about immigrating to Los Angeles, they have all struggled with the challenges of being separated from family in Korea and the frustrations with language barriers between them and their English-speaking Korean American grandchildren. When asked what hopes they had for future generations of Korean Americans, Young Shin Park, Sung Mi Lee, Myung Ja Kim, and Min Jung Choi all expressed a desire for young people to learn the Korean language and stay connected to their Korean heritage, while Kyung Sook Kim conveyed her desire for a world without war where America and Korea could be at peace.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the courage and generosity of each of my interviewees in sharing their enlightening and sometimes painful experiences. I hope that this project will contribute to dispelling the myth of homogeneity among elderly Korean women, as well as honoring these women who have displayed great resilience and resourcefulness in raising families through occupation and war, uprooting their lives and migrating abroad, working to support their families, and continuing to claim and recreate spaces they can call home.

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