The project I am submitting for this award is a history research paper titled “KOREAN AMERICA: Korean Diasporic Movements in Los Angeles Throughout the 20th and 21st Century”. It explores Korean Angeleno immigration while highlighting the development of Koreatown, the emergence of the Korean merchant class, generational tensions through the history of the Korean church, and ethnic strains between Korean and Black Angeleno communities. For reference, the paper is in Chicago-style format.

This submission was originally a final research paper for my first-year seminar class (ID1) titled, LA and the Natural Environment, and taught by Professor George Gorse. In the class, we explored Los Angeles’s development in relation to its desert history, basin location, and ecological landscape. Moreover, the class became an exploration of Pomona College’s landscape and the physical infrastructure that holds up higher education institutions. The prompt for this class’s final paper was very loose, with a choice of what format we would like to structure our projects. My peers and I were assigned to write about anything that interested us about Los Angeles.

The conception of this project was rooted in my familial upbringing as a Korean American. For context, I grew up in an immigrant household in the Los Angeles/Orange County area for my entire life, and the Korean immigrant community in Southern California has been a constant part of my childhood and young adulthood. So, for this paper, I was interested in seeing my family’s immigration history through a wider academic lens, and this became the motivation for my research paper.

While taking the class, Professor Gorse had the class already involved with the library’s resources. About a few weeks before our final paper was assigned, one of our class sessions took place at Honnold-Mudd with social sciences librarian, Dieter Mackenbach. He taught us
extensively about effectively using the library’s search engine, advanced search tool, online databases, resource sharing, and more. This class session with Mackenbach was pivotal for my research paper because it informed me about the library’s resources and how to adequately utilize them.

My research process began with using the library’s advanced search engine to find any books/articles about the history of Korean immigration in Los Angeles. Preferring to use physical copies of books, front desk services and resource sharing assisted me in locating as many materials as possible that existed in book form. Afterward, I began to find texts in the library’s online database and used my sources' bibliographies to find other material I could utilize. All this led me to find critical information on the emergence of the Korean merchant class, the Korean church, and the strains between Korean and Black communities in Los Angeles. Researching Korean immigration became a surprisingly fun process of piecing together this historical puzzle. To find even more sources, I set up a research meeting with Mackenbach.

Being able to receive assistance with citations and searching for reliable sources from Mackenbach informed my work immensely. For example, his knowledge on using PolicyMap and Google datasets allowed me to see how Korean immigration demographics have changed in Los Angeles throughout the decades. Finding books and papers such as A Faith of Our Own, “Between the Cosmopolitan and the Parochial: The Immigrant Gentrifier in Koreatown, Los Angeles”, Koreatown, Los Angeles, etc. allowed for a library excavation that thoroughly uncovered the history of Korean-Angeleno immigration. I was able to find exactly what I needed for my project in an extremely accessible way. Finally, using the citation tool that the library’s website provides was immensely helpful in creating the footnotes and bibliography section of my paper.
With that in mind, my research paper would not have been feasible without all the resources I had found from the Claremont Colleges Library. Every source listed in the paper’s bibliography comes from using the library’s database/collection. Additionally, meeting with Mackenbach a second time created the research process, typically an individual activity, into one that was collaborative and communal, a trait that I value about the structure of libraries.

I was able to learn so much about what is available to students because of my experiences working on this paper. Already, in my other classes, I have utilized the library’s microfilm collection, zine section, news/magazine record books, and special collection services (now one of my favorite things about the Claremont Colleges library). As someone who is highly considering a career in academia, my experiences with learning about the research resources offered by the Claremont Colleges Library are things that I will take with me throughout my entire educational career.
KOREAN AMERICA:

Korean Diasporic Movements in Los Angeles Throughout the 20th and 21st Century

Becca Choe
ID 001: LA & the Natural Environment
Professor George Gorse
December 17th, 2023
1. Introduction

This summer, I visited Korea for the first time in ten years.

The month I spent there was wonderful and joyous, full of moments I hope to keep with me forever. Memories of Korea that sat hazed in my mind began to uncover themselves as I reunited with family members. I went to cities and places I had only heard about in stories from my parents. I rested and explored landscapes that I continue to long for.

At the same time, I could not help but notice how alienated I felt in a land that I was supposed to call “home”. I began to question what it meant for me to live within a Korean American identity – how that shapes my relationship with my heritage and culture. What experiences do Korean Americans hold on a systemic level? How did my immigrant community in the U.S. influence my upbringing?

My motivations for this research project are a dedication to Southern Californian Korean immigrant communities. In this paper, I will first explore the historical context behind Korean diasporic movements in Los Angeles and their connections to the creation of the Korean American church, one that can be broken up into three distinct waves. Having this background will create the framework for the creation of Koreatown and its Korean merchant class. Additionally, a conversation about Angeleno merchants would not be complete without discussing the history of tension between Los Angeles Korean and Black communities. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis of Koreatown’s current state and developments.

2. First wave: 1903-1949

On a contextual level, the economic and social state of Korea is important for understanding why so many Korean immigrants began moving to the U.S. Towards the late 1800’s, the Joseon dynasty was facing its decline due to the development of multiple uprisings
and rebellions. By 1905, political tensions between Korea and Japan were increasing, leading to the *Eulsa* Righteous War in 1905 and the start of Japanese occupation in 1910.¹ The economy could barely provide for its working class, and because of this, social tensions between the classes grew.

In the 1880’s, Christian missionaries from the United States began preaching in East Asia, and with the economic, political, and social declines that were occurring in Korea, Christianity provided individuals with a sense of hope and autonomy. It served as an alternative against Buddhist, Confucian, and Legalist teachings -- ideologies that influenced (and still influence) Korean society since the 12th century.² While the number of migrants was extremely low – not enough for it to be considered a wave of immigration -- it set the groundwork for the first wave that began in 1903.

Before Korean immigrants began to move to Los Angeles, they first worked on sugar and fruit plantations in Hawai’i, and many moved to Los Angeles almost immediately to work as truck drivers, farmers, waiters, and domestic workers.³ By 1905, more than 7,000 immigrants had started working in Hawai’i and 10,000 in Los Angeles. Those numbers grew exponentially.

After the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the U.S. government started partnering with the previously mentioned missionaries to bring Korean immigrants as an alternative labor source from Chinese migrants.⁴ During this time, Christianity began to connect the Korean Angeleno community together, and the Korean United Presbyterian Church was

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created in 1905, creating the backdrop for Korean Christianity during the second and third wave of immigration.\(^5\)

Asian immigration halted after the passing of the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924. However, many Korean scholars and academics studied in the U.S. under student visas.\(^6\) Another significant group that migrated to the US were “picture brides” -- women sent from Korea to marry those who immigrated to Hawai’i and mainland United States.\(^7\) The violent and severe presence of Japanese occupation in Korea during this time incentivized the desire for Korean students to study in the States even more. Immigrating under a student visa was virtually one of the only ways for a Korean to move to the United States until the Korean War, which initiated the second wave of the Korean diaspora.\(^8\)


During the Korean War, political and economic conditions forced many Koreans to immigrate out of their home country. Four distinct groups left: Korean women who had married American soldiers during the Korean War, orphans that were being adopted by families in the U.S., businesspeople, and students. A little less than 40,000 Koreans immigrated to the United States during this period.\(^9\)

This second diasporic wave follows the push-and-pull theory of immigration. The “push factor”, in this case, would be war, change in government, and economic difficulty – pushing native Koreans out of their home country. As for the “pull factor” that brought them to the United States, one would look towards economic opportunities, legislation, and marital

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\(^5\) Wŏn-yong Kim, Koreans in America, 33.  
\(^6\) Choy, Koreans in America, 107-111.  
\(^7\) Kim, Koreans in America, 4.  
\(^8\) Hurh and Kim, Korean Immigrants in America, 49.  
\(^9\) Hurh and Kim, Korean Immigrants in America, 49-52.
relationships as the biggest pull factors. While there was some logistical grace for these groups, the question of assimilation still hovered over these immigrants. The concept of the “model minority myth” began to be developed, and the alienation of Asian immigrants in American society was increasingly common.

As discrimination became increasingly present, Korean immigrants began to congregate together to create their own communities and infrastructure. While Koreatown was not fully formed at this time, many Koreans lived near Jefferson Boulevard, and this area became “Old Koreatown”. Second-generation children were raised in these areas from the 30’s to mid 60’s.10

During this time, Christianity also began to progress exponentially within the Los Angeles Korean community, and the developments of this period could be argued as a completely distinct religious movement. The Korean church created a cultural community space that was facilitated by religious structures. It was a “hybrid third space” that had multiple functions: serving as business networks, social settings, emotional supports, and more.11 “The ‘status-anxiety’ which stems from marginality of the Korean immigrants in American society tends to precipitate factional strife within a church. The immigrants who are underemployed, discriminated against, and oppressed by the white majority American society tend to consider the immigrant church as a place where their desire for recognition can be satisfied.”12

4. Third wave: 1965-Present

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As South Korea was recovering from the political and economic damages done by the Korean War, it was becoming much more involved in world trade. Dramatic population growth was occurring simultaneously, and between 1970 and 1975, the population increased at an annual rate of 1.8%. While not as significant as other countries at this time, its density became comparable to countries in Western Europe.\(^{13}\) “South Korea was experiencing economic dislocation as a result of internal capitalist development as well as participation in the world capitalist system.”\(^{14}\) Due to these changes, the South Korean government was extremely keen on increasing emigration rates, and one of the main target countries for emigration was the United States.

After the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, one truly sees the development of the Korean America that is present today. Asian immigration soared during the mid 1960’s and 1980’s, and a high number of Korean immigrants were moving to Southern California (see table below).\(^{15}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Males per 100 Females</th>
<th>Percent Increase per annum</th>
<th>Percent Increase from 1972</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>84,245</td>
<td>211.5</td>
<td>20.23</td>
<td>20.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>101,295</td>
<td>204.2</td>
<td>20.23</td>
<td>44.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>121,573</td>
<td>214.4</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>53.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>129,378</td>
<td>217.7</td>
<td>27.32</td>
<td>95.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>164,727</td>
<td>265.8</td>
<td>27.30</td>
<td>148.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>209,698</td>
<td>396.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


By 1970, Koreans in Los Angeles and Orange County made up 63% of Koreans in the United States. While the first Koreatown sign was not officially installed until 1983, the existence of a Korean immigrant enclave was established by the 70’s. The Korean merchant class emerged, and many Korean small businesses from this period still exist in Koreatown and all over Los Angeles County.

Moreover, the Korean church developed further. Second-generation children born in the second diasporic wave started to go to college, join the workforce, and enter society as grown adults. Soon, they were becoming active in religious leadership and hierarchy. As they became more involved, they “began to vocalize discontent over the immigrant churches, which they felt catered primarily to the needs of their parent’s generation.” This brought them to create their own denominations where Korean Protestantism became synthesized with various parts of American Evangelicalism. “It is only within the Korean American community that one witnesses large numbers of the second generation leaving the immigrant church to develop entirely autonomous religious institutions apart from the immigrant context.”

5. The Emergence of Koreatown and the Korean Merchant Class

The establishment of Chinatown and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles from the 1930’s to 50’s helped create the roadmap for Koreatown. Its growth began with Sonia Suk, a significant community leader in Koreatown's history. Years after immigrating to the U.S. from Pyeongyang, she attempted to sell the idea of a “Korea Town concept” in San Francisco but ended up moving

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to Los Angeles. With her experience in real estate, she began acquiring land and convincing Korean business owners to relocate with her. “In the 1960s to 1980s, she negotiated the sales for what became some of the most important establishments and community spaces in Koreatown, including the VIP Palace, Kang-suh building, Olympic Dduk House, and Korean Airlines office.” After teaming up with many other Korean community leaders in Los Angeles such as Hi Duk Lee, their vision started to come into fruition. By this time, the Korean immigrant population had flourished. From having a little under 500 migrants in 1940, Los Angeles was home to over 60,000 Koreans in 1980 (see table below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U.S. Number</th>
<th>California Number</th>
<th>U.S. Percentage</th>
<th>California Percentage</th>
<th>Los Angeles Number</th>
<th>Los Angeles Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>354,529</td>
<td>103,891</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>60,618</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>69,510</td>
<td>15,909</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>8,811</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1,711</td>
<td>1,088</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>482</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>1,097</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>1,224</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the 80’s, Koreatown acted as an extensive resource center for immigrants. From setting up firms to aiding in citizenship applications, Koreatown’s infrastructure aimed to guide Korean Americans through their immigrant experience. For many, it became a symbol of social mobility, ethnic representation, and financial freedom. “But the disconnect between dreamy aspirations and on-the-ground obstacles complicated these efforts and, thus, shed light on

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the unlikely and fraught origins of urban ethnic neighborhoods that emerged in the late twentieth century."\textsuperscript{23}

As Koreatown developed further, a merchant class emerged within Korean immigrant communities. Korean firms were created, and they began partnering together to create capital (see table below).\textsuperscript{24} Eventually, the Korean Labor Organization was founded in 1979.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Industry & Number of Firms & Gross Receipts ($1000) & Average Gross Receipts ($1000) \\
\hline
\textbf{Global Stats} & & & & \\
Construction & 267 & 7,238 & 27.3 & 70 & 1,056 & 24.5 \\
Manufacturing & 191 & 22,659 & 123.6 & 94 & 16,974 & 159.3 \\
Transportation and Public Utilities & 210 & 5,207 & 24.4 & 19 & 1,116 & 58.6 \\
Wholesale Trade & 299 & 25,823 & 100.9 & 56 & 12,374 & 220.2 \\
Retail Trade & 3,766 & 341,479 & 90.7 & 1,069 & 149,713 & 135.9 \\
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate & 235 & 6,161 & 26.7 & 87 & 1,495 & 19.3 \\
Service & 3,086 & 130,001 & 36.4 & 993 & 23,736 & 34.2 \\
Other & 121 & 2,471 & 18.9 & 50 & 419 & 13.6 \\
Not Classifiable & 209 & 8,345 & 30.9 & 52 & 4,013 & 77.1 \\
\textbf{TOTAL, 1977} & 8,806 & 374,040 & 40.5 & 2,232 & 105,052 & 92.9 \\
\textbf{TOTAL, 1982} & 31,780 & 2,677,062 & 84.3 & 7,706 & 950,657 & 125.9 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Gross Receipts by Industry of Korean-owned Firms in the United States and Los Angeles, 1977 with Comparison of Totals for 1982}
\end{table}

Notably, Koreans were extremely involved in manufacturing through the garment industry and retail trade through liquor stores. Korean workers tried extremely hard to “rise above the role of employee as quickly as possible.”\textsuperscript{26} Having one’s own business felt the easiest way to gain social mobility, and the resources in Koreatown made this possible. However, by the late 80’s many Korean small businesses were located outside of Koreatown. Garment shops were in the downtown fashion district, and liquor stores were mainly in South Central.\textsuperscript{27}

6. Korean & Black Conflicts in Los Angeles

\textsuperscript{23} Lee, Koreatown, Los Angeles : Immigration, Race, and the “American Dream.” of Asian America, 39.
\textsuperscript{24} Light and Bonacich, Immigrant Entrepreneurs : Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982, 149.
\textsuperscript{25} Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring, of Asian American History and Culture, 156.
\textsuperscript{26} Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring, of Asian American History and Culture, 150.
\textsuperscript{27} Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring, of Asian American History and Culture, 264-266.
Before the 1992 Rodney King riots, Black and Korean residents experienced lots of tension, specifically in the setting of liquor stores. Shops in Koreatown were disproportionately damaged during this time, and tensions grew further. Four key incidents that outlined this conflict: the shooting of 16-year-old Latasha Harlins by liquor store owner Soon Ja Du, the shooting of convenience store owner Jung Soon Yoo by gang members who attempted to rob his store, the shooting of Lee Arthur Mitchell by shop owner Tae Sam Park, and the shooting of two unnamed Korean store managers by Victor Beltran.28

While this conflict does not paint the entire image of the Rodney King riots, they do serve as significant events that contextualize the Rodney King riots, the history of Korean immigration in Los Angeles, and Black activism. One way to understand this hostility is through the middleman minority theory.

The middleman minority theory explains how a “middle minority” links producers and consumers together. It aids in “understanding the effects of Korean ethnic business on ethnic solidarity.”29 The middle minority in this situation, Korean business owners, are put under economic segregation, which leads to hostility from the host group, Black customers of these liquor/convenience stores.30 As Koreans were taking up space in the economic spheres of South Central, Black community members felt their resources being slipped away from them, and Korean store owners were upset because they suspected shoplifting from Black customers. Additionally, language barriers and cultural discrepancies contributed to these disputes.

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30 Min, Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America’s Multiethnic Cities, 21-22.
However, “although the middleman minority concept is a useful starting point for understanding the role of Korean merchants, we see their role as far more complex, given their multiple and sometimes international upstream links.”[^31] It does not truly account for the social and racial factors that contributed to the Rodney King riots. Understanding Korean-Black conflict in Los Angeles requires a distinct comprehension that “the emergence of the Korean merchant class was more than simply a process of one-to-one replacement.”[^32] It was an economic development that was facilitated under capitalist conditions going against both Korean immigrants and Black residents of Los Angeles – turning them against each other. "Both [groups] reckon the U.S. racial equation through trans-national idioms."[^33]

7. Immigrant Gentrification: The Development & Analysis of Current-day Koreatown

As Koreatown becomes increasingly an Angeleno and tourist hot spot, its changes have sparked new waves of businesses and real estate work. This has led to the pushing out of inhabitants that have lived in Koreatown since its beginning. Scholars have begun to propose an East Asian model of gentrification to explain these developments.[^34] It, “is premised on large developers, invariably facilitated by an entrepreneurial state via large-scale infrastructure provision. Ultimately, profit-seeking and mass homeownership are the goals, with privatizations as the dominant mode of land use.”[^35] This theory focuses on the immigrant-gentrifier as developers and businesspeople who are second-generation immigrants or from South Korea that want to expand Koreatown’s economic capital with Seoul’s model of development. This contrasts American

theories of gentrification as being geographically localized to the environment, one that has extremely Anglo-American roots.\textsuperscript{36} Koreatown’s development is becoming much more rapid, and there is an obvious tension between immigrant and gentrifier identities. “This process cannot be anything but profoundly parochial, indigenous, and localized, attracting a return of Korean-born immigrants to the hub neighborhood, many of whom are now empty-nesters, the elderly, or young adults in their 20s from the suburbs.”\textsuperscript{37} Thus, this new wave of immigrant-gentrifiers is sparking a new wave of immigration being casted on to the history of the Korean American diaspora.

8. Conclusions

My great aunt was the first out of anyone in my family to immigrate to the United States. I see the movements of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} wave of Korean immigration in her story. Moreover, learning about the 3\textsuperscript{rd} wave of immigration gave me a look into my father’s journey to the U.S., one that began with him finding part-time work in Koreatown. After finishing this final research paper, I realized how much I am a product of the history of Korean immigration.

I see my family’s old businesses in the history of the Korean merchant class: my father’s old video rental store, my uncle and aunt’s old jewelry business, the three Asian restaurants that my aunt still runs. The tensions between Korean and Black populations in Los Angeles that I still observe are a result of their complicatedly entangled histories. My parents’ devotions to Christianity are a clear result of the emergence of the Korean church. I understand my decision to leave religion as a part of the generational politics behind Korean Christianity.

\textsuperscript{37} DeVerteuil, Yun, and Choi, “Between the Cosmopolitan and the Parochial: The Immigrant Gentrifier in Koreatown, Los Angeles.”, 76.
So much of myself is built from the Korean immigrant communities in Southern California. This project connected many of the dots.
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