

## Political Tours of Koreatown and Little Tokyo: Learning about Community Involvement

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The feeling we got entering Koreatown on the morning of Sunday, February 15<sup>th</sup> was similar to the mood in Little Tokyo on the morning of Sunday, February 8<sup>th</sup>. We thought that it was strange that in both communities, the sidewalks were almost empty, and our tour group had no problems stopping in the middle of the sidewalk to talk about various landmarks. It was slightly depressing to see almost empty shops and restaurants on a sunny Sunday afternoon. We later found several reasons why these ethnic communities in Los Angeles are no longer in their prime.

In Koreatown, the population has shifted over the years from being predominantly Korean to predominantly Latino. Today, Koreatown is about 60-65% Latino and about 30% are new Korean immigrants or the elderly. During our tour on a Sunday, we saw mostly single men walking around and not too many families. It is obvious that Koreatown is a working class neighborhood by just walking down the streets and looking around, but the number of high-end cars that we saw was amazing. Practically every car in our level of the mall parking lot was either a Mercedes-Benz or a Lexus. These cars were a stark contrast to their humble surroundings. This example highlights a reoccurring theme in Koreatown: the powerful and the powerless. The struggle between the two has kept Koreatown from becoming a community where parents want to spend their Sunday afternoons after church with their children. There was nothing about

Koreatown that felt recreational; it felt more like a chore to come in to Koreatown to do grocery shopping and to eat a quick lunch.

There are several components of Koreatown that hold most of the power and money of the community. All the others are expected to succumb to the will of these few.

As with the relationship between Little Tokyo and Kajima Corporation, there is a similar relationship in Koreatown. A major landowner in Koreatown is the Korean American Federation (KFA). Most of the members of the KFA are first-generation Korean males who are either business owners or they have business interests in the community. While the KFA has supported several progressive campaigns and helped to produce the Koreatown Festival annually, it is widely known that the KFA collects funds from corrupt and underground activities that were previously done in Korea.

One of the more popular business ventures in Koreatown is owning a night club. Nighttime hot spots, such as Le Prive, are popular because of underage drinking and “booking.” I had never heard about booking and was horrified when Chong and Sarah described it to me. “Booking” at a club is when a waiter pulls an attractive girl from her friends to a table of guys to drink with them. If the girl does not go willingly, then the waiter will take her by force and make her go to a certain table. The waiters do this for tips and some of the girls go willingly because they want free drinks and fruit. As degrading as it is, I could not believe that there are girls out there who, literally, want to be picked out like a piece of meat, just so they can score a free drink and *some fruit*.

Chong did point out that this was similar to a Korean custom of meeting people, and that here in America it has to be done a little differently because of the lack of community. As we walked by Le Prive on Western Avenue, Steve mentioned that the creation of this night club caused the deletion of one of Tony Osumi's murals.

The restaurant and market industries in Koreatown are also powerful because of the amount of money these businesses bring in. Most restaurants and markets in Koreatown are successful ventures for one reason; cheap labor. The growth of the restaurants and markets in Koreatown has to be credited to the exploited immigrants who work the hard hours with little pay. Since the exploitation of immigrants in Koreatown is so obvious, the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocate (KIWA) is there to fight for the rights of immigrants. The Elephant Snack restaurant is a KIWA success story. KIWA was able to assist the restaurant workers in asking for back pay, benefits, minimum wage salary, and workers compensation. Today, the Elephant Snack has good labor practices in Koreatown, and KIWA encourages patronization of this restaurant.

We also visited the Assi Market, and that was an interesting experience. KIWA is currently assisting former Assi Market workers to get their demands met by the management, and soon KIWA will be revamping its campaign to attack the problem from another and, hopefully more successful, angle. When our group walked into the Assi Market, the manager, who was outside smoking, ran in ahead of the group and asked why we were there. Chong was able to explain to him, in Korean, that we were just students who only wanted to take a look around the market. As we watched people go about their

Sunday shopping, it was difficult to watch because of all of the issues that have been covered in class. Then the sale signs caught my eye. How could someone resist purchasing six packs of noodles for four dollars? Who could resist buying vegetables at 79 cents for a pound? Personally, I was momentarily torn between my desire to buy cheap food and my desire to help others. Then I snapped out of it and remembered that the low prices come at the expense of the livelihoods of others. We noticed that many of the workers stopped what they were doing momentarily to watch us walk through. They smiled at me, so I smiled back. It was an interesting feeling because they knew that we are students and why we were there. While we walked around the perimeter of the store, the store manager followed closely next to us and even told us which exit we had to use. Waiting for us at that exit were two security guards and a few market workers.

Lastly, the gentrification of Koreatown has ignored the needs of the majority of this community's population. Increasing rent to improve the appearance of this ethnic community have made it difficult for the people of Koreatown. Minimum wage jobs already make life complicated with rent and bills to pay and families to feed and clothe, but with the increased rent, people in the Korean community will be forced to move to other communities where it will be even harder to survive. This reminded me of the redevelopment of Little Tokyo by Los Angeles that put the outward appearance of the community before the actual needs of the people who live and work there.

Within the boundaries of Koreatown, there are many issues that affect the lower-middle class and "powerless." The LA riots of 1992 are a prime example of how a big city can

so easily ignore the needs of its minorities. Fueled by the media images of the Rodney King beatings, trial, and acquittal and the image of Latasha Harlins who was killed by Soon Ja Du, a Korean shop owner, some in the Black community felt the need to fight the injustices that had recently affected their community. The police did not enter Koreatown to help defend the shops from being looted; instead the police were sent up into Beverly Hills to guard the homes of the wealthy and affluent. Koreatown was obviously not a priority for the city when the riots resulted in millions of dollars in damages and loss and the loss of lives. We were not surprised when we were told that the FBI had actually come into Koreatown during the riots to meet with the LA Youth Riots Task Force and gave them “permission” to shoot to kill anyone with a firearm. This, essentially, was the government’s way of showing how minority groups are not considered with dignity and respect within the federal government.

This lack of consideration for the lives of minorities can also be seen in the actions of the local government. Koreatown is known for their mom-and-pop shops that primarily carry liquor and cigarettes. Los Angeles has found no problem with issuing multiple liquor licenses per block in Koreatown, but somehow the liquor store phenomenon of Koreatown has not popped up in Westwood and other upper-middle class neighborhoods. The police have also not done enough to prevent the influx of drugs and firearms into Koreatown and to end the battles between Korean gangs for territory. Instead, Los Angeles is working on the gentrification of Koreatown, while the people within this ethnic community are killing each other.

There is an option to help Koreatown grow in a positive direction that will help the children and businesses of the community. Unfortunately, bureaucracy has kept the project of turning the Ambassador Hotel into a school/commercial area at a standstill. It is very much like the bureaucracy that is keeping Little Tokyo from building a much need gym/community center that will give the community a face-lift. Looking at the vast amount of space that is available for a junior/senior high school in Koreatown was just amazing. The possibilities for that amount of space are limitless, yet nothing can be done for the benefit of Koreatown until the various city agencies involved can come to some sort of agreement. Again, the needs of the people of Koreatown are being overlooked while the city tries to decide what will be the most profitable for them.

After both tours we were impressed by the effects that student involvement can have on communities such as Little Tokyo and Koreatown. Little Tokyo benefited from the UCLA Drug Offensive when battling drugs on the streets, and Koreatown experienced a rebirth with the help of the Korean American United Students for Education and Service (KAUSES). Although the group does not exist today, after the '92 riots, students came to Koreatown to undo the mess that was left by the looters. In a time of crisis and hardship, all members of the Korean community were able to come together to rise out of a tough time with dignity and humanity.

With more student and community involvement, the future of Koreatown will be a bright one with more community events with families and friends attending. Also, the city of Los Angeles must be educated in the importance of an ethnic community within their

larger community and that the needs of the members of these communities are just as human as the members of other communities in Los Angeles.

### Political Tour of Little Tokyo

Little Tokyo is one of the oldest ethnic enclaves that exist today. It is also a community that is slowly diminishing due to the lack of recent immigration. The generations of Japanese Americans that held Little Tokyo together are dying of old age, and most of the recent generations are dispersing and assimilating in to the mainstream culture leaving their roots behind. Although what is left of the community is very small in size, its deep cultural history remains within.

Before participating in the political tour of Little Tokyo, we really did not know much of the stories behind the scenes, only that it was a place to eat good Japanese food. We really did not know how to prepare for the tour, so we just looked up a few sites online about the community. We found that one of the most current issues affecting the community was the correctional facility the city of Los Angeles plans to build within Little Tokyo next to the Nishi Honganji Temple. There are already two correctional facilities within a 1-mile radius of Little Tokyo. We could not understand why another needed to be built right next to a Buddhist Temple. If the jail happens to be built there, many criminals that are released who have nowhere to go would hang out in front of the facility or around the area attracting danger to the people and visitors of the community. This goes to show how inconsiderate the decision-makers of the city are toward ethnic communities. That is why we must stand together and protect our communities from bad

decision-makings of the city. Tony Osumi and J-town Voice are currently making a stand against this issue.

Tony Osumi was kind enough to take time off his busy schedule to give us a political tour of Little Tokyo. A group of around eleven from our class had participated in this tour. We met in front of the Japanese American Community and Cultural Center (JACCC) by the two big rock sculptures on Sunday, February 8, at 10:30 in the morning.

He started the tour by talking a little about the rock sculpture that was created by Isamu Noguchi who happened to be a “Hapa” (Hawaiian term for half-Japanese and White) like Tony Osumi. The sculpture was dedicated to the Issei (first generation Japanese Americans). We then took a look at the JACCC that was built in the late 70’s. This was not your typical community center because it does not have a gym. Since basketball is very popular in the Japanese American community, having a gym in Little Tokyo would help unite the community. Tony mentioned several times throughout the tour how important it was for the community to build a gym.

We then looked over to the Tokyo Towers where Tony explained to us how the community had to fight the city for this retirement housing. Since many people lost their housing to business buildings and parking lots, these types of housing was very important for the people of the community. The newest housing unit that was built in Little Tokyo was the Casa Heiwa, standing right across the street from the JACCC. Casa Heiwa is the

first low-income family housing center built in Little Tokyo since World War II. From where we were standing, it seemed like a very nice apartment building.

Next, we walked over to a grapefruit tree that happened to be the only remaining tree from the Spanish orchard in the 1880's. This tree was transplanted to its present position due to new buildings built in its original location. Tony told us that it was tradition to rub the tree on every visit so we all gave the old tree a rub. While everyone took turns rubbing the tree, we looked over to the monument of the WWII 442<sup>nd</sup> regiment to pay our respects to the soldiers who gave their lives for this country.

We then began walking toward Weller Court. On the way, we passed by the old railroad and a sign commemorating the Pentecostal movement. As we got closer to Weller Court, we were able to see the Rafu Shimpo newspaper company. Several years ago, the Rafu Shimpo laid off 10 of their dedicated workers without any compensation. Many organizations including Tony supported the workers and demanded what is due to the workers. After a long struggle, although it was not as much as expected, the workers received their payment. Although it was a small victory for the workers, it was a big step for labor movements around the world.

When we reached Weller Court by the Friendship knot sculpture and the Kajima building, Tony began telling us about New Otani and its owner, Kajima Corporation. During WWII, the Kajima Corporation forced 986 Chinese labors to slave in the Hanaoka mines in Japan. When the labors retaliated after being mistreated, Kajima employees and

police tortured 100 workers to death. By the end of WWII, 418 workers died from brutal mistreatment. The 11 workers that are left are asking Kajima for an apology and reparation, but the company claims that it is not responsible.

Kajima is also responsible for evicting many residents, small businesses, and community and cultural groups to make way for tourist boutiques and luxury suites. Part of the redevelopment contract was to make investment deals available to the residents of Little Tokyo. However, Kajima broke the contract and has not met its end of the deal even till this day. Its interests were never for the community but only for its own financial benefit.

In addition to all of these criminal activities, Kajima is also responsible for practicing unfair labor practices in the New Otani Hotel by eliminating paid healthcare and half-hour lunch breaks and firing workers who attempted to form a union. In other cases, whole departments such as security and laundry departments were mass fired and replaced by cheaper and less experienced workers. This was similar to the situation at the Assi supermarket but on a larger scale. Organizations are boycotting the hotel, but the issue still remains unresolved.

After the depressing information about Kajima and the New Otani Hotel, we began walking toward First Street. On the way, we bumped into one of Tony's friend named Hector Watanabe, a Japanese-Peruvian who was also involved in the community. He introduced himself and told us a story about the struggles of his family during WWII. They were kidnapped from Peru by the United States Army for security reasons and held

captive in the concentration camps until the end of the war. After the war, they were released but without an apology or a reasonable explanation to why they were held captive. The government claimed that they were not U.S. citizens and thus not eligible for an apology or redress. This was ridiculous because they were forced into the U.S. by the government. This issue also remains unresolved. Since it was such a depressing story, he added a funny story at the end.

As we continued the tour, we walked the corner of First and San Pedro where we stopped to look at the San Pedro Firm Building. This building used to be a slum and the city refused to restore it even though the community was in need of housing. Therefore, student organizations took matters into their own hands and volunteered their time to help rebuild. This was a very positive story where people come together in the time of need to help others. We were all happy to hear that since all the other stories were so depressing.

We finished our tour by walking down First Street toward Alameda St. so that we can see the old restaurants, bars, and small businesses that lined the street. These buildings appeared very old and original. It left us with a sense of the past walking down this street. We ended up near the Japanese American National Museum where Tony explained how Kajima wanted the contract to build the museum. However, the community believed that a war criminal should not be associated with a museum that was dedicated to the victims of the concentration camps. The community organizations protested against Kajima and eventually it backed out. This was another victory for the community.

Our tour ended by the tower in the Japanese Village Plaza where Tony told us to look around the plaza. In the plaza, we saw a few elderly Japanese Americans drinking beer in front of the small restaurants. He told us that these are some of the signs of the hidden needs of the community. These elderly hang out all day drinking beer because they have nothing else to do. Suddenly, a photographer named Eddie Oshiro, known for taking many pictures of events in Little Tokyo, came by and took a picture of our group. Right after the picture, Tony had to rush to his meeting with J-town Voice. Since it was around noon and we all were hungry from the tour, we had lunch at Suehiro restaurant. After that, we stopped by Fugetsudo, one of the oldest shops in Little Tokyo (over 100 years) to get some dessert. That concluded our tour.

We feel that with some more research and involvement with the community of Little Tokyo, we will be able to conduct a political tour for other students. This tour showered us with information that we would never get in a classroom or from a tour guide. It is the reality of a community that the city or government does not want the public to know. Therefore, many people do not know about the issues that their own communities face. That is why it is up to us, now that we are informed about these issues, to educate others in order to mobilize the community. As you can see from some of the stories during the tour, when people join hands and fight for the same cause, anything is possible. Therefore, we as Asian Americans plan to stay informed by Tony and other community organizations about the issues in Little Tokyo so that we can contribute to the benefit of the community.