

Creating a New History for Future Generations of Asian Americans

By Second-Generation Korean American

I once heard that the population of Korean Americans in Los Angeles is the second largest concentration of Koreans living in one city—second only to the population of Koreans living in the capital of South Korea, Seoul. While many may not find this particularly interesting, I found this bit of statistical data personally illuminating. I had, for many years, viewed my place and circumstance in life as a happy accident; I simply took for granted that my parents were both educated professionals, and that my many Korean-American friends came from families and backgrounds very similar to my own. I rather blindly assumed that other cities (at least the metropolitan ones) were just as diverse, and therefore housed just as many Asian Americans, as Los Angeles, and that Asian Americans, on the whole, were naturally more studious and education-oriented.

Fortunately, I grasped the opportunity at UCLA to take a few classes in Asian American studies. There, I learned events, legislative acts, and other historical forces that shaped the form of Asian American immigration. I learned that the 1965 Immigration Reform Act abolished national origin quota systems—which had historically obstructed Asian immigrant entry into the United States—and instead established a point preference system that encouraged, among other things, the admission of immigrants with professional skills that were needed in the U.S. labor market at that time. As I explored this part of American history, I came to see why so many of my Korean American friends had parents who held high degrees and had graduated from esteemed universities in Korea. I came to recognize how the dynamics between U.S. immigration policies and the political, social, and economic conditions of the immigrants' native countries interplayed to shape groups of immigrants characterized by differing levels of social class, wealth, and education.

While I studied the effects these developments had (and continue to have) in shaping the Asian American immigrant experience, I further learned to apply this broader view—of seeing myself and where I came to be within an historical context—to other classes outside those in Asian American studies. As a major in Political Science, I took several classes in American politics and foreign relations. I had previously approached the material in these classes as though it existed in an intellectual vacuum; I suddenly saw, however, how the effects of the Cold War, communism and nationalism, wars fought and lost, immigration policies of the U.S., and countless other historical movements and events conspired together to place me in America as a second generation Korean American.

The 1965 Immigration Reform Act allowed both my mother and father to enter into the United States. Both my parents were from middle to upper-middle class homes in South Korea, and were therefore afforded the opportunity of studying abroad in America. Because my mother was a medical doctor, and my father a student in chemical engineering, they were admitted under the Act's preference system. My parents met in

New Jersey, married in Boston, and had me in Boston. Our family moved to Los Angeles in the early 1980s, as my father was offered a promising job opportunity here.

But my life in Los Angeles, and more generally in America, would not have come to pass if my mother's side of the family had not escaped North Korea before the 39th parallel was drawn. The Korean War and North Korea's reclusion as an isolated, communist country, I feel, is the most dramatic instance of history intersecting my life.

I was raised by my maternal grandmother and my mother, after my parents divorced in the early 1980s. Because my mother worked full-time, I spent most of my early youth with my grandmother. She would often speak of her firstborn—a son—whom she longed to see. I was too young to understand at the time, but my grandmother had left her eldest child in North Korea during the Korean War. At that time, my grandparents lived with their extended families on the northern part of the Korean peninsula. They had just had two of, what would become later, six children.

My grandfather looked towards providing a better home for his family, and so traveled to Seoul to make business arrangements. He instructed my grandmother to stay behind with the children. But after some time without hearing from her husband, my grandmother grew increasingly worried and decided to go to Seoul herself. She brought her infant daughter with her, as she was still nursing the child, but told her five year old son she would be back to fetch him after she had found his father. After my grandmother left to Seoul, the fighting in Korea grew worse until finally a line was drawn, dividing the country into north and south.

Growing up in America during the final years of the Cold War, I would often hear jokes about the uneducated "North Koreans." Many of my Korean American friends insisted on their "South Korean-ness," and disassociated themselves with North Korea. While my grandmother yearned to see her son, my siblings and I, out of embarrassment, denied any familial ties to the totalitarian state.

I finally came to understand the significance of the events, and the weight of its outcomes directly on my life, through my studies at UCLA. I realized how easily I could have been in the same situation as my eldest uncle. My family and I were living in America, with the freedom to move and do as we pleased, as a result of timing, decisions, and historical developments. This discovery, of history intersecting my life, was both a "terrible lesson" and a "magnificent one." The discovery that Cold War politics in weak, impoverished Korea catalyzed a division in that country and in my family forced me to understand that while I am blessed to be free, along with this freedom comes the responsibility to speak and act for those less fortunate.

This consciousness of my life's intersection with history has led me to pursue law as a channel for social change. Living in America, we are afforded a right to speak. Stereotypes of Asian Americans still abound, and a quiet minority remains a disadvantaged one. We can shape the future and create a new history for future generations of Asian Americans by raising our voices and making ourselves visible in

such varied fields as law, politics, literature, and entertainment. By practicing law, I hope to help Asian Americans fight against being victimized, exploited, and ignored; I hope to help raise the wider American public's consciousness that Asian Americans are a rich texture of the fabric of America and American history.