

TAE Stands for: The American Experience

By John Tae Kim

“Hyung!” I yelled across the schoolyard to my older brother. He only looked back for a second and resumed walking towards the crosswalk. Fortunately, being held up by the commanding red glow of the “DO NOT WALK” light signal, I was able to catch up to him. It was the normal after-school routine for us both at Pepper Tree Elementary: find each other after waiting until the jostling crowd of grade school children dies down then walk home together. We silently waited for the signal to change and as the yellow light glared on for the perpendicular traffic, a large passenger truck with even larger wheels slowed in obedience. With a clear and safe passage, we stepped onto the asphalt — “SCREEECH!” The tires of the truck roared to life and it came mercilessly close to making us its pitiful prey! Inside the truck, two teenage white boys were bellowing a menacing laughter while one threateningly screamed, “Hahaha, Chiiiinks!” as they bulleted past their red light, leaving us in complete shock. Couple seconds later, freeing himself from paralysis, my brother looked over and with a reassuring yet angry expression he exclaimed, “John, when I get older, I’m going to buy a truck and do that to white kids.”

White kids — we grew up with a lot of them. In them, we found some friendships, but we mostly found enemies and eventually white became synonymous with racist in our childhood minds. We moved into a beautiful two-story house in this middle-class, predominantly white, suburban area, far away from the seedy apartment complex we had

previously occupied in East LA; my father's business was leading us down the similar path of the "American dream" that many immigrant families furiously pursued. We hadn't experienced that many racially charged conflicts with other children when we lived in Los Angeles but we would soon learn much about such conflicts in the battlegrounds of our new schoolyard.

Through my developmental years, having to deal with the ugliness of racism was a perplexing and even disturbing ordeal for me. The crippling impact of alienation due to the color of my skin forced me to internalize society's racism into my own worldview; I used to abhor the color of my skin and I had wonderful nightly dreams where I would wake up one day and have blonde hair and blue eyes.

Entering middle school, I traded my confusion and self-hatred for anger. You see, if you get pushed down enough, naturally, you push back. I didn't fully understand what had happened that day when the white teenagers senselessly attempted to run us over but I remember the anger that swelled up in my brother. It was the same anger that I would later adopt in middle school to rally other Asian American students into a clique (our little gang) to make sure we weren't openly picked on. Anger became our only weapon against racism growing up in Upland, California.

Looking back, I realize that I never understood the bigger picture of the Asian American experience in America. I only knew of the individual experience for myself, family members and a few friends but never pictured our struggles as a collective experience for

the rest of Asian Americans all around the nation. First of all, I didn't realize how new we were to the country and that my parents were a part of a large migration of Asians into the country after the immigration reforms of 1965. Secondly, I didn't realize the significance of being a second-generation Korean American because I had overlooked the commonality of our circumstances — being the bridge between mainstream America and our first generation parents.

I am a part of a significant occurrence in the Korean American community: the Yisseh (second-generation Korean American). The Japanese who migrated in the early 20th century encountered a similar situation in which the pioneering generation (Issei) of migrants witnessed their children experience acculturation at a more rapid pace.

Therefore, the Nisei (second-generation Japanese) were able to be translators for their parents in their businesses, excel in American schools and even become more successful in their eventual careers. Such is the case, over three-quarters of a century later for the subsequent Asian communities and especially for the Korean Americans.

However, as much as the successes were felt, there are many of the similar struggles. While the first generation, sometimes powerless due to their inability to communicate with mainstream society, trudged on without much protest, many times, the second generation refused to sit idly by as they witnessed oppression. Especially during the period of the Japanese internment in WWII, historians report that it was the Nisei who were the most vociferous about their opposition towards their internment while the Issei, for the most part, silently accepted their mistreatment in shame. Not to say that everyone

in the first generation of Asian migrants were and are pacifists, but in general, the second generation are more equipped to engage the oppressive majority — just like it was back in the days of the Japanese internment so it is in the era of the second generation Korea Americans as they grow up and assume professional roles.

Such a phenomenon is not an individual occurrence but a collective one. It is sad but fortunate that I discovered the significance of my position as a second-generation Korean American in college. Institutional racism may be at an all-time low but racism is very alive today as it was a century ago and the Yisseh are outfitted to face the threat head-on. Other second-generation Korean Americans may refuse to be classified and passed off as a trend of the immigrant experience, but I have not only accepted such labeling, I intend to take full responsibility of it. It is a crucial time period for Korean Americans (as well as the entire Asian American community): as we increase in number, the tension for Korean Americans to be increasingly included in the democratic process of our nation will grow. We are witnessing such friction today with the growing number of the educated among the immigrant populations and we must continue to put the pressure on. We need to do so, not only for the sake of our people, but in order to further facilitate the democratic ideals which this nation holds so dear.

For myself, after a summer of research and close work with the people involved in the Sovereignty movement of Hawaii in 2004, I have confirmed my aspirations to pursue a *Juris Doctor* (law degree). Witnessing the injustice of our government, memories of my own experiences of racism flooded my mind and the conviction to fight such

wrongdoings on the political level strengthened; I can no longer pursue monetary security when so many legal and political threats abound. Also, my parents couldn't pursue a law degree with their limited English, such responsibilities fall upon me. Furthermore, not only for the work on the grand level (increased political equality for the ethnic immigrant communities) but for the sake of my immigrant parents I am convinced that it is my calling to obtain a J.D.; their ignorance of a detached system leaves their social and economic stability vulnerable.

This is the legacy of the Yisseh, the history that the second-generation Korean Americans are making today. I am a part of our story in America, a country that once was viewed as the white man's but is steadily becoming *our* land too. If it wasn't for the oppressive racism and injustice I experienced in my developmental years, I wouldn't feel the urgency for change. At the end of the day, I am a product of such social and political evils: I am a hope for good. With such optimism, I press on to *truck* over the injustices (not white boys) of our society; to perpetuate the wonderful core values that the framers decorated our Constitution with. That is my desire and my place in this beautiful country of ours — our America.