Koreans in LA

2005

Introduction

The 1992 Los Angeles, CA, riots caused economic destruction to the Korean American community as well as psychological harm that could lead to the sorrow and anger that Koreans call 'Han'. Responses to the riots revealed anti-Korean feelings in other racial groups, often provoked by the media. Many Korean Americans feel betrayed that the democratic system failed to protect them (Baldassare, 1994).

Consequences of the LA Riots

Korean-American double victims suffered an estimated $56 million in lost property and business, according to a post-quake survey conducted by the Korean Youth and Community Center, a local community outreach organization. And that figure does not include the loss of wages for people who lost their jobs, or lost tax revenues or loss of goods and services to residents, the organization reported earlier this month. Most of those Korean-American double victims suffered losses to their businesses in the riot and losses to their homes in the quake. But because many small-business owners rely heavily on their personal assets to secure loans, etc., quake losses to personal residences can and do have serious negative consequences for the victims' businesses (Abelmann and Lie, 1995).

Korean Americans in Los Angeles responded to the destruction of the riots, their representation by the media, and government intervention in many ways. The voices and vignettes that follow portray Korean American diversity in Los Angeles and reveal a creative tension between U.S. and South Korean ideologies and meanings. At the heart of Korean Americans' riot responses is a contest over the meaning and direction of the Korean diaspora. This struggle engages both the U.S. ideological landscape and the South Korean memory-scape, the sense of what has been left behind in the homeland. The prevalence of borderland ideologies of culture and nation-idioms that traverse place and time-is striking. In other words,

these responses speak to the transnational reality of multiethnic Los Angeles (Abelmann and Lie, 1995).

Diaspora Formation: Modernity and Mobility

Korean Americans' reflections on the riots reveal enormous diversity in politics, ideology, and idiomatic flair. Furthermore, the Korean memory emerges alongside the American ideological landscape. Riot responses cannot be wrested from the meanings Korean Americans attach to immigration itself. Korean immigrants inhabited transnational spaces before emigrating from South Korea, and they continue to do so after immigration. Most South Koreans have a relative, or at least a classmate or good friend, in the United States. However there is nothing to diminish the profound rupture experienced by the Korean immigrant who leaves Seoul for Los Angeles or a regional South Korean city for an American small town. Emigrants' contacts with the United States, however, do not begin on the eve of emigration, nor do their connections with South Korea end at the beaches of Los Angeles (Abelmann and Lie, 1995).

Korean American Entrepreneurship

Most media accounts, Korean American entrepreneurial success is articulated as a function of cultural characteristics, such as hard work, frugality, family and ethnic solidarity, and so on. This essentialized ethnic portrait, however, is deceiving. The ability of Korean Americans to open small businesses depends on a confluence of factors that cannot be reduced to the ethnic or cultural characteristics of Korean Americans. It is necessary to transcend ethnic essentialism and consider the class-based resources of, as well as the opportunity structure facing, Korean Americans. Such a perspective also illuminates why Korean Americans, and not African Americans, tend to open shops in South Central Los Angeles (Bonacich, 1988).

Becoming American

Korean immigrant views of America, shaped as they were by U.S. cultural influences and official anticommunist South Korean education, (Abelmann and Lie, 1995) differed radically from that of many poor people in the communities they served It was unaware of the shameful history of oppression of nonwhite immigrants and other people of color in the U.S., they regarded themselves as having arrived in a meritocratic "land of opportunity" where a person's chances for success are limited only by individual lack of ability or diligence. Having left a homeland where they foresaw their talents and hard work going unrecognized and unearned, they were desperate to believe that the "American dream" of social and economic mobility through hard work was within their reach (Abelmann and Lie, 1995). Korean Americans in Los Angeles found themselves abandoned. They joined together to guard each other's means of livelihood with guns, relying on Korean-language radio and newspapers to communicate with and help each other. On the third day after the outbreak of violence, more than 30,000 Korean Americans gathered for a peace march in downtown L.A. in what was perhaps the largest and most quickly organized mass mobilization in Asian American history. Musicians in white, the color of mourning, beat traditional Korean drums in sorrow, anger, and celebration of community, a call to arms like a collective heartbeat. (Abelmann and Lie, 1995) It can be reckoned that the mother of Edward Lee, the Los Angeles-born college student mistaken for a looter and shot to death in the streets, has been able to endure in great part because of the massive outpouring of sympathy expressed by the Korean American community that shared and understood her han (Abelmann and Lie, 1995).

Conclusion

Given the diverse nature of the Korean American population, Korean American responses to the tension leading to the April 1993 verdict and its aftermath were, not surprisingly, extremely varied. For some suburban Korean Americans who suffered no direct damage, the memory of the L.A. riots had become something akin to a natural disaster-an event to be discussed from time to time. Their response was to go to Koreatown less frequently. Yet the 1992 L.A. riots had, as we have seen, a tremendous impact on many Korean Americans. Those bearing the most visible scars of the riots remain the victims-those who suffered damage or lost their business altogether. The Korean American Inter-Agency Council, in a survey of over 1,500 respondents ten months after the riots, found that "approximately 75 percent of the Korean American victims of the Riots have not recovered from its after effects" (Abelmann and Lie, 1995). Less than 28 percent of those surveyed had been able to reopen their businesses. In spite of being declared a federal disaster area, the first riot site to be so designated, federal relief was lagging. The damages were not simply material; post-traumatic stress disorders remained common a year later. One such victim "suffered such a severe case that he has had temporary memory loss. He also has nightmares where African Americans and Latinos/as are attacking him and setting things on fire. The victim replays the Riot scenes over and over in his dreams" (Abelmann and Lie, 1995). The immigrant dream-materialism, modernity, mobility-burned with the flames of the 1992 L.A. riots. The most profound effect of the 1992 L.A. riots for the wider Korean American community, however, was the politicization of many, especially second-generation, Korean Americans. Significant shifts have occurred in the politics and consciousness of Korean Americans: a new articulation of their transnational spaces and an effort to resituate themselves in the United States. It remains to be seen which directions and

tendencies will prevail: essentialist nationalism, multiethnic alliance politics, cultural conservatism, labor solidarity, or perhaps even a return to political quietism. The complexities and confusions of Korean American politics refract the major political and ideological struggles of our times: the persisting divides of ethnicity and class, the meaning and morality of community, and conflicts over gender and multiculturalism (Abelmann and Lie, 1995).

A fundamental lesson of the L.A. riots for many Korean Americans was the need to shift their focus from South Korea to the United States. The transition from "Korean Korean" to "Korean American" implies not only a generational transfer of power but new articulations of the South Korean-U.S. relationship-from the first generation with its irrevocable ties to the homeland to the second generation with its firm footing in the United States. Many Korean Americans therefore seek to organize the community for better representation in U.S. politics and media. Yet not surprisingly, this scheme, trumpeted by younger Korean Americans, is not so simple. Members of the first generation do not somehow disappear; they do not stop working. Moreover, as we have seen, "Korean American" is not a monolithic identity (Abelmann and Lie, 1995).

Bibliography

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