

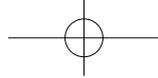
Younger-Generation Korean Experiences in the United States: Personal Narratives on Ethnic and Racial Identities, by Pyong Gap Min and Thomas Chung, eds. Lexington: Lexington Books, 2014, 254 pp., US\$90.00, ISBN: 978-0739191415 (hardcover)

Korean Americans Who Have Empowered the Korean-American Community 재미 한인사회에 힘을 실어준 한인들, by Pyong Gap Min and Thomas Chung, eds. Seoul: Book Korea, 2014, 505 pp., KRW 25,000, ISBN: 978-8963243733 (paperback)

Since the establishment of the Research Center for Korean Community at Queens College of the City University of New York, Pyong Gap Min and his colleagues have been diligently working on documenting Korean American experiences. These two publications in particular focus on personal narrative data on Korean Americans. These narratives relate personal recollections about the quest for ethnic identity and belonging, and are full of insights gained from the struggles, frustrations, hopes, and successes throughout the subjects' life experiences. Readers, especially Korean American readers but also those of any background, will find the two books in equal measures thought-provoking and touching as they empathize with the various narrators from their own perspectives.

Over the past 50 years of Korean immigration to the United States, the increasing involvement of younger-generation Korean Americans both in the mainstream labor market and in the ethnic community organizations and institutions raises the question of the extent to which Korean Americans retain their ethnic identity and how they are integrating into American society. While there has previously been some qualitative research on this topic based on in-depth personal interview data, *Younger-Generation Korean Experiences in the United States* examines the ethnic identity of 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans through fifteen personal narratives. The first and last chapters of the book comprise the editors' theoretical and analytic attempt to account for the formation of ethnic identity.

The first chapter lays out the theoretical framework, identifying four crucial factors and formulating how those factors influence the nature and degree of ethnic identity among younger-generation Korean Americans. There are three internal factors: 1) retention of Korean culture, 2) involvement in ethnic social networks, 3) linkages to the mother country; and one external factor: 4) experiences facing racial prejudice and discrimination in the United

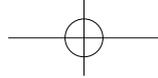


States. The editors then suggest four hypothetical types of ethnic identities, depending on the combination of the varying levels of the four factors identified above.

Of the four types, two empirically match well with the cases of younger-generation Korean Americans, depending on the historical and social context(s) of their upbringing. The earlier cohort of younger-generation Korean Americans who grew up in the 1960s and early 1970s may fit the case of reluctant ethnic identity in which individual members of a minority group exhibit low levels of ethnic retention and ethnic social networks and linkages to the homeland but face high levels of racial prejudice and discrimination from the host society. This cohort tended to grow up in predominantly white communities where they found themselves as racially marked as the only Asian kids in their schools or neighborhoods. In this environment, younger-generation Korean Americans struggled to accept or outright resisted their ethnic heritage. Distancing themselves from being Korean, they instead tried to “act white” in order to blend in with their white peers or the dominant culture. U.S.-born second-generation Korean Americans who grew up in the social and historical context of English-only emphasis from the 1950s to the 1970s frequently felt rejected by their own ethnic community because of their lack of Korean language and cultural proficiency.

Another type of ethnic identity illustrates the experiences of the later cohort of younger-generation Korean Americans who grew up in the 1980s and early 1990s, mainly in large metropolitan areas with a sizeable Korean population. These Korean Americans tended to possess high levels of ethnic retention, ethnic social networks, and linkages to the homeland combined with a very low level of exposure to racial prejudice and discrimination. They are more likely to voluntarily and positively embrace their Korean heritage as they witness the thriving presence of the large Korean community in their surroundings, the rising status of Korea on the global stage, and increased emphasis on multiculturalism in public discourse and institutions. Minority group members in this ethnic identity type are likely to facilitate a process of selective acculturation and maintain a hyphenated American identity (i.e., Korean-American) with less angst.

Whether belonging to the earlier or later cohort, there appear some experiences common among younger-generation Korean Americans. It is during their college years that they encounter ethnic consciousness on a serious

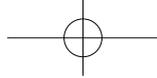


search for their ethnic identity. All the participants disclosed that they lived in or felt caught between two worlds: “We are too Korean to be American, yet too American to be Korean” (p. 115). The participants had to constantly negotiate their ethnic identity between blending in and defining their Korean-ness. For instance, some participants felt too Korean upon realizing that, as a consequence of growing up without learning those skills from their immigrant parents, they lacked mastery of the social and conversational skills that may be crucial to advancing in the mainstream workplace. Others felt too American when struggling with the Korean patriarchal culture at home or, alternatively, the overemphasis on academic performance and professional career security, or the materialistic, upwardly aspiring, middle-class mindset. Thus, their ethnic identity is often situationally constructed.

Some younger-generation Korean Americans identified as cultural foreigners within the Korean community since proficiency in Korean language is necessary to gain full access to the community. Growing up, their only connection to the Korean community was the Korean church or (the usually church-affiliated) Korean language school. However, as the editors unexpectedly found, ethnic church participation has reduced the level of younger-generation Koreans’ ethnic attachment and networks. Lack of language fluency and cultural barriers engender a sense of rejection from Korean community, foreignness, and even mutual bitterness setting. However, this dynamic may change if the rate at which the Korean community replenishes with fresh Korea-born immigrants diminishes. On the one hand, the participants of the book recalled homeland trips to visit family or attending a camp or language school in Korea as having strengthened their American identity due to their linguistic and cultural foreignness. Yet, simultaneously, their improved Korean proficiency gained through their contact with relatives or fellow classmates or roommates in stimulating environments helped them to discover their ethnic heritage in a positive way. The positive effect of linkages to the homeland on increased Korean identity is more evident for the later cohort than the earlier cohort of younger-generation Korean Americans.

The second book *Korean Americans Who Have Empowered the Korean-American Community* is a collection of eighteen personal narratives from Korean Americans who have made remarkable achievements in the mainstream society. These individuals range from former or incumbent elected politicians or high-ranking public officials to community leaders and currently operating activists.

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Some are self-made elder statesmen (e.g., Paull Shin, Jay Changjoon Kim, and Sunny Park) and others are younger-generation Korean-American up-and-coming politicians and public administrators (e.g., Ron Kim, Sharon Ha, and Steven Choi). Hailing from various socioeconomic and politically ideological backgrounds, each, on a personal journey to find a place of belonging, relentlessly endeavored to overcome many obstacles as a minority and challenges along their career trajectories. Furthermore, they shared a common desire to contribute to the empowerment of Korean American community, going beyond their individual aims and needs. They strived to penetrate to the core of the mainstream society and leveraged the mainstream society to empower Korean community. Their efforts have raised them to prominence as model minority Korean Americans with a vision for broader public service. These participants may serve as role models for younger Korean Americans who aspire to attain the American dream for themselves and support the further advancement of empowerment and political representation of Korean Americans or Asian Americans as a whole and Americans in general. While it does offer some useful historical data, this book should be read not as a scholarly work but as a practical book of short autobiographies that highlights and recognizes promising political candidates or role models for the empowerment and the long-term development of the Korean American community.

The biggest strength of the two books reviewed is their provision of personal narrative data. The advantage of personal narrative method is that participants take plenty of time to reflect upon their life experiences handling ethnic identity and articulate them through their own words. These unobtrusively collected narratives add a valuable source of qualitative data to the ethnic identity studies on Korean and Asian Americans. Related to the narrative method, the strength of the book further lies in the embeddedness of the personal stories in a social and historical context. Despite the value that the two volumes contain, the reader ought to be aware that the participants featured therein are a highly selected group. To illustrate, six of the fifteen subjects in the first book have obtained or are working toward a Ph.D. degree in the field of social sciences, primarily sociology. These participants are obviously trained in the contextualization and critical reconstruction of their personal experiences and do not necessarily represent the general Korean American population.

This selectivity may give impression to the reader that the two volumes affirm the myth of the model minority theory by giving too much attention

to the extremely successful or sophisticated and critically-minded individuals. Doing so would overlook, for example, that Asian American political candidates are increasingly recruited by mainstream political parties and politicians to tap into minority electorates and to maneuver minority groups for their political aims/endeavors. It would be advisable to remind readers that the successes of the individuals in the second book are not merely the results of their individual efforts and talents but partly the reflection of the growing tolerance of identity politics in American society.

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