ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDIES

Korean American History (An overview of Korean American history and resources for teachers and their students)

HSS Content Standards 11 11.1

Ethnic Studies Principles 1,2,4,6,7

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Professor Chang is author of eight books, seven edited volumes, and numerous articles in *The Los Angeles Times, Korea Daily, and the Korea Times.* His mostrecent book is the Korean translation of *Lonesome Journey* published by Korea University Press in 2016. He translated the Korean book *Unsung Hero: The Story of Col. Young Oak Kim* (2011). Chang is also the author of "*Ethnic Peace in the American City: Community Building in Los Angeles and Beyond*," (with Jeannette Diaz-Veizades) in 1999. His commentaries have aired on the Korea Broadcasting System and Radio Korea.

A Concise History of Korean Americans

Edward T. Chang

Today, Korean Americans are a growing ethnic group whose history in the United States reaches back to the late 1800s. The first Koreans came to the U.S. as diplomats, students and ginseng merchants. Official Korean immigration to the U.S. began in 1903. A group of 102 Koreans boarded the *SS Gaelic* and sailed to Hawaii. On January 13, 1903 those pioneering Koreans landed in Honolulu. Today, January 13 is recognized and celebrated by the United States as Korean American Day.

Koreans in Hawaii established the first Korean American church in November 1903. However, most of these Korean worshipers resided and worked on plantations and were dispersed across several islands. The Korean Methodist Church of Hawaii provided a haven for Korean laborers who had no formal community of their own because they lived on plantations as workers. The living arrangements on the plantations resembled a pyramid, where the owner lived on the top of the hill and the supervisor known as the Luna, resided in the middle acting as a buffer, and the diverse labor force lived in cottages or camp sites.

Korean laborers resided on these plantations with other minorities including the Chinese, Japanese, and later Filipinos. In fact, Hawaii had become a multiethnic/multiracial society because the plantation owners continually imported foreign labor – 400,000 workers from 33 different countries to work on the sugar plantations from the 1860s to the 1940s. Koreans in Hawaii formed their own organizations including a village council for each plantation. The council, known as the Dong-hoe, was led by the eldest person who was known as the Dong-jang. Each plantation Dong-hoe provided Korean laborers a sense of stability in their chaotic plantation lives.

Many of the Korean plantation workers were bachelors and very few came with families. However, beginning in 1910, Korean “Picture Brides” began to arrive in Hawaii. The women typically came from poor families. Parents of both groom and bride would consult each other and based upon recommendations and photographs, a match would be made. The women were motivated by several factors including the hope they would have more freedom in America, escaping Japanese rule, filial obligation, and the prospect of economic prosperity.

The age difference between brides and grooms averaged about 15 years. Thus, many Korean picture brides were often widowed and ended up working and supporting their families on their own. Picture Brides brought stability, focus, and economic prosperity for their families. They labored with their husbands and moved with them when they left Hawaii for the US mainland.

Church continued to be a strong and influential part of Korean lives in Hawaii. After Koreans moved to the US mainland, they continued to worship at churches and eventually, in October 1905, the Korean Methodist Church of San Francisco was founded.The bustling city of San Francisco served as the port of entry for Koreans who came to the United States mainland. The city was already saturated with Chinese Americans who had established a Chinatown in the city. While there were a small number of Koreans living, and working in San Francisco, there were not enough of them to constitute a Korean settlement. Instead, Koreans who came to San Francisco used it as a temporary station to learn about job opportunities elsewhere. San Francisco had a high rate of anti-Asian sentiment and very little employment opportunities for Asian immigrants as they faced overt discrimination. Thus, Koreans found themselves migrating to other cities such as Riverside, CA, Redlands, CA, Hastings, Nebraska, and

even as far away as New Jersey.

DosanAhn Chang Ho, famed Korean patriot and leader, was one of those early Korean settlers who came to the U.S. before official Korean immigration to the U.S. and arrived in SF on October 14, 1902.Some of those Koreans moved from Hawaii to the United States mainland. Dosan had five children. Phillip became an actor with well-known roles on television series like Kung Fu. Philson became an engineer. Susan joined the US military during World War II. Soorah opened a restaurant – the Moongate – in Panorama City, CA with the help of Philip in the 1950s. Ralph also enlisted in the US Navy and later became an actor. Dosan's children continued to be active community members and leaders, carrying on their father's legacy of honesty and integrity. Dosan was eventually deported in 1926.

The First Korean Settlement

Meanwhile, Dosan arrived in Riverside, CA, in March 23, 1904 and established a Korean Labor Bureau in 1905 in an effort to help organize the Korean community. The Korean Labor Bureau attracted many Koreans who settled in Riverside and lived at Pachappa Camp. The settlement was known as Pachppa Camp, or Dosan's Republic. It housed about 100 Koreans (1910 census) who worked on neighboring citrus farms. Korean men, women, and children resided at Pachappa and held weddings, social activities, and other community functions like English classes. The community flourished and Dosan's wife and children also moved to Riverside where they resided until 1913.

The importance of Pachappa Camp and the role the settlement played in the growth of the Korean American community and the global Korean independence movement in the early 1900s has long been overlooked by historians and academics. But, new discoveries including local church records, maps, and newspaper articles illustrate just how important and significant Pachappa Camp was. It is important to note that Korean women at Pachappa Camp played a very important and active role in the independence movement as well. They helped with fund raising, donated what little they had to the cause, and actively participated in meetings. In fact, they also fundraised, gave lectures, and participated in discussion groups. Korean women not only worked as well as the men, they also took care of the family, cooked, and maintained the Pachappa Camp buildings.

Koreans living in the United States spent much of their time working for the independence of Korea which became a protectorate of Japan in 1905 and was formerly colonized in 1910. Ahn Chang Ho, Syngman Rhee, and other Korean independence activists worked to liberate Korea.
While the Korean National Association fought for Korea's independence during the early 1900s, Koreans in America were about to engage in their own independent recognition as non-Japanese. On June 26, 1913, a group of eleven Koreans were contracted to work in Hemet, CA picking apricots. But at the time anti-Asian sentiment was high. The Korean workers, who went to Hemet by train, were greeted by white protestors who threw their baggage back at them and forced the Koreans back on the train. This

incident would later prove to be invaluable to the Korean American community. As word spread of the event, Koreans became the subject of American newspapers who reported on the story which became known as the “Hemet Valley Incident.”

According to the news reports, the Japanese Consulate moved quickly to represent the Koreans, who they claimed as Japanese subjects at the time. Outraged by the Japanese government’s interference, the Korean National Association’s president David Lee, sent a telegram to then Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan proclaiming that Koreans in America were not Japanese subjects and should be treated as Koreans.

Secretary of State Bryan took this opportunity to deflect criticism from the Japanese government and issued a press release stating that “Koreans are not Japanese subjects.” The Hemet Valley Incident would serve as an important moment in Korean American history. Koreans in America were now unofficially recognized by the U.S. government and were considered free from Japanese authority. In essence, the Korean American community gained semi-formal status and the Korean National Association became the unofficial diplomatic representative of Koreans in America.

The March 1, 1919 Mansei uprising in Korea which protested Japanese occupation inspired Koreans living abroad to become more active in independence movements. Shortly after, on April 13, 1919, the Korean Provisional Government was formed and its president Syngman Rhee oversaw operations. Syngman Rhee also formed an independence organization known as the Dongji-hoe, or Comrade’s Association. Established in Hawaii by Rhee, the organization moved its headquarters to Los Angeles in 1929.

Church and Independence Movement

The early Korean community in the U.S. evolved around Church and the independence movement. In fact, church and the independence movement were inseparable as the Korean immigrant church was the center of independence movement activities. Despite economic hardship and racial discrimination, Korean immigrants supported and actively participated in the independence movement by voluntarily paying a “duty fund.” One Korean American, Park Yong Man, went as far as establishing a youth military school in Hastings, Nebraska and later in Hawaii to prepare for armed resistance against Japan.

With new hope and motivation after the March 1, 1919 Mansei movement, a group of visionary Koreans, aided by the newly established Korean Provisional Government, set forth on an endeavor to form a combat pilot training school in Willows, CA – it became the Willows Korean Aviation School/Corps. Thus, sometime in March 1920, the Willows Korean Aviation School Corps was established. For about one year the school trained Korean American men in the art of flying airplanes. Classes were structured like a military school. Under the direction of the Korean Aviation Board which received its blessing from the Korean Provisional Government, the school admitted about 25 students to start. Several dozen students trained at the Willows Korean Aviation School/Corps. At some point, plans to train up to 100 pilots were made. But, misfortune

and bad weather would change the tide of the school's fate. Today, the school is regarded as the origin of the Korean Air Force.

From the 1920s to the early 1940s the Korean American population grew very slowly. Korean Americans found work throughout the U.S. as farmers, house servants, bakers, cooks, coal miners, and various other hard labor occupations. Some even opened stores and shops, selling fruits and vegetables. The Korean American population never gave up on their mother country and strived to support the independence movement. Many Korean Americans joined the Korean National Association, Comrade's Association (Dongji-hoe), other independence organizations and donated money, and held meetings to support the cause.

WW II and Korean War

With the United States now firmly entrenched in the violence and chaos of World War II, Korean Americans saw an opportunity to fight the Japanese; this was their chance to help the Korean independence movement. Even though Korean immigrants were not eligible to become naturalized American citizens until 1952, they still felt the call to arms. More than 200 Korean Americans were able to enlist or were drafted by the US military.Many Korean Americans viewed enlisting in the US military was beneficial to the independence of Korea.

The most famous of Korean American military war heroes who served during World War II was Col. Young Oak Kim. He would then be assigned to the 100th Infantry Battalion. This battalion would become the famed Nisei Unit of the US Army. The mostly-Japanese American men did not trust Kim at first. When Kim arrived in Hawaii to take command of this fledgling unit, his commanding officer told him that he would be transferred citing the fact that at the time, Koreans and Japanese did not get along. Kim, however, saw beyond the color lines and said: "We're all Americans and we're all fighting for the same cause."

Kim would earn the respect of his men after he showed them compassion, leadership, and genuine care for their well-being. Kim would lead this unit through Europe, fighting on the frontlines in Italy, France, and Germany. Kim would later receive the equivalent of the Medal of Honor from Italy, France, and the Republic of Korea.

Another amazing Korean American who served his country with honor was Dr. Sammy Lee. Dr. Lee was the first Asian American to win a Gold Medal for the United States during an Olympic Games. Four years later, during the 1952 Helsinki, Finland Olympic Games he won gold again.
Dr. Lee's life and accomplishments include coaching Olympic divers Bob Webster and Greg Louganis. Dr. Lee was a well-known man and he and Col. Young Oak Kim were life-long friends.

After years of relentless fighting, World War II would finally end in 1945. For Korean Americans, the surrender meant the liberation of their homeland. After thirty-five years

of occupation, Korea was now free from Japanese rule.

Korea would be divided. The Soviet Union would take the Northern half of the Korean peninsula and the United States the southern portion. Syngman Rhee would become the Republic of Korea's president in the South. Kim Il-Sung would become the Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of the North. The newly divided country would not see peace for long.Today, Korea is the only country still divided against its own will.

In the United States, the Korean War shined a light on this small community living and working in America. Between 1950 and 1965, Korean American population grew steadily. Many of these Koreans were orphans, adoptees, GI brides, students, and diplomats who migrated to the US after the Korean War. In fact, GI brides played a critical role in helping to bring Koreans to the United States after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. The act allowed Korean Americans to sponsor their family members and bring them to the United States. Thus, many GI brides sponsored their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and even cousins, aunts and uncles. The Korean American community flourished and grew with the help of the Korean GI brides.

New Urban Immigrants

With the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the doors were opened for Asians to come to the United States. Quotas and bans were lifted. The Korean American population skyrocketed after 1965. In 1970, the Korean American population was 69,130! This was an increase of about 60,000 since 1940!The new wave of Korean Americans found themselves trying to live the American dream. Many came to the United States after the Korean War, seeking a better life and opportunities.

Korean immigrants who came after the passage of 1965 Immigration Act are known as "New Urban Immigrants." Unlike traditional immigrants who enter the U.S., Korean immigrants were educated, middle class, and had managerial backgrounds. They sought opportunities in the U.S. and were driven to achieve the American Dream they had heard so much about. These New Urban Immigrants also came to the United States so they could find economic success and send their children to the best universities. It is also important to note that the 1965 Immigration Act was based on family reunion and a preference for skilled workers. Thus, GI brides who sponsored family members or Koreans who came on their own, were skilled laborers. But, they would soon realize, their skills were not transferable in the U.S. and would not be valued. So, they turned to self-employment and opened small businesses; this, they believed, was the fastest way to achieve the American Dream.

When these Korean New Urban Immigrants came to the United States, one distinct characteristic stood out about the community: almost 70 percent attend church regularly, even to this day. The Protestant church is the focal point of the Korean American community today. Another characteristic of the Koreans who migrated to the US in the 1970s and 1980s is that they were unaware of the Civil Rights Movement. They knew little of the anti-war movement or of the race riots of the 1960s. Essentially,

Koreans in the United States had no idea that the businesses they were buying or the locations they were now occupying were once owned by the Jewish community. The Jewish community left inner cities after riots including the Watts Riots of 1965. The vacuum that was created by the exodus of the Jewish store owners in inner cities provided an opportunity for the new Korean immigrants.

Los Angeles Riots of 1992

The LA Riots represented a watershed moment for Korean Americans who realized they needed to have political representation and better community relationships. The unfair depiction of the Korean American community as the middle man minority or gun toting vigilante by American media, put Korean Americans in a hopeless position.

It is often said, that the Korean American identity was born or reborn on April 29, 1992. Korean Americans suffered triple oppression during and after the riots: Economic loss, Post-Traumatic Stress Disoder, and portrayal by the media portray as “vigilantes.” In fact, the Korean American community had no voice in city hall and the LA city council prohibited Korean immigrant merchants from rebuilding their stores.

Korean American shop owners became the target of looters and arsonists. The LA Riots would decimate the Korean American community’s livelihoods as their businesses went up in smoke. During 1980s, many Korean Americans opened shops in inner cities like Chicago, Flushing, NY, and South Central Los Angeles. Grocery markets, wig shops, liquor stores, and other small businesses were the main types of businesses Korean Americans operated in those inner cities. Soon the black-Korean conflict, as it was called, began to take up headlines in news reports. As the Korean American population continued to increase – by 1980 the Korean American population would reach more 354,000 – tensions began to brew between the black and Korean communities.

Korean immigrant merchants were now the “middleman minority.” This meant that they served as the buffer between the dominant white and subordinate black populations in the U.S. The anger and frustrations of underclass blacks were directed toward Korean immigrant merchants. Tensions increased, boycotts, and violence exacerbated the divide and animosity between the two minority communities.

Robberies and murders of Korean Americans increased as well. In 1991, there were 30 Korean American homicides in Los Angeles County. That number would dramatically decrease by 1995; there were 8 homicides in LA County that year.

By April 1992, the trial for the Rodney King beating would grab headlines. The African American community expected justice this time. Instead, not guilty verdicts were given by the jury and the police officers were not convicted. The verdicts became the straw that broke the camel’s back as the African American community gathered in protest, demanding justice and equality.

Many valuable lessons were learned from the LA Riots and Korean Americans worked to become more visible in America. Korean Americans began to participate in politics and gained empowerment and voice. They also encouraged generational cooperation

within their community and involved their American born children in the effort to gain visibility and voice in the United States. And, most importantly, Korean Americans became proactive members of the multiethnic and multiracial societies they were part of.

The wake-up call was heard by the Korean American community and they began to participate in politics and give back to the communities they were part of. Cultural misunderstandings were explained and the African American community began to understand a little better the Korean Americans that were also a struggling minority class. Korean Americans spent the next decade raising their voices. David Ryu was elected as a city council member in Los Angeles in 2015. He is the first Korean American and second Asian American to ever be elected to LA City Council.

Hallyu Wave and the Future

From 2000 to current day, the popularity of Korean culture hit the American scene hard. Suddenly, Koreatown became a popular place to eat and hang out as interest in Korean food was spurred by trending K-drama and K-pop music. Korean actors like Steven Yeun and Sandra Oh also helped increase interest in Korean culture.

The Hallyu Wave, as this interest is known, increased awareness of Korean culture and helped Korean Americans become more visible and accepted in mainstream American culture. Today, Korean Americans are an integral part of cities like Los Angeles, New York, and other major metropolitan cities. While there are Koreans in nearly every state in America, Koreans are still concentrated in Los Angeles.

Korean Americans also became more organized and sought better voice and representation. In 2010, a group of Korean American leaders formed the Council of Korean Americans. CKA works to raise the voice and identity of Korean Americans on a national scale.

Today, Korean American students excel in school and professional fields. While the success and visibility of Korean Americans has increased dramatically since the days of the 1992 LA Riots, this small community of almost 2 million still faces many challenges. Today, there are still a number of undocumented workers and students who face deportation and poverty. The working Korean immigrant class continues to struggle to make ends meet. Meanwhile, the older Korean American generation – senior citizens – also struggle to survive.

Korean Americans also still face the challenge of how to incorporate these marginalized groups within their community. How can they connect, help, and work with undocumented workers and students? How can American-born Koreans connect with the older generation? As the Korean American population continues to grow, the struggle becomes about how to function, fit in, and live within America’s multiethnic communities.

The answers lie within the 1.5 and the second generation of Korean Americans whose efforts – like the CKA – to raise the voice and identity of their community is the hope for the future. The 1.5 and the second generation have the advantage of being fluent in English and Korean. They can help bridge the gap between the generations, articulate

the needs of the Korean American community, and teach their children about Korean American history and the journey, struggles, and successes of their ancestors so they can forge onward and not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Arirang is a two part documentary on Korean American history created by filmmaker Tom Coffman. Each documentary is one hour. The second part includes an informative and powerful segment on the L.A. Riots and its impact on the Korean American community. One may order *Arirang* for $25 (includes mailing). Send a check to Tom Coffman for $25 at Arirang Project, 44-114 Bayview Haven Place, Kane'ohe, HI 96744. (For High School and College)

Arirang (1:56 minutes), a documentary on Korean American history, is accessible for teachers and their students on You Tube. The documentary was created by filmmaker, Tom Coffman, and was originally available for purchase as a DVD. The documentary begins with the beautiful sounds of Korea's most famous song, *Arirang*, and followed by segments that include: conditions in Korea in the late 19th early 20th century, the first Koreans who came to Hawaii in 1903 and their experiences working on sugar plantations, the first Korean settlements in California, Japanese occupation of Korea, the church and the Korean Independence Movement, Ahn Chang Ho, the Korean National Association, World War II (Col. Young Oak Kim),the Korean War, the Immigration Act of 1965, the experience of Koreans in Los Angeles, and the L.A. Riots followed by discussions about the impact of the riots and the response of the Korean community. The documentary includes interviews of historians, journalists, and community leaders. Some segments could be shown to upper elementary and middle school students.

1- 8:33 (the experience in Hawaii), 8:33 – 15:00 (Japanese occupation of Korea, Korean Independence Movement, World War II) 15:00 -18:00 (Korean War) 18:00 -30:00 (Immigration Act of 1965 and life in Koreatown, Los Angeles) 30:00 – 53:00 (Angelo Oh, Racial tensions , the L.A. Riots, and Solidarity), 53:00 – 1:15 (Korean values, Korean achievements, Japanese occupation, March First Movement, Syngman Rhee, the Korean War, the division of Korea), 1:15 – 1:26 (Charles Kim, Korean American Coalition, how to be a Korean in America and retain one's heritage, the need for Koreans to become involved politically in America), 1:26- 1:33 (Professor Charles Armstrong, the importance of education, the Korean work ethic and life in the suburbs, issues of identity and assimilation) 1:33- 1:44 (Helen Kim Griffin, a researcher, discusses her experience in the U.S. and her pride in being Korean) 1:44-1:56 (Harold Sunoo, discusses his father's and his own involvement in the Korean Independence Movement, his life experiences that include being a Korean pastor, and his pride in being a Korean.

You Tube includes many videos of the L.A. Riots. Some are excellent.

For more information on Korean American history: KoreanAmericanStory.org (The mission of Korean American Story is to create and preserve the stories of the Korean American Experience). For information on Korea: *Teaching East Asia: Korea*: www.KoreanSeminar.org