

## A COHORT ANALYSIS OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS' CLASS BACKGROUNDS AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS IN THE UNITED STATES\*

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*Class backgrounds of Korean immigrants have changed during the last three decades, partly because of changes in U.S. immigration policy and partly because of changes in the economic conditions of South Koreans. The number of Korean immigrants from lower-class backgrounds has gradually increased since 1976, when the U.S. immigration policy placed a grater emphasis on family unification and the widening income inequality in South Korea made emigration to the United States more attractive to less fortunate Koreans. Partly because of the less selective class backgrounds among the post-1976 immigrant cohort, this cohort has achieved lower socioeconomic status in the United States than the pre-1976 cohort, even when we control for the length of residence in the United States. The cohort analysis shows that the Korean immigrant community is increasingly heterogeneous in terms of age, occupation, and class position.*

### INTRODUCTION

Immigrant life involves constant doubt and justification of one's reasons for being in a foreign land. Whether voluntary or involuntary, immigration does not automatically separate people from their home country, at least not emotionally. The struggles and humiliation they face in their adopted country make them wonder why they immigrated in the first place. Thoughts of returning to their homeland for good do not diminish with time, and become more appealing when immigrants are made to feel out of place in their new home. However, for many people, return migration is not a realistic option to the difficult, marginal, and dissatisfying aspects of immigrant life. It would not only be humiliating evidence of their failure, but would also deprive them of any investments, whether large or small, that they have made in their new country through hard work and frugality.

Faced with this dilemma, Korean immigrants to the United States selectively contrast positive aspects of American life with negative aspects

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of South Korean life in order to justify their decision to live in the United States. America is then viewed as an open and fair place to compete, whereas South Korea is viewed as a closed and unfair place for those who do not have social connections. Military threats from North Korea, authoritarian political establishments, favoritism, overcrowding, and the extremely competitive college entrance examination in South Korea make America a safer and better place for them and their children to live. Nonetheless, the language barrier, prejudice, discrimination, and the glass ceiling Korean immigrants face in their everyday lives undermine their belief in the American system and rekindle their desire to return to a place where they are members of the dominant group. It is this constant mental comparison of opportunities and constraints in the two countries that makes Korean immigrant life an ambivalent and bittersweet experience.

In this article, I first survey briefly the history of Korean immigration to the United States from 1903 to the present. Second, I explain the motivations and entry mechanisms that brought Korean immigrants into the United States. Third, I document and explain the changes in the class backgrounds of Korean immigrants during the last three decades. Finally, I examine how such changes have affected the patterns of social and economic adaptation among the different waves of immigrants.

## DATA AND METHODS

The primary sources of data for this study are the Statistical Yearbook of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for 1965 through 1990, and one percent and five percent samples of the Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the 1980 and 1990 U.S. censuses. The Statistical Yearbook provides information on annual number of immigrants, age and sex of immigrants, type (or class) of admission, occupation in countries of origin, and other variables related to immigration and naturalization. In this study, class backgrounds of immigrants are measured by self-reported occupations of immigrants at the time of entry. In 1990, about a quarter of the 32,301 Korean immigrants reported having an occupation at the time of their entry. In 1990, 7,929 Koreans qualified for immigration based on their skills, and entered the U.S. workforce in their reported occupations. The remaining immigrants reported either the occupation in their last job before immigration or the occupation they had been trained in or were qualified to perform.

The PUMS provides individual-level information on various social and economic statuses of immigrants in 1980 and 1990, such as education,

occupation, income, poverty status, welfare dependence, and home ownership. Because the PUMS has information on the year of immigration, we can divide immigrants into several cohorts and compare social and economic statuses among the different cohorts.<sup>1</sup>

## A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF KOREAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Korean immigration to the United States is divided largely into three periods: the early period from 1903 to 1944, the intermediate period from 1945 and 1964, and the recent period from 1965 to the present. Each wave of Korean immigrants was caused by different factors in Korea and the United States, and motivations and characteristics of Korean immigrants in each period were substantially different.

### *The Early Period of Korean Immigration, 1903-44*

Korean immigration to the United States dates back to January 13, 1903 when 101 Koreans from Inch'on arrived in Honolulu. Fifteen additional shiploads in 1903 brought 1,133 more Korean immigrants. By 1905, when Korean immigration to Hawaii was brought to a halt by a Japanese opposition against Korean immigration, 7,226 Korean immigrants had arrived in Hawaii (Houchins and Houchins 1974, p. 553). Of the 7,226 immigrants, 6,048 were male adults in their twenties, 637 were women, and 541 were children. Thus, the majority of the early Korean immigrants to Hawaii were young single males who came to Hawaii to make a quick fortune and return home rich and respected. This sojourning orientation resulted in an unbalanced sex ratio in the Korean immigrant community: there were ten men for every woman. To redress this problem, Korean women were brought into Hawaii through the exchange of pictures between prospective brides and grooms. Between 1910 and 1924, when the picture marriage was banned, almost 1,000 brides arrived in Hawaii and another 115 in California (H. Kim 1980, p. 602).

During the decade after 1910, some 541 Korean students came to the United States to study at American schools and universities (Houchins and Houchins 1974, p. 558). Although their status at the time of entry was

<sup>1</sup> A cohort consists of individuals who experienced the same significant demographic event during a specified period of time, and who may be identified as a group as successive later dates on the basis of this common demographic experience (Shryock, Siegel, and Associates 1976, p. 550).

“students”, they were essentially political refugees who tried to escape Japanese rule over Korea (1910-1945). They soon became the intellectual and political leaders of the Korean immigrant community and organized and sponsored the Korean independence movement overseas. From 1924, when the Immigration Act effectively curtailed Asian immigration to a minimal level, until the end of World War II, there was virtually no more immigration from Korea (Yu 1983, p. 23). By 1945, when Korea regained its independence from Japan, Koreans in the United States were a small and largely isolated minority, with about 6,500 in Hawaii and about 3,000 on the mainland (Shin 1971, p. 32).

#### *The Intermediate Period of Korean Immigration, 1945-64*

Shortly after its independence from Japan, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel into a communist North Korea and a democratic South Korea. Between 1945 and 1948, the United States ruled South Korea through a military government and was involved more deeply in South Korea during the Korean War (1950-1953). After the Korean War, the United States stationed more than 40,000 troops in South Korea, until 1990 when a small reduction occurred. The presence of U.S. troops in South Korea produced a sizable number of intermarriages between Korean women and American military servicemen serving in South Korea. Between 1950 and 1964, six thousand Korean women entered the United States as spouses of American military servicemen. During the same period, five thousand children, who were either war orphans or children of mixed parentage, were adopted by American families. Those intermarried Korean women and adopted children accounted for two-thirds of the Korean immigrants admitted to the United States between 1950 and 1964. Unlike the early Korean immigrants, who formed their own communities, these new immigrants were attached to American families and were scattered throughout the United States. They are still cut off from the Korean immigrant community and live isolated and marginal lives in the United States (B. Kim 1978; Yu 1983, pp. 23-24).

The post-World War II military, political, and cultural relations between the United States and South Korea were also responsible for the migration of Korean students to the United States. Between 1945 and 1965 about six thousand Korean students came to the United States to seek higher education at American colleges and universities (W. Kim 1971, p. 26). They entered the United States expecting to have high social prestige back in South Korea after obtaining American diplomas. Many of them, however, settled in the United States after they completed their study and laid a

foundation for chain migration for succeeding waves of Koreans.

## CHANGING FACES, CHANGING FORTUNES

Korean immigration to the United States entered a new phase when the United States changed its immigration policy in 1965. Since 1970, when a new wave of Korean immigration gained momentum, large numbers of Koreans have crossed the Pacific Ocean to start a new life in the United States. In 1971 alone, 18,346 Koreans were admitted to the United States as permanent residents. Since the second half of the 1970s, about 30,000 Koreans have immigrated to the United States annually. During the peak of Korean immigration, between 1985 and 1987, more than 35,000 Koreans immigrated annually, making South Korea the third largest immigration country after Mexico and the Philippines. Together, more than 660,000 Koreans entered the United States as permanent residents between 1965 and 1990. As a result of the massive Korean immigration after 1965, the Korean population in the United States increased dramatically from 69,150 in 1970, to 357,393 in 1980, and 798,849 in 1990 (Barringer et al. 1993, p. 39).

The zeal of Koreans for U.S.-bound immigration, however, began to dwindle from 1988 onward, as the deepening economic recession in the United States made immigration to the United States less attractive than before. Since then, the annual number of Korean immigrants, particularly new arrivals, has been declining. In contrast, the number of Koreans who return permanently to Korea has been growing since 1988. Nineteen eighty-eight was an important turning point because in that year South Korea successfully held the Seoul Olympic Games. This event raised South Korea's international status and Koreans' pride and nationalism. The rise of Korean conglomerates, such as Hyundai and Samsung, in the world market has also attracted a growing number of U.S.-educated and trained Korean professionals and technicians back to South Korea.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 also dramatically changed the demographic and socioeconomic profiles of Korean immigrants. From the Korean War (1950-53) to 1965, more than half of the Korean immigrants were young women between the ages of 20 and 29, who had married American servicemen serving in south Korea, and children less than five years of age who were adopted by American parents. The Koreans immigrating after 1970 were quite different from their predecessors. First of all, they were permanent immigrants, not sojourners like their predecessors. As a result, they immigrated as nuclear families and the family unit could be maintained intact. Their stable family structure and strong family ties

later became important assets for their economic adaptation in the United States. They also came from urban, college-educated, and white-collar occupational backgrounds in South Korea. More than half of the post-1965 Korean immigrants came from Seoul, and the remainder came from Pusan, Taegu, and other large cities.

Data from the 1980 U.S. Census also show that about 30 percent of Korean immigrants aged 25 and older who were admitted between 1970 and 1980 had received four years of college education. The corresponding figures were 22 percent for new immigrants of all nationalities during the same period and 16 percent for the U.S. native-born population (U.S. Bureau of Census 1984, p. 12). In addition, the majority of the post-1965 Korean immigrants were professional, technical, managerial, or clerical workers (broadly defined as white-collar workers) before immigration. Laborers and farmers, in contrast, have been uniformly underrepresented in the Korean immigration to the United States, although they made up more than half of the Korean labor force as recently as 1980. Thus, Korean immigration to the United States has been primarily a movement of middle-class Koreans.

Nevertheless, the proportion of professional and technical workers, especially medical practitioners, among Korean immigrants has been declining during the last two decades, whereas that of the Korean immigrants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds has been increasing. A larger proportion of recent immigrants have reported working in Korea as operatives, laborers, or farmers—occupations that generally constitute the lower class and the working class in South Korea. Why have Koreans of middle class background been overrepresented in the post-1965 Korean immigration? Why have Koreans of lower- and working-class background responded to the immigration opportunity only in more recent years? How have the changes in class backgrounds affected the immigrants' pattern of social and economic adaptation in the United States? These three questions are the central issues to be explored in this article.

### *Motivations for Emigration to the United States*

The major motivation for emigration among middle-class Koreans was their sense of limited opportunity for social and economic mobility in South Korea, not only for themselves but also for their children. During the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea underwent a dramatic structural transformation from an agricultural society to a capitalist, industrial one. After 1961, when President Park Chung-Hee came to power through a military coup d'état, his military government initiated an export-oriented economic development

program. That strategy has changed the industrial structure of South Korea dramatically in a short period of time. Agriculture declined rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s, but manufacturing and service industries posted large gains. During this industrial restructuring, large numbers of rural out-migrants were drawn into the booming manufacturing industries or marginal service sectors in large cities. Massive out-migration from rural areas led to rapid urbanization and the concentration of population in several large cities, especially Seoul, from where the majority of the post-1965 Korean immigrants to the United States came from.

During the same period, Korean higher education expanded substantially, owing to foreign aid to education and the strong demand among Koreans for higher education. The strong desire among Koreans for higher education resulted from the fact that education has been the single viable avenue of upward social and economic mobility in Korean society.

The industrialization, urbanization, and expansion of higher education during the 1960s and 1970s produced a new urban middle class, which consists of urban, college-educated, and white-collar workers. For example, the proportion of professional and white-collar workers in the South Korean labor force grew from 14.6 percent in 1960, to 20 percent in 1970, and 27.2 percent in 1980 (KEPB 1962-1992). As members of the new urban middle class attained a college education and became professional and white-collar workers, their aspirations for upward social mobility were heightened. However, they could not realize their goal of upward mobility in South Korea because of the limited opportunities available to them.

One of the most serious structural imbalances in South Korea has been that the supply of college graduates greatly exceeds the demand for such a highly educated labor force. The imbalance between the demand for and the supply of highly educated labor has resulted in the lack of employment opportunities congruent with higher education. Between 1965 and 1980, the average unemployment rate for male college graduates was 28 percent (Korean Ministry of Education 1965-90). The high unemployment rate among college graduates led some Koreans to migrate overseas for employment. About 17,000 Koreans migrated to West Germany and the Middle East as contract mining workers, construction workers, and nurses between 1963 and 1974. Others sought emigration to the United States as a solution to the lack of employment opportunities congruent with higher education.

Another important motivation of middle-class Koreans to emigrate to the United States was aspirations for their children's education. The strong demand for higher education and the government's decision to restrict

enrollment at the college and university level have resulted in fierce competition for a limited number of slots in colleges and universities. Every year more than 70 percent of college applicants fail the entrance examination and have to prepare for one or two more years to retake the examination. The annual number of reapplicants is around 300,000, placing tremendous financial and psychological stress on students, their families, and the society at large. Increasing numbers of middle-class Korean families have come to the United States to seek a second chance for their children or to bypass the stressful rite of passage in the first place. For this reason, aspirations for children's education has been one of the most important reasons for Korean immigration to the United States.

### *U.S. Immigrating Policy*

The overrepresentation of middle-class Koreans among Korean immigrants before 1976 was due partly to a U.S. immigration policy that favored highly educated and professional workers. Because of the shortage of medical and engineering professionals in the United States in the 1960s, Korean medical doctors, nurses, and engineers could enter the United States without difficulty. According to the statistics of the INS, a total of 6,185 Korean medical professionals immigrated from 1965-1973 (I. Kim 1981, p. 148). In addition, because of the small number of naturalized Koreans in the United States before 1965, Koreans could not use family preferences as an entry mechanism. Thus, between 1965 and 1974, occupational preference was the most widely used entry mechanism among Korean immigrants, accounting for 30 percent of the Korean immigrants admitted to the United States each year.

Economic recession during the 1970s led to political pressure on Congress to amend the Immigration Act of 1965 to curtail even further the flow of immigrants admitted under occupational preferences and to increase the proportion of those admitted under family-reunification preferences. Congress responded in 1976 by passing the Eilberg Act and the Health Professions Educational Assistance Act (Yochum and Agarwal 1988). The Eilberg Act required alien professionals to gain job offers from U.S. employers in order to be admitted as legal immigrants. The Health Professions Educational Assistance Act in effect removed physicians and surgeons from eligible categories of labor certification. Since the late 1970s, the U.S. Department of Labor has also discouraged other types of occupational immigration by not issuing labor permits to many qualified prospective immigrants. As a result, the proportion of occupational

TABLE 1. ENTRY MECHANISMS FOR KOREAN IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES: 1966-1990 (%)

Year of entry	Immigrants Admitted Under Numerical Limitations of Preference Categories					Immigrants Exempt from the Numerical Limitations				Total	
	1st Pref. <sup>a</sup>	2nd Pref. <sup>b</sup>	4th Pref. <sup>c</sup>	5th Pref. <sup>d</sup>	Occupational Pref. <sup>e</sup>	Parents of U.S. Citizens	Spouses of U.S. Citizens	Children of U.S. Citizens	Other Special Immigrants <sup>f</sup>	%	No.
1966	0.5	2.2	0.0	0.2	17.6	1.7	52.0	23.8	0.8	100.0	2,492
1967	0.2	5.7	0.3	4.3	32.7	1.6	37.3	16.4	1.2	100.0	3,956
1968	0.1	7.6	0.6	4.6	27.8	2.2	37.1	18.1	1.7	100.0	3,811
1969	0.1	8.6	0.1	8.8	30.1	1.9	33.8	15.7	0.6	100.0	6,045
1970	0.2	8.8	0.4	14.2	30.8	1.9	29.4	13.0	1.0	100.0	9,314
1971	0.1	7.7	0.2	13.5	41.9	1.5	23.2	11.0	0.8	100.0	14,297
1972	0.1	7.9	0.2	15.2	45.1	1.8	18.3	11.4	0.8	100.0	18,876
1973	0.1	14.0	0.2	22.0	32.2	2.6	16.3	11.6	1.1	100.0	22,930
1974	0.0	15.0	0.3	21.6	33.5	2.3	14.8	10.2	2.6	100.0	28,028
1975	0.1	16.7	0.3	30.0	22.2	3.1	10.7	11.7	4.8	100.0	28,362
1976	0.1	14.2	0.3	35.4	13.0	4.0	15.9	14.3	0.8	100.0	30,803
1977	0.1	13.1	0.3	42.3	8.5	5.5	14.5	14.1	0.6	100.0	30,917
1978	0.1	15.7	0.5	35.0	8.9	7.4	15.1	12.2	1.1	100.0	29,288
1979	0.1	19.8	0.7	35.0	5.2	9.7	16.6	10.2	1.4	100.0	29,248
1980	0.1	18.9	0.5	39.1	2.9	10.2	13.7	10.2	0.7	100.0	32,320
1981	0.1	27.7	1.6	23.3	8.3	13.0	13.3	9.7	0.9	100.0	32,663
1982	0.2	31.3	1.7	19.8	3.4	13.5	13.2	12.2	1.6	100.0	31,724
1983	0.2	27.3	1.3	22.3	8.3	9.7	11.9	14.9	1.3	100.0	33,339
1984	0.2	24.5	1.8	21.7	8.8	9.9	12.0	17.7	0.9	100.0	33,042
1985	0.3	25.5	2.3	19.4	7.7	11.1	12.2	18.3	1.0	100.0	35,253
1986	0.2	23.4	2.6	19.2	8.4	12.7	12.7	19.2	0.8	100.0	35,776
1987	0.2	25.1	2.1	24.5	3.4	11.9	12.7	18.5	0.7	100.0	35,849
1988	0.2	20.1	2.2	27.0	8.7	11.3	12.9	16.2	1.0	100.0	34,703
1989	0.2	22.6	2.3	21.9	9.0	10.1	13.5	12.5	1.0	100.0	34,222
1990	0.4	17.4	2.3	27.7	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.2	10.0	100.0	32,301

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Annual Reports, 1966-1977; Statistical Yearbook, 1978-1990.

- a. The first preference category applies to unmarried sons and daughters of U.S. citizens and their children.
- b. The second preference category applies to spouses, unmarried sons and daughters of resident aliens, and their children.
- c. The fourth preference category applies to married sons and daughters of U.S. citizens and their spouses and children.
- d. The fifth category applies to brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens and their spouses and children.
- e. The occupational preference category applies to immigrants in professions and with special skills and their spouses and children. It includes the third preference, sixth preference, and nonpreference categories.
- f. Other special immigrants include immigrants such as ministers of religion and employees of the U.S. government abroad and their spouses and children. In 1990 this category included 2,244 Korean legalized aliens under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986.

immigrants, including professional immigrants, was drastically reduced between the late 1970s and 1990.

The 1990 Immigration Act reflected another change in U.S. immigration policy. In essence, the Act aimed at attracting highly skilled workers into the United States in the belief that they would increase national productivity. To achieve this goal, 140,000 employment-based visas are allocated annually, which is 2.6 times more than the pre-1990 level of 54,000 employed-based visas. This change will benefit such countries as the United Kingdom and Canada, which have used employment preferences more extensively than family preferences as entry mechanisms. Another important change is the establishment of a flexible cap of 480,000 family-related immigrants. This cap includes immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, who had been exempt from the numerical limitation up to this point. This change will result in a decline in the number of immigrants admitted under family preferences.

Applicants from countries such as Mexico and the Philippines, which have relied on family reunification preferences as primary entry mechanisms, will be adversely affected by the reductions in immigrant visas for family preferences. The Immigration Act of 1990, however, is not expected to have as great an impact on Korean immigration as it will have on immigration from the Philippines, mainland China, and India. This is because the zeal for U.S.-bound immigration has been dwindling among Koreans in recent years, whereas the desire to immigrate is still strong among Filipinos, Chinese, and Asian Indian citizens.

### *The Changing Class Backgrounds of Korean Immigrants*

As a growing number of Koreans became U.S. citizens after five years of permanent residence, and thereby became eligible to sponsor the immigration of their brothers and sisters from South Korea, the proportion of relative-preference immigrants increased. From 1975 to 1981, those who entered under the fifth preference category (brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens) accounted for more than 30 percent of the total. When a huge backlog of applications built up in this category, prospective Korean immigrants began taking advantage of the second preference category, spouses and unmarried sons and daughters of permanent resident aliens, which had not been used extensively earlier. Thus, since 1981, such individuals have accounted for more than 20 percent of all Korean immigrants.

The growing importance of family networks as an entry mechanism has resulted in the declining occupational selectivity of Korean immigrants

since 1976. After 1976, the successive cohorts of immigrants began including less selective Koreans in comparison with their predecessors. A close examination of the trends in occupational backgrounds of Korean immigrants during the last three decades reveals three patterns. First, the proportion of professional workers has steadily declined (see figure 1). Second, the proportion of white-collar workers in managerial, sales, and clerical occupations has steadily increased. Finally, the proportion of manual laborers, farmers, and service workers, who generally constitute the lower classes in South Korea, has increased, although its growth has been erratic over the time period (see figure 2). As for the irregular growth of precision production workers, craft and repair workers, operators, and service workers, this may be a reflection of the frequent changes in the demand for such job skills in the U.S. labor market. Thus, as figure 3 shows, after the early 1980s, blue-collar workers caught up with white-collar workers.<sup>2</sup>



**FIGURE 1.** TRENDS IN THE OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUNDS OF KOREAN WHITE-COLLAR IMMIGRANTS: 1965-1990

Source: Same as Table 1.

Notes: Data for 1980 and 1981 are unavailable. "Professional" refers to professional specialty and technical workers. "Administrative" refers to executive, administrative, and managerial workers.

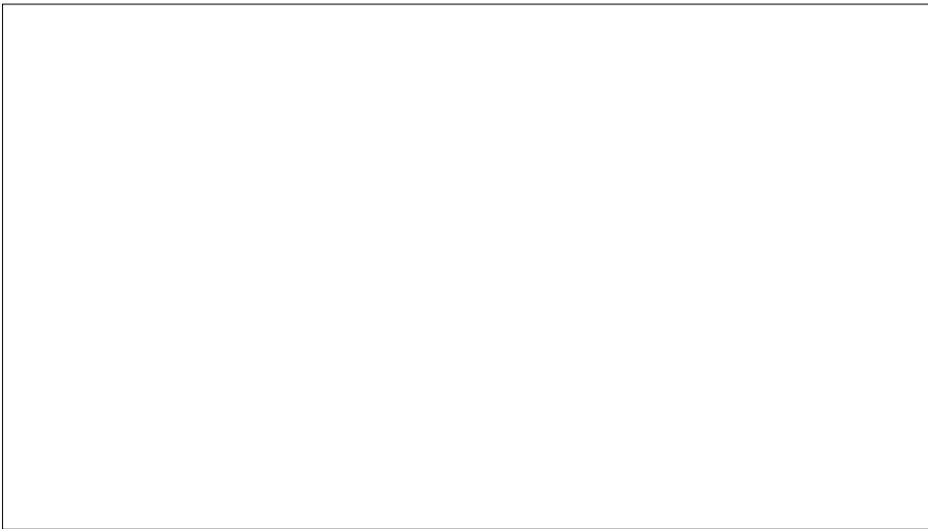
<sup>2</sup> At the risk of oversimplification, I treat professional and white-collar workers as representing the middle class and blue-collar workers as representing the lower class. There is no doubt that some blue-collar workers have higher economic statuses than some professional and white-collar workers. Generally speaking, however, professional and white-collar workers constitute the middle and upper-middle classes and blue-collar workers constitute the lower classes in South Korea.



**FIGURE 2.** TRENDS IN THE OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUNDS OF KOREAN BLUE-COLLAR IMMIGRANTS: 1965-1990

Source: Same as Table 1.

Notes: Data for 1980 and 1981 are unavailable. "Precision" refers to production, craft, and repair workers. "Operator" refers to operators, fabricators, and laborers. "Farming" refers to farmers, forestry workers, and fishers. Because of a small number of farmers, forestry workers, and fishers, they are treated as part of blue-collar workers.



**FIGURE 3.** TRENDS IN THE CLASS BACKGROUNDS OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS: 1965-1990

Source: Same as Table 1.

Note: Data of 1980 and 1981 are unavailable.

The economic situation in South Korea is another contributing factor for the gradual increase of immigration of Koreans from lower-class backgrounds. Income inequality in South Korea has been increasing in recent years, especially disfavoring the lower classes. The Gini Index, a measure of income inequality, increased noticeably between 1970 and 1975, from 0.332 to 0.391, and decreased only slightly in 1980 to 0.387. Similarly, the income share of the bottom 40 percent of the population declined from 19.6 percent in 1970 to 16.9 percent in 1975, and to 16.1 percent in 1980, whereas the share of the upper 20 percent increased from 41.6 percent to 45.3 percent and to 45.4 percent in the respective years. Absolute poverty in Korea has been significantly reduced, but relative poverty, measured by the percentage of the population below one-third of the national median income, has increased from 5 percent in 1970 to 14 percent in 1978 (Koo 1984, p. 1030).

In addition, the desire for U.S.-bound emigration has been decreasing in recent years for the middle and upper-middle classes because their economic conditions have improved and they have become aware of the limitations of opportunities in the United States. The United States is no longer seen as the land of opportunity. Koreans realize that a large number of Korean immigrants who had been white-collar workers in Korea now engage in small businesses in minority areas or in ethnic markets simply because they do not have other choices. Thus, middle-class Koreans have become increasingly reluctant to exchange their secure positions in South Korea for lower social and economic positions in the United States.

While economic conditions have been improving for the middle and upper-middle classes during the last decades, a sense of relative deprivation has spread among lower-class Koreans. According to a recent national opinion survey (ISS 1987, p. 107), lower-class Koreans are now more strongly motivated to emigrate than are the middle and upper classes: higher proportions of the working class (29 percent) and the urban marginal class (45 percent) favor emigration than do the upper middle class (22 percent), the new middle class (24 percent), and the old middle class (22 percent). It is expected that the number of immigrants from lower- and working-class backgrounds will therefore continue to increase as long as their economic conditions do not substantially improve in relation to those of middle and upper-middle classes.

The establishment of Korean immigrant communities throughout the United States has further reduced barriers to international migration for lower- and working-class Koreans. Those who do not have specific job skills or cannot speak English fluently can now find employment in Korean-

owned small businesses in Korean ethnic enclaves. These protected ethnic enclaves provide immigrants with employment, housing, and recreation, thus decreasing the drawbacks of immigration.

#### CHANGING PATTERNS OF SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY

Such changes in class background are expected to affect significantly the rate and pattern of social and economic mobility among different cohorts of Korean immigrants in the United States. Statistics from the 1990 U.S. census confirm that Korean immigrants who arrived in the United States before 1975 had higher levels of education and higher socioeconomic status (SES) than the later arrivals. As table 2 shows, they had achieved more adequate labor utilization (as measured by a higher labor-force participation rate, a lower unemployment rate, and a higher percentage of full-time workers), filled more prestigious occupations, earned greater personal and family income, and achieved better command of English than their later counterparts.

However, The higher SES of these cohorts may simply be due to their longer residence in the United States. As earlier arrivals, they may have had more opportunities than the post-1975 cohorts to learn English and acquire job skills and interpersonal networks, which in turn have increased their chances of earning higher wages and filling more prestigious occupations. For this reason, the cross-sectional comparison of cohorts is problematic. To compare different rates of socioeconomic mobility more meaningfully, we therefore need to control for the different lengths of residence in the United States. To that end, I have looked at the 1970-74 cohort in 1980 and the 1980-84 cohort in 1990, groups that had each spent between 7 and 11 years in the United States, but were separated by the 1976 changes in immigration policy. Because I have used non-Hispanic whites as the comparison group for each cohort, changes in dollar values between 1980 and 1990 do not pose a problem to the comparison of personal and family incomes.

Compared to the 1980-84 cohort in 1990, the 1970-74 cohort in 1980 included more professional workers, filled more prestigious occupations, earned greater personal and family income, had a lower chance of being under the poverty level, had a higher chance of owning homes, and achieved better command of English given the same length of residence in the United States. Members of this group earned 94.5 percent of the personal income and 101 percent of the family income of whites, whereas their counterpart in 1990 earned only 72 percent and 89 percent, respectively. Partly because of their weaker earning power, only 47 percent

**TABLE 2. SELECTED SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STATUSES OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS, BY YEAR OF ENTRY TO THE UNITED STATES (%)**

Characteristics	Year of immigration				
	All periods	1985-90	1975-84	1965-74	Before 1965
<b>Educational level</b>					
Some high school or less	17.3	17.1	17.7	16.9	17.0
High school graduates	26.1	28.9	28.1	19.2	18.4
Some college	21.0	17.2	22.5	22.2	22.4
Four-year college graduates	22.8	22.5	21.6	26.1	20.7
Graduate school graduates	12.8	14.4	10.0	14.7	21.5
Mean years of schooling	11.2	11.2	11.1	11.5	11.7
<b>Employment Status</b>					
Labor force participation	72.3	60.6	75.8	77.6	77.6
Unemployment	4.2	6.4	3.9	3.2	2.4
Year-round full-time <sup>a</sup>	41.4	26.2	44.5	50.7	51.2
<b>Occupational distribution</b>					
Professional workers	13.6	12.6	10.8	18.3	23.8
Managerial workers	12.4	10.5	12.1	14.3	15.7
Service workers	15.5	18.5	15.4	13.8	11.1
Operators and laborers	13.7	15.3	13.6	13.0	9.7
Occupational prestige scores <sup>b</sup>	42.0	40.0	41.0	44.9	47.3
<b>Economic well-being</b>					
Mean personal income (\$)	19,226	10,313	18,894	27,907	30,909
Mean family income (\$)	46,812	30,679	46,084	63,425	64,852
Percent below poverty level	13.0	25.0	10.3	5.7	7.5
<b>English speaking ability</b>					
Speak only English	6.9	3.0	4.1	11	36.5
Speak English very well	25.8	14.8	24.5	38.4	40.5
Speak English well	34.7	27.0	39.4	37.4	18.3
Speak English not well	28.1	44.8	28.5	12.8	3.8
Do not speak English at all	4.5	10.3	3.5	0.6	1.0
No.	18,598	4,911	8,614	4,208	865

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 5 percent Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the 1990 U.S. Census.

Note: Only adult immigrants between 25 and 65 years old were included in the analysis.

- a. Year-round full-time is defined as working 50 to 52 weeks per year and working 35 or more hours per week.
- b. Occupational prestige scores were based on the 1989 NORC occupational prestige score scheme (see Appendix F of the *Codebook of the General Social Survey, 1972-1992*).

**TABLE 3. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STATUSES OF DIFFERENT COHORTS OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1980 AND 1990**

STATUS	1980		1990	
	1970-74 cohort	1980-84 Whites	cohort	Whites
<b>Employment status</b>				
Labor force	74.2	72.6	74.6	78.0
Unemployment rate	4.7	4.3	4.1	4.1
Year-round full-time	42.9	48.5	42.3	52.9
<b>Occupational distribution</b>				
Professional workers	14.8	14.1	10.2	15.3
Managerial workers	9.8	12.0	11.9	13.7
Service workers	16.9	10.4	16.1	10.7
Operators & laborers	19.4	16.3	13.2	14.1
Occup. prestige	47.6	43.6	40.0	44.4
<b>Economic well-being</b>				
Personal income (\$)	13,670	14,458	16,941	23,377
Family income (\$)	26,532	26,262	41,174	45,810
Poverty status	7.3	6.4	12.1	7.3
Public assistance <sup>a</sup>	1.7	2.5	1.7	2.7
Home ownership <sup>b</sup>	61.0	76.4	47.1	76.2
<b>English speaking ability</b>				
English only	4.7	94.1	3.3	95.0
Very well	23.9	4.1	20.2	3.5
Well	47.5	1.3	39.4	1.0
Not well	21.7	0.5	32.2	0.5
Not at all	2.2	0.1	4.9	0.1
No.	2,848	890,014	4,911	989,295

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 5 percent and 1 percent PUMS of the 1980 and 1990 Censuses.

Note: Only adult immigrants aged between 25 and 65 were included in the analysis. Non-Hispanic whites were used as the comparison group.

a. Public assistance is the percent of people who received public assistance.

b. Home ownership is the percent of people who owned their homes.

of the later owned homes as compared to 61 percent of the former. All these statistics tend to suggest that rates and patterns of socioeconomic mobility are different among different cohorts of Korean immigrants and so-called model minority images of Korean Americans are increasingly outdated for more recent cohorts.

In other words, the entry of growing numbers of immigrants from lower- and working-class backgrounds into the existing Korean American

**TABLE 4. FAMILY INCOME BY RACE, 1980 and 1990 (Median)**

Race	1980		1990	
	Income (\$)	% of White family income	Income (\$)	% of White family income
Total population	19,917	94.8	35,225	94.8
White	21,014	100.0	37,152	100.0
Black	12,627	60.1	22,429	60.4
Hispanic	14,712	70.0	25,064	67.5
Asian	22,849	108.7	41,251	111.0
Korean	20,459	97.4	33,909	91.3

Source: Same as Table 3.

**TABLE 5. POVERTY RATE BY RACE, 1980 and 1990 (Percent)**

Race	1980		1990	
	Rate	% of White poverty rate	Rate	% of White poverty rate
Total population	9.6	140	10.0	140
White	7.0	100	7.0	100
Black	26.5	380	26.3	380
Hispanic	28.3	400	22.3	320
Asian	14.3	200	11.6	170
Korean	13.1	190	14.7	210

Source: Same as Table 3.

community during the late 1970s and 1980s does seem to have lowered the overall economic status of Korean Americans in comparison to whites. According to published data from the 1980 and 1980 U.S. censuses, the median family income of Koreans was 97.4 percent of that of whites in 1980, but declined to 91.3 percent in 1990 (see table 4). During the same period, the proportion of Korean Americans living below the official poverty line increased from 13.1 percent to 14.7 percent (A family of four is below the poverty line if it earns less than \$12,647 per year.) As a result, Korean Americans were twice as likely as whites to live below the poverty line in 1990 (see table 5).

The declining economic status of Korean American families becomes even more significant if we compare it with the improving economic status of Asian Americans as a group. Asian American families earned 108.7 percent of the median income of white families in 1980 and 111 percent in 1990. During the same period, the poverty rate of Asian Americans declined from

14.3 percent to 11.6 percent.

In addition to changes in the class backgrounds of Korean immigrants, the increasing proportion of the elderly is another contributing factor in the declining economic status of Korean Americans between 1980 and 1990. In 1970, only one percent of Korean immigrants were over 60 years of age, but this figure increased to 6.7 percent in 1980 and 7.7 percent in 1990. These elderly immigrants are less likely to participate in the labor force and are more likely to be poor and dependent on welfare than younger immigrants. Their increasing representation in the Korean American community seems to have increased its overall poverty and welfare dependence rates. All of these changes suggest that the community is becoming increasingly diverse and heterogeneous in terms of age, occupation, and socioeconomic status.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Changes in the class backgrounds of Korean immigrants have had important implications for patterns of adjustment in American society. Because of their occupational backgrounds, the pre-1976 Korean immigrants established themselves as professionals or successful entrepreneurs and moved to white suburbs with little resistance from residents. Their children attended private schools or the better public schools in the suburbs and had close interactions with their non-Korean peers. This social and cultural assimilation into mainstream society was a dominant pattern among the Korean immigrants who came to the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In contrast, the more recent immigrants, especially those from lower-class backgrounds, have tended to settle in ethnic communities for employment, residence, and recreation. They work as employees in Korean-owned businesses, live in apartments in close proximity to Korean stores, and watch Korean television programs and movies.<sup>3</sup> Their children speak Korean most of the time and interact mostly with Korean peers. Retarded economic mobility, confinement in ethnic communities, and resistance to social and cultural assimilation are thus common among these immigrants. It is difficult for them to follow the paths of their predecessors because they have fewer resources and because opportunities for economic advancement, such as business ownership, have already been claimed by earlier arrivals.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Koreans accounted for 19.3 percent of the residents of Los Angeles' Koreatown in 1990, which was an 84 percent increase from 10.5 percent in 1980 (Min 1993, p. 189; U.S. Bureau of Census 1993, pp. 1057-1058).

<sup>4</sup> The difference between the early arrivals and the latecomers in terms of social and

As the number of Koreans who immigrate through family connections and depend on assistance from family members for employment and residence increases, the concentration of immigrants in ethnic communities and their consequent segregation from the larger society are likely to increase as well. And as the number of Korean immigrants from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds grows, the immigrant community will become more heterogeneous and class will become more important as a basis for interpersonal relations.

economic adaptation may be somewhat exaggerated. Furthermore, I do not have first-hand data for many aspects of everyday lives of the Korean immigrants and their children. However, based on my ten-years of research on Korean Americans, I think there are significant differences in patterns of socioeconomic adaptation among different waves of Korean immigrants. Further research is needed to empirically document those differences and examine how they affect the social, economic, and cultural fabric of the Korean American community.

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