# "KOREATOWN" LOS ANGELES: EMERGENCE OF A NEW INNER-CITY ETHNIC COMMUNITY

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*This paper attempts to explore the origin of Koreatown in Los Angeles, describe its characteristics and functions, explain the causes of its development, and speculate about its future.*

*This study adopts a historical comparative analysis of the growth patterns of Little Tokyo and Chinatown in Los Angeles, utilizing several types of data resources such as the author's own observation on the processes of the town's growth as one of its active participating members, articles regarding Koreatown in Los Angeles Times and Korea daily newspapers published in Los Angeles, the 1980 and 1981 Claremont Survey providing the basic demographic and socio-economic statistics about Koreatown.*

The Korean community in America is relatively new, widely dispersed, and rapidly growing. Korean operated shops are commonly found in big cities of every region of the country and Korean's growth has often become targets of both praise and envy by the mass media and competing minorities. Although it looks thriving on surface, the community is in the infant stage of development and in need of overall direction, organization, and coordination.

The first group of some eight thousand Korean immigrants landed on the Hawaiian shores between 1903 and 1905. It was not until the late 1960's, however, when Koreans began to immigrate to the United States in great numbers. This had been made possible by the changes in the 1965 U.S. immigration laws. Thus the number of Koreans ennumerated in the U.S. censuses increased from 70,598 in 1970 to 354,529 in 1980, an increase of 413 percent during one decade. This was one of the highest rate of increases among the major ethnic groups in America during the same period. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization statistics, annual volume of Korean immigration to this country has averaged about 32,000 since 1980. If we take into account of an assumed annual rate of natual increase of 3 percent (in the light of the favorable age structure of the immigrants for reproduction) and a sizable number of undocumented Koreans (those who jumped the ship, smuggled in through Mexico, and visitors whose visa have expired), the Korean population in this country should be between 650,000 and 700,000 at this time.

California, particularly Los Angeles, has been the major home for Koreans. About 10 percent of the U.S. population live in California. However, 29.3 percent of the Korean population in the U.S. were living in California according to the 1980 Census. The corresponding percentages for other Asian groups were 46.2 for Pilipinos, 40.0 for Chinese, and 37.4 for Japanese. Although widely scattered when compared to other Asian groups, a large percentage of Koreans are nevertheless located in California.

Los Angeles has been the main port of entry for the Korean immigrants and home to the largest Korean community in America. The 60,618 Koreans in Los Angeles county and 11,339 Koreans in Orange county enumerated in the 1980 Census together represented 20 percent of the total Korean population in the U.S. The number of Koreans in these two county areas (hereafter will be referred to Southern California) is probably exceeding 100,000 by now.

Residentially Koreans show a dispersed pattern of distribution in Southern California. Unlike the earlier immigrants from Europe and Asia at the turn of the century, many of

the Korean immigrants today settle directly in suburban areas (Kim, I.S., 1981: 184; Yu, 1983: 23-35). Nevertheless, the centripetal process of community formation has been concurrently occurring. The downtown area of Los Angeles along Olympic Boulevard and Eighth Street between Crenshaw and Hoover has attracted a large number of Korean immigrants as well as shops during the last 15 years and has turned into a Koreatown. The City of Los Angeles officially designated the area as Koreatown and posted the "Koreatown" signs on the main streets leading to the area. It has attracted attentions from major newspapers and magazines[1]

> "From a modest beginning in 1972, Koreatown now has an area five times larger than Little Tokyo and Chinatown combined. Unlike other ethnic groups who have immigrated to the United States, Koreans come here with capital. And they come with education. Koreans have taken run-down structures, weedy vacant lots and neglected streets in the previously declining area and tured them into thriving businesses, interspersed with clean, landscaped areas.[2]

This paper attempts to explore the origin of Koreatown in Los Angeles, describe its characteristics and functions, explain the causes of its development, and speculate about its future.

## Methods

This study takes a variety of approaches and utilizes several types of data sources. The author moved to Los Angeles in 1968 when the present Koreatown was about to form. Since then he has observed the processes of the town's growth as one of its active participating members. In this respect he takes the role of a participant observer. The study attempts a historical comparative analysis of the growth patterns of Little Tokyo and Chinatown in Los Angeles. Articles regarding Koreatown in Los Angeles Times and Korean daily newspapers published in Los Angels are also analyzed. The 1980 U.S. Census and 1981 Claremont Suvey[3] provided the basic demographic and socio-economic statistics about Koreatown.

This study is exploratory and the conclusions drawn here should be viewed as tentative. The author's biases as a member of the community and as a participant observer must be taken into account when one reads this article. Also it should be noted that this study makes use of secondary analysis of the data collected for other purposes. To this extent, the study is limited and incomplete.

## Inner-City Ethnic Communities

During the period of sustained and heavy European immigration into the United States prior to the mid-1920's, a great majority of the immigrants settled on the margins of the central business districts of large metropolitan areas and formed ethnic communities such as Irish, Italian, Polish, and German towns. Two factors seem to account for the location of the immigrant settlements adjacent to the central business districts. First, the central

1. *Newsweek,* May 26, 1975: 10; *Time,* June 13, 1983.
2. *L.A. Times,* February 25, 1979.
3. The survey covered 301 Koreans randomly selected from public telephone directories of Los Angeles and Orange counties (179 Kims) and *The Korean Directory of Southern California,* 1980 (Los Angeles: Keys Ad & Printing Co., 1980), 122 non-Kims. The author participated in the 1981 Claremont Survey project as co-principal investigator.

business district provided the largest source of unskilled employment opportunity. The European immigrants at the time were largely of unskilled laborers and they settled near the sources of unskilled employment. Second, many of the adjacent residential quarters had been abandoned by their original residents because of the threatened encrouchment of commercial activities from the central business district. Once abandoned by their original population, residential zones adjacent to the central business districts were most frequently adopted by low-income immigrants (Ward, 1971:291-299).

Once established by an ethnic immigrant group, the central tenement districts provide institutions and life familiar to the immigrant and group consciousness stimulate the formation of an ethnic ghetto.

> "Most immigrants preferred to spend their earlier years in a new country and unfamiliar city in a district which housed their fellow countrymen or coreligionists if not their immediate family and friends (Ward, 1971:295)."

Once or two generations latter, however, most of the European immigrant settlements adjacent to the central business districts were replaced by the new non-Caucasian immigrants from the American South, Puerto Rico, and Latin America. This phenomenon is called the invasion-retreat process by the classical ecological model (Burgess, 1925:47-62).

Chinatowns and Japanese settlements (J-towns) also appeared around the turn of the century adjacent to the central business districts of large cities in the west. Unlike the earlier European settlements, however, Chinatowns and J-towns still remain in the vicinity of the central business districts with distinction and flavor.

**Little Tokyo in Los Angeles**

Many of the earliest Japanese settlers in the United States at the turn of the century were laborers on the Santa Fe or Southern Pacific. Railway jobs, farm labor, and small businesses absorbed most of them (Nishi, 1955:29). The origin of Little Tokyo in the present location (First and San Pedro Street area at the southeastern corner of the Civic Center) is directly related to the nature of the work that earlier Japanese immigrants were engaged in and the extreme racial discrimination against Asians existed in California at that time. Little Tokyo had its beginning in 1884 when a sailor known as Kame opened a tiny restaurant to cater to the 25 young Japanese men who had come to Los Angeles to find work on the railroad.[4] The First and San Pedro Street area was adjacent to the Central Station. The Japanese laborers after day's work on the railroad rested in inexpensive boarding houses in this location since they were not welcome elsewhere.

The proximity of the Los Angeles central business district and Chinatown also played a role in making this particular locale as Japanese settlement. The place was labeled Little Tokyo by century's end, as the more than 100 Japanese living in the town had opened small shops and dry goods stores.[5] The place was noisy with passing trains and active with small factories, stores, food processing shops, and wholesale houses (Matsuoka, 1971:322-234). The Japanese in Los Angeles gradually developed the area into their own community center containing a variety of small shops, recreational places, and employment agencies.

4. *L.A. Times,* August 26, 1984.
5. Ibid.

The location of the two largest vegetable and fruit wholesale markets, the Union Wholesale Terminal Market at Seventh and Central Avenue and the Los Angeles City Market at Ninth and San Pedro Streets, expedited the stable and sustained development of Little Tokyo. After 1900, the Japanese with families began to move into the area and Little Tokyo began to grow into a more stable community. The 1913 California Alien Land Act denied Asian immigrants from owning any real estate property including homes and farm lands and drove many Japanese farmers into the city. They put together temples, newspapers, shops, and homes in the Little Tokyo area. The Japanese with families engaged in agriculture, either as tenent farmers or farm laborers, in great proportion. In 1940, 36 percent of the employed Japanese in the county of Los Angeles were engaged in agriculture, 90 percent of them being tenant farm operators. By 1940, they achieved a near monopoly of truck crops, vegetable farms, flower growing, and nursery in Los Angeles (Nishi, 1955). The bulk of the Japanese farm produce grown in Los Angeles county was handled in the two wholesale produce markets (Nishi, 1955:48). At the same time, about 75 percent of the retail fruit and vegetable stores were operated by the Japanese in Los Angeles county (Nishi, 1955). Also, 75 percent of the total Nesei (second generation Japanese) employed in the city of Los Angeles worked in some phase of produce marketing (Nodera, 1936:115).

The Little Tokyo Japanese community gradually expanded its boundary to the south toward the site of the two main produce markets. By the 1930's, the area between East First and the wholesale produce markets on 10th and San Pedro Streets had been settled heavily with the Japanese families (Matsuoka, 1971). By this time, Little Tokyo had been firmly established as social, economic, and cultural center of the Japanese community in Southern California. The Nesei Week Festival started in the 1930's and still continues today.

With the outbreak of World War II, Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo as well as all other Japanese Americans along the west coast were involuntarily moved to relocation camps. During the War, Little Tokyo became a temporary residential zone for black people who moved in from the south.[6] After the War, many Japanese-American businesses, community organizations and cultural groups returned to the area, but Japanese people in large part did not return.

There was an effort until the early 1960's in the part of the Japanese-American people to revitalize the Little Tokyo area. But they were not able to mobilize sufficient funds to rebuild the town. Beginning towards the end of the 1960's, Japanese-American community group coordinated with the community redevelopment agency of the city of Los Angeles and a consortium of thirty large corporations in Japan to plan and implement the revitalization of Little Tokyo. Consequently, during the 1970-80 period, a total of more than $80 million were poured in through the redevelopment project in an effort to maintain and rebuild the Little Tokyo district (Matsuoka, 1971). Kajima building, New Otani hotel, Little Tokyo shopping mall, Weller Court, Tokyo Tower (apartment complex for the elderly), and the Japanese American Culture and Community Center are the fruits of these coordinated efforts.

Little Tokyo is no longer a Japanese residential community. Japanese-Americans constitute a very small minority among the Little Tokyo residents. The 1980 Census counted only 639 Japanese among the 3,015 total residents in the census tract no. 2062, which contains Little Tokyo. Less than 1 percent of the 116,543 Japanese-Americans in Los Angeles County lives in Little Tokyo.[7]

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6. Ibid.
7. Derived from the U.S. Census of Population, 1980.

Little Tokyo has become a tourist attraction to other Americans, shopping and lodging center for the visiting Japanese businessmen, and cultural, commercial, and symbolic center for the Japanese Americans in Southern California. Most of the Japanese American community organizations have headquarters in Little Tokyo and many cultural and artistic activities of Japanese Americans take place there.

**Chinatown in Los Angeles**

Like Little Tokyo, the Central Station and the two major produce markets played a key role in the site location of the old and new Chinatowns. When Chinatown was first established in North Los Angeles Street near Sunset Boulevard adjacent to the Central Station before the turn of the century, most of the Chinese workers were laborers, and many of them worked on the railroad. The railroad workers established their shelters near the Central Station and the site became the old Chinatown. The Chinese workers were not welcome elsewhere in town. The railroad line and the railroad yards encircled the two sides of the old Chinatown (Tom, 1944:6). By 1871, there were about 200 Chinese living in the area and the number increased to about 2,000 by the turn of the century.[8]

Construction of the Union Station in the site of the old Chinatown pushed Chinese stores several blocks northward to the North Broadway, which has become the site of the present Chinatown (Tom, 1944:7). Latter, as the two produce markets on the San Pedro and 9th Street area became one of the major sources of employment for the Chinese, many of them settled in the San Pedro District south of the markets. The Chinese settlement area once extended from the southern edge of the market to the 32nd Street (Tom, 1944:8).

Chinatown today is a commercial as well as residential community. Its major clientele includes both Chinese and non-Chinese. It occupies an area much larger than Little Tokyo on the northern edge of the central business district. Its residents are largely of the Chinese descent. The 7500 Chinese (including the Vietnamese Chinese) in Chinatown enumerated in the 1980 Census accounts for 66 percent of the Chinatown population and 8 percent of the Chinese in Los Angeles County.

Like the Japanese counterpart, children of the earlier Chinatown settlers left the town as they have become largely professionals. A great majority of the Chinese residents in Chinatown today are low-income recent immigrants from Hong Kong and Vietnam. The older section of Chinatown is still congested with run-down structures.[9] In contrast, business sections of the town on Broadway and Hill Street have been and are being redeveloped with modern shopping centers and office complexes often financed with investments from Hong Kong or Taiwan.

Community groups have coordinated with the city authority to redevelop Chinatown. A 16-story 270-unit senior citizens housing project is under construction at Sunset Boulevard and Broadway with the aid of the city redevelopment agency. The agency also subsidized rehabilitation of 132 apartment units in Chinatown. A $50 million commercial-residential project for Hill Street in Chinatown by a Hong Kong developer is being negotiated with a strong endorsement and support from the city redevelopment agency.[10] Although there have been efforts from the people's lobby (such as now disbanded Chinatown Project Area Committee) to block the encrouchment of commercial development into the residential section, it is expected that the late 1980's and early 1990's

8. *Joo Kan Hankuk*, September 17, 1984.
9. *L.A. Times*, February 21, 1984.
10. Ibid.

will witness the similar changes in Chinatown that Little Tokyo went through during the 1970's. The Chinatown core will eventually develop into a commercial-business-cultural center with residential units around the periphery.

Both Chinatown and Little Tokyo were created in part by white racism and repression against Asians. The changing political and economic situation in Asia and the easing racial discrimination against Asians in America since the 1960's have reshaped the scene of Chinatown and Little Tokyo. Large corporations from Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan are gradually gaining control of the business and commercial activities of these ethnic towns. Investments from Asia have been the key factor in sustaining them adjacent to the central business districts as commercial, tourist, and cultural centers.

**The Old Korean Community**

When Korean community was first established in Los Angeles is not clearly determined. Starting in 1883, a number of Koreans including ginseng merchants, diplomats, political refugees and students came to the United States (Kim, W. Y., 1971:3-4). Between 1903 and 1905, 7,226 Korean immigrants came to Hawaii including 6,048 men, 637 women, and 541 children (Kim, W. Y., 1971:10). In 1905, 1,031 Koreans (802 men, 207 women, and 23 children) arrived in Mexico. Some of these earlier arrivals must have found their way into Los Angeles as early as 1904. Thus, in that year (March 11, 1904) a retired missionary by the name of Mrs. Sherman opened a residential mission school on Magnolia Street near the University of Southern California campus and started Bible study, worship, and English lesson for Koreans. This was the beginning of the Korean Methodist Church of Los Angeles (Kim, W.Y., 1971:34). In 1905, the first association of Koreans, Taedong Kyoyukhoe (Korean Education Society) was formed in Pasadena, a suburban city of Los Angeles (Yang, 1982:9; Noh, 1951:27). In May 1906, a group of Koreans established a presbyterian mission at a rented house on Hill Street, Los Angeles. This latter became the Korean Presbyterian Church of Los Angeles (Kim, W.Y., 1971:37). It is apparent then that a small group of Koreans in Los Angeles area formed a community sometime between 1904 and 1905 by establishing churches and associations.

The residential pattern of Koreans in Los Angeles at the time is not known. However, by the location of the three Korean organizations (one in Pasadena and two in the Adams area of downtown Los Angeles), it may be speculated that they did not form a compact residential community like Chinatown or Little Tokyo. Also it is possible by the location of the two churches that a number of them were residing in areas near the University of Southern California campus. This general vicinity latter became the base of the Korean community organizations in Los Angeles.

By 1910 a significant proportion of the Korean immigrants who had originally landed in Hawaii went to the mainland United States. A newsletter of the Korean National Association in 1910 reported that 1,999 men and 12 women had gone to the mainland United States. Although San Francisco was the main port of entry to the mainland at the time and became the home base of the mainland Korean communities, a number of Koreans from Hawaii and the students and political exiles made home in Los Angeles. During the 1920's, Los Angeles had become one of the three leading concentrations of Korean activities in America along with Honolulu and San Francisco. In 1932, Hung-sa-Dan secured an office building in Los Angeles (Kim, W.Y., 1971:63). Toward the end of the 1930's, Los Angeles had firmly established itself as the center of Korean communities in America as evidenced by the location of the monumental Korean National Association's head office. The building was secured on West Jefferson Boulevard in 1938 (Kim, W.Y., 1971:61) right next to the Korean Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles.

There is no official record regarding the size of the Korean population in Los Angeles before World War II. One estimate gives 650 Koreans in Los Angeles toward the end of the 1930's (Givens, 1939:22). The figure, however, appears to be an under-estimate. By this time the boundary of the old Korean community was well established. The area between Adams and Slausen Boulevards and between Western and Vermont Avenues had the largest concentration of the Koreans (Givens, 1939). Most of the Korean churches and community organizations were located in the same area. The Hung-Sa-Dan headquarter on South Catalina Street, the Korean National Association building on Jefferson Boulevard, and Dong-Ji-Hoe building on Ellendale Place were all secured during the 1930's and located in this area. The Cho-Sun People's Revolutionary Party also rented a house on West Jefferson Boulevard in 1943 (Kim, W.Y., 1971:63-69). The Korean Methodist Church of Los Angeles was meeting at a rented house on University Street near the USC campus (Givens, 1939:26).

In the 1930's, a number of Korean business establishments were found in the vicinity of Temple and Figueroa Streets at the western fringe of the Los Angeles central business districts. Givens describes the phenomenon of the work-residence separation: "Korean families who have scattered throughout the county have chosen these locations for business, and they return to the Korean community for social and religious life (Givens, 1939:22)." This area has now become part of the central business district filled with high rise skyscrapers.

Racial and economic factors seemed to have played a principal role in determining the location of the old Korean community. The area was an older section of the city and a racially mixed residential zone including Chinese, Japanese, Black, Mexican, and White people. Because of the mixed population, rental rates were moderate and the race restrictions were not enforced (Givens, 1939). The California Alien Land Laws of 1913 prohibited native-born Asians from owning a home. Also white people would not lease an apartment or a home in nicer residential sections of the city.

The earlier Korean community in Los Angeles was made up largely with agricultural laborers with a small group of students and political exiles providing the leadership. Even prominent leaders like An Chang Ho in the 1910's and 1920's found it necessary to work for living in the farms along with fellow Korean laborers.[11] It may be hypothesized that the Korean farm laborers wanted to stay close to their leaders who were largely students. It is conspicuous that the site of the old Korean community is in the vicinity of the USC campus.

Toward the end of the 1930's, Koreans in Los Angeles had largely become small businessmen. Many second generation Koreans graduated from colleges by this time, but it was virtually impossible for them to find work in the professions for which they had been trained due to racial discrimination. Many second generation Koreans with college degrees found it necessary to go to Hawaii for professional openings (Givens, 1939:31). The rest followed the business lines of their parents.

Most of the small businesses owned by Koreans were in the line of vegetable and fruit retailing. Of the 73 businesses owned by Koreans in Los Angeles in 1938, 57 (78%) were in line of fruit and vegetable distribution (Givens, 1939:34). The short distance between the Korean community and the two major wholesale produce markets in the San Pedro and 11th Streets area might have been a factor in sustaining the original site of the community. It should be noted however that the total size of Korean population in Los Angeles before World War II were less than 1,000. The number was simply too small to develop a compact town like Little Tokyo or Chinatown.

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11. *Hankook Ilbo L.A. edition,* February 6, 1985.

The boundary of the old Korean community had remained unchanged until toward the end of the 1960's, when the post-1965 immigrants started to form a new Koreantown along the Olympic Boulevard between Crenshaw and Hoover. By this time, the old Korean business establishments in the Bunker Hill area were gone. Many of the second generation Koreans moved out of the old Korean community as the housing restirictions against Asians had been eased. The old Korean community in the 1960's was left with several community organization buildings, a few restaurants along the Jefferson Boulevard, and a small number of surviving families of the earlier settlers.

**The New Community**

The size as well as the location of the Korean community underwent a drastic change during the 1970's. Korean population in the city of Los Angeles rose from 5,700 in 1970 to 33,100 in 1980 (481 percent). Los Angeles county's Korean population increased from 8,900 to 60,618 (581 percent), and Koreans in Orange county grew from 1,648 to 11,339 (588 percent) during the same period. The Korean population in the two county areas making up the Southern California Korean community increased more than seven folds from 10,500 to 72,000 within ten year period.[12]

The Korean community center has moved northward from the site of the old community. The legend is that the Olympic market opened by Lee Hui Duk in 1969 at the corner of Olympic Boulevard and Hobart Street was the origin of the new Koreatown. The northward movement of the Korean community had already begun in the early part of the 1960's as the Black and Hispanic people moved into the Jefferson and Adams area in great numbers.

Starting with the Olympic market, Korean shops mushroomed along the Olympic Boulevard between Crenshaw and Hoover during the 1970's. In 1973, a group of Korean merchants and scholars got together and formed the Koreatown Development Association. Their first project was a campaign to put up Korea signs on Korean shops to let others know that the area was going to be the Koreatown. Their second project was the Korean Street Festival, which began in 1974 and has continued every year. The new downtown Korean community that appeared after 1970 now occupies a vast area between Hoover and Crenshaw Boulevard and between Pico and Melrose Avenues. The place is now widely known as Koreatown. The area corresponds to six mail zip code zones: 90004, 90005, 90006, 90010, 90019, and 90020.

According to the 1980 U.S. Census, 15,011 Koreans were living in the Koreatown area as of 1980. These Koreans constitute 45 percent of the Koreans in the city of Los Angeles, 25 percent of the county's Koreans, and 21 percent of the Koreans in the two county areas of Los Angeles and Orange. Within Koreatown, about 8,000 Koreans were concentrated in an area surrounded by Beverly, Normandie, San Marino, Hoover, Pico, Arlinoton, Wilshire, and Western. This area shows the heaviest concentration of the Korean population, Korean business, and service establishment. The area may be designated as Koreatown Core. The Koreatown Core contains nine census tracts and in each of these tracts, Koreans constituted at least 10 percent of their respective population. In four of these tracts, Koreans were more than 20 percent of the total population. The most densely settled Korean tract is census tract No. 2126, located just north of Olympic Boulevard between Vermont and Hoover. In this census tract Koreans constituted 24 percent of the

12. From the 1970 and 1980 U.S. population censuses.

total residents in 1980.[13]

Relative to other groups, Koreans in Southern California are heavily concentrated in Koreatown. About one in every five Koreans in Southern California is living in Koreatown. When the Koreans were compared with other groups, the degree of concentration is overwhelming for the Koreans (Table 1). As indicated by the index of concentration, Caucacians are least concentrated. Asian/Pacific population, Blacks, and Hispanics all show some degree of concentration in Koreatown. Among these three groups, Asian/Pacific people show the highest concentration. But Korean's concentration is four times greater than other Asian/Pacific people as measured by the index.

As shown in Table 2, in the Koreatown Core, the degree of Korean concentration is twenty times greater than the general population and seven times than the other Asian/Pacific people.

Although Koreans show highest degree of concentration in Koreatown relative to other people, Koreans constitute a small minority among the total resident population in

Table 1. **Ethnic Concentration in Koreatown, Los Angeles, 1980**

| Ethnic group | Koreatown | Southern California | Percent in Koreatown | Index of Concentration |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Korean | 15,011 | 71,957 | 20.9 | 8.5844 |
| Other Paci/Asian | 25,003 | 510,857 | 4.9 | 2.0123 |
| Black | 45,609 | 969,255 | 4.7 | 1.9383 |
| Hispanic | 82,888 | 2,352,442 | 3.5 | 1.4486 |
| White | 60,395 | 5,505,701 | 1.1 | .4527 |
| Total | 228,909 | 9,410,212 | 2.4 | 1.0000 |

Note: Southern California here refers to Los Angeles County and Orange County.
Koreatown: Mail zip code zones of 90004, 90005, 90006, 90010, 90019, and 90020.
Index of concentration: percentage of each ethnic group in Koreatown divided by the percentage of the total population in Koreatown.

Source: Computed from *1980 All Races and Ethnic Data by Census Tracts in California* (from Summary Tape File 1A. Sherman Oaks, California: Western Economic Research Co. 1982).

Table 2. **Ethnic Concentration in Koreatown Core, 1980**

| Ethnic group | Koreatown Core | Southern California | Percent in Koreatown | Index Core of Concentration |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Korean | 7,962 | 71,957 | 11.06 | 20.1091 |
| Other Pacific Asian Popl | 7,583 | 510,857 | 1.48 | 2.6909 |
| Black | 5,975 | 969,255 | .62 | 1.1273 |
| Hispanic | 18,721 | 2,352,442 | .80 | 1.4545 |
| White | 11,528 | 5,505,701 | .21 | .3818 |
| Total | 51,769 | 9,410,212 | .55 | 1.0000 |

Koreatown Core: Census tracts with more than 10 percent Koreans.
See the Note and Source in Table 1.

13. From the 1980 U.S. Census of Population.

Koreatown. Koreans constituted only seven percent of the town's total population in 1980. As presented in Table 3, Hispanics are the largest group in Koreatown, making up 36 percent of its residents. The next largest minority group is the Blacks, constituting 20 percent. Other Asian/Pacific group (Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thais, and Pilipinos) made up 11 percent. About a quarter of the Koreatown's population consist of white population. In other words, Koreatown is racially mixed area where the minority races are the majority.

Koreans are a minority even within the Koreatown Core. In this area, Koreans constituted 15 percent. The rest are made up with Hispanics (36%), whites (22%), other Asian/Pacific people (15%), and Blacks (12%). Other than Blacks and whites, most of the people living in Koreatown (including the core) are recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia.

Table 3. **Ethnic Makeup of the Koreatown Core, Koreatown, Los Angeles County and Southern California, 1980**

| Ethnic group | Koreatown Core | | Koreantown | | Los Angeles County | | Southern California | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Korean | 7,962 | 15.4 | 15,011 | 6.6 | 60,618 | 0.8 | 71,957 | 0.8 |
| Other Asian/ Pacific | 7,583 | 14.6 | 25,003 | 10.9 | 422,352 | 5.6 | 510,857 | 5.4 |
| Black | 5,975 | 11.5 | 45,609 | 19.9 | 943,968 | 12.6 | 969,255 | 10.3 |
| Hispanic | 18,721 | 36.2 | 82,888 | 36.2 | 2,066,103 | 27.6 | 2,352,442 | 25.0 |
| White | 11,528 | 22.3 | 60,395 | 26.4 | 3,984,462 | 53.3 | 5,505,701 | 58.5 |
| Total | 51,769 | 100 | 228,909 | 100 | 7,477,503 | 100 | 9,410,212 | 100 |

See Table 1 for definition and source.

Koreatown covers much larger area than Little Tokyo and Chinatown combined. It is interspersed or bounded by several major throughfares. The Wilshire corridor skyscrappers cut across Koreatown in the middle. Other major thoroughfares are Vermont, Western, Crenshaw, Hoover, Pico, Olympic, Third Street, Beverly Boulevard and Melrose Avenue.

Residential units behind these throughfares and local streets in Koreatown are largely old run-down tenement houses and some new apartment buildings for low income families. Koreatown is bordered with black residential areas to the south, relatively better Fairfax areas to the west, Hollywood areas to the north, and run-down Hispanic residential areas to the east. The center of Koreatown is about four miles east of the Los Angeles central business districts.

Koreatown is a zone of residential transition. It was primarily developed as white working class residential neighborhoods. During the 1930's and 40's, the area had become a racially mixed zone of Japanese, Jewish, Mexican American, and working class white settlements. This pattern continued until toward the end of the 1960's, when immigrants from Latin America and Asia began to crowd the area. While former Jewish, white, and Japanese residents and businesses retreated from the area, Koreans and other Asians gradually moved in. This ecological retreat-succession process is still continuing in

Koreatown.

Koreans more than others have gradually taken over a great number of small business establishments, renovated the run-down store buildings, posted newly painted signs (often with Korean symbols), and dramatically changed street scenes of the Koreatown area. Now, businesses along Olympic Boulevard and Eighth Street between Crenshaw and Hoover are mostly owned by Koreans. Vermont and Western Avenues between Pico and Beverly Boulevards are also becoming Korean business districts. As a result, business property values of Koreatown have skyrocketted.

While the business scenes along the major throughfares in Koreatown have changed drastically over the last 15 years, residential scenes behind the main streets have remained the same. Bonacich and Jung have demonstrated that Koreatown is located in areas with great social problems as measured by five indicators: income, unemployment, poverty, welfare, and juvenile delinquency (Bonacich and Jung, 1982:89-90). The Koreatown Corridor Economic Revitalization Study in 1982 also reveals that 10 percent of all Asian men, 15 percent of all Latino men and nearly 20 percent of all black men in Koreatown are unemployed. The study further demonstrates that Koreatown suffers from high incidence of residential burglary, robbery, larceny and aggravated assault. The study describes a typical scene in the area, "Abandoned, deteriorating and vacant buildings and lots are sprinkled liberally among the viable businesses along the main streets in Koreatown (Logan, 1982)."

Koreatown is not an attractive residential area. Korean residents in Koreatown are largely the recent arrivals in this country. The 1981 Claremont Survey reveals that 61 percent of the Koreans in Koreatown are immigrants who have come to this country since 1975. In the suburbs, the post-1975 immigrant Koreans constituted 46 percent. The Survey also shows that while 39 percent of the suburban Koreans are naturalized American citizens, only 20 percent of the Koreatown Koreans are in the same category. Unskilled Korean workers are over-represented in Koreatown (20%) relative to the suburbs (11%). Likewise American college graduated Koreans are over-represented in the suburbs (23%) in contrast to those in Koretown (18%). Koreatown is also overrepresented by those Koreans over age 55 (16% versus 12%) and those between 25 and 34 (36% versus 28%).

Koreatown is serving as launching station for many incoming immigrants. The author's 1978 study finds that 89 percent of the Koreans who had lived in Koreatown in 1972 left the area by 1977. On the other hand, only 37 percent of the Monterey Park (a suburban community) Korea residents are found to have moved out of the area during the same period (Yu, 1982a:23-47).

Despite the highly transient nature of Korean residents in the area and many problems associated with unplanned growth, rising racial tension, poor neighborhood, high crime, etc., Koreatown has become the nucleus of the over-100,000 member Korean community in Southern California. Koreatown is a symbolic center for the geographically dispersed Koreans in Southern California prividing a sense of community, identity, and pride. It also provides many vital functions and services to the Koreans. Many important cultural, economic, social, and community functions and activities affecting daily lives of the Koreans are heavily concentrated in Koreatown.

First of all, Koreatown forms a necleus of commercial and business activities of the Koreans in Southern California. Korean businesses and organizations listed in the 1982 Korean Directory of Southern California (published by Key's Printing) have been analyzed in order to examine the degree of concentration of social and economic functions in Koreatown. The Korean Directory would list only those businesses that have at least some value to Korean clientele. Those Korean businesses that mainly serve the non-Korean clientele would not be listed in the Directory.

Bonacich and Jung found that 35 percent of the 2,268 business firms listed in the 1977 Korean Directory of Southern California were concentrated in the area that we designate as Koreatown. They also note that Koreatown has higher than average representation of the business lines such as construction, moving, finance, and service (Banacih and Jung, 1982:92-92). The 1982 data also show a heavy concentration of these business activities in Koreatown. Our analysis reveals that particularly those retail and service establishments that draw Koreans as their major clientele are heavily concentrated in Koreatown. According to the 1982 data, Koreatown contains 27 (61%) of the 44 Korean-operated accounting and income tax service outfits in Southern California. Other Korean-operated retail and service outfits that are heavily concentrated in Koreatown and have Koreans as their major clientele are as follows:

| Type of business | Number in Koreatown | Percent of the total in Koreatown |
|---|---|---|
| Certified Public Accountant | 24 | 72 |
| Banks and loan offices | 11 | 55 |
| Attorney at law | 8 | 50 |
| Advertising | 9 | 82 |
| Boutique | 34 | 79 |
| Cosmetic | 17 | 81 |
| Department stores | 16 | 67 |
| Escrow Service | 7 | 78 |
| Gift shop | 52 | 61 |
| Health Club | 9 | 82 |
| Hospital | 11 | 69 |
| Pharmacy | 18 | 67 |
| Optician | 10 | 67 |
| Insurance agent | 95 | 64 |
| Private Investigation | 3 | 100 |
| Marriage go-between | 2 | 100 |
| Immigration Service | 18 | 78 |
| Shopping mall | 10 | 100 |
| Sign-painting | 11 | 79 |
| Travel service | 43 | 67 |
| Trophy shop | 3 | 75 |
| Video shop | 4 | 80 |

Korean activities and establishments that are typical of Korean tradition or custom are heavily concentrated in Koreatown. The 1982 Korean Directory lists 14 fortuneteller offices. Of these 11 (79%) are located in Koreatown. Fifty (56%) of the 89 herb and acupuncuture outfits are found in Koreatown. Seven (88%) of the eight Korean Buddhist temples in Southern California are in Koreatown. Most of the clientele of these establishments are Korean. The Tae-Kwon-Do gyms are the only exception. The sport is of Korea origin, but its establishments do not show any tendency to concentrate in Koreatown. Only two of the 50 such operations are located in Koreatown. The major clientele of the sport establishments are non-Koreans and there is no particular reason why they should locate in Koreatown.

Koreatown is the center of night time entertainment for Koreans. Koreans are sport-lovers. Koreans are ubiquitous on public and private golf courses and tennis courts throughout Southern California. After sport events, many Koreans go to Korean restaurants in Koreatown. Many continue on with E-cha (second stop) at Korean

nightclubs. Korean immigrants make business deals, release stresses, make friends and enemies in these places. Thus, 28 (54%) of the 52 Korean-owned nightclubs in Southern California are located in Koreatown. Clientele of these entertainment outlets are mostly Korean.

Light contends that "Koreans in Los Angeles made effective business use of language and cultural barriers distinguishing co-ethnics from the general population, reactive social solidarity, nepotistic hiring, and formal and informal mutual support networks." for the entrepreneurial success (Light, 1984:195-216). Apprently Korean entrepreneurs find Koreatown an ideal locale for maximum utilization of the available ethnic resources.

Koreatown serves as the center of cultural activities for the Koreans in Southern California. Nine (82%) of the 11 Korean book stores are located in Koreatown. It also contains five dance studios (100%), seven art galleries (58%), five magazine publishers (71%), five music schools (71%), 21 printing shops (57%), four oriental medicine colleges (50%), and four typesetting shops (100%). Koreatown also houses Korean School of Southern California, the largest of such kind in the area. Most of the Korean musical performances and art exhibits take place in theatres and galleries located in Koreatown. All three daily Korean newspaper offices and 11 (58%) weekly or bi-monthly newspaper outfits are located in Koreatown.

Major social events of Korean community take place in Koreatown. Koreatown restaurants are favorite sites of the year-end parties for the hundreds of high school and college alumni associations. Fund-raising parties for major Korean social service organizations such as Korean Youth Center and Korean-American Youth Foundation usually take place in hotel ballrooms in Koreatown. Olympian Hotel, Wilshire Hyatt Hotel, Ambassador Hotel, and Sheraton Townhouse are the favorite places. The Annual Korean Street Festival takes place on Olympic Boulevard. Private parties, treats for visiting out-of-town visitors, and receptions for the visiting dignitaries also take place in restaurants and ballrooms in Koreatown.

Koreatown is the center of Korean community activities. The four-story Korean Community Center situated at the corner of Olympic Boulevard and Western Avenue houses a number of Korean community organizations including the Korean Federation of Los Angeles (formerly Korean Association of Southern California), which claims to represent the Korean community in Southern California, and Korean Chamber of Commerce in Southern California. Eighty two (54%) of the 153 Korean non-profit organizations listed in the 1982 Directory maintain an office in Koreatown. Business meetings of these organizations mostly take place in restaurants and conference rooms of Koreatown. Ardmore Park which is situated in the middle of Koreatown is the staging area of many political rallies and demonstrations that occasionally take place in the Korean community.

Although only 73 Korean churches (23%) of the 321 listed in the 1982 Directory are located in Koreatown, major church related community events such as church music festivals take place in Koreatown. The five largest Korean churches, Yongnak Presbyterian Chuch, Oriental Mission Church, Berendo Street Baptist Church, and Philadelphia Korean Church, are all located in Koreatown. These churches draw their membership from all over the region. An analysis of the Yongnak Church directors indicates that less than 20 percent of its members come from Koreatown. A significant number of its members come from as far as Orange and Ventura counties.

Koreatown has one Korean post office, public library, and Koreatown Police Substation. Except administrative town hall (there cannot be such one because Koreatown is not an administrative unit), Koreatown contains most of the amenities and facilities necessary for the daily lives of the Korean immigrants in Southern California.

We have seen that Koreatown attracts both Korean immigrants and business establish-

ments. Both segments have grown rapidly as a result of snowball effect. New immigrants settle in Koreatown because of its proximity to work place and ethnic establishments. Primarily due to language difficulty, cultural difference, and unfamiliarity with American employment opportunity, many of the newly arriving Korean immigrants, including those with college education, often find it necessary to start with a blue collar work. Office maintenance work and sewing are the two most easily available lines of work for the incoming Korean immigrants. Korean entrepreneurs have deeply penetrated into these lines of business. These operations favor the newly arriving Korean immigrants because they are productive but inexpensive. Many of the Korean-operated sewing shops are located near or within Koreatown. Rows of skyscrapers along Wilshire Boulevard and many other commercial buildings in Koreatown provide ample opportunity for work the Korean immigrants. Our study of Koreatown in 1978 finds that 22 percent of the Korean housewives in Los Angeles were engaged in sewing and other 14 percent in cleaning. The same study reveals that 13 percent of the Korean men were also engaged in cleaning work (Yu, 1982 b: 49-73). The 1981 Claremont Survey confirms a continuing trend: twenty percent of the Korean workers in Koreatown were engaged in unskilled work, mostly sewing or cleaning.

Once established, it attracts further business because here ethnic resources can be effectively exploited and utilized. New immigrants are further attracted because these ethnic establishments provide jobs, psychological comforts, and conveniences. As a result, Koreatown is becoming a central residential, business, and service district for the entire Korean community in Southern California.

It is expected that Koreatown will continue to develop into a major Korean residential and business community. New immigrants will continue to move into the area, while many others will directly move into the suburbs. During the early 1970's, a great majority of the Korean immigrants were of middle class or upper-middle class origin. Korean immigrants today contain a large number of those from lower socio-economic strata. Semiskilled and unskilled laborers constituted 47 percent of the 1978 cohort of Korean immigrant workers. In 1973, the corresponding figure was only 15 percent.[14]Many of these new immigrants will find it convenient to settle in Koreatown at least in the initial stage of settlement. Koreatown also contains some nicer residential sections within and in the vicinity of its western and northern boundaries. A number of successful Korean merchants based in Koreatown and professional people have settled in these locations. The land value in Koreatown has skyrocketted. The median housing value in Koreatown increased from $23,940 in 1970 to $82,333 in 1980.[15] The commercial property values increased much more.

Koreatown's development process is somewhat different from other ethnic towns. Little Tokyo and Chinatown are situated adjacent to the city's central business districts as European ethnic towns did in the earlier period. In contrast, Koreatown is situated some distance away from the city's central business district. Earlier settlers of Chinatown and Little Tokyo were largely mine workers, railroad workers, and farm laborers. Korean immigrants today are largely of family migration and consist of the people with relatively high education and urban life experience. Thanks to the rapid economic growth of Korea during the last twenty year period, Korean immigrants today do not arrive with empty handed, which is distinct from the experience of the earlier immigrants at the turn of the century.

Koreans have changed otherwise blighted and deteriorating section of downtown into a

14. Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1973 and 1978.
15. *L.A. Times,* August 15, 1982.

thriving Koreatown with their own effort and investment. It took more than one hundred years for Chinatown and Little Tokyo to be developed as they are today. Koreatown is in a process of achieving it in two decades. This is a rare phenomenon in American urban history.

Koreatown has now reached the stage in its growth for a detailed planning and coordination. Koreatown has so far taken natural course in its expansion. The municipal planning department did not pay any attention to Koreatown until very recently. Nor has there been any self study about the town's development of future direction.

In order to guarantee a sound development, Koreatown must deal with many problems it is facing. The crime rate in Koreatown is one of the highest in Los Angeles. Unemployment and under-employment rates are rather high among the residents (including non-Koreans) in Koreatown. Traffic congestion in Koreatown is getting worse as traffic, parking lot, business, and residence compete for limited space. There are many community organizations, but they do not seem to be able to work together. Diverse elements compete for conflicting interests. Business competitions in certain lines (such as travel agencies) are severe and almost fatal among Korean entrepreneurs. Racial tension is reaching a critical level in Koreatown between poor non-Korean minorities and seemingly successful Koreans.

Korean community in Koreatown is isolated and compartmentalized. It mainly serves the need and interest of the Korean people. It is aloof from the daily concerns of the populace occupying the Koreatown area. Its shops and business establishments mainly serve the Korean clientele. Its main social and cultural events are attended mostly by Koreans. Korean facilities in Koreatown have not reached non-Korean populace yet. Although Koreatown has attracted attention from media, it has not yet attracted American visitors, shoppers, and tourists.

Belatedly, however, a Koreatown redevelopment project is being readies with a direct involvement of the city redevelopment agency and with a sponsorship of an Asian-American community agency (Pacific Asian Consortium in Employment: PACE). The project is to help Korean merchants apply for business loans under the Commercial Area Revitalization Effort (CARE) program. The Committee for Koreatown Community Planning, a coalition of six Korean organizations, is working with PACE to coordinate the project. The project has set up six program areas: the development plan, business seminars, safety and security, promotion and marketing, public improvements, and real-estate development.[16] The City Council has approved an initial allocation of $100,000 for the project. If implemented successfully, this will be the beginning of a long-range redevelopment project for Koreatown. This is the first real challenge that the Korean community has come to face. It will have to demonstrate that it can work together both within and without.

The local community, city redevelopment agency, and capital from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan have cooperated in the process of redevelopment of Chinatown and Little Tokyo. The Korean community which is lacking both the capital and organizational network to engineer the redevelopment plan will need to consider carefully the feasibility of similar type of tri-partite cooperation. The goal should reflect the principle of equity and justice for all parties concerned: Korean community, non-Korean residents in the area, city's overall development objectives, and capital investors.

16. *The Korea Times Los Angeles edition,* February 6, 1985.

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