

KOREANS IN THE UNITED STATES: ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND ASSIMILATION

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The Koreans who immigrated to the United States in the 25 years following 1965 quickly established a strong economic base in their new society. Many became successful small-business operators and entrepreneurs, while some succeeded in professional fields. The extent of their economic achievement is indicated by personal and household income levels, and by their rate of business ownership and the growth in business income.

Several major factors in American society and in Korean society that contributed to this unusual economic achievement are identified and discussed.

The question of what this economic achievement means for how Koreans will find their place in American society is addressed. Several processes of incorporation identified by sociologists are discussed, including assimilation and labor-market participation. It is concluded that more evidence and time is required for determining how Koreans will fit into their new society.

INTRODUCTION

Immigrant groups arriving in the United States during the last two centuries typically worked for long periods to achieve economic footholds. However, a few groups were exceptions to this pattern, including the Koreans who came to this country in the quarter century following 1965. Their economic accomplishments within a single generation were unusual. Although Koreans in the U.S. today continue to encounter occupational discrimination and income disparities, it is clear that many of them have economically arrived (*New York Times* 1993, p.A1). This article focuses on the economic accomplishment of these post-1965 Koreans in the United States. It briefly describes this achievement and, using the growing research findings about Korean Americans, it identifies major factors in the United States and Korea contributing to this achievement. The article also examines the implications of this economic achievement with respect to questions of how and when Koreans may find their place in America.

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KOREANS IN THE UNITED STATES AND THEIR ACHIEVEMENT

Korean immigration to the United States can be divided into three categories on the bases of composition and times of arrival: a small immigration mostly of laborers and refugees from 1880 to 1924; a small immigration of professionals, refugees, students, and war brides from 1950 to 1965; and a larger and broader immigration in the years after 1965 (see Kim 1981, pp.17-28; Kitano and Daniels 1988, p.106). We are concerned here primarily with the areas and extent of achievement, and assimilation possibilities, of people in this last category, whose arrival followed major changes in U.S. immigration laws in 1965.

In 1970, according to the Census Bureau, there were 69, 510 Koreans in the U.S.; by 1980, the population had grown to 354, 529 individuals (Light and Bonacich 1988, p.130). A decade later, there were a reported 789, 849 Korean and Korean-Americans in the U.S. (*Korea Times News* 1992, p.B6). Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, over half a million Koreans had immigrated to the U.S., with approximately 30,000 people arriving each year in the decade and a half following 1975 (Park 1990, pp.2-8). By the late 1980s, over 90% of the Korean population in the U.S. were recent immigrants, with largest settlements in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago (Barringer 1988, p.22).

According to one projection, there will be over 1.3 million Koreans in the United States in the year 2000. By 2030, Koreans may be the third largest Asian group in the U.S. with a population of nearly 3 million (Bouvier and Agresta 1987, p.292).

The post-1965 Korean immigrants to the United States possessed several notable characteristics differentiating them from earlier immigrant groups. Some Koreans arrived as highly trained professionals, in medical specializations for example, attracted by the expanding U.S. health-care field. Others arrived as young, ambitious business managers and workers who saw greater economic opportunity and political freedom in the U.S. By the late 1970s, others arrived following a more typical pattern as relatives of earlier immigrants, under the wider family-reunification provisions provided by 1975 modifications in U.S. immigration restrictions.

Koreans moved into a range of occupations but the most recognized accomplishment of those Koreans arriving after 1965 is their entrepreneurial achievement in building small to mid-size import/export businesses and small retail stores (see Barringer 1989, pp.50-76; Kim 1981, pp.101-45; Light and Bonacich 1988, pp.127-327; *The New York Times*, 1993, p.1). While no

single occupation is typical of Koreans in the United States, for various reasons including the limits of their school-based English-language skills, restricted access to American corporate careers, and personal preference, a considerable percentage of Korean immigrants came to rely on starting their own businesses or on working for a new family-run business in one of America's metropolitan areas (see Hurh and Kim 1984; Min 1984; Park 1990, pp.77-90). Some Korean immigrants in the post-1965 years began import/export businesses dealing with manufacturers in Korea. Others undertook operation of businesses like neighborhood groceries, liquor stores, appliance stores, dry cleaners, and gas stations. Where such businesses served non-Korean speaking customers, they required limited interaction, thereby minimizing effects of language barriers. Although entrepreneurship demanded long hours of work for them to succeed, they were capable of providing earnings larger than those otherwise available to non-professional immigrants in the secondary-labor market in the United States.

It is clear that the extent of economic achievement by post-1965 Korean immigrants has not exceeded that for other groups in all respects. For example, Barringer has concluded from research data that personal and household income levels for Koreans through the 1980s, while surpassing those of several major groups in America, were lower than those for White Americans and some Asian Americans. This lag was attributed to factors including the higher number of women in the Korean population, periphery employment, and an unusually high percentage of very recent immigrants. It was found that prestige levels of occupations taken up by Koreans had significant effects on their income levels in the U.S., and that Koreans working as self-employed professionals were able to achieve the highest income levels (Barringer 1989, pp.77-107).

However, evidence for significant economic achievement in other respects exists, ranging from newspaper reports to more systematically gathered data. According to a 1992 report in *The Wall Street Journal*, "... thousands of Koreans have become successful entrepreneurs..." running small businesses in large American cities across the nation. By the early 1980s, various data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that Koreans in the U.S. had achieved the highest rate of self-employment among immigrant groups of the time, and had increased the number of Korean-owned businesses from 8, 504 in 1977 to 31, 769 in 1982. More significantly, the amount of gross receipts from Korean owned businesses grew, according to Census Bureau minority-business surveys, from \$5.5 million in 1977 to \$2.6 billion in 1982 (Light and Bonacich 1988, p.149). By the end of the 1980s, according to the

Census Bureau, Korean-Americans had achieved the highest business-ownership rate among all racial and ethnic groups in the nation (*The Wall Street Journal* 1992, p.1).

U.S. FACTORS IMPACTING KOREAN ACHIEVEMENT

In considering why Korean immigrants to the United States since 1965 have achieved an economic base so quickly, certain aspects of American society over the past quarter century seem significant. Three of these are (1) the 1965 Amendment to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, (2) the prior existence of Korean communities in the U.S., and (3) the types of economic opportunity existing in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s.

Changes in immigration law like that in the U.S. in 1965 affect not only identification of source countries and numbers of immigrants but also socioeconomic attributes of immigrants. As Borjas (1990, pp.15-19) has indicated, such codes produce non-random sortings for types and levels of skill, age and gender characteristics, educational levels and financial resources, and so on. The 1965 immigration amendment had such effects on immigrants from Korea, sorting for attributes that contributed to Korean economic achievement in the United States. Regulations directly affected age and educational levels among Koreans, producing a population which generally was young, energetic, and well-educated in many respects (see Barringer 1989, pp.19-56). Kim (1981, p.38) found in the New York area in the late 1970s that 67% of Korean householders had finished college in Korea. In 1980, 51.3% of Koreans throughout the U.S. had the equivalent of at least some college-level courses, as contrasted with 35.3% of white Americans (Barringer 1993, p.172). Such characteristics meant that Korean immigrants were also likely to have been successful urbanites in Korea, a characteristic that apparently served them well in American metropolitan areas.

The 1965 immigration regulations also affected family groups thereby contributing to a population in which family members and family revenues could become central resources. In part, this development occurred because family unification was an objective of the revised immigration codes. Light and Bonacich in their analysis of Koreans in Los Angeles noted that 87.9% of individuals seeking permission to immigrate to the U.S. between 1966 and 1981 did so on the basis of family-reunification claims (Light and Bonacich 1988, p.144). What was taking place during these years was a process of chain migration whereby extensive kin groups (chains) spanning generations and branches immigrated person-by-person over time.

According to Light and Bonacich (1988, p.145) the combination of preferences among Koreans with United States law produced "... a preponderance of kin of previous immigrants..." among individuals admitted to the country. Both the family labor and financial resources possible through larger family presences have been recognized as significant factors in Korean economic achievement in the United States (see Kim 1981, p.145; Light and Bonacich 1988, p.143; Park 1990, pp.67-77). The psychological assurances from such presences were also important, given the value of family unity in Korean culture and the Korean tradition of emigrating in family groups (see Hurh and Kim 1984; Kim 1981, pp.45-46; Park 1990, p.80).

Established Korean communities in the United States were important for the post-1965 immigrants also. For newer immigrants, where there are existing communities of individuals from their former society, there exists possibilities of drawing from such communities important advantages to help them with needs and undertakings. Community-based resources include information about economic opportunities, as well as financial, business, and legal assistance. Such resources have existed for many immigrant groups in the United States (for example, see Light 1972; Lyman 1974; Rogg 1974).

In the New York area, Koreans who had previously immigrated during the 1950s and early 1960s comprised a major asset for post-1965 immigrants. Such earlier arrivals "... became issue makers and opinion makers, mediators with the larger society, therapists, labor exploiters, philanthropists, and preachers. ... they formulate Korean opinion on 'ethnic' issues with respect to the outside world" (Kim 1981, p.184). In Los Angeles, an established Korean community provided newcomers with important support in the forms of housing, cash, language translation and lessons, job information, securance of legal documents, and other resources that provide economic assistance to recipients. This community sustained the largest Korean economy within the United States, which attracted immigrants to the area and provided them with resources (Light and Bonacich 1988, pp. 155-56). Frequently, churches in America become the foundation of Korean communities, giving direct services to established Korean residents and to newer arrivals, including employment and housing information, language classes, and social events. As Korean communities in the U.S. have grown in the past quarter century, so have the roles of such churches and their ministers (Barringer 1988, p.31; Kim 1981, pp.182-202).

In addition to new immigration codes and existing communities of Koreans, economic opportunities in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s also

contributed to the economic achievement of the post-1965 immigrants. Where a group enters a prospering society, the chances of it doing well are enhanced by the general prosperity. Where a group enters a prospering society, and its socioeconomic characteristics fit with needs in the society, its chances of doing well are further enhanced. During the 1970s and 1980s, partly because of continuing demographic and consumption changes in an expanding American economy, opportunities for economic achievement opened. Because Koreans were able to develop these opportunities they made notable accomplishments. An example of this success is in the Korean response in the United States to growing consumer demand for cosmetic and apparel items during the 1970s. As described by Kim (1981, pp.125-30), Koreans in America used the wig industry as a major economic entry point and filled a range of commercial roles reaching from importers and wholesalers dealing with manufacturers in Korea to retailers and peddlers selling to American consumers. Through carrying out middleman roles with respect to cosmetic and apparel items, many Korean immigrants were able to succeed.

A similar example is the Korean entry into urban retail-store businesses during the 1970s and 1980s. In a variety of American cities and some suburbs, Korean immigrants became successful operators of greengrocers and dry cleaners. Kim attributes such opportunities in some areas, particularly central-city sections, to out-migration of white Americans and reluctance of older white ethnics to deal with growing minority populations (1981, p.144). Light and Bonacich interpret such forms of labor-intensive small business entrepreneurship by Koreans in America as a "disguised form of cheap labor utilization by U.S. capitalism" (1988, p.27).

KOREAN CULTURE AND ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN AMERICA

Immigrants bring social and cultural traits from the source country that both restrict and assist their advancement. Many post-1965 Koreans in the United States were hindered by their lack of English language skills. But they brought traits from Korea that proved assets in their U.S. economic ventures in the United States. While lack of data in the research on Koreans in America makes definitive discussion of traits impossible (see Park 1990, pp.9-10), we can tentatively identify traits that seem significant. Included among these characteristics were the cultural importance of family and the value placed on upward economic mobility.

Before discussing these it should be noted that these traits emerged in part from the more complex phenomenon of Korean Confucianism, a

central philosophical system for centuries, as well as a major influence on Korean immigrants in the United States. It is clear that a variety of Confucianism-based beliefs, attitudes, and practices probably influenced the activities of the post-1965 immigrants to the United States. For example, a principle in Confucianism is the value placed on hierarchies of responsibility and authority in organizations. The principle, if carried through to Korean business structures in the United States, would be a foundation for effective organizational divisions of labor and administration. Undoubtedly, Confucianism has affected Korean economic achievement by providing a basis for beliefs emphasizing reliable interpersonal relationships and conformity with social norms—each of which would prove an asset in Korean business operations.

Korean Confucianism also called for responsibility to and reliance upon kin, and it supported upward economic mobility as value (see Kim 1981, p. 298; Light and Bonacich 1988, pp.273-99). The family, including the extended kin group, is the basic social unit among Koreans and Korean immigrants to the United States. It provided for the post-1965 arrivals, in addition to financial assistance, a central resource for information, labor, and emotional support. Often, through kinship ties, Koreans in America were able to create original and spin-off businesses, and collateral sources of employment (see *The Wall Street Journal* 1992, p.1). Moreover, they were able to spread risk-taking, allowing for both aggressive competition and future investments by relatives in new undertakings. The Korean family in America, with its frequent emphasis on continuation of family roles and norms traditionally important in Korean culture, probably also served as source of psychological intimacy and support for individuals in a new society (see Hurh and Kim 1984).

Also apparently contributing to economic achievement by the post-1965 immigrants in the U.S. was the importance they attributed to individual upward mobility. While not all Koreans were motivated by accomplishment, many were willing to invest considerable effort and sacrifice to improve their economic status. In their analysis of the 1986 cohort of immigrating Koreans, Park and his colleagues (Park 1990, p.105) concluded that a variety of motivations were present but a concern "... for upward mobility seems to have been more pervasive." Similarly, Hurh and Kim (1984, p.49) found that Koreans commonly stated that greater chances for economic success in the U.S. were important in their decisions to leave Korea. Many immigrants had already experienced some mobility in Korea but felt themselves blocked by economic and political conditions in Korea from further accomplishment (see Light and Bonacich 1988, p.124; Park

1990, p.90; Hurh 1977, unpagged). Concerned with enhancing their statuses, they looked to the United States, which had for years symbolized for many Koreans freedom and prosperity. Among the 1986 cohort of Koreans coming to the U.S., expectations of high wage levels and "... the availability of adequate rewards for hard work..." were considered particularly favorable characteristics in the United States. In this group most individuals expected to start work quickly after their arrival and to quickly move on to still better employment (Park 1990, pp.81-105). The new arrivals saw the possibilities of encountering material hardships and discrimination, but most thought these obstacles would be over-come. In America, they expected to work shorter hours and to triple their annual income through their first job in the U.S. Similarly, they anticipated that their U.S. income would triple during their first five years in the new country (Park 1990, p.58).

IMPLICATIONS OF KOREAN ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The economic achievement of Korean immigrants to the United States after 1965 emerged largely from their hard-won development of opportunities in the U.S. In several respects, their achievement was unusual. Therefore, it is important to address the significance of this achievement with respect to the question of the overall place of Koreans within the society.

Early in the twentieth century, how immigrant groups fit into the United States was considered the result of "assimilation," a process variously conceptualized (see Gordon 1964, pp.60-68). In general assimilation was conceptualized as a dynamic producing the homogeneous integration of immigrant groups as equals into American society. However, by the time the first post-1965 Korean immigrants were arriving in America, this idea of assimilation had been fundamentally criticized among American social scientists. Twenty-five years later, by the time some Korean immigrants were operating import/export companies and other businesses, important concepts indicating perspectives going beyond assimilation and homogeneity had been developed.

The inescapability of assimilation and its consequential homogeneous integration of groups had been criticized as early as 1945 by sociologists Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole in their work on American ethnic and racial groups (Warner and Srole 1945). Writing on the probable futures of some groups in America, they foresaw situations of "permanent inferior ranking" unless the society changed its "methods of [racial] evaluation" (1945, p.285). Early in the 1960s further rejections of this conceptualization of assimilation

were published by Moynihan and Glazer and by Milton Gordon. In their analysis of ethnic and racial groups as interest groups, Glazer and Moynihan contended that such groups are continually re-created in America, where they operate as enduring social forms. "The assimilating power of American society..." they observed, operated on immigrant groups differently and left such groups "... distinct and identifiable" (Glazer and Moynihan 1963, p.13). Glazer and Moynihan did not discard completely the possibility of assimilation. Rather, they suggested it might be an long-term process with indelible effects far in the future.

The following year, Gordon argued for a multidimensional conceptualization of assimilation that excluded the notions of homogeneity and full integration for all groups (Gordon 1964; see also Gordon 1978, p. 65). He presented a model of assimilation constructed of seven dimensions: cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, marital assimilation, identificational assimilation, attitude-receptional assimilation, behavior-receptional assimilation, and civic assimilation.

Achieving equality and integration would mean that a group would have experienced all seven forms assimilation. According to Gordon's model, such an experience is not assured: some groups may experience certain types of assimilation and not others, thereby not reaching equality and full integration.¹ Thus, during the late 1960s, an assessment of the future place of Koreans within American society might well have been carried out through application of Gordon's model.

During the three decades following Gordon's reconceptualization of racial and ethnic assimilation in America, criticisms of his model and hypotheses were suggested, including the argument that the model does not sufficiently account for the impact of conflict, historical relationships, or power resources in racial and ethnic relationships (Geschwender 1978, p.58; Feagin 1989, pp.27-30). In the same period, with respect to some groups in America (notably several Asian groups), alternatives to the notion of assimilation were indicated, including middleman-minority theory (Blalock 1967; Bonacich 1973) and enclave theory (Portes & Rumbaut 1990).

According to thinking associated with middleman-minority theory, some groups have incorporated into American society not through assimilation but as economic intermediaries or middlemen operating in the United States' labor market, taking on occupations largely avoided by dominant

¹Gordon stated that most immigrant groups would first experience cultural assimilation (adopting the core language, history, values and norms of the society). Structural assimilation (represented by general admittance to primary-group relationships in the society) was seen as crucial to most of the other seven types of assimilation.

groups and not accessed by traditional minorities. According to Bonacich, groups operating as middlemen in a society typically start as sojourners with limited occupational options. They maintain high degrees of intra-group economic and cultural solidarity and control (Bonacich 1973, pp.584-87). With the passage of time, sojourning gives way to long-term residence for some immigrants from the group, who become permanent middlemen. Examples of groups incorporated into the United States through this relationship include the Chinese and Japanese who arrived during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Also achieving incorporation into American society through labor-market process are groups that establish and maintain immigrant enclaves, large urban communities largely populated by immigrants from a single source country and characterized by a heterogeneous class structure, a dense or complex economic network, and a high degree of institutional completeness. According to Portes and Manning (1991, p.319), the Korean community in Los Angeles and the Cuban community in Miami during the 1970s and 1980s were examples of such enclaves. Typically, immigrant enclaves provide opportunities for continuation of life inside a social and cultural framework emerging directly from the source society but providing greater changes for economic mobility because of the enclave's interaction with the host society's economic processes. For some individuals, remaining within the enclave is seen as loyalty to the group and a means of avoiding discrimination in the larger society (*The New York Times* 1993, p.A10). Because of this economic success, degrees of hostility exist between segments of the host society and the immigrant enclave.

Clearly, concerned with how groups become part of American society no longer employ only an assimilation perspective. However, it must be noted that assimilation has received new prominence among some social scientists who perceive that, historically, a shedding of significant ethnic cultures and relationships has occurred among some (predominantly European) groups and that assimilation is indicated by data on phenomena like self-identification, organizational memberships, and intermarriage across a range of ethnic and religious boundaries.

An important support for the assimilation perspective was established late in the 1970s through Herbert Gans's suggestion of "symbolic ethnicity." Addressing the question of re-emerging ethnic ties among descendants of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European immigrants to America, Gans found little evidence for significant ethnic revival. Instead, he argued, "... acculturation and assimilation continue to take place. ... My hypothesis is that in this [third] generation, people are less and less

interested in their ethnic cultures and organizations ... and are instead more concerned with... expressing that [ethnic] identity in suitable ways (Gans 1979, pp.1-7). Two years later, writing about descendants of Catholic European immigrants, Richard Alba argued that increases in education, mobility, and intermarriage indicated a "twilight of ethnicity" among these groups (Alba 1981, p.97). Around the same time, Charles Hirschman contended that "the assimilation perspective ... as a general paradigm has been strengthened by several major studies, although it continues to be plagued by controversy" (Hirschman 1983, p.401). More recently, he concluded "assimilation theory may have been dismissed prematurely. ... [Clearly] ... within the space of three or four generations, the very real ethnic differences of European immigrants seem to have survived for only a small fraction of their descendants" (Hirschman 1991, p.183).

THE PROSPECT OF ASSIMILATION FOR KOREANS AND KOREAN-AMERICANS

Is assimilation a possibility for the descendants of the post-1965 immigrants from Korea who have, in economic terms, achieved so much? Or will Koreans in America be incorporated into the society largely through their participation in the U.S. labor market as economic middlemen or residents of one or more long-term immigrant enclaves? Or will Koreans be incorporated through a process still unidentified?

By the mid-1980s the subject of assimilation of Korean and other Asian groups into American society was again a subject of serious inquiry. For instance, sociologists Lisa Neidert and Reynolds Farley included Asian groups in their 1985 research into ethnic and generational differences in status and achievement in America, concluding that, where assimilation is understood as resulting in a condition in which ethnic background is not an important determinant of occupational achievement, there is strong evidence to support the notion of assimilation for Asian and European groups (Neidert and Farley 1985, pp.840-50). In 1988, James Farley in a textbook on majority-minority relations stated that Asians had reached an "intermediate status" in American society, having experienced structural assimilation (following Gordon's model) to a limited extent similar to that experienced by eastern- and southern-European groups (Farley 1988, pp. 156, 208). Kitano, in research on Asian-American intermarriage published in 1984, clarified conditions under which Koreans in Hawaii experienced high rates of inter-group marriage (Kitano *et al.* 1984, p.186). In 1988, Kitano and Daniels suggested that "... it may well be that the third-wave [post-1965]

Koreans will be the Asian group that will make the transition from their culture to the American way in the least amount of time" (Kitano and Daniels 1988, p.118). Herbert Gans (1992, p.185) suggested that the racially based discrimination once inflicted on Asian Americans, now seems "irrelevant, at least as long as they are middle class." Thus we conclude that there is a very real prospect for the assimilation of Koreans into American society.

However, a number of crucial questions remain unanswered at this point. These include the issues of what obstacles to assimilation are likely to exist for Koreans, how much time will be required for assimilation of Koreans to occur, and how extensive this assimilation might be. Obstacles to assimilation include possible reluctance among Koreans, as well as resistance from the host society. In this connection, the strong reliance of Koreans in the U.S. on intragroup net-works, churches, associations, and financial resources described by Hurh and Kim (1984) is worth noting. For Hurh and Kim, the earlier "adhesive adaptation" of Koreans to American society was a variant of pluralistic incorporation rather than a forerunner of assimilation.

Moreover, as this article indicated earlier, there is much data suggesting that Koreans in the U.S. have been incorporated into the society through labor-market achievement and some acculturation. While it is clear that Koreans are not economic middlemen (there has been little of the sojourning typical of that category), many Koreans in the United States have lived in ethnic communities and participated in the economic networks of these immigrant enclaves in the past. But there are also indications that some Koreans are moving from enclaves and adopting life-styles typical of the American middle-class. If this movement grows, arguments for assimilation would be strengthened.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The post-1965 immigrants from Korea to the United States quickly achieved an economic foothold, partly through meeting the demands of entrepreneurship. This achievement is indicated by increases during the 1980s in Korean-owned businesses in American cities and in the gross receipts levels from these businesses. Important in this economic achievement were a number of factors from Korea and the United States. These included the importance of the family in Korean society, the value placed on upward mobility, and other elements of Korean Confucianism, as well as the 1965 changes in U.S. immigration laws, the existence of

established Korean communities in the United States, and the types of economic opportunity that existed in the United States. The significance of this economic achievement by recent Korean immigrants for their future place in American society remains an important but unsolved puzzle. There is obvious evidence to indicate that assimilation has occurred for some groups and that other groups were incorporated into the United States, up to this point in their experiences, through other processes. The prospect for assimilation of Koreans clearly exists and there is some evidence that suggests it may be occurring—but more time and information are needed before the puzzle will be solved.

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