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Pitting One Minority Against Another : Black Korean Conflict during the 1992 L.A. Riots

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Key words(중심용어): 미국의 인종 갈등(U.S. Racial Conflict), LA폭동(L.A. Riots), 한-흑 갈등(Black-Korean Conflict), 모범적 소수인종(Model Minority)

국 문 요 약

본 논문은 미국의 흑-백 갈등과 이와 비교하여 이전까지 덜 인식되고 주목 받았던 소수 인종간의 갈등이 복합적으로 드러난 예로써 1992년 LA폭동 당시 한-흑 갈등을 살펴보고자 한다. 또 한-흑 갈등이 어떻게 기존 백인중심의 지배 구조를 강화시켰는지 고찰하고자 한다. 1992년 LA 폭동의 원인은 백인 경찰의 흑인 로드니 킹 구타 사건과 이들 경찰에 대한 무죄 판결, 즉 기존의 백인사회에 의한 흑인 차별이었다. 그러나 흑인들의 분노 표출의 직접적인 대상은 백인사회와 기존 지배 구조가 아닌 LA South Central지역의 한인 업소들이었다.

이에 본 논문은1992년 한-흑 갈등의 원인들을 살펴보고 기존 사회구조와 백인 인종주의가 어떻게 이러한 원인들에 기여했으며 한-흑 분열을 가속화시키는지 살펴본다. 이러한 사회구조와 백인 인종주의 측면에서 볼 때 한-흑 갈등은 단지 이들 두 집단만의 문제가 아니라 어느 소수 인종간에도 일어날 수 있는 문제인 것이다. 마지막으로 논문은 이러한 한-흑 갈등이 어떻게 기존 지배구조나 백인 질서를 유지하고 강화했는지를 살펴본다. 따라서 LA폭동과 한-흑 갈등을 통해 표출된 흑인들의 분노는 그들과 소수인종에 차별적인 사회구조와 백인들의 지배는 그대로 둔 채, 또 다른 소수집단인 한인들의 희생화(victimization)로 귀결되었다.

I. Introduction

Despite the growing racial tolerance and the recognition of differences and multiculturalism in the U.S., the brutal police beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the ensuing acquittal of the perpetrators well demonstrated the persistence of violent racial bigotry and the moral bankruptcy of the contemporary U.S. Even though these incidents were presented as "news," they were in fact "the uneventful and ordinary realities," speaking for the historical tradition of the oppression of black people (Gooding-Williams 1993, 2). Despite this continuity, the riots following the not-guilty verdict in 1992 also highlighted new developments in the U.S. racial and ethnic relations. Indeed, the images of black and Latino rioters looting and burning Korean-owned stores in South Central Los Angeles and armed Korean store owners on the rooftops of their stores for self-defense brought to the fore the seriousness of the conflict among nonwhite minorities—especially between blacks and Korean Americans—that was thus far eclipsed by the more conspicuous black-white conflict.

In this sense, the black-Korean conflict during the 1992 L.A. riots vividly showed the complicated dynamics of the U.S. racial relations that was well underway and that went beyond the conventional racial paradigm of blacks vs. whites or whites vs. non-whites. Accordingly, studies on the black-Korean conflict during the 1992 riots have been frequently concerned with analyzing the origin and nature of this conflict and its implication for racial relations in the U.S. Yet, what is overlooked is the fact that the 1992 black-Korean conflict occurred precisely in the context of the well-entrenched racial culture of the U.S. As such, it showed how conventional racism between blacks and whites was played out among nonwhite minorities as they came to view themselves and each other according to the racial lens set up by the dominant white culture. Accordingly, an understanding of the black-Korean conflict during the 1992 L.A. riots requires an examination of the tension between blacks and Korean Americans along with the hegemonic white racial order.

This paper aims to review the black-Korean conflict during the 1992 L.A. riots as an instance to examine how conventional and new elements of the racial relations in the U.S were intertwined and how this worked to reinforce the existing racial order. While the paper focuses on this particular conflict between blacks and Korean Americans, it argues that this could have occurred among any minority groups. The paper will first examine some of the factors that led to the black-Korean conflict during the 1992 L.A. riots and how they were related to the hegemonic white racial order that not only denigrated nonwhite minorities but also pitted one minority against another. It intends to show how the black-Korean conflict helped to maintain, reinforce and reproduce the existing racial order, while also revealing the powerlessness of both Korean Americans as well as African Americans in the

white racial hegemony of the U.S.

II. Between a Greedy Invader and a Model Minority

Caught between haves and have-nots and between white society and the mostly African American and Latino community, Korean Americans were in an unenviable position during the L.A. riots in 1992. The immediate and underlying causes of the riots were rooted in police brutality, biased court rulings, and the deteriorating economic conditions for inner-city blacks and the poor, which were, in turn, the legacy of centuries of racism in the U.S. Yet, it was Korean Americans that were specifically targeted as an outlet for ventilating the anger and frustration of the rioters with the larger social structure. Framing the riots solely as a black-Korean conflict requires caution since Latinos accounted for a half of those arrested and a third of those killed during the riots. Yet, it is true that Korean-owned stores sustained nearly a half of the estimated $850 million of property damage caused by the riots. In addition, Latinos, either immigrants or undocumented workers, seemed to be motivated by material gain, looting stores rather than burning them down as an expression of anger (Henretta et al. 2000, 1021; Kim and Kim 1999, 19-20; Abelmann and Li 1997).

Korean Americans might have been accidentally placed "at the flashpoint of an historical event" (Ungar 1995, 298). Yet, their place in the U.S. racial hierarchy was not entirely accidental. Nor were they a completely innocent victim caught in a black-white conflict that was no fault of their own. The history of Korean immigration to the U.S. dated back to 1903, when 101 Koreans landed in Honolulu, Hawaii, as sugarcane farm laborers (Patterson 1988). However, most Korean immigrants came to the U.S. after the 1970s in search of economic opportunities and a quality education and a better life for their children. Their immigration was facilitated by the immigration reform of 1965, which repealed the national-origin quotas that had been in place since the Immigration Act of 1924 and that severely restricted the immigration of non-Europeans.[1)]

Korea was still a poverty-stricken nation around the time of the immigration reform and only the relatively privileged could escape Korea. Thus, unlike other immigrants to the U.S., Korean immigrants were well-educated and came from an urban middle-class background.

1) By 1905, when the first wave of Korean immigration was abruptly halted as Korea was annexed by Japan, about 7,000 Koreans were in the U.S. The second wave of Korean immigrants was triggered by the Korean War and there were about 14,000 Koreans in the U.S. by 1964. The third wave of Korean immigration was helped by the immigration reform in 1965 (Yu et al. 1098; Patterson 1988; Jo 1999).

However, their education and occupational experiences were generally not recognized in the U.S. due to language and cultural barriers and the lack of appropriate training in their professional fields. Unable to find jobs, they turned to manual labor, before they could save enough money to start their own small business that did not require language and technical skills or substantial overhead costs.

Yet, as new arrivals, their business opportunities were mainly restricted to an inner-city retail or service businesses. Previously, first and second generation immigrant Jews owned stores in inner-city area, but they moved out in the wake of the riots of the 1960s. Even African Americans who opened the stores with the ideal of investing in their own communities soon failed or closed stores in the face of crime. Thus, depressed and decaying inner-city neighborhoods avoided by American small businesses were the main openings American society could afford to Korean Americans. By the early 1990s, Korean Americans owned about 40 percent of the small and independent grocery and liquor stores in the L.A. area and almost 70 percent in the poor inner-city neighborhoods, where large supermarket chains and drugstores were closed (Kim and Kim 1999, 28-29; Unger 1995, 273, 278-279, 281).

However, in addition to the divergent class interests, oft-quoted cultural differences (which were closely intertwined with racial stereotypes) and tension-filled day-to-day experiences often negatively characterized black-Korean encounters. For example, Korean American merchants were seen as rude, as they never smiled and threw change on the counter. They were said to constantly watch black shoppers as if they were all shoplifters. Moreover, they did not contribute to the communities where they made money and did not hire African Americans. In a boycott against Korean stores in Harlem in 1981, Korean Americans were accused of being “vampires” and foreign intruders who came to black communities to “suck black consumers dry” and to “take over African American neighborhoods and extract maximum profits” (Waldinger 1995, 278).

Yet, despite this charge of the community takeover, Korean Americans in South Central L.A. often purchased liquor stores from African American owners at the prices up to five times higher than the average monthly gross sales (Kim 1993, 232). They were also not short of their complaints about African American patrons. A Korean merchant stated, “How can I smile at the customer who uses bad language and shows no respect for me?” (Chang 1999, 50). Another Korean liquor store owner in South Central L.A. said that he just assumed that part of his merchandise would be stolen everyday and he would increase the price on everything to try to compensate for that loss (Unger 1995, 274). When Korean merchants were robbed or murdered in their stores, such negative perceptions were reinforced, further straining black-Korean relationships.

These perceptions, stemming from day-to-day experiences and cultural differences, also reflected the extent to which African Americans and Korean Americans had internalized the dominant racial ideology and practices. Without regard to specific personal experiences, each other's behavior and culture were interpreted and lumped together through the dominant racial discourse in a way that conformed to and reinforced the existing social order. For example, despite often amicable relationships with African Americans and the recognition of white racism as a real culprit, most Korean store owners viewed African Americans as lazy and unreliable criminals or welfare queens.

This negative view of blacks was in part the cultural baggage Korean Americans had carried from South Korea. In addition to the global influence of U.S. media products in propagating white racial ideology, the American military presence in South Korea made the U.S. racial hierarchy and its attendant stereotypes implanted in Korea without any critical consideration until very recently.[2] In mono-ethnic and mono-racial Korea, white was accepted as natural and beautiful and women married to black soldiers were considered shameful.[3] For example, one Korean American said, "I grew up thinking that American meant white and whatever was not American and not white was not good" (Kim and Yu 1996, 346). Most Korean immigrants were not aware of the history and tradition of the African American struggle against racism. They did not know their immigration was made possible due to the African American civil rights movement of early the 1960s that was the catalyst for the 1965 immigration reform.

When Koreans immigrated to the U.S., the already-fixed stereotypes were further reinforced by the negative perception of African Americans in the U.S. As Toni Morrison argued, in the U.S. where the national identity and unity had been sought through racist

2) Hines Ward, a football player born to a Korean mother and an African American father and the winner of the Super Bowl MVP award in 2006, probably made the greatest contribution to bringing about the change in this regard. His success and his Korean background made Korean people rethink their prejudice and discrimination against interracial children between African American men and Korean women. Also, the growing presence in Korea of migrant workers from Southeast Asia since the late 1980s and the controversy over the discrimination against them helped to critically review Koreans' ethnocentric attitude toward other ethnic and racial groups.

3) Despite a more tolerant view of interracial marriage in Korea these days, even as late as 2002, one popular Korean TV drama, *Who Is My Love* [Nae Sarang Nugulka], was caught in a controversy over the issue of interracial marriage between an African American man and a Korean woman. In its episode aired on November 17, 2002, a Korean old woman said, after she found out that her granddaughter was dating an African American man, "Why a black guy among so many Yankees?" Her son also said, "My daughter gives me a headache [by dating a black guy]." After this episode was aired, the drama was criticized for discriminating against African Americans. On the other hand, it was argued that the drama was realistic given that, from the viewpoint of an aged grandmother, no one would say it was great if their granddaughter was dating a black man.

strategies, becoming American meant buying into "the rhetorical experience of blacks as noncitizens, already discredited outlaws" (1994, 98-99). On the streets of L.A., foreign Latinos were often perceived as native and safe, while native blacks were seen as foreign and dangerous (Miles 1994, 119). According to Sumi Cho, these stereotypes, combined with the perceived and real threats to which Korean merchants were exposed to in their work, further strained black-Korean encounter and led to the overly self-protective and paranoid actions of Soon Ja Du, a Korean grocer who shot Latasha Harlins, an African American teenage girl (1993, 199). The incidence happened in March 1991 when Soon Ja Du shot Latasha Harlins, after an argument over a $1.79 bottle of orange juice. Du accused Harlins of stealing the juice. Harlins reacted by turning her back and walking away. At this moment she was shot in the back of the neck. After a trial, Du was sentenced to four hundred hours of community service, a $500 fine, reimbursement of Harlins' funeral expenses, and five years' probation (Unger 1995, 283-84).

At the same time, Korean Americans were largely unknown in the U.S. One Korean American pointed out that "Korean life in America is mostly a caricature, because the host culture doesn't care to know about us. It's myth and misconception—Koreans as greedy, gun-happy, and exploitive of blacks" (Kim and Yu 1996, 24). Koreans were frequently mistaken as Japanese or Chinese or they were simply invisible. When Korean Americans were made visible, this often highlighted what was seen as "exotic" about them by mainstream American society. For example, according to Elaine Kim, the media coverage on Korean Americans' peace march on the third day of the riots invariably focused on the Korean musicians playing traditional Korean drums, as they "looked and sounded alien and exotic" (Kim 1993, 235).

Or, worse yet, Korean Americans were fitted into the usual negative stereotypes. In the Hollywood film Falling Down released in February 1993, they were seen as unscrupulous shopkeepers who did not give change unless something was to be purchased or tried to charge too much when the purchase was made. As if this irritating reality needed to be fixed by a white man, the white protagonist of the film trashed the Korean-owned store. This scene seemed to echo the rioters who believed that Korean Americans "had it coming" (Kim 1993, 217). These images of Korean Americans reinforced the perception of Korean Americans as callous and greedy competitors.

At the same time, Korean Americans were presented as struggling immigrants or the model minority, "bewildered by the hostile environment" where they earned a living and were exhausted from long hours of work. This was also how Soon Ja Du was portrayed in the media (Unger 1995, 284). Yet, instead of correctly conveying the reality of Korean/Asian Americans,[4] the discourse of the hard-working and successful model minority was foremost

used to discipline African Americans as it diverted attention from the racialized social structure. The discourse placed the blame for poverty and degraded living conditions on poor African Americans, not the structure, and thus justified the inequality of wealth and power in the U.S. The discourse directed the anger and frustration of African Americans toward Korean immigrants as an immediate target of the oppressive system that favored one minority over another. It also worked to discipline Asian Americans who felt forced to conform to the imposed standard. It alienated and frustrated those who could not live up to the standard and rendered invisible the differences among Asian Americans and the various socio-economic problems faced by those who were not doing well (Takaki 1998, 474-91).

III. Maintaining White Racial Order

Given this, the disturbing black-Korean conflict could not be considered apart from the hegemony of white racial discourse. It was a manifestation of undemocratic American racial culture that fueled divisiveness among nonwhite minorities, as they came to see one another through white racial discourse. Moreover, as whites have historically monopolized resources and power to determine the status of nonwhites in the U.S., this gave further impetus for divisive competition among minorities for limited resources and the whites' favor (Jankowski 1995, 93-94).

Seen from this perspective, the black-Korean conflict was like a time bomb waiting to be exploded and the 1992 conflict was its moment of explosion. In this regard, Korean Americans could be any minority working in an inner-city neighborhood. In fact, African Americans' charge against Korean merchants and the frequent eruption of boycotts against Korean-owned stores echoed their antagonism against Jewish storeowners who, before Korean Americans, owned stores in the black neighborhoods and sold to blacks but preferred not to hire them. In addition, while some of Korean Americans have moved their businesses out of the inner-city neighborhoods, this has not ended the conflict between African Americans and ethnic storeowners in this area. Similarly, there have been increasing clashes between blacks and Latinos who are conveniently lumped together as the "underclass" by the white racial order.

Despite this larger context which has perpetuated the racial conflict between blacks and whites as well as among non-white minorities, the eruption of the riots was mostly framed

4) For example, Ronald Takaki points out that the use of family incomes as a standard of Asian Americans' success is misleading, as this is often achieved through the presence of more workers in the Asian American family rather than through higher incomes (1998, 474-45).

as the black-Korean conflict arising from cultural differences, contentious daily experiences, and racial bigotry between the two groups. In the mainstream media, armed Korean men were portrayed as lawless vigilantes shooting randomly, while women were shown screaming hysterically or begging and crying in front of their ruined stores (Choy et al. 1993). The tape that showed Soon Ja Du shooting Harlins was the second-most-played video during the week of the riots. Blacks were castigated for blaming others for their poverty, while Korean American store owners were chastised for neither investing in the black community nor paying respect to black people. Thus, one Korean American, Tong S. Suhr, had to wonder "Was there any conspiracy among the…white-dominated media to pit one ethnic group against another and sit back and watch them destroy one another?" (Kim 1993, 234).

Both African Americans and Korean Americans looked like hopeless practitioners of racism in the contemporary U.S. This nicely obscured and diverted attention from the root cause of the black-Korean conflict. By interposing Korean Americans between the black-white conflict, white America could cover up its oppression of blacks and other minorities and divert any challenge to its racial hegemony. Indeed, as Elaine Kim argues, the focus on the black-Korean conflict was due to the "desire to excuse or minimize white racism by buttressing the mistaken notion that all human beings are 'naturally' racist" and to deflect Korean Americans and African Americans' attention from "the social hierarchies that give racism its destructive power" (1993, 221). Meanwhile, despite the sudden spotlight brought by the riots, the Korean Americans were as invisible as ever amid the contending images of a greedy invader and the model minority.

Thus, as blacks and Korean Americans were pitted against each other, this served to sustain the existing power structure and further highlighted the powerlessness of both groups. While casting Asian Americans as the model minority is the social construction employed to maintain the white racial order, the looting and burning of Korean-owned stores was the living reality for Korean Americans. In fact, when Korean Americans in South Central L.A. and Koreatown asked for police help, the touted model minority, along with black and Latino rioters, was ignored while the defense of the safety of wealthy white communities was prioritized. What the police did was to wish Korean store owners to have their stores insured (Choy et al. 1993). To most Korean Americans, the 1992 riots were the sober moment to fully realize what it meant to be American.

At the same time, the riots also demonstrated that the spontaneous actions of rioters lacking systematic and continued political mobilization did not and could not address the fundamental problems of the U.S. They were just signs of the deep frustration and anger of people locked into the bottom, against which Korean Americans were deployed as the "human shield to protect the real source of rage" (Kim 1992). In the meantime, hegemonic

racial order was not only secured but also reproduced and reinforced in the form of the conflict among the victims of this racial order.

IV. Conclusion

One Korean American woman recalled that she did not pay attention to the Rodney King verdict and did not think that it was serious (Kim and Yu 1996, 246-47). She probably spoke for other Korean Americans who thought the event had nothing to do with them. Yet, what ensued powerfully demonstrated how the black-white conflict was reproduced among nonwhite minorities. It showed how the existing racial ideology has fueled racist conflict among nonwhites and how this has helped the maintenance of white racial order. It thus made it clear that no one could remain as a spectator in the black-white conflict in the U.S. (Park 1996, 153).

As Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim pointed out, the real tragedy of the black-Korean conflict was that, while the social structure perpetuating African Americans' victimization remained intact, their anger led to the victimization of another minority group, Korean Americans (1999, 35). However, without a precise understanding of the broader forces which maintained and reinforced its hegemony by pitting one minority against another, this tragedy would continue and Rodney King's plea, "Can we all get along?" would only get hollow responses (Cho 1993, 196).

Obviously, it is white Americans who have to concede and share power and resources to establish a more democratic and racially tolerant society in which "the life of a child must be worth more than a $1.79 bottle of orange juice" (Chang 1994, 85). However, given the power of white racial order to divide minorities and reinforce its rule, as shown in the black-Korean conflict in 1992, this can be achieved only through a unified response among various groups who share commonalities against this order. It is the whites' racialized view of blacks that has provided the racist framework through which other nonwhite minorities have been incorporated into the U.S. (Takaki 1979). Racism for blacks means racism for any nonwhite groups including Korean Americans, and the suffering of Korean Americans ultimately means the suffering of African Americans. As one black prison inmate wrote to Elaine Kim, "Our struggle(s) are truly one and the same" (Kim 1993, 228).

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Abstract

Pitting One Minority Against Another: Black-Korean Conflict during the 1992 L.A. Riots

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This paper aims to review the black-Korean conflict during the 1992 L.A. riots as an instance to examine how conventional and new elements of the racial relations in the U.S were intertwined and how this worked to reinforce the existing racial order. The 1992 L.A. riots were triggered by the brutal police beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the ensuing acquittal of the perpetrators. This demonstrated the persistence of violent racial bigotry and the moral bankruptcy of the contemporary U.S. Despite this continuity, the 1992 riots also highlighted new developments in the U.S. racial and ethnic relations, as Korean Americans were specifically targeted for ventilating the anger and frustration of the rioters in regard to entrenched racism and the larger social structure.

Against this backdrop, the paper first examines some of the factors that led to the black-Korean conflict during the 1992 L.A. riots. It shows that the dominant structure and white racial discourse contributed to these factors, fueling divisiveness and pitting blacks and Korean Americans against each other. In this regard, conflict could have occurred among any minority groups, not necessarily between blacks and Korean Americans. It also examines how the black-Korean conflict served to sustain and reinforce the existing power structure. Thus, while the social structure perpetuating African Americans' victimization remained intact, their anger led to the victimization of another minority group, Korean Americans.

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