

---

# Putting the 'American' into 'Korean-American': the Social Identity of a Second Generation

Sang Ja Ahn

Sheffield University, United Kingdom

---

## Abstract

Very different from the first generation 'Korean immigrants', the second-generation 'Korean-Americans' retrieve the alleged culture of their ancestry and (re)create their ethnicity or 'Korean-ness'. In asserting their 'Korean-ness', members of the second-generation(s) are pursuing definitively American political and identificatory options. This ethnicity is both 'symbolic' and 'political'.

For members of the American national community, who believe in American values, it has become a national axiom to be politically and symbolically 'ethnic', or at least, to advocate ethnic diversity as constituting American nationhood. Persistent ethnic affiliation and adherence over the second generation, combined with the politicisation of ethnic groups, is the epitome of present American national identity. It is thus the American part of identity of second-generation Korean-Americans that asserts their 'Korean-ness'.

This paper examines the nature of second generation Korean-American ethnicity by reinterpreting the qualitative research undertaken by Kim and Zeon. I will be emphasising the '-American' in 'Korean-American', and considering the context of contemporary American universalism - the inclusive nature of American nationhood - as a factor which encourages ethnic identification among second generation Korean Americans

## **Introduction**

The assertion of ethnic identity in the United States needs to be differentiated from the ethnic nationalism and secessionism observed in Europe and the former Soviet Union. Analysing the ethnic revival in America in the 1960s to 1970s, Kymlicka describes it as a demand for “increased recognition and visibility within the mainstream society”, not “a repudiation of integration into the mainstream society” or a demand to construct distinct self-governing nations alongside the mainstream society (Kymlicka 1997: 245). He explains that the coincidence in time of ethnic revival in America, and nationalist movements in Europe and Quebec, does not mean that the same political process is involved. This is because ethnic nationalism is a demand to secede, as a separate nation alongside the mainstream society. On the contrary, American ethnic revival is essentially “a matter of self-identity” and “a demand for integration into the mainstream society” (Kymlicka 1997: 245). The question then arises of why American ethnic groups demand to be integrated, whereas other ethnic groups demand independence as ‘nations’. My contention is that it has something to do with the nature of American nationhood, which is characterised as ‘universal’. In other words, universalism is a part of American nationalism; one ought to be ‘American’ to assert a ‘universal’ membership.

The resurgence of ethnicity cannot to be understood unless we consider it within a social context and acknowledge the situational and flexible nature of ethnicity. Horowitz contends that, in a transitional situation, one can have more than one identity, acquiring the new identity along with the slowly regressing old identity; and one can have multiple identities “where the several identities are at different levels of generality,” such as ‘nationality’ and ‘race’ (Horowitz 1975: 118). Horowitz is correct in noting that it is possible for people to have more than one identity. This way of talking about ethnic identities derives from the way in which we conceptualise identity/ies. Jenkins (1997) theoretically solves the problem of dealing with oppositional or incompatible identities by conceptualising them as “social identity.” He insists that ethnicity should be conceptualised and theorised in the same way as social identity in general. His theory that all social collectivities are socially constructed helps us to consider the complexity of

ethnicity, race, nation, and other categories.

According to Jenkins, social identity is a practical accomplishment, made in social interaction, an ongoing dialectical processes of internal and external definition. While these two definitions are not always congruent, as Jenkins argues, “internalisation” plays a crucial role in identification. The externally imposed boundary can be internalised as positive self-identification. Thus, Jenkins’ emphasis is on the significance of external categorisation: “power and authority” in social relationships, rather than the internal identification. In this study, I would like to stress the influential power of the American ideology of political commitment and cultural pluralism, and its bearing on the production of ethnicity.

In modern society, the state has a massive impact on the life of its members. The nation-state affects not only the legal and political interests of its members but also affects their emotions, by providing them with a sense of community. The United States is distinct in this respect both ecologically and ideologically, as a nation of immigrants, and as a nation bonded by political commitment.

The ‘nation’ is often theorised into two types: the cultural nation and the political nation. The United States typically falls into the latter. The cultural nation is founded upon “seemingly objective criteria such as common heritage and language, a distinct area of settlement, religion, customs and history...”(Alter 1985: 9). On the other hand, the political nation depends on “the individual’s free will and subjective commitment to the nation” (Alter 1985: 9). The political nation stresses its universalism, to which its members, without cultural commonality, can emotionally commit. Thus, universalism can be nationalistic and particularistic. In the case of the United States, whose members come from all over the world, universalism comes to mean a tolerance toward human differences, which has culminated in the idea of cultural pluralism. Conversely, cultural pluralism has become an aspect of national ideology; and, as Jenkins asserts, “[e]veryday life is fundamentally ideological (1997: 160).” For the second-generation Korean-Americans, everyday ideology is not only at the level of their family life, but also in the wider American social life.

The significance of research on second-generation immigrants is greater than ever, because the children of the post-1965 immigrants have become a sizeable

presence in schools and are entering the labour market (Waldinger and Perlmann 1999). Researchers have tended to look at economic structures and racism as the external factors which facilitate and impede the assimilation of the second generations (Gans 1992; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Zhou 1997). I, however, draw more attention to the ideologies of multiculturalism inherent in American national identity, as the context within which the new second-generation (re)creates their identity. According to Gans, most of the researchers concerned with American immigration are insiders in ethnic background; among the researchers who applied for grants to the Social Science Research Council's Migration Division in 1997, fifty three percent were studying their own ethnic groups. They are mostly retentionist, as opposed to assimilationist (Gans 1997). This leads them to overlook the dynamics of ethnicity as an American phenomenon. In this paper, I will explore the nature of second-generation Korean-American ethnicity in the context of contemporary American universalism, emphasising the inclusive nature of American nationhood as the factor which develops ethnic identity among second-generation Korean Americans, rather than the discrimination which they suffer in American society. In other words, I will be emphasising the 'American' in 'Korean-American'. In asserting their Korean-ness, the second generations are pursuing definitively American political and identificatory options.

### **The Second-Generation Korean-American Identity**

The ethnicity with which the Americanised second generation eventually identifies is likely to be different from that of the first generation. The second generation apparently retrieves the alleged culture of their ancestry and (re)creates their ethnicity. This ethnicity will be 'symbolic' and 'political'. I intend to examine critically this kind of Korean-American ethnicity by reinterpreting the qualitative research undertaken by Myoung-Hye Kim and So-young Zeon.

In *Korean-American Identity in the Postmodern Condition: Narrative Accounts of the Politics of Identity* (1992) Kim aimed to show how Korean-Americans described and defined their identity in their own terms. Her interviewees were twenty-four Korean-American college students from Amherst College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College and the University of Massachusetts, composed of eight male students and

sixteen female students. Their ages ranged from seventeen to twenty two. She uses the term “pastiche” to describe their identity, a term which is originally used to describe the kind of postmodern art which has lost its authenticity and unique style through imitation, and has become ‘new’ through mixing styles, and decontextualising and recontextualising the past into the present. She applies this notion of pastiche to Korean-American identity in the postmodern era:

I take the term pastiche as a descriptive term for a hybridized form of identity, which “appropriates” from more than one culture, questions “authenticity,” and brings the past, i.e. the culture of origin to the present American context. In this sense, postmodern identity is potentially pastiched identity, because we live in the era of global village, world-wide cultural invasions, and ever homogenizing society accelerated by technological advances and late capitalism. With a growing intensity, we are confused about what belongs to us and what belongs to Others when traditional cultural boundaries are not longer to secure our sense of “authentic” identity. In this sense, ethnic people’s identity is the one that shows the characteristics of pastiched identity *par excellence*. (175)

Her conclusion is that Korean-Americans should assert their sameness and the difference of their ethnicity, in order to confront the meta-narratives of mainstream white society.

In *What it means to be Korean American in the Midwest: Eight Korean American College Students tell their Stories* (1994) Zeon surveyed eight undergraduate students enrolled at a large Midwestern university. Their age range was from twenty to twenty-five. This study aimed to analyse the process of Korean-Americans’ ethnic identity formation. This research both dealt with ‘1.5’<sup>1</sup> and second generation Korean-Americans, from the middle and upper-middle classes, living outside ethnic enclaves. Her analysis classifies Korean-Americans’ ethnic identity formation into four stages: “Ethnic Awareness,” “White Identification,” “Reinterpretation” (with three substages, categorised as “awakening,” “hurt and resentment”, and “reconciliation”), and “Incorporation”, as a final stage. Her conclusion is as follows:

These eight students, in sharing their lives, have revealed personal experiences that have

been unique to themselves which allowed for some exploring of common cultural awareness of Korean-Americans. These eight students left their “white” communities and were thrown into a totally different world in which they had more choices to make. It is the involvement of negotiating with different choices that brought these students to a point of searching and asking about who they are as a person and as a Korean American. The degree and intensity of seeking is different from individual to individual and their coping mechanisms are also different. (159)

Both Kim’s and Zeon’s studies elucidate the formation of Korean-American identity, but they both minimise the significant role of American values and ideology. They only acknowledge the influence of discrimination and prejudice in American society. Racism and prejudice do exist in various forms, even though they are not overt. The Americanised younger generations have not, however, actually experienced the structural pluralism or racism in their social, economic or political life, of the kind that in the past caused ethnic confinement or the development of ethnic enclaves. It is not only racism that affects Korean-American identity formation. It is also American society’s historical values, and the current trend toward cultural pluralism, that encourage the Americanised second generation to have an ‘ethnic identity.’ Min and Kim point out that ‘new second-generations’ have advantages in retaining their cultural traditions such as language and culture; firstly because of technological advances in communication, transportation and media; and secondly because of social policies emphasising cultural pluralism since 1970s (2000: 740).

I intend to explore how Korean-American identity is formed and developed in an American context and to show how the social context, and the zeitgeist in America, configure Korean-American ethnic identity. In using the secondary sources referred to the above, to examine the identity of Korean-Americans, I begin from a position which argues that:

...[S]ocial identity must be constructed as a proper subject for theorization in such a way as to allow for the inclusion of individual and collective identities within a unified analytical framework. Even the most private of identities is not imaginable as anything other than the product of a socialized consciousness and a social situation. Even the most collective

identities must in some sense exist in the awareness of individual actors. (Jenkins 1994: 219)

I will scrutinise the narratives of Korean-Americans and bring to light their socialised consciousness in the next section.

### **Being Korean-Americans in America**

The students from Zeon's study quoted below expressed their sense of similarity as Korean-Americans. Zeon analyses the process of their identity formation according to her typology. What I would like to argue, however, is that while they surely have a certain degree of common feeling or group identity as Korean-Americans, that feeling derives from their experiences of living in America.

[Grace]: I guess like coming to college and being away from my parents I've had a lot of time to myself and just time to think in general... now I just want to hang out with the people that are like me or share the same interests and not like try to conform into their ways of doing things and stuff like that I think...I think the...Korean Americans that I've met here, they can relate to the things that I'm going through, the things that growing up in America as Koreans we can talk about different parts in our lives...different things we went through...just because our family is Korean you know the way our parents are we can have fun about it, we can joke around and they'd understand what we're talking about actually and I guess there are certain things that we can talk about with them that we can't talk about with non-Koreans. (82)

[Youngcheol]: ...in high school most of my friends were Caucasian and a lot of times there were things where I felt uncomfortable like when they would come over and like foods or something simple like that and just the way sometimes my parents thought, they didn't understand but it was like calling home when I'm out with my friends and just letting them know when I was coming home, they didn't understand why but I think with my Korean American friends you know I began to get really comfortable because there was a lot of things that was just understood, you didn't have to explain, you felt a lot better because you weren't always at this uneasy state... (83)

[Min]: ...my talk with [friend] (parentheses in original) made me realize a lot of things, made me realize things that a lot of Korean Americans go through. In fact I'm sure all of them do, go through a period of denial, a period of being ashamed, and I think I was almost at the extreme of that because I refused to associate with any other Koreans who weren't Americanized [...] (117)

Second-generation Korean-Americans may deny their Korean-ness, feel more comfortable and a sense of belonging among Korean-Americans and feel different among other Americans, yet, these are their experiences as ethnic Americans, who must be allowed to be Americans, according to American national principles.

However, Korean Americans are continuously categorised according to racial stereotypes because of their physical appearance, no matter how much they are Americanised. Hurh's research into Americans' perceptions of Koreans in the United States revealed that the ethnic stereotype of Koreans as Oriental persists, while ethnic images or situational perceptions are more changeable, depending on external conditions (1994: 16). Consequently, Korean-Americans constantly confront the need to prove themselves as American. The followings are quoted from Kim's study (1992).

[William]: I understand that I can't ever be considered completely American, because of my skin color. There will always be like every single time when I meet a new person, I almost have to prove myself in a sense, because there [they] already built up stereotypes, me being Asian. Every time when I meet a new person, I have to establish identity more so, when white person or European person is already accepted. I seem to prove myself more. (126)

[Maggie]: I moved to a new house on campus, my house is like thirty percent Asians. I noticed myself at lunch and dinner, I'd sit at the Asian table, even though I didn't know anyone there. I didn't know this is Asian table or white table. But it really surprises me because I have been here all my life. I noticed this later that I tended to do that. I just ended up with these tables. If I sit down at the table that's all white, I feel like they wonder why I am not sitting at the Asian table. I think everyone expects me to do that. (125)

Analysing these two narratives, Kim argues that Korean-Americans' experiences of

racial prejudice are influential in the formation of their ethnic identity, even though overt racism has changed its form, to obscure racism. However, I wish to argue that their experiences of racism and prejudice in American life also make them assert their existence as Americans, precisely because the American universalistic ideal is believed to approve of ethnic diversity.

### **Political Ethnicity**

In terms of political strategy, some Korean-Americans positively affirm their Asian-American identity. Kim insists that Korean-Americans should construct a collective voice, forming a unity, as a political strategy at the national level, and assert the diversity within that unity at the ethnic level. She concludes that Korean-Americans should change their identity, depending on the political situation. Her conclusion is strategic rather than descriptive. My point is that the very practice of politicising ethnicity is actually part of the process of becoming American. It is the American-born and American-educated generation which is able to form such a political American identity. Kim interprets the following narratives as reactions to domination and oppression by 'whites'. I interpret them, however, as showing that these particular Korean-Americans have learned the American way of politics and the American strategy on racial politics.

[Susie]: There is not really affinity among Asian-Americans, only for political reasons, we are categorized together, but the only legitimate reason for that would be the area we came from, physical appearance which is more similar than any other minorities. It does not mean we are the same. I don't identify with other Asians, I do only in terms of discrimination factor. In terms of culture, they are just as different as others, even though we might follow a lot of same lines sometimes, like Buddhism, Confucianism, kinship and extended family. I don't identify with other Asians culturally but only politically. (153)

[Teresa]: It is important for Asians to work together, because they all had been put in one group. They all have been treated the same and looked upon as being all like and my assertion is a kind of response to that. (152)

Kim concludes that Asian-American identity is a "socially constructed identity which

opposes white domination and oppression in America (155).” She overlooks the possibility that these narratives might reflect an American inclination toward cultural pluralism, and historical American values of political participation. Being American means positive political participation. The success of the Civil Rights Movement was a lesson, that one should assert one’s rights if one wants to lead a life as an American. Korean-Americans who immigrated after 1960s, and have received their education in America, have learnt this American way of life.

Kim sees, in the following narrative of Teresa, the postmodern tendency to challenge the white’s meta-narratives. I interpret Teresa’s narrative differently: that she has learnt that being ‘ethnic’ can be the same as being ‘politically active’ in America.

[Teresa]: I guess there are two ways that identity politics is looked at. One way is when you assimilate and you realize that you are somewhat different, and you go through a certain phase, saying “Oh, I am going to start reading some books about Korean culture.” t[T]hen “Oh, it’s nice and now I know” and then go back to where you were. The other way would be identity politics, which works like “I am gay, I am woman, I am this... so I am going to join this movement and that movement” because of who you are. People who don’t join the movement or become political are then looked upon as being problems, and showing how hegemony has been imposed, like brainwashed in a lot of ways, into them thinking that they don’t have to do these things... Like Asians thinking that American culture is the best thing in the world. Like false consciousness and to show how much power has been instilled in the ways that we think so that there is no separation between the way we think and we have been taught to think. With the first kind of politics of identity you are doing nothing really. But the second one, you can find your heritage and create social changes, you have definitely to work for changes. (231)

‘Asian American’ is a categorisation invented by the government to sort out the increasing and varying ethnic demands. Espiritu explains that pan-ethnicity in the United States is in the first place the product of political and social processes, and that the creation of cultural bonds or definition follows after this. The government bureaucracies lumped diverse minority groups into the larger categories—which are blacks, Asian Americans, Hispanic and Native Americans—for their administrative convenience in the

allocation of economic and political resources. In order to respond to the demands of a number of ethnic minorities, the US government had to categorise the minorities in a simpler fashion. According to Espiritu, the collective action of members of subgroups within each category, to protect and to advance their interests, are responses to such policies (1992: 12-13). The current American zeitgeist is to categorise oneself as a cultural group, and then politicise the group in order to construct a collective voice.

Discussing the racial or pan-ethnic ethnogenesis of the 'Asian-American', Nazli Kibria (1997) points that the institutionalisation of race as a basis of access to government resources and of political mobilisation for racial minority groups after the civil rights struggles suggests that 'Asian-American' is created for a political agenda.<sup>2</sup> It is not only race or pan-ethnicity that have been politicised, however; Kibria also mentions that, "depending on the circumstances at hand, national identities may be emphasized over pan-ethnic ones or vice versa (536)."

The allocation of social resources on the basis of group identification not only mobilises political motivations, but also affects the identity of those who are involved, particularly in a society where this allocation is institutionalised. Following Jenkins' conceptualisation of identity as a social construction through internal definition and external definition, "[i]dentification and allocation are mutually and reciprocally entailed in each other (1996: 169)" and, moreover, "collective identifications are institutionalised processes (1996: 133)."

Korean-Americans, as other similar minorities, encounter many situations when it is demanded that they should describe themselves as 'Asian Americans.' Zeon overlooks how national social policy of this kind reflected in the self-identification of Americans when he reduces the following narrative to an individual process of identity formation.

[Ook]: Because in different forms that I fill out there's always that Asian American part there, so that's what I term myself so that they can understand. (65)

Nadine, below, states more clearly the importance of being political. Susie points out the difference between the political attitudes of Koreans and Americans, and asserts that

Korean-Americans should change their attitudes and adopt the American way. In their realisation of the importance of political participation, they are indebted to their American-ness.

[Nadine]: I think part of problem is that Koreans separate themselves a lot, they don't get involve[d] themselves in community, the same goes to like politics, they don't get involved so there is no one speaking on their behalf. No one says anything, so they just let it go... I think people have to be involved. I think the second generation Korean-Americans need to take different focus from the first generation Korean-Americans, they should be involved in not just Korean community, but also how the Korean community is interwoven in American society, if we are really to be considered Korean-Americans. Part of being a citizen of America is exercising your right as American. If you don't do that then, you know the blame goes more to us than others. (Kim 1992: 243)

[Susie]: Korean's political apathy has to go back to Korea,[,] t[T]hey would be killed for being politically inclined, and politically active. In America, it's so easy to say a lot of things and stay alive, that's what people have done all the time, but in Korea, there is no history of that, you are shut down for just trying to do that... It is hard to apply that in America, but that's the only way I see it happened. And it makes me angry, that Koreans are expected to stand up for those rights which are theirs in the first place. You have to define something that you shouldn't need a definition, because it should be there inherent in c[C]onstitution, equal rights etc. It makes me angry that Koreans have to change their culture and their ways and be more assertive because Koreans are looked upon as passive and non-asserting, which in many cases true. But you have to look at the context in which that happens, the context of Korean society and how that is. But that's not applicable in America, in order to gain the rights that they are entitled to have, they have to change their ways, and to be more assertive, so only way it's going to happen is not the way that I want, because I don't want to change Korean's nature, but that's the only way I guess. (Kim 1992: 246-247)

In the next quotation, T.J. mentions what he learned about ethnic politics in the United States:

[T.J.]: If you go up to the politician with hard number and say that I could influence to vote for you if you do this or that... that's what it is done in politics, especially in the States. So I think it's the most reasonable way of going about it to bring up the change in Korean community, and the only way to do this is to set up a strong bond in Korean community [...]. (Kim 1992: 245-246)

The point Kim makes is that Korean-Americans should thus construct a collective voice as a political strategy. She insists that Korean-Americans should establish an ethnic community in order to secure their position as Americans. She claims that Korean-Americans are re-inventing an ethnic identity as a political strategy, because they are losing their culture of origin. I, however, want to argue that such activity is inherently American. Americans are expected to be politically committed to the ideal nation and to change the nation in the direction of an ideal universalistic society. Korean-Americans may learn through their experiences of racism and discrimination that the American creed is merely an illusion or ideology, but they also recognise that they can, by becoming 'Korean-Americans', change the situation and thus become genuine American.

### **Symbolic Ethnicity**

There is another American social context that encourages Korean-Americans to retain their ethnic identity. Since American nationalism is universalistic in principle, it 'should' tolerate and value the diversity of its member's national or ethnic origins. In order to celebrate diversity and sustain the national bond, it encourages 'symbolic ethnicity,' ethnicity which does not threaten the American way of life. "Symbolic Ethnicity" was first theorised in Herbert Gans' article, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America." He points that when ethnic identity loses its instrumental function in people's lives, and ceases to be a cause of economic and political conflict, ethnicity takes on an expressive and abstract form:

Ethnic symbols are frequently individual cultural practices which are taken from older ethnic culture; they are 'abstracted' from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it. And if a label is useful to describe the

third generation's pursuit of identity, I would propose the term symbolic ethnicity. ...Symbolic ethnicity can be expressed in a myriad of ways, but above all, I suspect, it is characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior. (Gans 1979: 9)

This type of ethnicity can be discerned among the suburban, middle-class, later generations of European ancestry.

The Korean-American second generation also has such symbolic ethnicity. James tells how he feels about Korean culture in spite of the fact that he does not even speak Korean:

[James]: I love Korean culture so much, it's not like I don't want to know about it. Some people don't care...some Koreans live here and they are like "Oh, Korean culture is disgusting, it's so sexist, and racist, etc." But I love Korean culture. So I think in that respect I can still be Korean-American, even though I can't speak Korean and don't know much about Korean culture. I am very proud to be Korean, I like my Korean friends, they help me, they teach me things, they bring me closer to the culture that I never knew, because I lived here all my life. But I also realized how American I am. I really can't help it. My feeling American isn't any less than being Korean. I don't feel bad, but I see the difference. Most of the time, I accept the fact I am American. I have no problem. I can say "Yah, I am American." Having Korean identity means for me that just love for everything that I come from. That doesn't mean just Korea, the country I mean. I come from my parents, its culture, and the friends who have Korean background. That is part of identity what have influenced me, made me so interested in my background. It's more of your attitude toward it than what you can actually do. (Kim 1992: 187-188)

On the basis of this narrative, Kim correctly points out that one can consciously maintain an ethnic identity, regardless of one's actual cultural behaviour: "being Korean is a conscious assertion of one's self-identity rather than being blindly involved in Korean customs and practices without questioning and linking it to their sense of identity (187)." She describes James's identity as, "a neutral practice of pastiche," which does not cause conflict between his Korean-ness and his American-ness. She also notes:

Thus, his [James's] understanding of Korean culture is rather past-oriented than in the present context. Because he acquires his knowledge of Korean culture through his parents, his notion of Korean culture somehow leaps into the present American cultural context. In this sense, there is a spatial collapse between Korean culture and American culture, especially when Korean culture is brought to American cultural scene as well as temporal disruption between the past and the present within James's field of identity which disorients us from traditional boundaries. (189-190)

I have reservations about Kim's observation, that James's Korean identity comes from the past and disrupted space. James's expression of his Korean-ness sounds to me neither nostalgic nor local. According to Kim's Interviewee Profile, James emigrated to America at the age of one and "[s]ince he grew up in a predominantly white neighbourhood, he thinks most like white Americans. But as he met other Koreans in college, he became interested in Korean culture and Korean-American identity (263)." It was not until college that James acquired his explicit Korean identity. I see in James an expression of the present context of American society, that encourages James to love and be proud of the culture of his ancestry. Especially American universities have provided the cosmopolitan environment since 1970s, as seen in the establishment of the courses on ethnic studies and organisations for minority groups. Such social context surely affects people's identity formation at the individual level. Min and Park (1999) and Kibria (1999) also acknowledge such factors in analysing their empirical research on second-generation Korean Americans. As revealed in Koh's study of the generation difference, first-generation Korean immigrants show "little" pride in the Korean group, while the 1.5 and second generations expresses "moderate" to "extreme" pride in their group (Koh 1994). Taking pride in one's ethnic culture characterises the American-educated generation.

The expectation that every American person has a symbolic ethnic identity is institutionalised in elementary school. Second-generation Korean-Americans feel the institutional pressure to maintain their ethnic ancestry. Here are the examples:

[Anne]: Well just sometimes little kids would make fun of me or sometimes it was different

that like teachers would treat me different maybe give me special attention sometimes but I would sometimes feel uncomfortable when it was brought up that I was like, if somebody would say well, we're talking about like different cultures okay now Anne why don't you tell me about... then that would separate me from everyone else and I didn't want that at that age. (Zeon 1994: 76)

[Teresa]: [...] Like in school, I was really angry when they made me teach this new Korean kid geometry, triangle, square, etc I don't know those words in Korean. I felt angry towards him, because I tried to do my best to fit in and to show that I am speaking English. Because we are made feel so uncomfortable, we don't fit in. [...] (Kim 1992: 195)

Notwithstanding the teacher's positive attitude toward cultural diversity in the classroom, these students felt uncomfortable at being differentiated and having imposed on them what they saw as a wrong categorisation and expectation.

Kim and Zeon observed the ambiguity of their interviewees' identifications, but overlooked the fact that the expectation in American society that everyone should have an ethnic identity, at the same time as an American identity, is the very American context in which Korean-American ethnic identity is configured. It is so obvious that Americans are affected by such institutional attitudes that some people are anxious about and criticised this tendency. Recognising the institutional pressure on the diversification of Americans, Glazer argues:

...we should not support the creation of sharp differences... That is not the reality of U.S. society, for here all groups are to some variable extent acculturated and assimilated. ...The society should be open to those who have no interest in a background defined by their decent and have no desire to maintain it or make claims for it; but it should be also be open to those who do take an interest in their background and wish to maintain it and instil it in their children. The public agencies should take a position toward ethnic inheritance that I would describe as benign neutrality. (Glazer 1983: 123-124)

His view derives from the liberal assumption that sustaining ethnic attachment depends on individual choice and the expectation that ethnic groups are to assimilate to the

dominant culture in good time. However, as we have seen, the availability of the “ethnic option” for all Americans is the ultimate goal of a pluralist society even though it is not the reality for the racial minorities (Waters 1990: 167). It is the expectation of American society, based on a universalistic attitude, and the pressures of cultural pluralism, that promote, and sometimes insist on, symbolic ethnicity for all. Having an ethnic identity is inherent in current American society.

## **Conclusion**

The American national context is particularly unique in that it has been historically conscious of ethnic relations. Bonded by political principles, believing in their universal nationhood, Americans have historically been attempting to improve the social situation and paradigm of the ideal nation. This has been achieved by immigrants and racial minorities who wished, believed themselves, and claimed to be American. The idea of cultural pluralism has culminated in the core idea of universalistic American nationalism.

Having a Korean-American ethnic identity is part of being American because being American denotes having a positive political attitude, and having a symbolic ethnicity. Fuchs correctly points to the political relevance of American ethnicity:

Political principles remained the core of national community. The new immigrants entered a process of ethnic-Americanization through participation in the political system, and, in so doing, established even more clearly the American civic culture as a basis of American unity. (1990: 6)

His suggestion is that now, in such a politically-oriented nation, “the biggest domestic challenge to those who believe in equal rights lay in enhancing opportunity for those children born into the underclass (493).

Ethnicity is not only a political system; the value of ethnic pluralism has come to signify the righteousness of American nationhood. Waters argues how symbolic identity fits American values:

Having an ethnic identity is something that makes you both special and simultaneously part of a community. It is something that comes to you involuntarily through heredity, and at the same time it is a personal choice. And it allows you to express your individuality in a way that does not make you stand out as in any way different from all kinds of other people. In short, symbolic ethnic identity is the answer to a dilemma that has deep roots in American culture. (1990: 150)

For the members of the American national community, who believe in American values, it has become a national axiom to be politically and symbolically ethnic, or at least, to advocate ethnic diversity as constituting nationhood. Persistent ethnic adherence over the second generation, and the politicisation of ethnic groups, have their roots in American values, in American universalistic nationalism. The American discourse of cultural pluralism does not only celebrate the ethnic diversity or symbolic ethnicity, but also imposes social categorisation on all Americans, upholding, as it does so, universalism. The quest for a universal modern nation is the epitome of present American national identity. It is the American part of the identity of second generation Korean-Americans that asserts their ethnicity as Koreans.

This paper has attempted to put the 'American' into 'Korean-American'. It is often overlooked that American universalism is at the same time distinctively 'American', and even perhaps nationalistic. It is also often overlooked that 'Americanness' does not only affect second-generation identity as an exclusive nativism, but also as a national centripetal force. It is necessary to consider the force of this 'American' national identity, when 'Korean-American' identity is examined.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the study of post-1965 immigrants, the definition of the second generation varies because many of their children are foreign-born, and not necessarily US-born. In academic literature, the definition is given according to the age of the immigration. Among the Korean American community, "1.5 generation" or "*Il-chom ose*" is the term which has been used widely in daily life to describe the foreign-born generation who immigrated to the United States when they

---

were young, before adolescence or adulthood. Thus they are different from the second generation who were born in the U.S. but also different from the first generation immigrants. I have not stressed the difference between the 1.5 and the second generation because both are educated in the U.S. (because the foreign-born samples immigrated at a very early age).

<sup>2</sup> Kibria's purpose in this article is to examine the development of Asian-American identities from the angle of intermarriage, not from the angle of politicisation. Kibria's study revealed that the second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans' ethnic identity, as Chinese or Korean, was far more significant than their identity as "Asian-American" In another research on the second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans (1999), Kibria concluded that "Asian American" is an externally imposed category so that most of them rejected it as a natural basis of identity.

---

## References

- Alter, Peter. (1985) *Nationalism*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. (1992) *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1979) 'Symbolic ethnicity: The future of ethnic groups and cultures in America', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2(3): 1-20
- (1992) 'Second-generation decline: Scenarios for the economic and ethnic futures of the Post-1965 American immigrants', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15(2): 173-192
- (1997) 'Toward a reconciliation of "assimilation" and "pluralism": the interplay of acculturation and ethnic retention', *International Migration Review*, 31(4): 875-892
- Glazer, Nathan. (1983) *Ethnic Dilemmas: 1964-1982*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Fuchs, Lawrence H. (1990) *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture*, Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Hong Joann and Pyong Gap Min. (1999) 'Ethnic Attachment among second generation Korean adolescents', *Amerasia Journal*, 25(1): 165-180
- Horowitz, Donald L. (1975) 'Ethnic identity', in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (Eds), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 111-140
- Hurh, Won Moo. (1994) 'Majority Americans' perception of Koreans in the United States:

- 
- Implications of ethnic images and stereotypes', in Ho-Youn Kwon (Ed), *Korean Americans: Conflict and Harmony*, Chicago: Covenant Publications, 3-22
- (1998) *The Korean Americans*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.
- Jenkins, Richard. (1994) 'Rethinking ethnicity: Identity, categorisation and power', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 17(2): 197-223
- (1996) *Social Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- (1997) *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, London: SAGE Publications.
- Kibria, Nazli. (1997) 'The Construction of "Asian American": Reflections on intermarriage and ethnic identity among second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2(3): 523-544
- (1999) 'College and notions of "Asian American": Second generation Chinese and Korean Americans negotiate race and identity', *Amerasia Journal*, 25(1): 29-52
- Kim, Myoung-Hye (1992) *Korean-American Identity in the Postmodern Condition: Narrative Accounts of the Politics of Identity*, Michigan: University Microfilms International.
- Koh, Tong-He. (1994) 'Ethnic identity in first, 1.5, and second generation Korean-Americans: An exploratory study', in Ho-Youn Kwon (Ed), *Korean Americans: Conflict and Harmony*, Chicago: Covenant Publications, 43-54
- Kymlicka, Will. (1997) 'Ethnicity in the USA', in Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex (Eds), *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 229-247
- Min, Pyong Gap and Kyeyoung Park. (1999) 'Second generation Asian Americans' ethnic identity', *Amerasia Journal*, 25(1)
- and Rose Kim. (2000) 'Formation of ethnic and racial identities: narratives by young Asian-American professionals', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23(4): 735-760
- Portes, Alejandro and Rubén G. Rumbaut. (1996) 'Growing up American: The new second generation', *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. Second Edition. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 232-268
- Waldinger, Roger, and Joel Perlmann. (1999) 'Second-generations: Past, present, future.' in Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Eds), *Sociology for the Twenty-first Century: Continuities and Cutting Edges*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 240-257
- Waters, Mary C. (1990) *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zeon, So-young. (1994) *What it means to be Korean American in the Midwest: Eight Korean*

---

*American College Students tell their stories*, Michigan: University Microfilms International.

Zhou, Min. (1997) 'Segmented assimilation: Issues, controversies, and recent research on the new second generation', *International Migration Review*. 3(4): 975-1008

---

Sang Ja Ahn is a graduate of the University of Kobe, Japan, and is presently a research student in the Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield. During 2000-2001 she is undertaking field research in California, looking at the politics and meaning of second-generation Korean-American identity.

---

© Sheffield Online Papers in Social Research (ShOP)

ISSN: 1470-0689

[[Back to top](#)]