

Chapter 5



The Third Wave: Post–1965 Korean Immigrants

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Over the last few decades, Korean Americans have been one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. By the latter half of the 1970s, as many as 30,000 Koreans were immigrating annually to the United States, and this number increased to 35,000 per year by the late 1980s.¹ In the 1980s, South Korea emerged as the third largest immigrant-sending country, after Mexico and the Philippines.² By 2010 there were about 1.3 million Koreans living in the United States.

Given the restrictive nature of pre–WWII immigration policies, this dramatic increase in the Korean American population could be puzzling. The Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907–1908 between Japan and the United States cast Koreans into an exclusionary immigrant category. Korean migration was further restricted by subsequent U.S. immigration policies such as the Immigration Act of 1917, which restricted Asian migration by establishing a “barred zone,” or a so-called Asia Pacific triangle. More importantly, the Immigration Act of 1924 imposed national-origin quotas, which officially institutionalized prevailing anti-immigration sentiment and halted migration from Asia. The United States extended the immigrant racism to its domestic policies in which federal, state, and local laws prevented Asians who were already living in the United States from becoming naturalized citizens, owning land, and intermarrying with whites.³

Given this history, how have Korean immigrants become one of the fastest growing populations in America today? Particularly, what was happening in the United States and South Korea that led to this demographic transformation? How has the Korean community changed since the 1960s—a rocky decade in American history that eventually reopened the gate to Korean immigrants? With the previous restrictive immigration laws in mind, this chapter answers these questions.

Leading Up to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ushered in a new era for Korean immigrants who were searching for a better life in the United States. Dramatically shifting decades of systematic exclusion, the legislation fundamentally transformed the social, demographic, and economic fabric of America. As with previous historical moments, U.S. racial issues worked in conjunction with U.S. international relations with other sending countries to bring about this important change in immigration policy. What was happening in America that led to the reopening of its doors to a large number of Korean immigrants?

First, the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States marked the era of the civil rights movement. Civil rights activists vigorously fought against racial discrimination and segregation, waking up the moral conscience of America. White progressives and other racial minorities later joined this African American–led fight against racial inequalities. Starting with the Supreme Court’s landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed school segregation, various laws such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were passed in an attempt to end institutional racism in the United States. This drive for racial justice created a political climate that led to the elimination of racist immigration policies. Equality for all meant equality for immigrants who sought better lives in America.

Second, the Cold War also facilitated the revision of racist immigration laws. Emerging as a global superpower following World War II, the United States adopted policies intended to ensure U.S. dominance over the world and promoted its image as the leader of democracy. When the United States entered the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the United States was even more pressured to pass immigration policies congruent with its position as the leader of the free world. As such, Cold War liberals advocated for the repeal of the racially motivated 1924 Immigration Act as an important first step in reflecting the new international position of the United States. It was in this context that the United States tried to adopt an immigration policy that “welcomed” immigrants from all nations, regardless of their race and nationalities.⁴

Against the backdrop of these social changes, the United States first passed the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, which maintained both restrictive and progressive elements. The 1952 law ended Japanese and Korean immigrant exclusion, making it consistent with recent repeals of Chinese, Indian, and Filipino immigrant exclusion. With its political interests in postwar Asia, lawmakers attempted to distinguish “good (loyal) Asians” from “bad” (Communist) Asians. While South Koreans fell under the category of “good” Asians, the law did not entirely remove the Asian quota. Only 100 immigrants per nation within the Asia-Pacific triangle were allowed to enter the United States, with a ceiling of 2,000 for the entire region consisting of all Asian countries and the Pacific Islands.⁵

It was not until 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act that the racist quota was removed. Under this legislation, Asian token quotas significantly increased, with the United States allowing a maximum of 20,000 immigrants per country from the eastern hemisphere, with a ceiling of 170,000 from the entire region. In addition, the legislation created seven preference categories under which immigration officials used to allocate visas: 1) unmarried adults of U.S. citizens; 2) spouses and unmarried children of permanent residents; 3) professionals, scientists, and artists of exceptional ability; 4) married children whose parents are American citizens; 5) siblings (and their spouses and children) of adult citizens; 6) skilled or unskilled workers who are in short supply; and 7) political refugees. Exempted from this quota were immediate family members of U.S. citizens such as

spouses, children under the age of 18, and parents. With the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the stage was set for a sustained increase in the Korean American population.⁶

To be clear, the primary purpose of the legislation was family reunification. The preference system allocated 74 percent of its available visas to family members of U.S. citizens and permanent residents, while only 20 percent of the visas were allotted to the two occupational preference categories.⁷ However, the legislation was not expected to produce a drastic change in the number of Asian immigrants. By 1965 the total population of Asians equaled half of one percent, effectively making only a small number of Asian American citizens qualified to bring their family members to the United States.⁸ Due to this reason, U.S. officials thought that most of the immigrants would come from Europe. This expectation, however, proved completely wrong. First, most European immigrants came to the America before the 1920s, and therefore did not have many immediate family members seeking visas to the United States. Second, as with the United States, Europe had undergone a post-World War II economic boom, leaving little reason for Europeans to seek better lives elsewhere.

Unable to take advantage of the legislative family provision, many Koreans initially entered the United States through the third and sixth preference categories, which sought to recruit professionals and skilled workers from overseas. For example, in 1969, 23.2 percent of Korean immigrants used the occupational categories to obtain visas. An additional 11.6 percent entered the United States as immigrant investors in the same year.⁹ Consequently, despite its emphasis on family reunification, the United States gradually shifted its immigration policy from a race-based approach to a class-based method for selecting migrants from Asia. Because many immigrants did not have family members in America, only those with “desirable” skills were granted residency.

The Revised Occupational Category and a Bifurcated Labor Market

Along with the sharp change in U.S. immigration policy that occurred in 1965, a variety of other conditions following World War II also served to influence an increase in Korean immigration. First, as the space race with the Soviet Union was escalating, immigration had become a major role in beating the Soviets. By the mid 1950s, the United States had fewer students graduating from the fields of science and engineering in comparison to the Soviet Union.¹⁰ The launching of Sputnik in 1957 clearly demonstrated the Soviets’ superior scientific technology, and Congress, alarmed at the prospect of a labor shortage, consequently revised its occupational preference system to recruit immigrants from technical fields such as science and engineering.

Second, the United States was undergoing an economic transition that required high-skilled professionals from abroad. Following World War II, the United States needed health practitioners as a result of the proliferation of both private health insurance and public health coverage.¹¹ Moreover, America and other developed nations started moving their manufacturing industries to less developed countries, including Asia, to take advantage of lower labor costs. From 1850 to 1996, American manufacturing employment drastically fell from over one third of the labor force to less than 15 percent.¹² With the downsizing of manufacturing jobs, the U.S. labor market was now bifurcated between low-wage menial jobs and high-paying service jobs, which required technical and professional skills.¹³

With these changes, the initial third wave of Korean immigrants played a major role in meeting U.S. needs. These immigrants were mostly medical professionals, scientists, and engineers who entered the United States under the third preference category. For example, between 1953 and 1984, the majority of graduates from one of the most prestigious medical colleges in Korea came to the United States to practice.¹⁴ By 1974 Koreans comprised one third of the nursing professionals in the United States.¹⁵ In addition to these highly educated professionals, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 also enabled many Koreans living abroad, in areas such as West Germany, the Middle East, South America, Canada, and Japan, to remigrate to the United States.¹⁶

Class background served as the most visible difference of post-1965 Korean immigration in comparison to earlier waves. Because many immigrants came under the occupational preference category, they were highly educated, middle class, and urbanized, with nearly half of them being Christians.¹⁷ And by far, they were young. Over 90 percent of Korean immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1966 and 1975 were under the age of 39.¹⁸

While Koreans remain largely middle class, the demography of Korean American communities has slowly changed, starting from the late 1970s. In 1976 President Ford signed the 1976 Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, which tightened entry requirements for immigrant professionals, especially doctors and nurses. Intense lobbying by the American Medical Association facilitated the creation of the new provision that required immigrant professionals to find employers before migration to the United States. In addition, Korean professionals seeking entry under the third preference category now had to pass examination and be recertified.

As a result, a greater proportion of immigrants used their family ties to arrive to the United States. By the late 1970s, more Korean Americans had acquired permanent residency and become citizens, enabling more individuals to bring their poorer family members from Korea on family reunification grounds. By 1981, 92 percent of Koreans entered through this family reunification provision.¹⁹ This trend subsequently lowered the median family income of Korean Americans by the 1990s.²⁰

Leaving South Korea

In South Korea, post-1965 immigration was clearly shaped by a number of social, political, and economic changes taking place in the country following the Korean War. An overview of South Korea's transformation demonstrates the critical role that these structural factors and policy changes had on post-1965 Korean immigration.

Following the Korean War, South Korea experienced a long period of political instability. In April 1961, the student-led uprising known as the April 19 Movement successfully forced Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea, out of office. But the corruption of Rhee's presidency had created difficulties for the next figurehead president to exercise power. Many college students organized massive demonstrations and consistently demanded political reforms. In the midst of this political dislocation, Major General Chung Hee Park led a military coup and consequently took control of the government. In June 1961, Park created the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) to monitor all counterforces, both international and domestic. KCIA agents also used their powers to detain and arrest those who were suspected of antigovernment sentiments.

Authoritarianism characterized Park's government. During his military dictatorship, the Korean government controlled almost every aspect of life, ranging from consumption to reproduction.²¹ Curfews were strictly enforced, and the political right to criticize the government was severely restricted. Park exploited the fear of communism to justify his interventionist state. As a result, being fearful of both their own government and Communist invasions from the north, many South Koreans looked for stable middle-class lives in the United States. Because the South Korean intelligentsia was especially disgruntled with the government's authoritarian policies, post-1965 Korean immigrants included many professionals and students with antigovernment sentiments.²²

Changing economic conditions in South Korea also encouraged the migration of highly educated professionals. Under Park's leadership from 1961 to 1979, South Korea drastically increased its manufacturing and export capacity, ultimately moving from being one of the poorest countries in the world in 1950 to the position of an "upper-middle income level" country by the late 1980s.²³ Despite this rapid economic growth, the number of white-collar jobs did not match the number of highly educated Koreans. More than one out of every four males with college degrees was unable to utilize his education to find a professional or managerial job.²⁴ This fierce competition not only spurred Koreans to seek better employment opportunities outside of Korea, but it also pushed the South Korean government to arrange various programs to send its professionals abroad. In this context, the United States became a preferred destination for Korean immigrants, as the annual income for an average American was at least ten times higher than that of the average South Korean in the 1980s.²⁵

Finally, in addition to economic and political changes, cultural influence or "American fever" represented a third stimulus for Korean immigration.²⁶ Between World War II and the Cold War, the United States directly intervened in Korean affairs to realize its global domination over Japan, and later over the Soviet Union and China. As a foundation to its imperial expansion and domination, the United States "liberated" Korea from Japan in 1945 and immediately secured several Japanese colonial institutions.²⁷ Subsequent conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States brought massive numbers of U.S. military personnel to South Korea. And when the U.S. military arrived, they also brought U.S. culture to South Korea.²⁸ In the memories of many Koreans, America and its military personnel represented the nation's power, wealth, and prosperity. The U.S. presence left permanent marks on virtually all parts of South Korea, and became a powerful impetus for South Korea's "brain drain" after 1965.

Since the 1980s, however, many wealthy Koreans have had incentives to remain in Korea instead of leaving their homeland. The restructured capitalistic economy in the late 1970s improved the lives of upper-middle-class Koreans. In addition, the South Korean government introduced a law in 1975 that restricted the emigration of large property holders and high-ranking military personnel. As a result, these changes in emigration laws and the widening income inequality in South Korea shifted the demography of Korean Americans. Today, while wealthy Koreans still immigrate to the United States for business purposes, a greater proportion from lower-income groups uses their kinship ties to enter the United States.

Upon Arriving

Outside of Korea, the Korean communities in Los Angeles (300,047) and New York (201,393) are, respectively, home to the largest and second largest Korean immigrant populations in the world.



President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the immigration reform bill of 1965. Source: Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum.



Chung Hee Park and the Military Coup of May 16, 1961. Source: Overseas Koreans Foundation.



At the age of 53, Bong Dang Park immigrated to the U.S. in 1974. Her husband Yong Chang Park arrived in 1976.

Currently, over 40 percent of Korean Americans reside on the U.S. West Coast, while in the South, the Korean American population has grown at a remarkable rate of 46 percent between 1990 and 2000, with Georgia representing the fastest-growing Korean community in the United States.²⁹ To be clear, the wide suburbanization of Korean Americans today is an important feature that was unseen in the past. However, residential patterns reflect the class polarization of the Korean American community. Those who move directly into suburbs are professionals, while many family-sponsored immigrants, who come to America with far fewer resources and less capital, still settle in immigrant enclaves.

Unable to transfer their high levels of education into favorable occupational positions in the United States, Korean immigrants have changed the landscape of many cities by opening small businesses. Around the time Korean immigrants began arriving in America in greater numbers, opportunities for self-employment increased as the children of Jewish immigrants started transitioning from their small family businesses to mainstream white-collar occupations.³⁰

With these opportunities, many Korean immigrants took advantage of their middle-class backgrounds and ethnic resources and opened small businesses, eventually becoming one of the ethnic groups with the highest rate of self-employment in the United States. The self-employment rate of Korean immigrants reached 18 percent in the 1980s, 26.5 percent in 1990, and 23.4 in 2000.³¹ In American cities such as Los Angeles and New York, Korean immigrants can be found on almost every street corner running dry cleaners, nail salons, greengroceries, liquor stores, and flower shops.

More importantly, the nature of ethnic niches, dominated by earlier Korean arrivals, is particularly important when examining the ways in which post-1965 immigrants found jobs through the help of their co-ethnic community networks.³² Though ethnic communities historically resulted from racial and social barriers, Korean Americans' recent strong networks and ethnic economy continuously promoted social mobility for post-1965 immigrants and their children. Given that Korean immigrants presently

occupy the retail niches of greengroceries and liquor stores in inner cities, there exists a higher likelihood that new Korean immigrants can be channeled into these businesses. On the other hand, however, an increasing number of second-generation Koreans have also entered mainstream professional jobs. Whether this trend will change the self-employment rate of Korean Americans largely depends on the shifting policies of the United States and South Korea. What remains clear is that Korean immigrants are not passive victims uniformly reacting to the larger structural force. Rather, they actively employ specific strategies and create ethnic resources to change the world around them.

Study Questions

1. How were the McCarran-Walter Act and Immigration and Nationality Act markedly different from how the United States had historically regulated immigration?
2. Post-1965, what were “push” factors that may have influenced Koreans to emigrate? What were some of the “pull factors?”
3. At the beginning of the third wave of Korean immigration, from what social demographics did most of the Korean immigrants come? How did the immigrant demographics change over time?

Endnotes

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