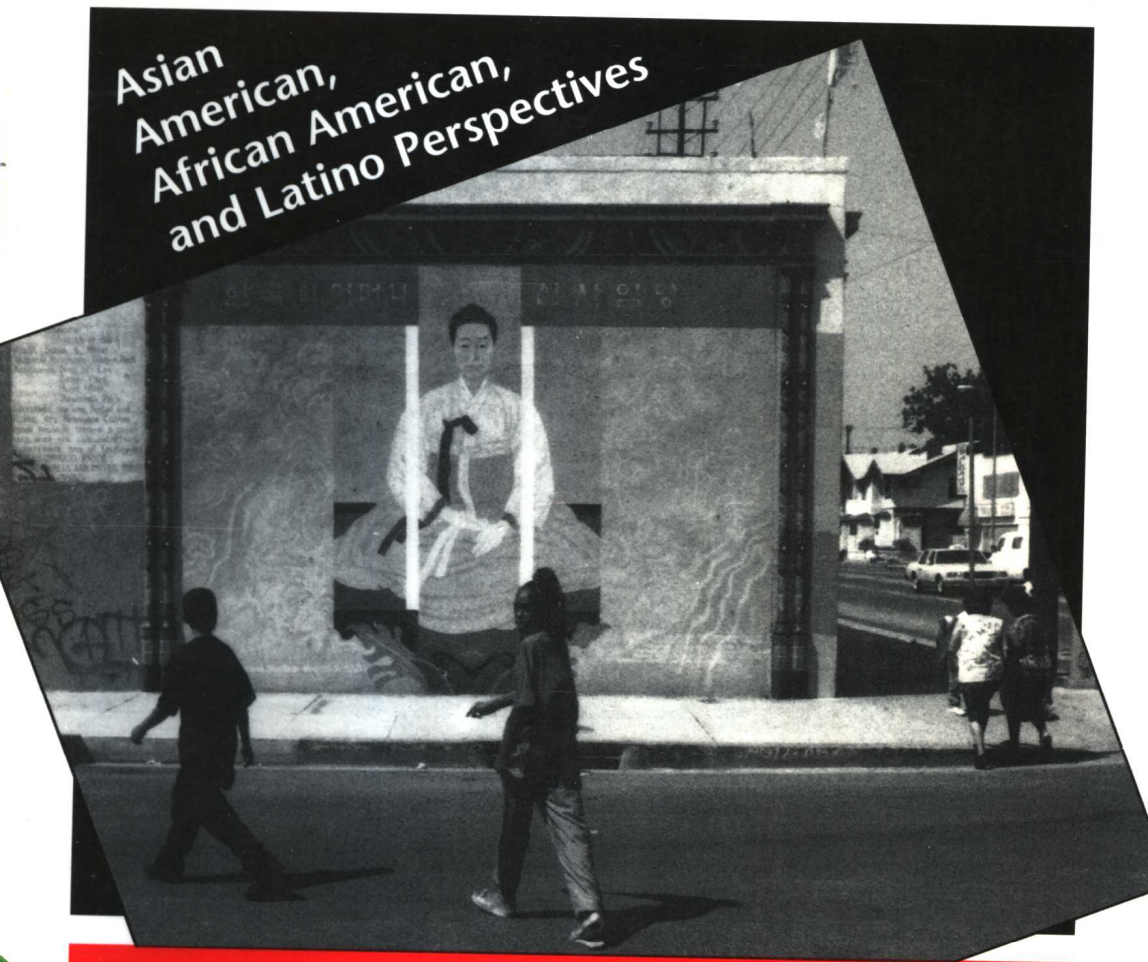


Los Angeles— Struggles toward Multiethnic Community

Asian
American,
African American,
and Latino Perspectives



Edited by
Edward T. Chang and Russell C. Leong

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Cover photograph by Eugene Ahn: At Western and 15th in Los Angeles, schoolchildren pass the mural of Madame Shin-sa-im-dang (1504-51), a poet and painter of the Yi Dynasty who in Korea today symbolizes the talented, beautiful, accomplished woman and virtuous wife and mother.

Preface

The Making of “Los Angeles—Struggles toward Multiethnic Community”

RUSSELL C. LEONG

In the City of Angels, the fire and smoke had not yet begun. Three years prior to the L.A. uprising, Edward Chang and I were grabbing a quick meal in a fast food restaurant in the heart of Koreatown in Los Angeles. The family-run Korean eatery was located in a brand-new indoor mall near Western and Olympic avenues. Inside the mall we could see Koreans, but—with the exception of one strolling couple—African Americans were noticeably absent. If one looked carefully, Latino men were present, usually lifting, cutting, or bagging in the supermarket or tucked behind counters in the restaurant kitchens. Partly because of their height and dark hair, which are similar in Asians, the Latinos did not stand out. Yet, we could not take their “blending” for granted; indeed, growing numbers of Asians and Latinos especially in Los Angeles were changing the complexion of race relations, which could no longer be defined as Black and White.

As we ate our noodles and *kim chee*, Edward and I talked about the 1990 Red Apple Grocery boycott in Brooklyn, New York, and about the economic conflicts and racial tensions that were bound to escalate in South Central Los Angeles. Previously all-Black neighborhoods were now predominately Latino; Korean-owned stores had replaced Jewish-owned ones in the same communities. Edward, a Korean American sociologist

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and civil rights activist, and myself, a Chinese American poet and editor, from our different vantage points, could see the racial clock ticking. The broad face of the clock was white, but the moving hands, numbers, and hours were black. But where did the Asians and Latinos fit in this timely scheme of things?

We concluded that one key to building multiethnic community was through education—teaching our own communities about one another: Asian, Latino, African American. We knew we had a vehicle for education in the *Amerasia Journal*, the national interdisciplinary publication of UCLA's Asian American Studies Center, with its editorial board and dedicated staff. We began to contact individuals who we knew were committed to analyzing race and ethnic relations in this city and in the nation and who were not afraid to tackle their controversial and contradictory aspects. But the Rodney King case, the Latasha Harlins killing, and the L.A. uprising occurred as we were putting together a special issue of the journal, and the articles had to be constantly revised during the editing process. Ella Stewart completed her study of communication patterns between Korean and African Americans before the uprising, for example, and then spent many months revising it to reflect conditions after the crisis.

The present volume, based upon this 1993 special issue of *Amerasia Journal*, focuses on race and ethnic relations in Los Angeles as they have emerged from the uprising and as they exist in the broader national picture. The uprising revealed that radical approaches are needed to address structured social, economic, and political inequality and pressing issues of race and representation in the literature, media, and culture.

Our goal for this volume was to gather a variety of academic and journalistic perspectives and commentary, as well as creative and literary approaches to building multiethnic community. Scholarly essays include "Jewish and Korean Merchants in African American Neighborhoods," by Edward Chang; "Communication between African Americans and Korean Americans: Before and After the Los Angeles Riots," by Ella Stewart; "Asian Americans and Latinos in San Gabriel Valley, California," by Leland Saito; "The South Central Los Angeles Eruption: A Latino Perspective," by Armando Navarro; "Race, Class, Conflict and Empowerment: On Ice Cube's Black Korea," by Jeff Chang, and "Which Side Are You On?" by Arvli Ward. Commentaries by Asian and African American writers feature Larry Aubry, Angela E. Oh, Sharon Park, Amy Uyematsu, Erich Nakano, Walter Lew, and Miriam Ching Louie.

A special feature of this collection is a section entitled "Seoul to Soul" that showcases literary writings by African and Asian American writers and artists from Los Angeles, including Mari Sunaida, Ko Won, Wanda

Coleman, Mellonee Houston, Sae Lee, Nat Jones, Arjuna, Chungmi Kim, and Lynn Manning. "Seoul to Soul" was based on the first reading by Black and Korean writers held in Los Angeles, which took place before the L.A. uprising.

Los Angeles has emerged as a focal point for social scientists as they develop new ideas about race relations, questioning previous theories and notions of the American melting pot and of a pluralistic society. We hope that *Los Angeles—Struggles toward Multiethnic Community* opens and stimulates the dialogue among groups that previously were speaking in limited ways with one another, and that it will encourage us to examine our own communities, wherever we may live in the United States, in fresh, critical, and constructive ways.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge each author's vital contribution that made this multiethnic collection possible: Ella Stewart, Leland Saito, Armando Navarro, Jeff Chang, Arvli Ward, Mari Sunaida, Ko Won, Wanda Coleman, Mellonee R. Houston, Sae Lee, Nat Jones, Arjuna, Chungmi Kim, Lynn Manning, Larry Aubry, Angela E. Oh, Sharon Park, Amy Uyematsu, Erich Nakano, Walter Lew, and Miriam Ching Yoon Louie. We thank the UCLA Asian American Studies Center and its director, Don T. Nakanishi, for their support. *Amerasia Journal* staff members who contributed to the editing and proofreading of the journal included Glenn Omatsu, labor activist and associate editor of *Amerasia Journal*; Mary Kao, production and design; and Jean Pang Yip, business manager and proofreader. Eugene Ahn provided the cover image and photographs for the issue.

Los Angeles—
**Struggles
toward
Multiethnic
Community**



PHOTO ON PREVIOUS PAGE:

Children walking home
from school, Los Angeles,

August 1993,

Western Avenue

and 15th Street.

Notations found

on mural: (title)

Madame Shin-sa-im-dang

(1504-1551), (artist)

Sonia S. Hahn.

Madame Shin-sa-im-dang

was the noted poetess,

painter and mother

of the Yi Dynasty's

famous scholar Yi Yul-Gok.

Today she symbolizes

the talented, beautiful,

and highly accomplished

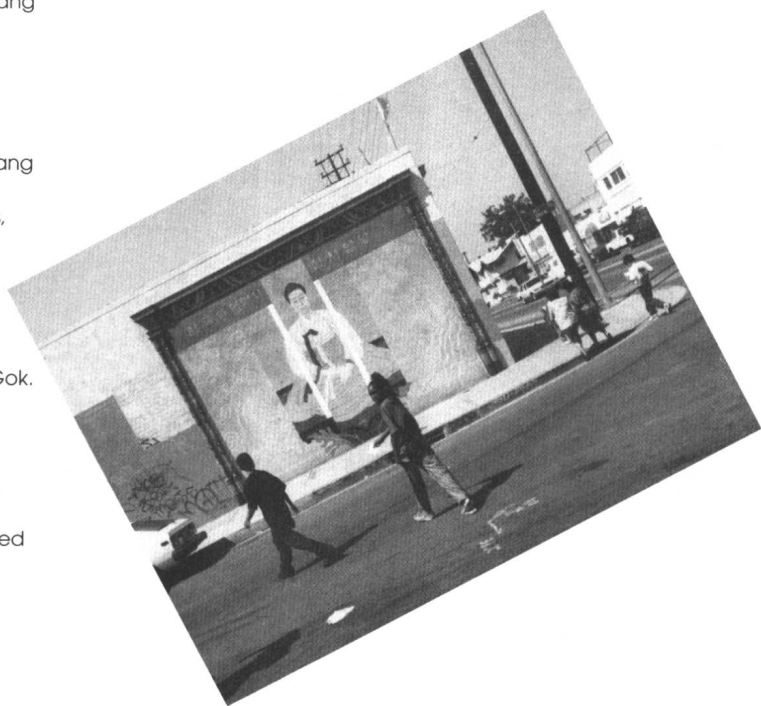
woman, as well as

virtuous mother and

wife in Korea.

Photograph by

Eugene Ahn.



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Introduction **From Chicago to Los Angeles—Changing the Site of Race Relations**

EDWARD T. CHANG

As smoke darkened the skies of Los Angeles, the issue of race took center stage. The city's civil unrest of 1992 brought forth new thinking and new questions about race relations in America. Myths and theories of the melting pot, of assimilation and of the plural society were shattered as racial violence vividly exposed the inadequacy of our prior assumptions. What is race? What is ethnicity? What does it mean to live in a multiethnic society? Can we truly live together in such a society?

The Kerner Commission Report of 1968 had concluded that America was headed toward two societies—one black and the other white—separate but unequal. Twenty-five years later, we must conclude that the commission report was only partially correct in its projections. Los Angeles' civil unrest was America's first multiethnic "riot" as Latino immigrants, Korean merchants, African American residents and Whites participated as both victims and assailants. As we begin to sort things out to understand exactly what happened, many pressing questions remain. One of the most troubling questions, in my view, is: Why do we lack the theories to explain what happened?

The lack of theoretical models leads us to evaluate the relevancy of traditional social science research in looking at society. Critics of mainstream academia have asserted that race relations research in the United States has had little connection to social reality. Sociology had become a science of methodology devoted to the proving of theories. The prevalence of positivist scholarship simplified sociology to the level of data collection and survey. Moreover, social scientists were themselves disengaged from social reality in their insistence on interpreting events

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from an "objective" perspective. Scholars and researchers were far more interested in constructing theories and in validating them than in understanding the "hows" and the "whys" of social change or of cultural and political upheaval.

For example, whenever I have presented findings about the roles of Korean immigrants in small business, sociologists ask me: "But what are the theoretical implications of your research?" It appears that we have forgotten that, bottom line, theory is only theory. Theory may be a useful tool in providing explanations of social phenomena, but social science also needs to provide adequate interpretations of social reality for the people and the communities that it is studying.

Studies have shown that economic inequality and pervasive poverty in urban America contributed to the civil unrest of the 1960s. The unrest of 1992 was no different. What are the causes of racial and ethnic inequality in America? Why are certain groups able to move out of ethnic ghettos while other groups remain? How can underprivileged groups uplift themselves and enter the mainstream? These were, and continue to be, among the major questions that social scientists address in race relations research.

* * *

During the early twentieth century, Chicago had become the site of race and ethnic research as millions of Jews, Poles, Blacks, and Irish settled in that midwestern city. A Chinese immigrant, Mr. Moy, recalled that "on the streets, every other man he met was a foreigner or a son of a foreigner in Chicago" (see Ting C. Fang's dissertation, "Chinese Residents in Chicago," University of Chicago, 1926). Researchers responded to the public pressure and concern over the arrival of immigrants into the city. Many claimed, then as now, that immigrants would aggravate existing problems and contribute to the deterioration of their community. Immigrants were often blamed for overcrowding, the rise of crime, delinquency, corruption, and for lowering the standard of living of the average worker.

Based on the utilization of the American city as a site to study race relations, researchers posed a number of interpretations. As social scientists abandoned the idea of the melting pot, for example, Robert Park provided a new interpretation of the "race relations cycle," asserting that immigrants experience the stages of competition, conflict, accommodation and eventual assimilation. Later, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), asked the critical question: Is it possible for African Americans to ever achieve full equality?

Other scholars such as Humbert S. Nelli, Melvin G. Holli, and

Dominic A. Pacyga rejected the notion of Anglo-conformity and focused on the survival of ethnic communities such as Polish, Jewish, Italian, and Irish enclaves, which flourished in Chicago.

In the 1960s, social science models such as the internal colonial model developed by Robert Blauner argued that nonwhites had been colonized by white America. This model dismissed the compatibility of Europeans and nonwhite immigrants, arguing that the historical experience of nonwhites fundamentally differed from those of European immigrants. According to John Ogbu, groups such as Afro-Americans came to America involuntarily, faced economic oppression, political subjugation, and racism. Asians, on the other hand, were voluntary migrants.

Until recently, most studies of race have continued to address the successful incorporation of European immigrants and the failure of African Americans and other groups of color to do likewise. America's race relations theorists focused on Black-White encounters. Race problems usually meant "Black" problems.

The 1992 Los Angeles uprising revealed the complexity of inter-racial relations today. A different multiracial social reality requires radical approaches to address the structural issues of economic and political inequality, and issues of race and representation. For these reasons, many researchers are coming to Los Angeles. The city has emerged as the newest laboratory for social scientists as they begin to experiment and to develop new ideas about race relations.

I would argue that the 1992 unrest can be seen as a turning point in academic research on race, as the site has shifted from East to West. We chose to focus on Los Angeles as the site of race because of obvious factors such as demographic shifts, the changing political landscape, and the emergence of the city as a center for Pacific Rim trade. Indeed, L.A. is a metropolis in motion.

What does it mean to be a Korean American in the 1990s? Can Latinos set aside their regional and ethnic differences to form viable political action groups? Will African Americans continue to play a leading role in defining the tenor of race relations and the political agenda of those in City Hall? And what about other Asian Americans? What will be the future of the Whites—the numerical minority in Los Angeles?

With this volume, we invite you to join us in exploring a new site with a focus on racial relations that is no longer Black or White.

Jewish and Korean Merchants in African American Neighborhoods: A Comparative Perspective

EDWARD T. CHANG

What has happened to non-African American merchants in African American neighborhoods since the 1960s? Many Jewish store owners fled from African American neighborhoods during the urban riots of the 1960s. "Jewish-owned stores were targeted by protestors, and many white owned stores were destroyed."¹ "And before August 1965 when the burning and rioting took place, most of the furniture and clothing, and a good many of the liquor and grocery stores in the area were Jewish-owned."²

Ethnic successionists argue that the Korean merchants in the 1980s and 90s have simply replaced Jewish merchants in African American neighborhoods and that Korean-African American conflict is nothing more than the "old" problem of Jewish-African American conflict.³ They see ethnic succession as a "natural" or "proper" order in a multiethnic society. Competition for scarce goods, power, status and privileges leads to conflicts between different groups. According to this view, friction intensifies because Jews and Koreans seem to have "taken over" businesses in African American neighborhoods. Under these circumstances, African Americans resent Jews and Koreans who seemingly exploit them for their own economic benefits. It is important to note that as Jewish communities in the inner cities became transformed into African American neighborhoods, many Jewish merchants sold their businesses to Koreans who became the dominant group of merchants in these areas.

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the Jewish-African American conflicts of 1960s with Korean-African American tensions of 1980s and 1990s. I address the following questions:

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- 1) What are the similarities and differences between the experiences of Jewish and Korean merchants in African American neighborhoods?
- 2) Did Korean merchants simply replace Jewish merchants in African American neighborhoods?
- 3) Are there any differences in the patterns of inter-ethnic tensions in the African American community?

New Urban Crisis

Korean-owned small businesses in African American neighborhoods have increased rapidly during the 1980s. Since the middle of the 1970s, Korean immigrants have begun to fill the vacuum created by the departure of Jewish merchants and the relocation of large retailers to the suburbs.⁴ Beginning in the middle of the 1970s, recent immigrants from Korea began to open grocery and liquor stores, vegetable stands, gas stations, laundry shops, indoor swap meets, and hamburger stands in predominantly African American and Latino neighborhoods. The influx of large numbers of Korean merchants into African American neighborhoods has resulted in increased complaints, tensions and dissatisfaction toward these merchants. Some residents have initiated "boycott" campaigns against Korean stores in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Although Korean-African American relations have deteriorated during the 1980s, relations worsened with the several highly publicized disputes involving Korean merchants and African American customers in New York and Los Angeles. The "Red Apple" incident in New York City in 1990 supplanted "Big Apple" as the symbolic term for the city. "Red Apple" is the name of the Korean-owned vegetable store that was boycotted by African American activists of the Brooklyn neighborhood of New York. Tensions had arisen since January 18, 1990, when a Haitian woman was allegedly beaten by the manager and employees of Red Apple, a Korean-operated store. Jislaine Felicine, forty-six, was accused by the manager of not paying the appropriate amount for the items she wanted to purchase. The manager, Chang Bong Ok, insisted that he and other employees did not assault the woman. Nevertheless, boycotts of Red Apple and Church Fruits took place during a year-and-a-half period.

In Los Angeles, two cases of disputes involving Korean merchants and African American customers further exacerbated relationships between the two groups. On March 16, 1991, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, Latasha Harlins, was killed by a Korean shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du, in South Central Los Angeles. This tragic incident generated anger, disbelief and shock from both communities. Several Korean-

owned stores were reportedly attacked and vandalized by angry crowds.⁵ At least one Korean-operated store had to shut the store down for six consecutive months to avoid violent protests by angry African American residents.⁶

Many Korean merchants called community crime prevention hot lines to express fear of retaliation by African American customers. The Koreatown police station reportedly received several telephone inquiries by Korean merchants who were burglarized and vandalized by African American customers. Korean Americans in Los Angeles hoped these incidents would not lead to the repeat of riots of 1960s. April and May of 1992 would prove otherwise. Korean-African American conflict has emerged as one of the most visible and volatile problems facing urban America today.

Bittersweet Encounter: Jewish-African American Relations

Scholars have debated about the historical alliance between Jewish and African Americans. Are African Americans more likely to be anti-Semitic than Whites? During the 1960s, many concerned African American and Jewish scholars and leaders met to discuss the worsening relationship between the two minority groups. Katz, in his introductory remarks during Jewish-African American symposium, commented that it is now widely accepted as an incontrovertible fact that, "1) there exists a pronounced anti-Jewish sentiment among the Negro masses in this country, despite the active participation of many idealistic young Jews in the Negro struggle for equal rights, and the moral support given to the Civil Rights Movement by organized Jewish groups, 2) that Jews are reacting to this sentiment with an emotional backlash."⁷

To many Jewish Americans, anti-Semitism among African Americans is a troublesome phenomenon and difficult to comprehend since the Jewish American community has consistently shown strong support for the anti-slavery struggle and Civil Rights Movements.

Others dismiss the historical alliance between Jews and African Americans as a myth. They reject the notion that "African American-Jewish relations used to be good and now they have turned sour. The truth is, of course, that they never were really good."⁸ Others have reinforced this sentiment: "while the Negro-Jewish relationships may have appeared to be peaceful in the past, it has always been tense below the surface, at least in the slums."⁹ Even within the Communist Party, solidarity between Jewish and African American working classes never materialized. "In Negro-Jewish relations in the Communist Left there has been an intense undercurrent of jealousy, enmity and competition