

2020

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Recommended Citation

Kwak, Hannah (2020) "Co-opted by U.S. Capital: A Diachronic Study of Korean Americans' Relation to the Model Minority Myth," *The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 28.
Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol1/iss1/28>

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Co-opted by U.S. Capital: A Diachronic Study of Korean Americans' Relation to the Model Minority Myth

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical conditions within which Korean Americans became a “model minority,” linking transnational Korean history to the diasporic formations around the model minority stereotypes. It advances that Korean Americans’ conceptualization of their economic success borrows heavily from the narrative of Korea’s postwar economic development, which itself resulted from the nation’s desire to overcome the past of Japanese colonialism. For instance, the Korean American small business owners interviewed in *Sai-I-Gu*, a documentary about the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, emphasize the values of hard work, thrift, and sacrifice when telling their immigrant stories, echoing media representations of Korea’s postwar economic success. As a result of these resonances, however, Korean American self-representation has become profoundly implicated in the mechanisms of U.S. capitalism, often to the harm of those minority groups who are not as easily co-opted by U.S. capitalist society.

It has become a truism that the “model minority” myth allows Whites to use Asian Americans’ perceived collective success to downplay other minority groups’ struggles against racism and discrimination (Chow). What is less widely acknowledged are the ways in which Asian Americans’ conceptualization of their own economic success often lends itself to the myth of the model minority. Immigrant stories which emphasize hard work and sacrifice are easily co-opted by a majority culture which attributes Asian Americans’ perceived collective success to their strong work ethic and family values at the expense of structural explanations.

If Asian Americans tell their immigrant stories in such a way that helps propagate meritocratic ideals, one must situate this phenomenon in its historical context, approaching diachronically, rather than merely synchronically, immigrant groups’ relation to the myth of the model minority. To that end, this paper analyzes the historical conditions within which Korean Americans became a model minority. Drawing from early 20th century Japanese travel accounts and guidebooks, the writings of Canadian missionary James Scarth Gale, and the journalistic accounts of Frederick Arthur McKenzie, I show

how the model minority stereotype was antedated by a much different trope of the idle, unproductive Korean “coolie.” I then turn to Park Chung Lee’s *The Country, The Revolution, and I* and the American media response during and after the Korean economic boom, key documents that cast Korea’s postwar economic success (the so-called “Miracle on the Han River”) as a way of overcoming the nation’s history of foreign domination. As Korea’s “success story” became entrenched in the minds of Koreans and foreigners alike, the image of the Korean coolie was quickly replaced by that of the productive, hardworking citizen. Finally, the testimonies of Korean American small business owners present at the 1992 Los Angeles uprising reveal the ways in which Korean Americans’ conceptualization of their economic success borrows heavily from the narrative of Korea’s postwar economic development, itself a result of the nation’s desire to overcome the past of Japanese colonialism. I thus show how Korea’s colonial history, the Miracle on the Han River, and Korean American immigrant experiences are imbricated in a continuous narrative.

A diachronic approach, which allows scholars to track the evolution of Koreans’ racialization throughout history,

shows how the model minority myth has substituted old racial stereotypes with new ones. A century earlier, Japanese discourses constructed an image of Korea as a country which, despite its high potential for productivity, had failed to modernize due to the idle nature of its people. During the boom in Japanese tourism to Korea in the early 1900s, Japanese travel accounts and guidebooks characterized Koreans as indolent, backward, unclean, and poor (Duus 404). This stereotype would play a pivotal role in rationalizing Japan's colonization. According to the Japanese, this indolence lay at the heart of a litany of vices which Koreans were understood to possess, from dishonesty to debauchery, and which would ultimately pave the way to "national destruction." (405) Japanese imperial discourse thus characterized Korea as already on its way to national destruction and diagnosed Koreans' laziness as the root of the country's ills, thereby legitimizing Japanese "intervention."

This racial stereotyping by the Japanese had its twin in Western constructions of Korea. In an 1896 essay titled "The Korean Coolie," Canadian missionary James Scarth Gale essentializes the idleness of the Korean peasantry:

From the first glimpse you have of him you recognize that he is a creature of repose. Nothing should be more restful to a nervous, impatient foreigner, than the sight of a coolie by the wayside, sitting on his heels, or as we generally say, squatting, (sometimes long rows of them), motionless as sea fowl, indifferent to the heat of the sun, to the flies that congregate upon them or to the pestiferous gutters that crawl beneath their feet. (Gale 52)

In this passage, the Korean coolie becomes the object of modernist nostalgia for the "nervous, impatient foreigner," who patronizingly marvels at the "restful" sight of the coolie in repose. Lurking in the shadows of Gale's Orientalizing *Korean Sketches* is a valuation of time characteristic of Western industrial capitalism. The Western subject's habituation to a certain type of labor discipline helps explain Gale's fascination with the Korean coolie's "atmosphere of repose." (53) "While other mortals are in constant commotion, fearful of this and that, yet aching for change, the Korean coolie continues immovable throughout the ages, the muscles of his heels never growing tired," Gale mythologizes. (53) Despite his intention of "draw-

ing young men and women into deeper sympathy with our brothers and sisters of the Hermit Kingdom," Gale's account conspires with the aforementioned Japanese travel accounts and guidebooks to reify an image of Korea as backward, uncivilized, and indifferent to the passage of time.

Frederick Arthur McKenzie, touted today as a journalist who "delves into Korean justice," uncomfortably echoes this stereotype in *The Tragedy of Korea*, which brought to light for Western audiences the consequences of Japan's imperial expansion (Yu). In one chapter, McKenzie sets off to I-Chon, hoping to witness the resistance efforts of the "Righteous Army," an informal civilian militia that fought against Japanese forces during the Japanese occupation of Korea. While recounting his tale, McKenzie expresses his frustration at the slowness of his party, whom even "a mixture of harsh words, praise, and liberal tips" could not invigorate. "A hundred reasons would be found for halting, and still more for slow departure," he complains (McKenzie 183). Finally, he bribes the pack-pony leader. In a confidential tone, he proposes to him an agreement, saying, "You and I understand one another... These others with their moanings and cries are but as children. Now let us make a compact." (184) Presumably meant as a humorous aside, this anecdote, in a work which denounces Japan's imperial expansion as "built up by odious cruelty, by needless slaughter, and by a wholesale theft," ironically evinces the same stereotype which appears in Japanese imperial discourse (vi).

Discourse characterizing Koreans as lacking work discipline and industriousness rationalized and enabled Japan's colonization. For instance, the so-called "Korean land grab," the promotion of Japanese land ownership in Korea by government officials in the early 1900s, was driven by the perceived availability of arable land in Korea. Speculating about the myth of available land, the Japanese turned to common stereotypes, surmising that the Korean peasants were unwilling to cultivate the land out of sheer laziness or for fear of losing their profits to "corrupt officials or rapacious landlords." (Duus 365) Indeed, many of the Japanese settlers who were taken by land investment in Korea were motivated by the belief that they, with their superior knowledge and excellent work discipline,

could increase Korea's agricultural productivity. According to one guidebook, "If hard-working Japanese farmers were to shoulder their hoes, come to Korea, improve agricultural techniques, and farm the land according to Japanese methods, they could easily increase the harvest by twofold or threefold." (Duus 366) In reality, the reports describing vast tracts of available land in Korea had been ill-founded, based on a few eyewitness accounts rather than reliable figures.

Such were Japan and the West's patronizing representations of Korea, serving as the backdrop against which Korea's postwar economic development took place. During the authoritarian Park Chung Hee regime, under which South Korea experienced rapid industrialization, Korean discourses conceived economic growth as a way of overcoming the nation's past of Japanese colonialism. Park Chung Hee's *The Country, the Revolution, and I*, in which Park delineates to the Korean people his blueprint for the nation's future, is a case in point. Explaining the need for political change (and thereby justifying his May 16 military coup d'état), Park posits economic growth as a solution to Korea's domination by foreign powers. He conceptualizes Korea's past as "a history of being exploited by, and relying upon others... an annal of foreign oppressions, conquests and misery," referring to, among others, invasions by the Manchus, Mongols, and Japanese (Hee 166). "On the whole... our history is just a long process of desolation and despair," he regrets (168). Park then suggests economic development as a solution, claiming that the "creation of a self-supporting economy and accomplishment of an industrial revolution is a key [sic] to national renaissance and prosperity." (171) This "economy first" consciousness was framed as a prerequisite to "a strong national state," politicizing Korea's economic development (168).

A divisive figure in modern Korean history, Park led the nation's transformation from a developing country to a developed one. The recent memory of Japanese colonialism contributed to Koreans' triumphalism over their nation's postwar economic development. Korea's economic success became a source of pride for Koreans partly because it challenged the stereotype that had been so pivotal to their "shameful" colonial

history. A 1988 *New York Times* article titled "South Korea's High-Tech Miracle" remarks on this triumphalist surge:

Indeed, Samsung's mastery of the demanding technology [D-RAM chips] is a source of national pride for South Korea, whose success has been built around textile factories, shipyards and automobile assembly lines. Giant pictures of the chip appear on billboards in downtown Seoul. Government officials tout the accomplishment as an example of how South Korea will rival Japan, whose occupation of the Korean Peninsula for the first half of the 20th century and economic success in the second half embitter many people here. (Sanger)

The article suggests the political undertones of Korea's technological progress, relating the perceived importance of this achievement to Korea's colonial history. Author David E. Sanger moreover presents Japan's economic success as comparable to the Japanese occupation of Korea in occasioning Korean resentment, drawing attention to the cultural resonance between economic independence and political sovereignty.

Media discourse in the United States not only reported, but actively participated in, the politicization of Korea's economic development. For instance, the same *New York Times* article celebrates South Korea's entry as "a full-fledged member of an exclusive club producing the most advanced type of memory circuits now made—a club dominated by Japanese companies." (Sanger) Such statements emphasized the ways in which Korea's technological advancement symbolized, to Korea and to the rest of the world, an overcoming of Korea's colonial history. But as Park reminds us in *The Country, the Revolution, and I*, Korea's history of foreign oppression does not reduce to the event of Japanese colonialism. The following passage can be taken to expand the political implications of Korea's foray into one-megabit chips:

Newly industrialized nations like South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore are no strangers to semiconductors. But in the past, their chief contribution was cheap labor: they would make simple chips for watches or calculators, or take more complex chips - almost produced elsewhere - and insert them in larger, ceramic packages that could be plugged into circuit boards. The designs and technology all belonged to foreign chip makers, American or Japanese, which were simply moving the labor-intensive part of the work offshore. (Sanger)

Here, Sanger names America and Japan as examples of foreign chip makers with access to the highly sophisticated designs and technology newly acquired by South Korea. It is unclear whether Sanger, when choosing his examples, had in mind the U.S. occupation of Korea following Japan's surrender in World War II. His choice nevertheless calls attention to the political significance of South Korea's technological advancement by positioning the country alongside—and on a par with—its two most recent occupying forces.

While South Korea experienced rapid economic development and industrialization under Park Chung Hee, Korean immigration to the United States increased significantly following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which removed restrictions on Asian immigration to the United States (Chin and Cuisson Villazor). Given that these two phenomena were largely coextensive, it is not surprising that Korean Americans' conceptualization of their own economic success borrowed heavily from the narratives of Korea's postwar economic development cemented both abroad and at home. To understand the entrenchment of the model minority myth in Korean immigrant communities, it will be worth attending to the continuities between the discourse on Korea's postwar economic development and Korean Americans' immigrant stories. To that end, I turn to the 1993 documentary *Sai-I-Gu*, which features the testimonies of various Korean American small business owners present during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising.

By 1996, Koreans had earned themselves a worldwide reputation as hard workers. A *New York Times* article published on October 25, 1996, for instance, describes South Korea as “a country that spawned global industries from sheer effort and hard work of the labor force.” (Johnston) The Korean American women interviewed in *Sai-I-Gu*, a documentary about the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, echo such narratives of Korea's rapid industrialization in telling their immigrant stories. Here, work discipline and industriousness emerge as common themes: “I had to be much more diligent than others. If I was lucky, I ate once a day. I lived on crumbs... I had no time, no time,” (Kim-Gibson 13:10) recounts one interviewee. Another woman reiterates, “Because I worked seven days a week, I had

no life of my own. I knew nothing but my house and store.” (13:35) Foregrounded in these interviews are the speakers' thrift, time-budgeting, and sacrifice, which are both explicitly and implicitly linked to their economic success as small business owners in Los Angeles.

Importantly, the Korean American women interviewed in *Sai-I-Gu* emphasize their hard work and sacrifice upon their arrival in the U.S. in the context of their ongoing fight for reparations from the U.S. government. Statements like “We Koreans worked hard to realize our dreams. Nothing is left but ashes” and “I saved money in Korea and worked very hard here. All that money turned to ashes in one morning” portray the Korean immigrants as model capitalist subjects who have internalized Western industrial capitalism's valuation of hard work (21:50; 32:15). No mere recapitulation of the model minority myth, the interviewees' self-narratives are part of a tactic for economic justice. The speakers garner sympathy for losses incurred during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising and make a case for government compensation.

Lynn Mie Itagaki's *Civil Racism* explores how the celebration of the “traditional” Asian American family intersects with the interests of U.S. capitalism. She aptly observes that Judge Joyce Karlin's sympathy for Soon Ja Du, the Korean immigrant who was put on trial for the murder of Latasha Harlins, is founded on Soon Ja Du's embodiment of “the figure of the small business entrepreneur whose work supports a family unit.” (Itagaki 49) She is thus allowed to be recuperated back into “the dominant state narrative that maintains family as the primal source of civility and the cornerstone of U.S. capitalism.” An additional dimension of Korean Americans' implication in the mechanisms of U.S. capitalism is that by framing their economic success as a result of their time-budgeting and work discipline, the Korean American women interviewed in *Sai-I-Gu* lend themselves to the myth of the model minority. As model capitalist subjects, they have successfully built their small businesses from the ground up by internalizing the values of Western industrial capitalism—or so their narratives would have us believe.

I thus interpret the Korean American women's empha-

sis on the “success from scratch” narrative as a rhetorical strategy that is inextricable from their continued struggle against the devaluation of their suffering by government authorities. This is not to disregard or excuse the harmful consequences such rhetoric can nevertheless have for those minority groups who are not as easily co-opted by U.S. capitalist society, which values its subjects in accordance with market requirements on their productive ability. Korean Americans face the moral imperative to interrogate their positionality in the American racial order, to fight for racial justice without upholding the racialized dichotomy of deserving versus undeserving.

One might contrast these interviews with Claire Jean Kim's treatment of Korean American small business owners in *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*. Drawing from Roger Waldinger's account of how African Americans have fared in New York City's postindustrial economy, Kim situates “Korean immigrant opportunities [as] direct products of the spatial and economic marginalization of Blacks in American society.” (Kim 38) According to Kim, discrimination by Whites in the private sector led Blacks to concentrate in the public sector, which was relatively open to them. Subsequent white flight during the 1970s and 1980s opened up formerly White private sector niches to incoming immigrant groups. Kim thus gives a structural explanation for how Korean Americans have come to occupy the small business niche in New York City, as an alternative to the model minority myth.

One cannot help but wonder if Korean Americans' implication in the mechanisms of U.S. capitalism haunts them even as they at times benefit from it. After all, one of the predominant negative stereotypes of Korean Americans during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising was, in Itagaki's words, that of “the heartless capitalist.” (Kim 41) The irony of this stereotype is, I posit, that it instantiates the failure of the Korean American tactic of accessing the rights and privileges of citizenship via absorption into U.S. capitalism. If such a tactic has allowed the Korean/Korean American to shed the once-pervasive image of the Korean coolie, it has not protected her against the demonization of the selfsame tactic once it was deemed convenient to the American racial order.

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