

The Gendered Construction of Korean Community in Junction City, KS*

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[Abstract]

This paper seeks to go beyond the received conception that Korean immigration to the US is just East-West coastal phenomena, by examining the lived experiences of Korean military brides and Korean communities in Kansas. It focuses on the dynamic community-building process of KMBs and other Korean immigrants in the Junction City-Fort Riley area. In so doing, the paper aims to illuminate how the Korean community by KMBs had been a part of the larger Junction City and Fort Riley community in Kansas, despite the negative reception and treatment that Korean immigrants, especially KMBs had to endure. It also pays a special attention to the Korean cultural values that KMBs have transmitted to their children and the local community. This paper seeks ultimately to uncover the unrecognized history of Korean migration to Kansas in what appears to be a constructed official history of Korean diaspora in Kansas. More importantly, it hopes to illuminate how to understand the Junction City Korean community is to understand the broader Korean immigrant demographic and settlement patterns now found in the military cities in the Midwest and Southwest.

* This study was supported by the Research Program funded by the Seoul National University of Science and Technology

Key Words: Korean Americans, Korean immigration, diaspora, gender, oral history

I. Background

The major history of Korean immigration to Kansas began with Korean military brides (KMBs) who married American servicemen and followed their American husbands when they completed their tour of duty. They came back to places such as Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth, KS. Although Korean immigration to Kansas began with the influx of KMBs into Junction City from the 1960s, few have been written about how and why a number of KMBs and other Korean immigrants ended up in the rural American city. More importantly, to overlook the Junction City Korean community is to lose a chance to understand the broader Korean immigrant demographic and settlement patterns now found in the military cities in the Midwest and Southwest. I have selected and examined much newspaper materials from the 1980s when Korean presence in Kansas became more visible. Through 1990s, the continuing migration of these women and massive chain-migrations of their immediate family members and relatives has made the construction of Korean American communities possible. Not all Korean migration to Kansas traces back to KMBs. Many recent Korean immigrants in Kansas include professionals with a U. S. degree and their spouses, a significant number of Korean nurses with their families, and a large number of Korean adoptees. Yet, it is hard to deny that a vast number of Koreans came to Kansas through chain migration, to which KMBs played a significant role.

Despite their significant contribution to the construction of ethnic Korean communities, as well as their role in the expansion of the Korean diaspora in Kansas,

KMBs have been excluded in the history of Korean immigration to the United States. To both the Korean American community and mainstream American society, these women were considered neither Korean nor American enough. For example, within Korean American communities, KMBs have been treated as *yanggongju*, or western whores living in the middle of nowhere. Some local Americans called them “dog-eaters” from the poor third world Asian country. Other fellow Koreans and American males exploited them sexually. Many Koreans considered these women as bad examples against Koreans’ pursuit of being “a Model Minority.” To a lot of Americans KMBs were seemingly permanent others evidenced by their looks, language, and way of life which white Midwestern values¹⁾ found hard to embrace. In short, these women have been marginalized by both the Korean and American communities: many members of the Korean communities in Kansas regard these women as former “prostitutes,” while many Americans in the surrounding communities see them and their families as immigrant others. This paper is designed to illuminate the process of formation of the Korean community in Junction City; how it took place and challenges and struggles that the community has faced. It is also intended to discuss strategies and efforts that Korean immigrants, especially KMBS have made to battle stereotypes and prejudices by both Americans and Korean immigrants.

Several key interviewees have helped me understand better about the Junction City Korean community. One such person was Ms. Park, a KMB, who is one of the first Korean settlers in the Junction City in the 1960s and was willing to share her story of coming to American to “pick stars out of sky.” Then there was Ms. Peter. I met Ms. Peter in 2002. Between 1990 and 1994, she taught English in ESL in Junction City High School. She had a number of Korean students who were KMBs in her class. Her story about the KMB students revealed some of the initial difficulties that

these women faced. During the first couple of years, Ms. Peter had all of her students write a personal journal regularly. Gradually, it had become really difficult for her to grade students' journals because "these journals were often so personal, and students would reveal things that were hard for me as a teacher to have them cope with. I had the feeling that I was rather doing counseling than teaching sometimes because those women had a lot of things to deal with." It was hard for her to imagine that so many Korean women who spoke little English and who had little knowledge of American culture and society followed their American G.I. husbands to places like Junction City and struggled. To help ease their adaptation process, Ms. Peter and several people in Junction City High School tried very hard to teach them English and American culture. She had kept most of the journals and other materials done by her Korean students. She shared them with me. Later, those materials have become a very valuable source of information, through which I had come to understand the process in which KMBs have battled prejudice from both Americans and Korean immigrants and how they adapted to life in rural America.

Another key informant was K. Kim, 35. K. Kim grew up in Junction City and currently lives in Kansas City. When he was young, his family came to Junction City through chain migration by his aunt, a KMB. I came to know K. Kim when I started working for Korean American Society of Greater Kansas City in 2004. He was, then, working as a director of sports, while my job for the organization was to publish monthly newsletters as an editor. Two years younger than me, K. Kim always called me *hyoung* or brother. We became close enough that I sometimes invited him as a guest speaker for the class I taught at the University of Kansas. A specialist in Human Resources department in a major company in Kansas City, K. Kim is considered one of the most successful Koreans that the Junction City Korean community has produced. He is "the proud son" of a pastor in one of the Korean

churches in Junction City. Every other week, he and his wife drive to attend the church service in his father's church and help the church members who are mostly KMBs. He said that the Junction City Korean community was built by KMBs and Koreans who came through chain migration like his family.

Years later, I met Ms. S., 43. Her mother is a KMB and father is African American. She does not remember her father because he left the family when she was a baby. Ms. S's family moved to a place near Junction City from South Korea in the 70s. In her early 40s, her memory of "the Korean family" who "never even said hello to her Korean mother until now" never goes away, although there were not many Koreans where she grew up. And, she never forgets the Koreans, whites, and blacks who never accepted her because she looked different from them. Ms. S said that some people still give her "a funny look." I called her *nuna* or sister because she is a few years older than me and I saw Korean in her. In return, she treated me as a brother, and we felt comfortable with talking to each other. She is the one who made me think deeply what it means to be Korean/American because she looks to me as an embodiment of a person with multiple identities. Half of her is Korean. The manners in which she treated me seemed American, yet with some Korean twist such as *jeong* and filial piety to her mother.

In the meantime, I met Ms. Jeong, 31, in 2004 when she was an MA student at the University of Kansas. At the time, she was writing her thesis on KMBs in Leavenworth, KS. Being a KMB herself, Jeong contacted me to ask about my research on KMBs and Koreans in Junction City, KS. We compared and contrasted Korean communities in both cities. Moreover, she explained that many KMBs have dealt with stigma of *yanggongju* or western princesses, and she believed that such stigma was a grave injustice done to Korean women who tried to come to America and have a better life. As written in her thesis, after Jeong and her American

husband moved to Leavenworth from South Korea, she had to divorce him due to marital conflicts such as cultural misunderstanding and his drinking problem. It was “a bad marriage,” but at the same time, the marriage experience gave her an opportunity to understand what it is like living as a KMB with a stigma of yanggongju. Although she was college educated, whenever her marital history was brought up, she said that she found herself having to deal with negative looks and gazes from fellow Korean immigrants. That is also a primary reason she stopped going to Korean church in Kansas City and decided to go to church in Leavenworth, in which most of the members of the church are KMBs. She was “determined to do something about injustice done to KMBs by both Korean and American society.”

With the help from my key informants on the Junction City Korean community, I have conducted my ethnographic research in the Junction City-Fort Riley area.

II. Literature Review

My research on KMBs and the Korean diaspora in Kansas builds on previous scholarship aimed at making KMBs visible as agents. This emerging Asian American scholarship wishes to unearth and reinterpret the past and thereby reconstruct history from the “bottom up” history so that voices from the margins can assert their identity as a coherent group. Two books specifically treat KMBs: Ji-yeon Yuh’s *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown* (2002) and Grace M. Cho’s *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* (2008). Yuh’s book examines the historical and sociological context in which camptowns around U.S. military bases grew and Korean women worked and served American servicemen in the shadow of Korean society and Korean people. Some of those women ended up marrying American GIs in the gendered relationship between

Korea and the United States. Based on a number of oral history interviews that she conducted with KMBs, Yuh suggests that KMBs are not the victims of their choice to marry American servicemen. Rather, the testimonies of these women reveal the “agency and dignity with skill and compassion” that they utilize in their negotiation and adaptation to their life in the United States. On the other hand, Cho’s book looks into the origins and the complicated role of yanggongju, who are considered as shameful, yet at the same time, have been responsible for bringing hundreds of thousands of other Koreans to the United States through chain migration. Using the concept of “transgenerational haunting,” Cho identifies the collective amnesia about KMBs as yanggongju that still seeps into the hearts and minds of many Koreans in the U.S. Korean diaspora.

Woo-jung Jeong’s Master’s thesis, *Korean Military Wives in Leavenworth, KS* (2005), deals with the lives of KMBs in Leavenworth, KS. Jeong examines the stigma and stereotype with which many KMBs deal and demonstrates how they attempt to overcome them by strategically forming supportive networks of their own. Her thesis goes beyond the studies that focus on the hardships and pains of acculturation that KMBs have faced in their lives in the United States. Similarly, Haesun Juliana Kim’s “Voices from the Shadows” (1991) argues that Korean women married to American servicemen should be seen as survivors, not “unlike earlier Korean immigrants who utilized their intelligence, compassion, and strength to raise their families, work, and even to support parents and siblings in Korea.” She argues that these women deserve recognition on their own terms, as a vital part of Korean and American communities. Kim speaks against the “unspoken caste system” that brands these women as “war brides” caught in the “shadows” between the Korean and American communities. She argues that they would probably never receive an invitation from the ranks of “Korean American” society: they were stigmatized and

oppressed as outsiders. They were not “American,” not “Korean,” in the ethnic sense, because they had broken away from the traditional homogeneous Korean community.

While I recognize the significant contribution that these scholars have made to assure the visibility of KMBs in the historiography of Korean immigration to the United States, my paper differs from their works in that it examines the specific Korean communities in rural Kansas and shows the significant role that KMBs and their family members have played in its construction of Korean diaspora by looking into the construction of the Korean community in the Junction City-Fort Riley that offers unique community formation and acculturation embraced by the local community. The paper deals with the ethnic Korean community with the issues such as stigma, silence, rejection, denial, admission of the presence of KMBs that are deeply contested.

III. The beginning of new ethnic mosaic in Kansas

The history of Kansas has been the story of European immigrants that was thought to be a “proof of American society, the benign and absorptive powers” of American democracy and America as a nation. It is the “ethnic inclusion,” “ethnic mobility,” and “ethnic assimilation” on the European model that set the norm of America as an ideal place to accommodate newcomers (Jacobson 84).

Until the end of World War II, the history of Kansas had been constructed as mostly white and sometimes black. Even until recently, the traditional black and white binary line has occupied the history of the state of Kansas. As Velina Hasu Houston, a prominent playwright, who was born and raised by a Japanese mother and an African American father in Junction City, KS recalls, “In Kansas, the world

is black and white. They don't want to hear about yellow and red and multicolored people." When Houston applied to the Kansas Arts Commission to pursue her Japanese "War brides" history book project, her project proposal application was denied on the grounds that the project was not about "Kansas" (Franzen 128).

Despite its invisibility, a new ethnic mosaic in Kansas was in the making due to the influx of tens of thousands of newcomers from Asia and the Americas from the early 20th century. For example, when the "colored" soldiers of the 9th Cavalry returned from the Philippines in 1922, Filipina wives of fifty US soldiers followed their husbands to Fort Riley in Kansas, which made Fort Riley a site of interracial Army families. Subsequently, in 1924, Filipino musicians and their families came to Fort Riley and settled in Junction City as part of the 9th Cavalry band (Franzen 16). In the meantime, the first "Chinese national" to be granted United States citizenship in Kansas was Frank Yobe Yokohama, 65, from Wichita, Kansas. He came to Kansas from Yokohama, Japan by way of Mexico. It took Yokohama 46 years to be finally eligible for the U.S. citizenship. Yokohama was the beneficiary of the McCarran Act of 1952 that allows a foreign national to be eligible for U.S. citizenship as a spouse of a United States citizen.²⁾ Before then, it was virtually impossible for any foreign national from Asia to file a citizenship application.

In fact, changes in U.S. immigration laws and a specific U.S. Army policy played a significant role in bringing new immigrants to Kansas. More specifically, after World War II, U.S. military and immigration authorities had to deal with "war brides" as exceptions to the country's restrictive immigration policy that still barred Asian immigration to the United States. Spouses and children of GIs were allowed a passage to the United States. For example, the War Bride Act of 1945 was enacted to permit the U.S. servicemen to bring their foreign brides to the United States, while the Immigration Act of 1946 enabled the Asian spouses of U.S. citizens to bypass

the restrictive quotas on Asian immigration and enter as “non-quota immigrants.” Moreover, McCarran-Walter Immigration Act of 1952 made exceptions for “war brides” into a continuing policy for the special consideration of the wives and children of servicemen. War brides from Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines became key cohorts of Asian immigration to the United States, especially Kansas until and even after 1965, and they established a basis for continued immigration even after the new Immigration Act of 1965 that lifted the restrictive ban on Asian immigration and established a legal preference for family reunification.

Over time, the Fort Riley-Junction City area of Kansas has grown to have an exceptionally large number of foreign military brides from South Korea, Germany, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. From the beginning of the post-World War II era, African American soldiers returned from overseas with European wives, and soldiers of all races brought their Japanese wives back to the United States. After the Korean War (1950-53), many US soldiers began to return home with their Korean wives. Domestically, antimiscegenation laws were still upheld in many states until the Supreme Court finally struck down all laws forbidding interracial marriage in 1967. Given the serious racial climate in the 1950s, the Department of Army designated Fort Riley as one of the “compassionate bases” that the Army believed would provide interracial couples with a much “safer terrain” given many other larger military bases were located in states that still had anti-miscegenation laws.³⁾ Especially, the Army sent Japanese-American couples to Fort Riley in the 50s and 60s given the anti-Japanese sentiment and hostility against the Japanese that stemmed from World War II.

IV. The construction of Korean community in the Junction City–Fort Riley Area

Within these circumstances, a major history of Korean immigration to Kansas began with the influx of KMBs into Junction City from the 1960s. Despite the relatively long period of Korean presence in Kansas, there has rarely been a study of Korean American communities in Kansas or of communities that are located near the military bases across the country; how they have formed their own ethnic networks, and what they have gone through in that unique circumstance. Through the 1990s, the continuing migration of KMBs and massive chain-migration of their immediate family members and relatives has made the construction of Korean American communities possible. More specifically, the 2000 census shows that 348 Koreans live in Junction City, while the 1990 census reflects 478 Koreans in the place. Among those people, 375 are females. Moreover, Korean women and their husbands are believed to have sponsored most of the 103 Korean men living in the city for immigration from South Korea.

Unlike other military brides of different nationalities, KMBs in Junction City started building their ethnic community by bringing their relatives to join them, starting small businesses, and forming ethnic Christian churches. Koreans are engaged in the local economy to the extent that their visibility in the city economy is greater than their proportion of the city population. For example, on Grant Avenue, leading to Fort Riley, there was a strip mall composed exclusively of Korean businesses such as ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, dry cleaners, a video rental store, bars, and clubs. Several Korean-owned shops are on Washington Street and on its side street are Korean churches, hair salons, a tire shop, and a travel agency. Three Korean ethnic churches have been operating in Junction City since Korean immigrants took

over churches that belonged to the locals. These included the Korean Mission church occupying the former Christian Science building; the Korean Baptist Church of Central Kansas, whose building once belonged to the Faith Lutheran Church and parochial school, and the Korean United Methodists, whose building was formerly the Church of Our Savior.

Park, Keum-ja is one of the first three Korean settlers who moved to Junction City in 1963 after marrying an African American soldier who was stationed in South Korea. According to her, Korean women and their relatives began to settle in Junction City from the 60s:

I began to see the growing number of Koreans coming to Junction City from 1965 since I came here in 1963. The Korean newcomers worked under my supervision when I worked at KP (Kitchen Police) on Fort Riley base. As you can imagine, when they first came they had limited access to jobs. They would work as dish washers and cleaners at KP.

However, Korean immigrants in Junction City met with a number of challenges. For example, the identity of KMBs has been constantly defined and redefined, or understood and misunderstood where issues such as race, gender, and class are deeply contested. Many Koreans in the Greater Kansas City area view Junction City as a rural military town full of yanggongjus because most Koreans living in Junction City are KMBs who moved to the city from South Korea following their American husbands. One of the Korean seniors I interviewed in Kansas City said, “You know. What kind of people could marry American GIs? Where could you find those American GI husbands in South Korea? Only yanggongjus could, right?”⁴⁾ Unless one takes time to find out about the Korean community in Junction City, the community remains invisible in the Korean diaspora in Kansas.

Similarly, K. Kim, who grew up in Junction City and currently lives in Kansas City, said, “There is a stigma on Koreans in Junction City or Leavenworth because people automatically assume you are a different kind of Korean if you say to them that you live in either of the places.”⁵⁾ One of my informants, a black-Korean biracial, shared a similar story:

Growing up, I couldn't have any Korean friends because they did not want to hang out with me. They wanted nothing to do with me because I looked different from them. It really hurt me a lot. I have a Korean mother. I am part Korean, but they never accepted me.

At the same time, there were fears and anxieties shared by KMBs. For example, Rev. Jae Jeong Shin, minister of the Korean United Methodist church in Junction City, discussed the problems facing Korean women married to Americans. “Cut off from their Korean families and surrounded by different culture, customs, and habits, they became terribly homesick. Their husbands may not eat Korean food or understand Korean customs. Some women can't communicate with their American families. In many cases, as their children grow up speaking English, they can't even speak to their children” (Franzen 172). One KMB's main reason to divorce her American husband was because of the food. “I wasn't able to eat Korean food with my ex-husband. I used to eat alone at home or go to a Korean friend's house. I missed Korean food very much. One day, I bought some kimchi from a local store and it was a disaster. Disgusted by the smell of fermented cabbage, he forced me to throw away all the Korean food in my refrigerator” (Jeong 43).

Moreover, one survey that a former ESL teacher conducted in her class in Junction City High School in 1991, especially, illuminates the struggle and challenges that the KMBs had to deal with. According to the survey about the culture shock of

her students in ESL class, most of the KMB students said that they felt confused, lonely, and sad.”⁶⁾ When asked about “things they don’t like about Americans,” students responded by saying “when American people [are] mad at me,” “racial discrimination,” and “prejudice.” In fact, the initial reception that many KMBs received from the locals was often hostile and unfavorable. In a predominantly white Midwestern town, many locals found it very strange to witness a growing number of Korean women with biracial children who looked different from their mothers. For example, one of the biracial children of a KMB from the nearby Junction City area said that after her family moved to the area, not a single day passed without her Korean mother being ridiculed and made fun of by some locals due to her looks and lack of English skills.

However, KMBs’ struggle with adjusting to life in the U.S. was paralleled by their determination to overcome the challenges. For example, one of the Korean students said that one thing she liked about her life in America was her faith in Christianity. Another student wanted to change her life positively. Others suggest that the best thing for was to be able to go to school. Despite facing a number of hardships and adjustment problems, each of the students strove to survive in ways that they never had before.

Ms. Peter said that she was really concerned about the well-being of her Korean students. Not being able to speak English and with limited knowledge about American society, many KMB students found Ms. Peter’s class helpful in that it provided them with an opportunity to learn English and a chance to spend some time with other fellow Koreans and wives from other countries.

Not surprisingly, to many KMBs, Junction City did not seem to be the place to achieve their American Dream. It was the place where there were not many ways to make a living or jobs available for military dependents. In particular, living

conditions for the dependents of the privates were less than desirable, as one article describes:

Riley's housing office had told the wives [of the privates] that the fort had no housing for families of such low rank. The only housing in Junction City within their price range turned out to be mobile homes in grim trailer parks featuring sagging trailers, disassembled cars and weedy patches of grass... I saw the trailers had no walls under them and wondered how the young wives would cope when cold wind shot up through the trailer floors (Wilson 171).

To make matters worse, their husbands' low pay and divorce put them in a very difficult situation to take care of their children. This vulnerability led some KMBs to become victims to the network of prostitution. "I thought American guys, they have money...Military pay isn't enough."⁷⁾ For example, in September 1986, the Associated Press broke a series of articles titled, "U.S.-based Korean prostitution ring."⁸⁾ The story is about a growing Korean prostitution along with "thousands of people" and "millions of dollars involved, whose origin was "imported from Korea" and whose profits rely on Korean prostitutes coming to the United States through "sham" marriages to American servicemen. According to the article, Junction City had been a major spot for recruiting women, mostly Koreans, to work as prostitutes in states such as Hawaii, Texas, New York, Illinois, Michigan, and Wyoming. In one of the AP articles, police Detective A.B. Farrow claims that out of 1,000 to 1,200 Koreans in Junction City, more than 100 Korean women may have been recruited by the Korean prostitution network operating in dozens of U.S. cities. The Junction City police claimed to be able to document 20 to 25 cases of such recruitment. Susie, a pseudonym, is among those Korean women who were recruited. She is 31 years old. After marrying an American serviceman, she came to the United States in 1977 and

arrived in Junction City, KS in 1984 with her GI husband, son, and daughter. Life was “very hard” for her because her husband’s pay was not enough to make ends meet. To support her family, she worked in a commissary and a Korean restaurant as a waitress.

Then, a lure of money came from a Korean woman who offered Susie \$1,000 to pay off her debt and an opportunity to make “big money” as a waitress in a “special” club in Houston. After leaving her children with a babysitter, Susie ended up working as a prostitute serving sometimes “15 customers” a day. She made good money in a brick building where “you can hear nothing, see nothing. The only thing money is good.” Two weeks later, she was able to pay off her loan. Out of her guilt, Susie called her husband to let him know the truth that eventually led her husband to divorce her. Susie lost everything with her realization that “the money is good, but it’s not the future, you know. Lonely inside.”⁹⁾ Although the Korean community in Junction City held a meeting and asked anyone involved in “this humiliating act ... to reconcile and repent,” the news reinforced the image of KMBs as tragic victims of being yanggongju as Dr. Hyun C. Shin, a psychiatrist and vice president of Korean Community Services in Detroit says in one of the AP articles, “A very small minority has damaged our very good reputation.”¹⁰⁾

Moreover, according to one of my interviewees, extreme poverty after a divorce from their American husbands and their responsibility for raising their children led some Korean women to do domestic work for old white farmers. She said that sex was also involved in exchange for money: “when [the old white farmers] flirt with Korean women, you can tell what kind of look and gaze they give to these women. Growing up, most of the [rural white] men probably never saw any Asian woman. Then, all of sudden, ‘the exotic other’ shows up right in front of them. They wanted to fulfill their desire, while these Korean women were in desperate need of money

to take care of their children. That's how it worked."

KMBs were not only viewed as exotic others by some locals, they were also seen as those who came from a poor, uncivilized third world country. For example, on September 22, 1991, in the "Letter to the Editor" section of Junction City Daily Union newspaper, Lisa Dotson of Junction City wrote:

Dogs are thrown alive from the roof top of Korean houses for amusement and eating. Korean students and people carry heads of dogs in their pocket around for good luck... Is that why you have more money for businesses in our beautiful country: add to dog and cat meat, Korean prostitution income?¹¹⁾

Dotson then goes on to conclude her letter by saying that there would be no friendship between "civilized Christian Americans" and Koreans, and if the Koreans wanted to be accepted and respected by "civilized, decent and Christian people in the U.S.," they should stop "pet fortune and eating."¹²⁾ Describing herself as a devout white Christian with compassion for an animal cause, Dotson makes it clear that Europeans are superior to Asians in terms of their care for animals. She wrote that Koreans abuse and eat dogs, some of which are "the pure breeds" coming "originally from Germany and England and where they're bred for intelligence and companionship."¹³⁾

In the next two weeks, the "Letter to Editor" section of the newspaper was flooded with written refutations regarding what Dotson wrote on Koreans and their handling with dogs. Those who wrote to the newspaper all live in Junction City or in the vicinity; they include a Korean pastor, former soldiers who have been stationed in South Korea, husbands of KMBs, a 14-year-old white middle school student, a Korean American woman, and a local who "simply wanted to respond to Dotson's racist remarks." People from all walks of life turned out to be the vigorous

defenders of their Korean friends, wives, and neighbors, and it showed how the diversity and interactions of different cultures could pave the way for a better understanding of a different culture.¹⁴⁾ The Dotson episode demonstrates that the presence of KMBs in Junction City created a terrain in which people had come to understand different cultures and expand their idea of diversity.

V. Human Agency

As much as there were people prejudiced toward Korean newcomers, the presence of KMBs created a new social terrain in which KMBs has helped to bridge the gap between what used to be considered peripheral culture and the core of the more dominant one and its people. As Sherif Hetata suggests, people at the periphery can cut the widening gap between themselves and those at the core. He further explains, “They can bring the cultures of the South closer to the North... They can bring the cultures of the North to the attention and understanding of the South in a different way. They can do a lot to dispel the misconceptions; the ugly images that people in the North and the South have of one another, and contribute to build up solidarity and resistance to the developments engineered by power groups. They can help in setting up intercultural studies based on multicultural studies based on multicultural groups with equal rights” (286).

KMBs are not just the product of their generation in Korea, but also accumulators of cultural, social, and symbolic capitals such as their holding American citizenship and their understanding of race, culture, and society in America. They use these capitals to better themselves and their children. For example, the Americanization process of biracial children of KMBs was expedited through their Korean mothers’

way of raising their children in deeply Korean ways. My interviews with biracial children suggest that the way they were raised by their Korean mothers is different from how other American children were raised. For example, while their mothers worked “like 24/7,” children were always encouraged to “speak like white people do,” “study hard to be successful,” and “respect your parents and others.” Especially, darker skinned biracial children were always reminded to “know your place in America. That’s why I want you to speak perfect English, study and work hard to overcome your status as black.” In this way, biracial children’s Americanization process was expedited through their mothers’ sacrifices and efforts to raise them in a deeply Korean way as their Korean mothers and they are dealing with the stereotype and stigma imposed on their questionable identity.

To set themselves as good examples for their children, while not forgetting their responsibility for their family back in Korea, many KMBs worked tirelessly to support their children and relatives. Said Ms. Park:

My life in America has been suffering itself. Nevertheless, I have never stopped sending money to support my family in Korea, through which all of my sisters got their education all the way to college and married well-educated and successful husbands.

Ms. Park said she often reminded her biracial children of what she had done for the family as an example of the way for the children to live their lives.

Likewise, biracial children’s idea of a positive personhood has been partly constructed by their Korean mothers’ claim on the whites’ sexual and cultural inferiority who “do not take good care of their children, lazy, and dirty. They even send their parents to nursing homes.” Whites are a majority in America, but in claiming a moral and cultural superiority over whites’ as a strategy to raise their

children, some KMB mothers describe themselves as “more family oriented and dedicated” than white mothers.

Just like Ms. Park said that coming to American was “like picking stars out of sky,” most Koreans have imagined America as “the land of opportunity.” That is what led thousands of Korean women to come to America through their exogamy to American servicemen. America as a superior nation and a dominant culture has been deeply ingrained in the minds of these women. However, being dominant or being subordinate is relational in that as Yen Le Espiritu contends, the “margins” do imagine and construct the “mainstream” to claim superiority over it (416). Seen as not well assimilated as their lack of understanding of the mainstream white culture, language, and way of life, many KMBs realize that not everything about America is positive. In other words, KMBs under enormous pressure to erase their otherness utilize elements in their otherness such as “caring” “sacrifice,” and “communalism” to raise their biracial children. In this way, KMB mothers reaffirm their self-worth and transmit their cultural values to their offspring.

Although biracial children of color do not want to be identified as ‘black’, several interviewees told me that they could see the similarities of some cultural superiority between black and Korean cultures over the white culture: dedicated mothers, close-knit family environment and cleaner. White people tend to be “unclean”; they even have their shoes on in their house.” As one biracial person says, “half-Korean children like me either willingly or unconsciously embrace Korean culture.” However, biracial children have gone through a difficult process of identity formation and finding a sense of belonging:

There is nothing about people like me. People look at me as black which I am not. Koreans treat me like I am not Korean which I believe I am. Then, who am I? I was raised by my Korean mother just like the way that other

Korean kids were raised by their Korean mother. I am Korean because I know Korea is my motherland. It has been a constant struggle to 'fit in'. Like my Korean mother who had a hard time being accepted by both American society and Korean communities, I did not know where to belong. I would also like to know why it has been so difficult to find my place in America and in the Korean communities.

Nonetheless, transnational cultural values that biracial children inherited from their Korean mothers have affected the ways in which biracial children of KMBs have formed their identity. "When I state that I am Korean, it is less nebulous than I am African American – mainly because I grew up with my mother and not my father or any extended family that was African American. It was my mother who had babysat my daughter. My daughter's speech, although elegant, is peppered with my mother's broken English but because of the fluidity and eloquence she speaks with, goes undetected. I can pick it out because I know my mother's tongue. I, too, speak her mixed metaphors and broken idioms as well as manifest her mannerisms that I see in other Koreans." Thus, KMBs played a role not only in the massive chain migration of Koreans to the United States but also as agents of transmitting and maintaining traditional Korean cultural values. These transnational cultural values played a pivotal role in the identity formation of biracial children.

Moreover, despite initial reception that was not favorable to them, KMBs in Junction City have opened up businesses and been recognized to have brought a new culture to the locals.

One such example is the owner of the travel agency that is located on the side street of Washington St. Ms. Choi, the Korean owner, works in the lobby office, while her American husband occupies the main office taking calls from his clients. On the wall behind her desk, there are pictures of South Korean Presidents, cities,

and mountains in South Korea. Ms. Choi said that she had reminded herself of where she was from and the culture that she had inherited. She opened up the business after struggling with her husband's pay and deciding to "do something to get better."

The travel agency is one of eight Korean-owned businesses around the downtown area. For example, J. D.'s Furniture & Brass is owned by Chong Gooden who opened the shop when her husband retired from the army. Two blocks down from the store is Pusan restaurant that is KMB-owned. The restaurant is frequented by KMBs and their family as well as "soldiers who had served in Korea. They "felt more at home in Korean restaurants or clubs than they did in traditional Junction City establishments" (Franzen 175). Korean students from Manhattan, KS, where Kansas State University is located, are also regulars to the restaurant. Near the downtown area, Kim's hair salon has served KMBs, other locals, and Korean students at Kansas State University. Ms. Kim, the owner, said that her family came to the United States in the early 80s through chain migration. Her sister-in-law married an American serviceman. Right next to the hair salon is a car stereo/tire shop that Ms. Kim's husband owns.

Furthermore, KMBs in Junction City found the city their home and became important elements of Junction City's rich diversity by reaching out to the non-Korean community. For example, the Korean Baptist church of Central Kansas, under Rev. Paul C. Kim, has opened a food pantry in the church, helping all people in need in their neighborhood. Moreover, when the Junction City Chamber of Commerce held its Crossroads of Leadership Program for potential leaders of the community in 1991, Nina Willey, Ki Hwan Daniel's daughter, became increasingly upset when some people in one session discussed the removal of bars on Washington St., one of which her mother owns. Willey stood up and said: "My mother [Ki Hwan Daniel] has owned the Mission Billiard Parlor for eighteen years. She does a lot for

the community. She helps people who are on the street by providing food, shelter, and odd jobs. If you don't like the way outside of her business looks, tell us what you want and we'll improve it" (Franzen 174).

Before his death from stomach cancer in 1973, Ki Hwan Daniel's husband bought the Mission Billiard Parlor and helped her learn to manage it so that she could support herself and their three children. Although she could not read or write English, Ki Hwan had good business skills. Her regular customers were mostly civilians, "older and white" with an army crowd on payday. Some of the regulars included people who are unemployed and homeless. On many occasions she offered them jobs in her billiard parlor or found jobs for them. She even provided her customers with a turkey feast. Her business flourished, and she brought her family over from Korea: her mother, a brother and his wife, a sister and her husband, and five nephews. She became a leader of the Korean community (Franzen 173-4).

As more Koreans opened up small businesses in Junction City, they formed the Korean business association. One of the former presidents of the association is Jae Myung Yu who came to Junction City with the help of his sister and American brother-in-law. After his family moved to the city, they started working on the military base for several years to save enough to open up their own businesses such as the Korean grocery store, restaurant, and mill house, which are leading up to the Fort Riley gate. Yu's Korean restaurant is frequented by many U.S. soldiers and locals, and his restaurant has played an important role in bringing Korean culture to Junction City.

In addition, Korean churches have provided KMBs and their families with an opportunity to "maintain social interactions and friendship with fellow Koreans" (Min 381). Many KMBs hold regular church district meeting called *kuyok yebae*. This group district meeting constitutes a religious service with a number of opportunities

for informal social interactions. Church members belonging to the same district rotate hosting the meeting at their house. I attended one of Ms. Park's kuyok yebae upon her request. There were six Korean women and a daughter of one of the members. When I got to their meeting, all of the members were already present singing a hymn in a small living room. Then, each of them offered an individual prayer. One prayed to God that her American husband would turn over a new leaf to take care of the family. Another prayed for better days after all the economic hardship that she had dealt with. Other members all prayed for the little girl at the meeting who has disability. The women I interviewed all tried to regain their physical and emotional strength through God. They also listened to other members' prayers and concerns and offered advice. Ms. Park said that it was good to share her pain and sorrow with fellow Koreans. She insisted, "what God had given to us is that the love to take care of each of the fellow Koreans in this alien country."

It is important to note that KMBs are not a homogenous group. There are divisions and conflicts among these women depending on their husband's rank and race. "My husband is a lieutenant colonel, so I can't talk to you," "Do you know that officers' wives are not allowed to talk to sergeant's wives because of military regulations?" "You can't come here because this is only for officers' wives, sergeants' wives are not allowed to come" (qtd in Jeong 75). Said Mrs. T, "many officers' Korean wives seem to believe that if their husband is a Major, then they are also a Major, if their husband is a lieutenant colonel, then they act though they are the one who has earned the right to a position high up in the chain of command." Even at the church, officers' wives almost always sit together and eat their lunch, while Korean wives of the enlisted eat together on the other table. Although most KMBs achieved their symbolic capital of an American citizenship, their capital is valued in relation to one another, and their identity is constructed situationally. For

example, those who married a private, especially a black private had to deal with more discrimination and racism from other KMBs and Korean immigrants. As Jeong, a KMB, suggests that she had met KMBs who socially segregate themselves from others, while informing their children that “all Korean women who marry U.S. servicemen are whores,” and they even “refuse to speak Korean as a way of separating themselves from those they deem socially inferior” (Jeong 12). Furthermore, the social status of a KMB tends to be judged based on her husband’s rank:

As a regular attendee of a Korean church around the military base (in Leavenworth, KS) for more than six, I witnessed many such instances of discrimination and preference based on husband’s rank. One pastor had a habit of only officially welcoming new church members who were married to officers. On occasion, when he made announcements during the service, even though it had nothing to do with the sermon, my pastor would often interject off topic like “We haven’t seen Mrs. Y for a while, Mrs. Y is back from her trip to Korea. Welcome back. Your husband is a Major, right?” (Jeong 76).

Jeong contends that many Korean wives of the enlisted experienced discrimination from officer’s wives. Thus, social status of a KMB is greatly influenced by the rank and race of her husband.

After KMBs came to Junction City, KS, they had gone through dynamic transnational transformation in a rural Kansas town. By building and sustaining an ethnic community and cross-cultural alliances with the locals, they were able to make Junction City their home. In this community building process, however, each KMB’s coping strategies in the new place was different within these circumstances to negotiate their racialized and gendered identity. My interviews with KMBs suggest that some women chose to remain permanently isolated from anything Korean because of the deeply embedded pain that they had to endure from Koreans and

Korean society. They also did so to expedite their children's Americanization process. Some turned to prostitution in exchange for money. One of my interviewees explained that many KMBs and even biracial children of these women worked at bars, massage parlors or became some white men's mistresses. She added that many white men viewed these Korean women as "exotic others," and there was "a demand for the exotic Asian women" in small towns, Kansas. Most of them strove to better their lives and children by working on the Fort Riley base, at retail stores, or at factories near Junction City. Many of them also opened their own businesses from which the Korean community and people in Junction City have benefited greatly in terms of economy and culture. Most importantly, most of the KMBs chose to sacrifice their lives for the betterment and success of their children. They believe that uplifting the status of their children through education and hard work would give the mothers an opportunity to be accepted to mainstream Korean and American societies.

VI. Conclusion

As Richard Gruneau argues, structural constraints give social actors new possibilities to expand their agency (26-8). "Black man or white man didn't really matter. I had to go to America." In a society where traditional patriarchal gender-norms and stigma of yanggongju still held disciplining power over their questionable identity, to KMBs like Ms. Park, Geum-ja, 87, marrying an American serviceman was the only way for her to escape extreme poverty, support the rest of the family that she left behind, and realize their American Dream. Simply putting these women as victims of yanggongju and representing them as a homogeneous group who lacks agency reflect the view of the existing studies that have situated

KMBs at the margins of the Korean American community and American society. Thus, my efforts to look at the Korean community in Junction City are to overcome the limits of the existing studies. KMBs, whether their marriages to their American husbands failed or not, have become integral members of both the Korean and the local communities to which they belong.

Notes

- 1) In *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, Thomas Averill explains the popular culture role that Kansas and the rest of the Midwest play. The idea of the Midwest as the “Heartland” influences many Americans to believe that “somewhere people are innocent ... close to God, living out the values of an older America—the ‘family values’.” 19-21.
- 2) Yokohama came from Yokohama, Japan, so it is clear that he is a Japanese national when he applied for the U.S. citizenship. According to the article, he married a white American woman from Newton, Kansas. Therefore, he was eligible for an American citizenship as a spouse of the United States citizen. *Kansas City Times*, Sept. 4, 1953.
- 3) Chico Herbison and Jerry Schultz, “Quiet Passages: The Japanese American War Bride Experience,” The Center for East Asian Studies, the University of Kansas.
- 4) Field note on September 26, 2004.
- 5) Kim’s father is a pastor in one of the Korean churches in Junction City. His aunt who married an American serviceman brought Kim’s family to the United States. Known in the Korean community as one of those immigrant families who made their American Dream, he works as a manager at a telecommunication company, while his two brothers work as an accountant and hold a managerial position in a company.
- 6) According to Ms. Peter, many KMB students could take ESL classes because of efforts of Junction City High School. Especially, a counselor at the school, a former serviceman stationed in Korea, did everything he could to accommodate English classes and leaning environment for these women. He had a good knowledge on the Korean community and really wanted to help them ease their adaptation process. Sometimes, they overlooked the federal regulations to let in as many Korean students as possible.
- 7) Cohen, Sharon. “Susie’s story: From GI wife and mother to prostitute.” *Junction City Daily Union* 24 Sep 1986: 11. Print.

- 8) Sharon, Cohen. "Michigan City cracks down on Korean-run health spas." *Junction City Daily Union* 24 Sep 1986: 11. Print.
- 9) Cohen, Sharon. "Susie's story: From GI wife and mother to prostitute." *Junction City Daily Union* 24 Sep 1986: 11. Print.
- 10) Sharon, Cohen. "Michigan City cracks down on Korean-run health spas." *Junction City Daily Union* 24 Sep 1986: 11. Print.
- 11) Dotson, Lisa. "Unhappy with pet treatment." Letters to the Editor. *Junction City Daily Union* 22 Sep 1991: 6. Print
- 12) Dotson, Lisa. "Unhappy with pet treatment." Letters to the Editor. *Junction City Daily Union* 22 Sep 1991: 6. Print
- 13) Dotson, Lisa. "Unhappy with pet treatment." Letters to the Editor. *Junction City Daily Union* 22 Sep 1991: 6. Print
- 14) Letters to the Editor. *Junction City Daily Union* 28 Sep, 3, 22, and 27 & 3, Oct 1991. Print.

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Census Data

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3. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1970 Census of Population, Prepared by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Washington D.C. 1973), 18-87.
4. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1980 Census of Population, Prepared by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (Washington D.C. 1981), 18-35~15: Table 15.
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6. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000. Table DP-1.

Interviews

Junction City

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Moon, J. Personal interview. 9 Aug. 2003.

Ms. S. Personal and e-mail interviews. 11 Jan and 19 Jan. 2011.

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국문초록

캔자스 주 정선 시티 한인 이주민 역사 연구: 국제결혼 여성들을 중심으로

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이 연구는 미국 캔자스 주 한인 디아스포라 조사를 통해 미주 한인 이민의 역사를 동부와 서부에 국한시키는 패러다임을 넘어서려는 시도이다. 캔자스 주 한인 디아스포라는 미군과 결혼하여 이주한 군인아내들이 주축이었으며, 그들이 한인사회와 지역 공동체와의 관계 속에서 큰 역할을 했다는 사실이 드러났다. 구술 인터뷰와, 고문서 조사연구, 그리고 참여자적 관찰방법으로 캔자스 주 한인들이 타자가 아닌 주체로서 자신들만의 정체성을 구성해 온 과정을 탐색했다. 연구는 캔자스 주 정선 시티 한인 이주민들의 역사 연구를 통해 한인들이 인종과, 계급, 그리고 젠더의 장벽 앞에서 한국인으로서의 정체성을 잃지 않고 경계인이 아니라 미국 사회에서 한국계 미국인으로 인정받고자 노력했음이 밝혀진다. 또한 향후 미국 중부지역 한인 이민 역사 연구에 대한 창의적 패러다임들 제시한다.

주제어 : 미주 한인, 한인 이민, 디아스포라, 젠더, 구술사

논문접수일: 2016.05.16

심사완료일: 2016.06.15

게재 확정일: 2016.06.20

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