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The Making of a Racial Divide: Black-Korean Tensions and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

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Abstract

Following the Civil Rights Movement and the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965), Asian immigrants increased in America; at the same time, many Black American communities faced the processes of deindustrialization, segregation, and police violence. Then, "model minority" emerged, presenting the Asian Americans as exemplary immigrants who achieved economic success through hard work and perseverance. These developments converged in Los Angeles as Korean immigrants opened stores in Black American neighborhoods long marked by economic underdevelopment. The purpose of this historical case study is to explore how the development of the model minority stereotype has impacted the underlying causes of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, as well as the interpretation of these events. Through secondary sources—with frequent references to platforms dedicated to Asian American history, scholars such as Edward J.W. Park, the chair of the Department of Asian American studies at Loyola Marymount University, and the use of empirical evidence provided by reliable data centers and universities—it can be thoroughly argued that the riots occurred from the marginalization of two minorities which masked the structural nature of the inequality present. Ultimately, the analysis finds that structural factors such as economic disparity, segregation, and institutional failures played a crucial role in the tensions between the two marginalized groups. Media and political portrayals of the race-based conflict were found to have neglected these structural factors, showing how the model-minority stereotype influenced the perception of the event.

Keywords: Los Angeles riots, Model minority, Sa-I-Gu, Asian Americans, Black Americans, Economic segregation, Deindustrialization

1. Introduction

April 1992 featured American TV screens filled with pictures of burning buildings and Korean American storeowners armed with weapons guarding the Korean community in the Los Angeles Riots. Swiftly, the Los Angeles Riots on April 29th became characterized by mainstream media as an interracial riot, pitting the Black and Korean communities against each other in Los Angeles, with minor attention paid to the underlying social causes of the riots. However, the riots were not purely about racism within interpersonal interactions. Indeed, the riots resulted from years of neglect and abandonment of South Central Los Angeles through economic policy, segregation, deindustrialization, harsh policing, and poor leadership. It is important to note that the model minority stereotype played a role in these conflicts, and this use of the stereotype is rooted in the politics surrounding it. Though on the surface this stereotype appears positive, it is politically motivated by comparing Asian Americans to Black Americans, suggesting that institutionalized racism can be overcome through individual perseverance. Many Korean immigrants also encountered discrimination and hardship, finding business opportunities through owning businesses within Black communities because other options were limited. Additionally, Black residents in South Central Los Angeles were experiencing increased unemployment, poverty, economic decline, and police harassment as the result of decades of factory

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closures and white flight—the "departure of white residents from neighborhoods in response to the arrival of non-European racial, ethnic, or cultural groups" (Britannica, 2026). The acquittal of the four police officers, who had been caught on video tape beating Rodney King, ignited these tensions, resulting in an instantaneous protest. Ultimately, according to City Journal, "L.A. 's Korean immigrant community sustained nearly half the riots' $1 billion in property damage…including 2,300 predominately Korean-owned businesses in South L.A. alone" (Johnson, 2012). The significant damage incurred by Korean-owned businesses marked the date *Sa-I-Gu,* or the date 4/29 in Korean, as a major part of Korean American history and exposed the effects of structural discrimination as opposed to merely racial discrimination. This paper explores how the myth of the model minority affected the circumstances leading up to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and the interpretation of the riots among the general public. The central question posed in this paper is: In what ways did the myth of the model minority affect the causes of and interpretation of the Los Angeles Riots? By situating the riots within the broader contexts of immigration policy, economic restructuring, housing inequality, policing, and media representation, this study argues that the violence cannot be understood solely as a racial conflict between two communities. Instead, it demonstrates how political narratives and systemic inequalities positioned Black and Korean Americans in opposition while obscuring the institutional forces that shaped both communities' experiences. Reexamining *Sa-I-Gu* through this broader historical framework offers insight into the continuing influence of racial stereotypes and structural inequality on interethnic relations in the United States.

2. Methodology

Both qualitative historical research and descriptive data approaches are employed for the analysis. Qualitative historical research, in this case, will focus mainly on the use of secondary sources to establish the connection between the model minority myth and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. The research of keywords, including "Sa-I-Gu" and "Korean Americans in the 1990s," on JSTOR provided the necessary background information to corroborate the findings. Additionally, graphs and statistics from sources including Pew Research Center, Decennial Census and the American Community survey, UCLA Asian American Studies Center, and the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University supplied essential visuals to illustrate the factors that caused certain perceptions of both Korean Americans and Black Americans. Notably, when researching, the years 1990-2000 were frequently searched. Emphasis was placed on economic statistics such as that of homeownership and income, proving the existing tension between KoreanAmericans and Black Americans due to the success of Korean-Americans in LA. The case study of *Sa-I-Gu* is observed based on the themes of immigration policies, economic restructuring, police work, and media. The main objective of this research approach is to study the background behind the events in terms of structural causes, as well as their perception by the society at large. Sources of historians, sociologists, legal scholars, and Asian American studies scholars are used to analyze the development of the model minority myth historically, change in immigration policies since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the economic restructuring of South Central Los Angeles, and the experiences of Black American and Korean Americans prior, during, and after the riots. Quantitative research was used as descriptive data, involving the use of demographic, educational, income, ownership data, and media representation to analyze stereotypes associated with the model minority myth as well as the portrayal of the LA riots to the public. Statistics were interpreted to reinforce ideas such as the financial and educational prowess of Asian Americans.

3. Rodney King, Latasha Harlins, and the Consequences of Systemic Inequality

Institutional inequities and discriminatory practices significantly contributed to the tension that gave rise to the LA Riots. Many Black Americans were frustrated with the justice system and police institutions that did not provide equitable treatment. There were two well-publicized cases that came to exemplify these inequities in institutions. The first instance came on March 3, 1991, when a Black American motorist Rodney King was severely beaten by Los Angeles police officers, who pursued King in a high-speed chase. According to prosecutor Steven Clymer, the recording captured widespread attention, "stoking worldwide outrage" by providing unprecedented visual evidence of police brutality. The footage became "the centerpiece of a state court prosecution" against four LAPD officers; yet,

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despite the apparent indisputability, all four officers were acquitted (Clymer, 2022). Specifically, the officers "had been charged in the seven-week trial with assault with a deadly weapon and excessive force under color of authority" (Rowland, 1992). According to Clymer, the long history of racism and police force in the United States connects cases of police brutality as indicators of the country's racial injustice. Therefore, Black Americans' fear that the justice system would not hold police officers accountable for violence became acceptable. The four officers' acquittals reinforced concerns among many Black residents about police accountability. The dissatisfaction was increased after fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins was shot in the same month. Harlins entered Empire Liquor Market owned by Soon Ja Du—a Korean American woman—with an intention to purchase a bottle of orange juice worth $1.79. However, Du accused Latasha of shoplifting, and shot the girl. Video evidence proved that Harlins did have money in her possession and Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter (*People v. Soon Ja Du*, 1992). Still, Du was allowed to serve her punishment outside of prison. American historian Brenda E. Stevenson suggested that Judge Joyce Karlin's identification of Du "as a member of a model minority"— stereotypes that portray Korean immigrants as hardworking, law-abiding, and economically successful—influenced not only Du's judicial perception, but also that of the public, in this case (Yi et al., 2020). Both the King and Harlins verdicts that condoned the violence towards Black Americans suggest mistreatment of the Black American community. Similar to the King verdict, the verdict from Harlins' case proved that, from a Black American's perspective, American society appeared to work unfavorably towards them. Together, the King and Harlins' events highlighted years of neglect, segregation, and discrimination against Black Americans. Occurring within weeks of each other, these cases reinforced that there were continuous failures of the American system in ensuring equality for Black Americans or providing justice. Yet when the riots erupted, the public increasingly framed the violence as a conflict between Black and Korean communities, framing the riots as a representation of violence as opposed to the institutional failures that had fueled widespread frustration.

4. Inventing the "Model Minority"

The concept of "model minority," advanced by sociologist William Petersen, has been established in the 1960s as a political narrative about Asian Americans. Petersen introduced the term in his 1966 New York Times Magazine article titled "Success Story, Japanese American Style," in which he portrayed Japanese Americans as a group that had achieved socioeconomic success despite discrimination (University of Michigan Department of History, n.d.). After the Japanese Americans were interned in remote camps during World War II, they were presented with the term *model minority*. The Japanese Americans rebuilt their lives, with growing rates of church attendance, college attendance, and high-paying professional employment, proving Japanese Americans' resilience as they overcame discrimination largely through their own efforts (Edwards, 2026). The stereotype was later broadened to characterize Asian Americans as uniformly hardworking. By the time of LA riots, Asian Americans had already "assimilated economically and socially… [and] Politicians then labelled Asian Americans the 'model minority' because of their alleged strong work ethic, family values, and lawfulness that supposedly lead to their integration into American society" (Kim, 2021). This portrayal was deeply connected to a broader American belief that success was a result of individual effort and the ability to achieve the American Dream. By presenting Asian Americans as evidence that hard work alone could overcome barriers, the model minority myth reinforced the idea that economic success was equally accessible to all Americans. The "model minority" stereotype eventually became a confirmation of the ideal of meritocracy that underlay the myth of the American Dream. With Asian Americans rising on account of determination, the persistent discrimination of other minorities had more often been attributed to individual failures rather than institutional discrimination.

4.1 Constructing a Myth of Meritocracy

The academic success of Asian Americans further advanced the model minority as a factual reality rather than a myth. This idea is significantly supported in Los Angeles, where the college enrollment statistics in the UC system showed an immense discrepancy between Asian Americans and Black Americans. In 1990, an enrollment survey by the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS) recorded that out of 124,160 total undergraduates, 5,878 Black

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American undergraduates were enrolled in the UC system (~4.7%) whereas 30,846 Asian or Pacific Islander identifying undergraduates were enrolled (~24.8%). This roughly sixfold difference implied that Asian Americans had successfully achieved the American Dream through education and hard work.

Moreover, economic status served to promote the idealistic perception of Asian Americans. Granted, some of the income data from the graph comes after the uprising; nevertheless, Figure 1 illustrates a longer-term pattern of economic inequality and increased changes in income between Asian Americans and Black Americans. According to Figure 1, during 1970 to 2016, the incomes of Asian Americans at the 90th percentile increased by 96% between 1970 and 2016, the largest increase than any other racial group. Specifically, the 90th percentile of White Americans had an increase of 80%, Black Americans had an increase of 79%, and Hispanic Americans had an increase of 58%. Thus, when analyzing the majority of the population of each race, Asian Americans proved to have experienced the greatest success in terms of income. At the same time, it is important to note that this generalization did not apply to Asian Americans as a whole. In particular, the 10th percentile of Asian Americans had an income increase of only 11%. Such data clearly indicate that economic growth was concentrated among higher-income Asian Americans, while those with lower-income experienced limited gains. Despite the slight increase amongst the 10th percentile of Asian Americans, the perception of Asian Americans as largely successful persisted. This understanding of Asian Americans as economically thriving remained in 1992, serving as a catalyst for increased frustration during the LA riots.

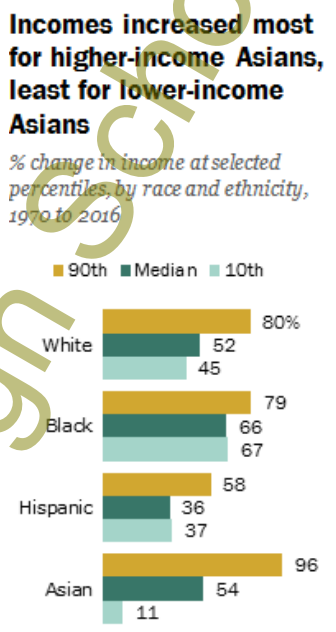


Figure 1. Changes in Income By Race and Ethnicity, 1970-2016
Source: Pew Research Center

The economic success of the majority of Asian Americans helped reinforce the model minority stereotype, portraying Asian Americans as prosperous at a time when other groups—particularly Black Americans—were comparably lower in economic status.

4.2 Homeownership as the Measure of the American Dream

Within this narrative, homeownership came to embody the idea of economic security and belonging in America owing to its association with the country's values of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," together with the idea that ownership of property symbolized independence and upward social mobility. This connection between property and personal freedom can be traced back to Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, whose emphasis on natural rights shaped the political foundations of the United States. In *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke argues that "Lives, Liberties and Estates, which I call by the general Name, Property" demonstrate that property was not merely a material possession, but an extension of individual liberty. By placing property alongside life and liberty, Locke implied that the opportunity to acquire and maintain possessions was essential. Thus, the American Dream came to include financial achievement: home ownership. Subsequently, Asian Americans diligently worked to become homeowners—another testament to their model citizenship.

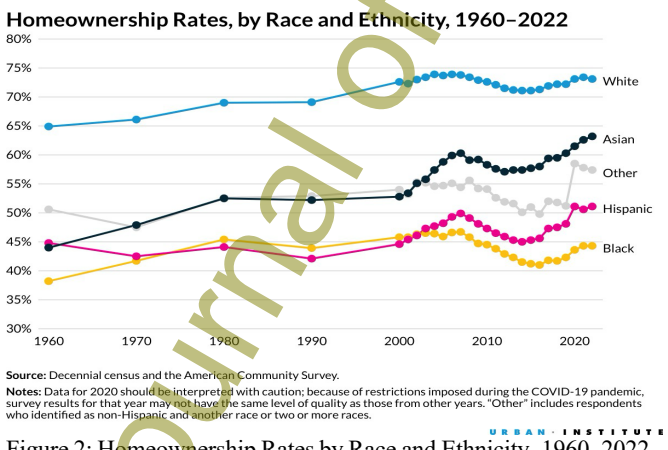


Figure 2: Homeownership Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 1960–2022
Source: Decennial census and the American Community Survey

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Historian Jim Cullen argues that homeownership became "the most widely realized American Dream," emerging from the Homestead Act of 1862 and reaching its height with the expansion of suburbia in the twentieth century (Cullen, 2003). Rather than simply providing a place to live, owning a home came to symbolize that an individual had achieved financial stability, independence, and a permanent place within American society. Cullen further explains that many Americans viewed homeownership as "the best means to their end of upward mobility for their children," illustrating that purchasing a home was seen as an investment in future generations as much as personal success. This transformation elevated homeownership beyond a financial asset into a cultural measure of whether someone had fulfilled the American Dream. Consequently, because homeownership increasingly determined access to wealth, stability, and opportunity, those who were denied the ability to own homes were effectively excluded from one of the nation's defining ideals. Nevertheless, this path to financial success and happiness was not inclusive.

For Black Americans, decades of segregation and discriminatory housing practices severely restricted opportunities for homeownership. This exclusion remained evident in the 1950s, when Black Americans were barred from purchasing homes in Levittowns, prominent suburban developments that symbolized postwar homeownership. Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese quotes John S. Fells, a real estate broker from 1949, that “a Negro could not buy one of the houses” (Nicolaides and Wiese, 2006). Throughout American history, certain groups were excluded from homeownership due to racial inequality. The desire for homeownership existed across racial groups, but access to it was certainly not equal. The whiteness of suburban residential communities had long been protected by homeowners, real estate companies, and lending institutions, while the home loan system was “rigged against minorities” (Lee, 2016). Yet, Japanese and Chinese Americans, in particular, were increasingly accepted “almost like whites,” making them more likely than Black Americans to gain access to suburban housing in the mid-1950s (Lee, 2016). Indeed, Asian Americans increasingly entered the suburbs as the “model minority” image gained prominence in American society, suggesting that their growing access to homeownership was shaped by changing racial perceptions (Lee, 2016). Moreover, by the late twentieth century, statistics indicated that Asian Americans had even succeeded economically. According to the 1990 Decennial Census and American Community Survey (Figure 2), more than 50% of Asian Americans owned their homes, as opposed to about 45% of Black Americans. The statistics suggest that Asian Americans are a “successful minority,” who have risen above racial challenges through hard work and determination to achieve that American Dream. This interpretation was strengthened by the changing treatment of some Asian Americans in the housing market.

Homeownership became a fulfillment of the right to life, liberty, and property, which had long been deeply rooted in American politics. In this way, Asian Americans proved themselves as model minorities whose achievement resembled that of white Americans. Property ownership was perceived as the proof of individual freedom and independence and the complete membership of one into society. In other words, an increase in Asian American homeownership was interpreted as the result of the successful acquisition of basic American values through one's own efforts and hard work. However, these comparisons ignored the historical circumstances that shaped these outcomes, specifically the experiences of different racial groups.

5. Significance of 1965: Immigration Reform and Unequal Opportunity

In 1965, a breakthrough was made in relation to the issues connected with racism, immigration, and citizenship in America. Namely, some processes occurred in connection with the Civil Rights Movement which had been created in order to struggle for rights of oppressed Black Americans in America. Civil rights acts, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, played an important role in the struggles of Black Americans for their rights and against discrimination and segregation. Nevertheless, in 1965, a breakthrough was made concerning the policy of American immigration, due to the adoption of the Hart-Celler Act, which is also called the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Due to this act, signed by the President of the USA Lyndon B. Johnson, the system of national origins quota introduced in 1924 and limiting immigration of people to America was canceled. As a result, immigration of Asians to America increased. This demographic change was part of the larger changes that came due to the Civil Rights Movement, as this movement dismantled many forms of legalized racism and created an atmosphere where Asian Americans who were now coming into the country would be able to build their businesses and even buy homes

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without encountering as many formal obstacles as their predecessors did. All of these factors have led to the fast-growing communities of people from nations including Korea, China, India, and the Philippines. This was not without its drawbacks, however, as the opportunities had appeared after the Civil Rights Movement. As American legal scholar Dyson notes, “race relations among West Indians, Africans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and biracial persons, there has been a notion that Black Americans ‘earned’ their civil rights, while other immigrants continue to ‘free ride on benefits borne out of a legacy of the racial struggle fought by black Americans over the past 400 years’”(Yi et al., 2020). Here, the phrase “free ride” reflects a divisive perspective that suggests later immigrant groups benefited from civil rights protections achieved through Black Americans’ historical struggle, rather than having fought for those protections themselves. This characterization represents a perspective expressed in the cited source, rather than an established fact or a conclusion of this paper. This narrative further incited resentment among Black Americans, as political perspectives were developed comparing the success of Asian Americans to the economic hardships that were being faced by Black Americans. In doing so, the model minority myth transformed the achievements of many Asian Americans into a racial comparison that ignored the distinct historical experiences and inequalities faced by both groups.

6. The Demographic Shift and the Rise of Interminority Conflict

While the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 allowed for increased chances for Asian immigrants to enter the country, it was also responsible for changing the racial dynamics of the United States. While the Act may have allowed for increased immigration to the country, it changed the demographic structure of the United States, especially in urban areas where both newly arrived Asian immigrants and well-settled Black communities coexisted. Race relations in the country thus could no longer be viewed only in terms of Black and White people.

Professor of Ethnic Studies Edward T. Chang explains that "the demographic shift began with the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act which brought new waves of immigrants from Asia and Latin and Central America and significantly altered the face of America” (Chang, 2012). Rather than representing a gradual demographic trend, the Hart-Celler Act produced a rapid influx of immigrants whose arrival transformed cities, such as Los Angeles, into increasingly multi-racial communities. Supporting Chang's argument, Tran et al. note that the post-1965 immigration wave "made an indelible imprint on the nation's ethnoracial landscape, transforming it from a largely black-white society at the end of World War II to a kaleidoscope of ethnoracial groups” (Tran et al., 2018). This observation highlights the importance of the Hart-Celler Act in changing not only the level of immigration but also in transforming the demographic structure of the country to become one where interracial relations assume greater importance. These changes meant that Americans could no longer understand race through a simple Black-white framework. As Chang further notes, "racial and ethnic relations in Los Angeles and beyond in the United States have shifted from biracial to multiracial" (Chang, 2012). This transformation challenged traditional understandings of race while simultaneously creating new relationships and new competition among minority groups.

These demographic changes also reshaped economic relationships between minority communities. Chang explains, "the growth of the Asian American and Latino population aggravated relations between Korean and African Americans, Latino and African Americans, and white and African Americans” (Chang, 2012). While growing diversity itself was not inherently divisive, rapid population growth occurred alongside deindustrialization, shrinking employment opportunities, and limited affordable housing in many urban neighborhoods. As more groups competed for the same resources, racial tensions intensified. Rather than addressing the structural causes of inequality, public discourse increasingly interpreted these conflicts through racial comparisons, allowing stereotypes about supposedly "successful" and "unsuccessful" minorities to gain traction. Due to the manner in which society perceived both racial groups, Asian Americans and Black Americans were likely to internalize these perceptions, heightening the hostility toward one another.

With increasing ethnic diversity in the United States, these demographic changes occurred alongside existing racial and economic inequalities, creating conditions in which tensions between minority communities could emerge. South Central Los Angeles became one of the clearest examples of how demographic transformation intersected with economic restructuring. Chang observes that during the 1980s "the African American population increased only by

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13%, but the Latino population increased by 53% and Asian Americans by 108% in South Central Los Angeles (Chang, 2012)." He further argues that "these demographic changes along with the restructuring of the American economy have had a profound impact on racial and ethnic relations in Los Angeles... in the form of increasing inter-minority conflicts" (Chang, 2012). Although demographic changes on their own did not lead to conflict, they worked together with the economic decline, lack of job opportunities, and competition for small business and housing. All of these elements contributed to the tension between various communities becoming more apparent as they themselves felt marginalized. Demographic changes thus served as a backdrop against which the stereotype of the model minority became transformed into a full-fledged racial narrative, dividing the minority communities instead of working out the inequalities they both had in common.

7. Economic Competition and the Racialization of Korean Businesses

Structural inequalities shaped not only where communities lived and worked, but also how they perceived one another. The resulting tensions became especially visible in interactions between Black residents and Korean business owners.Culture played a major role in shaping the perception of Black and Korean communities. Still, these tensions cannot be understood without taking into consideration the economic and structural conditions of the late twentieth century. Economic situation and lack of opportunities affected the environment of interaction of these communities, creating both an atmosphere of competitiveness and misunderstanding.

7.1 The Economic Landscape

During the early 1990s, there were already heightened levels of tension between certain elements of the Black and Korean populations in South Central Los Angeles. This friction had been generated in an atmosphere of economic downturn. According to the Population Reference Bureau, the elimination of low-skill manufacturing jobs created a "spatial mismatch" between inner-city workers and employment opportunities, while the shift toward a service economy produced a "skills mismatch," leaving many residents without access to jobs that matched their experience (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). The report notes that these changes had an especially severe impact on Black Americans, who were "overrepresented in manufacturing jobs and more likely to live in inner cities." Despite the fact that both the Korean Americans and the Black Americans lived in the same neighborhoods, the two groups had access to these neighborhoods through very different social and economic lenses. It is worth noting that the Korean American owned businesses in the predominantly Black neighborhoods whereas the Black Americans had been denied economic opportunities because of racial discrimination for decades. This scenario was indicative of the existing patterns of racial inequalities in the U.S. As seen in Figure 3, despite the highest income increase among all minorities, Asian Americans showed the biggest gap in income inequality between 1970 and 2016. In other words, the highest income inequality within the Asian American minority increased more compared to other racial minorities. Thus, many poor Asian immigrants, among them being the Korean Americans, had not benefited from the high growth of incomes. At the same time, Black Americans were encountering obstacles in economic mobility because of discrimination in housing, segregation, and employment for decades.

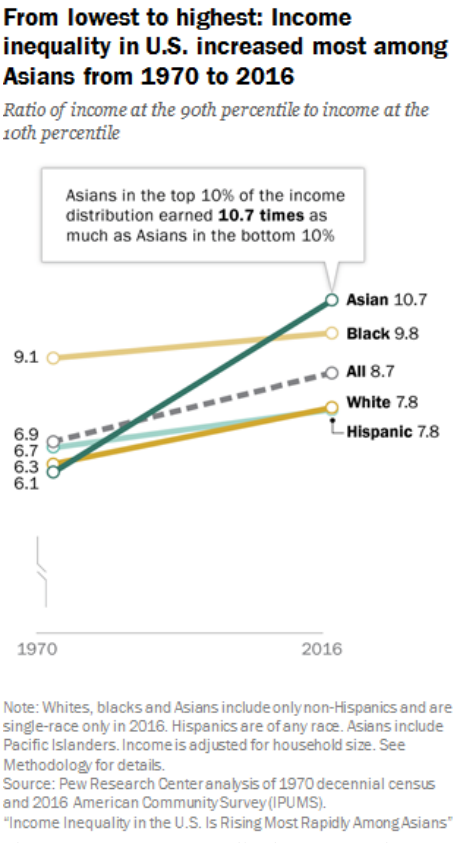


Figure 3: Income Inequality by Race and Ethnicity, 1970–2016
Source: Pew Research Center

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7.2 Community Perceptions

From the perspective of some Black residents, Korean merchants were perceived as parasites who were often viewed as "working here, living there" and "earning here, spending there," reinforcing the perception that profits left the community rather than being reinvested locally (Yi et al., 2020). Some even went to the extent of describing Korean Americans as "foreign intruders" who "disrespect and insult Black American customers while making money" in Black neighborhoods (Yi et al., 2020). These perceptions contributed to growing distrust and hostility, particularly as many Black neighborhoods continued to struggle with poverty and limited economic investment.

Importantly, these conflicts were not a consequence of the fact that Korean Americans conducted business activities, but rather the result of the social environment in which economic difficulties led to competition for scarce resources and segregation by race did not allow for the development of interaction between ethnic groups. At the same time, public discussions since the 1992 Los Angeles riot have moved away from the underlying problems of the riot, instead focusing on the notion that the primary cause of the riots was the conflict between Black American citizens and Korean Americans. This narrow framing of the unrest obscured the deeper structural inequalities that fueled it, as "Redirecting Black Americans' anger and frustration toward Korean immigrants" worked to divert Americans' attention from the underlying causes of the riots (Yi et al., 2020). Many Korean businesses were then "scapegoated" as the ones who had caused the plight of people in South Central Los Angeles. However, eventually, the use of the term "model minority" brought about accusations of Korean Americans' public opinion because this story was hiding the structures that prevented Black people from moving up and instead shifted all the blame for this inequality to Korean businesses and made Korean Americans look like people who were benefiting from this unfair situation. Moreover, the label did not take into account the structures that influenced the development of Korean American entrepreneurship as well as the inequalities that existed within the Black American community.

Focusing on the problems faced by the Black American population rather than the root causes of these inequalities and discrimination, some Black residents viewed Korean merchants as outsiders who were economically privileged and thriving in contrast to their suffering neighbors. With the frustration accumulated in the South Central Los Angeles neighborhood, Korean-owned businesses became easy targets. Many residents viewed these businesses as symbols of the economic inequality and racial tensions that had been building in the community. Furthermore, the tension was exacerbated by the increased gap between Korean entrepreneurs and the Black population, since many Korean Americans ran their own businesses in places where they did not feel like they belonged. In addition, Black residents had very little economic prospects, thus making successful businesses owned by Koreans seem very unfair. Resentment towards Korean business owners was increasing despite the fact that they were not responsible for the broader structural issues affecting the community. Thus, already existing economic and racial tensions led to Korean-owned stores becoming the objects of destruction during the unrest, thus distracting from the real problem that made people upset. In other words, the perception made the existing rift between the two communities even stronger and contributed to the racial tensions experienced during the unrest. Ultimately, these misconceptions shifted attention away from the underlying social and economic inequalities and further deepened the divide between Korean American and Black communities.

8. Media Representation

In the media coverage of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, there is a conspicuous trend of excessive presentation of images of "Blacks" and "Latinos" but not many portrayals of Asian-Americans although Korean Americans were severely affected by these riots. Such trends reflect the nature of the media's choice of narrative form, which promotes racial stereotypes and simplifies the issues by presenting the visible violence that took place during the riots rather than its complex social and economic reasons. Figure 4, published by Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government shows the race of people who appear in TV news coverage of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992. Network and local TV stations have paid much attention to Black Americans and Latinos, but they have presented limited information about Asian Americans. It is important to note that the data collected in Figure 4 was collected from "the three major networks (the "NBC Nightly News," the "CBS Evening News," and "ABC World News Tonight");

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Univision, the top-rated Spanish-language news network three stations in Los Angeles, including KABC-TV and KNBC-TV, the top-rated network affiliates and a Korean-language news program, Korean Television Enterprises or KTE-TVj and three top-rated local news programs in geographically diverse parts of the country-WCVB-TV in Boston, WXJI-TV in Winston-Salem, C. and WDAY-TV in Fargo, N.D.-Moorhead, Minn….In all, 903 stories and 2,228 soundbites were coded. The coverage analyzed includes 621 riot news and 282 general news stories, totaling 28.5 hours."(Smith, 1994)

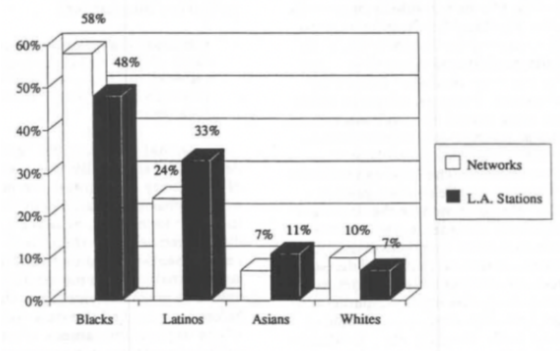


Figure 4: Korean and Latino Representation in Los Angeles Media Coverage of the 1992 Riots
Source: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

8.1 Constructing Foreigner Stereotypes

While the film Sa-I-Gu made some contribution to helping Korean Americans establish their identity to an extent, it only managed to do so through media coverage of the event as being one where the racial dimension was highlighted more than the social problems that had brought about the issue. In place of highlighting those factors which were behind the anger of the people living in South Los Angeles, the media focused on violence and destruction, making the incident one of confrontation between the black populace and Korean Americans. Korean American portrayal by the media further contributed to pre-existing stereotypes of Asian Americans being the "perpetual foreigners," whose chief interest was economic survival and not community membership (Park, 2020). Through constant representation of Korean Americans as immigrant shopkeepers, the media made it look as though Korean Americans were isolated entrepreneurs whose identity revolved around business alone. This framing may suggest that Korean Americans were perceived as outsiders who were competing against, rather than participating in, the communities in which they lived. According to professor and scholar of Asian American studies Edward Park, Korean Americans were often depicted as people who gained economic success from America but remained isolated from the community at large. Network and local TV stations have paid much attention to Black Americans and Latinos, but they have presented limited information about Asian Americans. It is important to note that the data collected in Figure 4 was collected from "the three major networks (the "NBC Nightly News," the "CBS Evening News," and "ABC World News Tonight"); Univision, the top-rated Spanish-language news network three stations in Los Angeles, including KABC-TV and KNBC-TV, the top-rated network affiliates and a Korean-language news program, Korean Television Enterprises or KTE-TVj and three top-rated local news programs in geographically diverse parts of the country-WCVB-TV in Boston, WXJI-TV in Winston-Salem, N.C. and WDAY-TV in Fargo, N.D.-Moorhead, Minn….In all, 903 stories and 2,228 soundbites were coded. The coverage analyzed includes 621 riot news and 282 general news stories, totaling 28.5 hours" (Smith, 1994).

Rather than examining the historical reasons many Korean Americans became small business owners—including limited employment opportunities, language barriers, and immigration patterns—news coverage reduced their identities to a single economic role. Through such stereotyping, the media portrayed Korean Americans more as traders rather than being neighbors, parents, and citizens, which may have contributed to to the perception of Korean Americans as foreigners and not as full members of the city. As noted by Park, mainstream media would rather go for stereotyping immigrants as it was easier for them to do so than to show complex realities about them. The media did not depict Korean Americans as a diverse group of people with different professions, political affiliations, and experiences; instead, according to Park, it reduced them. This was very harmful since it led the audience to see Korean Americans only in terms of their economic accomplishments without paying attention to the discrimination, financial insecurity, and political disenfranchisement which characterized the lives of many Korean Americans. Thus, model minority theory gave an impression that Korean Americans managed to escape from discrimination through hard work and, therefore, the structural barriers they encountered became irrelevant. In this context, it ignored the diverse experience of the Korean owners of small businesses, which included not only the difficulties of running their business

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in poor neighborhoods, but also linguistic and social discrimination as well as underrepresentation in politics. According to Park, the media coverage tended to present Korean Americans as owners of liquor stores in South Central Los Angeles while most of them did not actually operate such businesses. In turn, Black people were shown either as customers, or as rioters during the riots, while no attention was paid to their historical background of unemployment, segregation and underrepresentation. In this way, the media provided a skewed image creating an illusion that the conflict between the two communities was inevitable.

8.2 Turning Structural Inequality into a Racial Conflict

Media coverage of the riots also intensified racial tensions by repeatedly associating Korean Americans with images of conflict and destruction. As Park observes, the repeated broadcasting of "Soon Ja Du shooting Latasha Harlins" alongside footage of "armed Korean men standing on the rooftops of their stores" framed Korean Americans primarily "through the lens of violence and vigilante justice" (Park, 2020). Figure 5 reinforces this pattern by showing that both national networks and Los Angeles stations overwhelmingly emphasized "character issues" rather than "public policy issues" in their coverage. By focusing on individual actions instead of broader issues such as police protection and economic inequality, news outlets presented biased information, encouraging audiences to interpret the riots as a conflict between racial groups. At the same time, the media largely ignored the fact that the Los Angeles Police Department "did not protect adjacent communities like South Central Los Angeles, Pico-Union, and Koreatown," leaving residents to defend themselves (Park, 2020). By omitting this context, news coverage shifted responsibility away from institutional failures and toward a narrative of racial hostility, reinforcing stereotypes while obscuring the shared experiences of abandonment and marginalization faced by both Black and Korean communities.

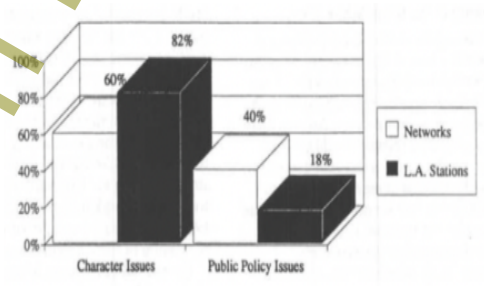


Figure 5: Media Framing of Korean Americans and Police During the 1992 Los Angeles Riots
Source: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

The shooting incident involving Soon Ja Du was used to represent the unrest, with media houses showing the images of the shooting and at the same time those of Korean owned businesses being set on fire. Through the connection that the coverage created, the riots were represented mainly by the race conflict instead of a problem brought about by institutional failure. In some instances, the struggles of the Korean Americans were either exaggerated for racial reasons or completely ignored. According to Park, Korean Americans could not be acknowledged in terms of their political issues and their suffering was not acknowledged. The distortion of statements made by public officials also led to simplification of the conflict. Angela Oh, a Korean American lawyer, who took up the position of spokesperson following the riots, tried to explain the complex situation in terms of frustrations of different groups. However, her statements were often taken out of context and reframed by media outlets, reducing nuanced discussions about race and inequality into a more divisive narrative. Reflecting on her experience with the press, Oh explained that producers often invited her to discuss solutions for rebuilding Los Angeles, only to shift the conversation at the last minute into a discussion of "Black-Korean conflict, the reason for the riots in LA." She recalled that this framing left her "in a position to do nothing more than respond" to inflammatory claims rather than address the deeper structural issues she intended to discuss. After one particularly misleading television appearance, Oh expressed her frustration towards the network for undermining coalition-building efforts "and all the hard work we've put into building coalitions" (Hicks et al., 2020). Her aggravation demonstrates how media outlets favored overstated narratives of racial antagonism over conversations about economic inequality, policing, and systemic discrimination. Rather than allowing Korean American leaders to articulate their communities' political concerns, the media often reduced them to symbolic representatives of an imagined Black-Korean conflict. This selective framing reinforced a binary interpretation of the riots, obscuring the shared experiences of marginalization that many Black and Korean American activists sought to highlight and limiting public understanding of the broader institutional failures that fueled the tension.

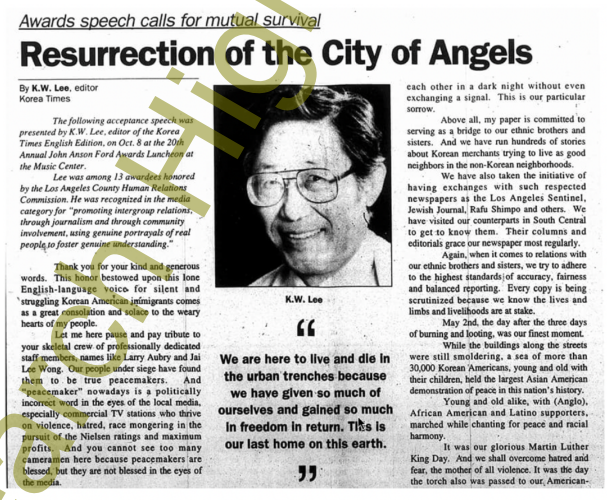
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Media coverage thus served as an interpretation of the Los Angeles Riots that distorted the true nature of the unrest. By presenting it through the lens of racial confrontation instead of social, economic, and institutional problems, the media turned the Los Angeles riots into a confrontation between black and Korean communities while neglecting the fundamental and intricate issues that caused the riots. It is crucial to understand that media plays an important role in creating racial narratives which became even more prominent in the age of social networks.

9. *Sa-I-Gu* and Korean American Identity

Sa-I-Gu resulted in immense material and emotional loss for Korean Americans. Granted, it also became a defining moment in the development of a stronger Korean American identity. Elaine H. Kim frames the events through the Korean concept of *han*, which she defines as "the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression." Rather than representing passive suffering, *han* embodies a history of endurance through invasion, colonization, war, and displacement. Watching Koreatown burn, Kim recalls fearing that Koreans were "a people destined to carry our *han* around with us wherever we went in the world," connecting the impact of *Sa-I-Gu* to generations of historical hardship. Yet Kim argues that the uprising ultimately revealed more than victimization. Instead, *Sa-I-Gu* exposed what it truly meant for Korean immigrants to "become American" (Kim, 1993). Many Korean Americans came to the United States with the belief that it offered equal opportunities for those willing to work hard. However, the riots exposed the persistent racial inequalities and barriers that challenged this ideal. As Korean business owners watched their stores burn, their calls for police assistance went unanswered, leaving many without protection for several days. According to Kim, the events revealed to Korean Americans that they had been placed within the broader historical pattern of racial violence and inequality in the United States, often serving as visible participants in conflicts rooted in longstanding systemic injustices.


Awards speech calls for mutual survival

Resurrection of the City of Angels

By K.W. Lee, editor
Korea Times

The following acceptance speech was presented by K.W. Lee, editor of the Korea Times English Edition, on Oct. 8 at the 20th Annual John Anson Ford Awards Luncheon at the Music Center.

Lee was among 13 awardees honored by the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. He was recognized in the media category for "promoting intergroup relations through journalism and through community involvement, using genuine portrayals of real people to foster genuine understanding."

Thank you for your kind and generous words. This honor bestowed upon this lone English-language voice for silent and struggling Korean American immigrants comes as a great consolation and solace to the weary hearts of my people.

Let me here pause and pay tribute to your skeletal crew of professionally dedicated staff members, names like Larry Aubry and Jai Lee Wong. Our people under siege have found them to be true peacemakers. And "peacemaker" nowadays is a politically incorrect word in the eyes of the local media, especially commercial TV stations who thrive on violence, hatred, race mongering in the pursuit of the Nielsen ratings and maximum profits. And you cannot see too many cameramen here because peacemakers are blessed, but they are not blessed in the eyes of the media.

K.W. Lee

"We are here to live and die in the urban trenches because we have given so much of ourselves and gained so much in freedom in return. This is our last home on this earth."

each other in a dark night without even exchanging a signal. This is our particular sorrow.

Above all, my paper is committed to serving as a bridge to our ethnic brothers and sisters. And we have run hundreds of stories about Korean merchants trying to live as good neighbors in the non-Korean neighborhoods.

We have also taken the initiative of having exchanges with such respected newspapers as the Los Angeles Sentinel, Jewish Journal, Rafu Shimpo and others. We have visited our counterparts in South Central to get to know them. Their columns and editorials grace our newspaper most regularly.

Again, when it comes to relations with our ethnic brothers and sisters, we try to adhere to the highest standards of accuracy, fairness and balanced reporting. Every copy is being scrutinized because we know the lives and limbs and livelihoods are at stake.

May 2nd, the day after the three days of burning and looting, was our finest moment.

While the buildings along the streets were still smoldering, a sea of more than 30,000 Korean Americans, young and old with their children, held the largest Asian American demonstration of peace in this nation's history.

Young and old alike, with (Anglo), African American and Latino supporters, marched while chanting for peace and racial harmony.

It was our glorious Martin Luther King Day. And we shall overcome hatred and fear, the mother of all violence. It was the day the torch also was passed to our American-

Figure 6: Korean American Community Resilience and Solidarity After the 1992 Los Angeles Riots
Source: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

At the same time, the riots demonstrated that *han* is inseparable from resilience. As historian Edward T. Chang observes, "the community did not passively accept [the] riots." Within days of the uprising, more than 30,000 Korean Americans gathered in Los Angeles for a Peace March, which Chang describes as "the largest gathering of Asian Americans in all of Asian American history" (Chang, 2012). The march represented a drastic shift for the Korean American community; immigrants working to succeed on their own joined as a united front that sought to be heard and given respect and political representation. Through this act, *Sa-I-Gu* managed to change the meaning of han for the Korean American community by using their collective resilience. This collective mobilization helped Korean Americans rebuild after the devastation that was the Los Angeles Riots, transforming the community from politically fragmented immigrants into advocates for institutional representation. Essentially, the riots became a turning point, exposing Korean Americans' vulnerability within America's system of structural and racial inequality. The newspaper article "Resurrection of the City of Angels," published by the Korea Times (Figure 6), reinforces this sentiment by emphasizing the Korean American community's determination to rebuild. K.W. Lee expresses this notion: "This is our last home on this earth." This belief highlights the desire of Korean Americans to assert their place in American society, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to restoring their lives despite devastating losses. In this way, along with the pain of discrimination and exclusion, *Sa-I-Gu* came to embody the perseverance of Korean Americans.

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10. Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge this study's limitations. Firstly, because of the selective nature of this case-study, this paper mainly deals with *Sa-I-Gu*, focusing on the experiences of Black and Korean Americans of Los Angeles. Therefore, it is unlikely that this paper represents experiences of other Asian Americans or Blacks throughout the US. Secondly, the paper is largely based on secondary sources, such as historians and other scholars' works rather than relying on primary sources. Thirdly, the historical perspective is limited to the mid-twentieth century until 1992 Los Angeles Riots. Thus, it is unlikely that the changes in race relations and economic disparity will be accounted for beyond this time frame. Finally, despite the evidence about the relationship between immigration, economics, housing, and the model minority myth, it is impossible to draw any cause-and-effect relationship between them and the riots. Rather, it identifies the historical patterns and relationships that help explain the broader structural context in which *Sa-I-Gu* occurred.

While the 1992 Los Angeles Riots is known for conflicts between Black American and Korean Americans, such an approach to history fails to recognize the broader circumstances which caused this unrest. Segregation, and the myth of the model minority created the circumstances in which two marginalized groups were positioned against each other. While there were certainly tensions developing between Black Americans and Korean Americans, they were not an inevitability; rather, they were worsened by larger structures which profited from dividing communities who shared similar circumstances of oppression. In order to comprehend the history of Los Angeles during this period, one cannot rely on blaming either community. The Black community has experienced systemic oppression through racism and police brutality for generations, and immigrants from Korea have struggled to overcome language barriers and discrimination while establishing themselves economically. Thus, what makes Los Angeles a tragic example is not only the fact that two communities experienced conflicts with each other, but that larger structural factors have turned communities with very similar backgrounds into enemies. Nevertheless, the relationship between Black and Asian communities stretches back further than this experience. Throughout American history, these communities have also built relationships through shared resistance against racial discrimination. From Frederick Douglass advocating against Chinese exclusion in his speech "Our Composite Nation" to Asian American activists drawing inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement, Black and Asian movements have repeatedly intersected in the pursuit of justice. As journalist Leslie Nguyen-Okwu writes, "stories of loss, struggle, change and hope are the most powerful tools we have to understand one another and bridge what divides us" (Nguyen-Okwu, 2022). The Los Angeles Riots legacy should therefore not be seen as a lesson about the inevitability of racial division; rather it should be seen as a way to observe the ways in which inequality creates conflict among groups who, in reality, have considerable similarities. The same issues that caused the problems in 1992—the media's reliance on simplifying racial issues, the prevalence of stereotypes, and the unequal distribution of resources—are still affecting community relations today. However, seeing the history of these factors also offers a chance for action. By acknowledging both the pain and the solidarity within Black and Asian histories, communities can move beyond narratives of division and work toward a future built on accountability, and collective action.

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