KOREAN IMMIGRANT NATIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF DIASPORIC STATEMAKING

Richard S. Kim
Assistant Professor
Asian American Studies Program
University of California, Davis
One Shields Avenue
3121 Hart Hall
Davis, CA  95616
rskim@ucdavis.edu

PLEASE DO NOT CITE, QUOTE, OR CIRCULATE WITHOUT PERMISSION FROM AUTHOR

This paper provides an overview of my book project in progress, entitled *Diasporic Dilemmas: Korean Immigrant Nationalism and Transnational Statemaking, 1903-1945*. I begin with a historical anecdote that illuminates the major themes and issues of the book.

On June 26, 1913, eleven Korean laborers arrived in the small rural town of Hemet, California. Local ranchers, Joseph Simpson and William Wilson, had hired the Korean men to pick apricots on their orchard. Fruit growers in the region were eagerly anticipating a record harvest season. However, many ranchers were frustrated to find a shortage of available labor from the local area. According to grower estimates, over 600 laborers would be required to harvest the abundant fruit crops expected for the coming season, but the region could only supply 350 workers. Growers also had not forgotten the previous year’s travails when a large portion of their crops went un-harvested due to similar labor shortages. As a result, many ranchers felt they had no choice but to hire laborers from outside areas to avoid major financial losses. Given these circumstances, orchard owners Simpson and Wilson had contracted Korean laborers from nearby Riverside to pick their apricot crops.

Upon arriving in Hemet around midnight by train, the Korean workers contacted Simpson for transportation to his orchard. While waiting for Simpson, they made their way to a recreation hall near the railroad station. News of the arrival of a group of “Asiatics” quickly spread throughout the small town. After completing their meals, the Korean laborers left the building and suddenly found themselves surrounded by an angry mob of over 100 white men, who had been gathering in front of the recreation hall. The strong presence of Japanese tenant farmers in California agriculture had been igniting virulent anti-Asian sentiments among white workers throughout the state. In the prior month of May, the California legislature, responding to the powerful anti-Japanese movement, almost unanimously passed the Alien Land Law of 1913 that prohibited Japanese, as well as other Asians, from owning land and greatly limited the length of tenure for leasing land. Consequently, anti-Asian, particularly anti-Japanese, sentiments, were running high in Hemet when the Korean laborers from Riverside arrived.

The angry crowd, who assumed the Koreans to be Japanese laborers, began to threaten them with physical violence and ordered them to leave town immediately. Greatly outnumbered and fearing for their
lives, the Koreans rushed to the train station to catch the next train out of Hemet. The large mob followed them and continued to harass them until the next train arrived around 1:30AM. As soon as the train pulled into the depot, the Korean men hurriedly jumped aboard, leaving behind their baggage and camping gear. As the train pulled out of the station, the crowd defiantly threw in the laborers’ cargo. Shortly after the forced departure of the Koreans, orchard owners Simpson and Wilson arrived at the scene and informed the crowd that the expelled men were actually Korean and not Japanese. Members of the mob replied that it made no difference to them, proclaiming Hemet to be “a white man’s valley.”

The incident received widespread press coverage. Upon learning of the episode in Hemet, a Japanese immigrant organization in Los Angeles, the Japanese Association of Southern California, quickly gathered information from local Japanese residents and provided the Japanese Consulate in San Francisco with details of the expulsion of the Koreans. Representatives of the Japanese Association urged the Consul-General to investigate the matter further, claiming that the Korean victims, as colonial subjects of Japan, were entitled to protection from the Japanese government as any Japanese citizen.

News of the Hemet incident also quickly reached government officials in Washington D.C., who were greatly disturbed by the event. The Japanese Ambassador in Washington directed the Consular-General office in San Francisco to investigate the matter promptly. Without waiting for any complaints or actions by the Japanese Ambassador, U.S. Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, immediately ordered his own investigation through the Department of Justice. Suddenly, the small farm town of Hemet had become a hotspot for a potential international crisis.

Bryan was particularly concerned that the incident could exacerbate already tense diplomatic relations between the two nations. In the preceding months, the Japanese Ambassador, Viscount Sutemi Chinda, had vehemently protested the passage of the Alien Land Law in California, arguing that the law violated international treaty agreements in which citizens of either nation had the right to own land and property in the nation of the other. In trying to ease tensions with the Japanese government, Secretary of State Bryan assured Ambassador Chinda that he had personally ordered an official inquiry into the expulsion of the Korean laborers in Hemet and that the U.S. government would take appropriate actions to prosecute any individuals responsible for the affair. Relieved that no physical harm had been inflicted upon the Korean laborers, Bryan also hoped that his office’s swift action in Hemet would prevent the occurrence of similar incidents against Japanese nationals in California that could easily escalate into actual violence.

While State Department officials were making their way to Hemet, the Japanese Vice-Consul from San Francisco and a representative of the Japanese Association of Southern California met with the expelled Korean men in Riverside on June 27. Explaining that Koreans in the United States had no official diplomatic relations with the American government, the Japanese officials offered their diplomatic services to help the Korean laborers receive some form of redress for the incident. The Koreans adamantly refused any Japanese assistance for what they considered to be a “purely Korean problem,” emphatically asserting that Koreans in America were capable of handling their own problems. Incensed at what they perceived to be Japan’s attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of the Korean community, the Korean laborers reported the Japanese diplomatic overtures to the Korean National Association (KNA) headquarters in San Francisco, which was formed in 1909 to provide social services to Korean immigrants as well as to promote the cause of Korean independence.

Greatly disturbed by the Japanese attempts to represent Korean interests, KNA President David Lee sent a telegram to Secretary of State Bryan on June 30 informing him that the incident in Hemet had been resolved and requested the State Department to cease its dealings with the Japanese government in matters pertaining to Koreans. Lee asserted that Koreans in the United States were not Japanese subjects because they had left Korea before Japan’s annexation in 1910. As a result, Japan had no jurisdiction over Koreans in America. Lee added that Koreans would never submit to Japanese rule “as long as the sun remains in the sky,” and that the American government should deal directly with the Korean National Association on all matters involving Koreans in the United States.
The telegram greatly alleviated Bryan’s concerns. The self-declared autonomy of the Koreans from the Japanese would help him to deflect any criticisms from the Japanese government concerning the expulsion of the Korean laborers. Bryan promptly released a press statement explaining that the matter involving the Koreans in Hemet had been resolved and the government’s investigation would be discontinued immediately.11 Though he avoided direct contact with the Koreans, Bryan’s decision to close the case following his receipt of the KNA telegram represented a de facto recognition by the U.S. government that Koreans were not Japanese subjects and thus Japan had no jurisdiction over Koreans in the United States. Moreover, the KNA was indirectly acknowledged as a quasi-diplomatic representative for Koreans residing in America.12

Despite the response of the State Department that seemed to bring an official end to the matter, the case was not altogether over for the Koreans. The Japanese Association of Southern California continued to make public statements that the Korean laborers still intended to pursue Japanese diplomatic channels to gain financial indemnity from the U.S. government for losses suffered as a result of their expulsion from Hemet.13 Outraged by the ongoing diplomatic gestures from the Japanese, one of the Korean men involved in the incident issued a public statement published in the Los Angeles Times. Shortly after the incident in Hemet, he explained Korean representatives had arranged a meeting with Joseph Simpson, who had hired the Korean laborers, and he had agreed to compensate them for their train tickets out of Hemet and the loss of wages for two days of work, all of which amounted to about $70.14 Asserting that Koreans were unequivocally not Japanese, the Korean laborer went on to express his indignation at the continual attempts by the Japanese to represent the interests of Koreans in America:

We don’t want to see the Japanese Consul, or for that matter have any Japanese interfere with our affairs whether they are personal or even of an international character. We are responsible for ourselves even though we should perish in this or any other country, the victims of fanatical hatred of any other people, we should not look to Japan for redress of our problems. We are Koreans, not Japanese, and Japan has no reason to protest at Washington because of our troubles.15

Korean Émigrés and the Politics of Diasporic Statemaking

The Hemet incident illuminates the ways in which the local experiences of Korean immigrants in the United States were inextricably linked to a larger global context. The circumstances of colonization and exile precipitated the migration of Koreans not only to the United States but also to Manchuria, Siberia, China, Europe, Mexico, and Cuba. By 1944, 11.6 percent of all Koreans were, in fact, living outside of the Korean peninsula, creating conditions for the emergence of what historian Robert Lee has aptly called “nationalism in a transnational community.”16 Strategically situated at the nexus of a complex web of geopolitical relations involving Korea, Japan, and the United States, Koreans in the United States emerged as central actors in a transnational movement that sought to free Korea from Japanese colonial rule.

Given the extremely repressive nature of Japanese rule in Korea, independence activities had to be carried out from abroad. Indeed, much of the trajectory of Korean nationalism occurred from beyond the Korean peninsula.17 The conditions of statelessness and exile necessitated that the Korean nationalist movement create a sovereign national state entirely outside the territorial boundaries of Korea. In the process, the Korean independence movement generated complex networks of communication and alliances as people, money, values, ideologies, and information continually traversed across a matrix of Korean settlements dispersed around the globe. These networks housed a host of competing ideologies and political organizations, dedicated to mobilizing support and disseminating information and resources for the Korean independence movement. Korean nationalism was thus fundamentally a diasporic one.18

The experiences of the 10,000 Koreans, who migrated to the Hawaiian Islands and the continental United States, were framed by a diasporic involvement in homeland politics as a result of Japan’s colonization of Korea between 1910 and 1945. Like the Korean immigrants at the center of the Hemet incident, the colonization of Korea left Koreans abroad without a state or nation. At the same time,
Korean immigrants were racially barred from becoming American citizens as “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” Without citizenship rights, Korean immigrants lacked any real legitimate recognition before the eyes of the U.S. state. Despite these obstacles to their political participation, Koreans in America came to exert a political presence in and out of the United States that far exceeded the size of their population.

In tracing the development of Korean émigré politics, my book, *Diasporic Dilemmas: Korean Immigrant Nationalism and Transnational Statemaking, 1903-1945*, situates immigrant political activities within the diasporic statemaking efforts of the Korean independence movement, manifested in the systematic attempts of the Korean diaspora to establish a sovereign political entity that could be recognized as a legitimate actor within the international system of nation-states. These efforts to institutionalize a sovereign national state resulted in the formation of the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) in China in 1919. Korean immigrants in the United States were instrumental in the creation of the KPG and its embodiment of a new democratic Korean nation-state.

Drawing upon an array of English- and Korean- language sources such as the records of Korean nationalist organizations, U.S. government and military documents, court records, newspapers, oral histories, personal correspondences, and autobiographies, I focus on the experiences and activities of U.S.-based Koreans in four key migrant sites - Honolulu, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C. With the rise of American global power during the first half of the twentieth century, the U.S. polity emerged as a key arena for the articulation of transnational practices associated with the Korean nationalist movement which enabled Koreans in the United States to mobilize international support and influence for the cause of Korean independence. Moreover, the adoption of American political values served as key rhetorical and political strategies for the independence movement, empowering Koreans in America to play a vital role in the statemaking project of Korean nationalism. Given these circumstances, the U.S. component of the Korean diaspora, though significantly smaller in population than their counterparts in Manchuria and Siberia, came to hold particularly privileged positions, ideologically and institutionally, within the nationalist movement across the diaspora.

The purpose of my book is to shed light on the implications and consequences of statemaking in the Korean diaspora through a close examination of different forms of émigré politics within the diaspora. Issues of state power and its uses were central to all Korean immigrant political concerns as evident in the Hemet incident. Which state did Koreans turn to in order to advance and to protect their interests and well-being? And which state would assume such responsibilities? With issues of state power fundamental to the politics of Korean nationalism, these questions would be continually debated and negotiated within the diaspora.

With the formation of the Korean Provisional Government following the March First uprising in 1919, the nationalist movement created an intricate array of networks that linked a matrix of Korean settlements dispersed around the world. Though the transnational networks emerging from the Korean independence movement provided opportunities for increased political participation among Korean émigrés, the multiple and diverse channels for political participation also led to intense contestations within the diaspora. The nationalism movement, in particular, faced a formidable challenge of centralizing national authority as a multitude of groups within the diaspora struggled for the right to leadership. Given that the nationalist movement had to be built in the diaspora, how did an effective supreme authority develop that could unite dozens of local communities spread all over the world? How could the diaspora develop a focused policy towards the homeland?

I argue that the transnational dimensions of Korean diasporic nationalism presented a fundamental paradox. While the process by which Koreans in the diaspora constructed the Korean nation from abroad, or what historian Matthew Jacobsen has called the “diasporic imagination” emanating from émigré political activities, countered territorialized notions of the nation-state, these activities were nonetheless fundamentally grounded in territorialized constructions of the modern nation-state. In their endeavors to create their own national sovereign state, the Korean diaspora employed a nationalist discourse founded on the exclusive territoriality of the sovereign state. As a deterritorialized entity, however, the Korean nation-state had paradoxically transcended itself upon its creation or rather re-creation, greatly
constraining its ability to act with sovereign authority. Formed entirely in the diaspora, the Korean state, represented by the Korean Provisional Government, lacked the basic defining feature of a sovereign state – the administrative control of a defined territory based on the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence to exact obedience from all persons within its territorial boundaries. Though the KPG exhibited the institutional framework of a sovereign state, it had neither a clearly demarcated territorial base to govern nor the coercive authority to control and direct its national constituency in the diaspora. As a result, heated factional debates and conflicts soon developed over determining who had the legitimate right to govern. Ultimately, the KPG failed to develop a working consensus that could implement effective policies which addressed the multiple and diverse ideological and strategic perspectives to the liberation of Korea that emerged from competing sites of power throughout the diaspora. These difficulties of defining and achieving coherent political action under diasporic conditions posed a perpetual dilemma for the Korean nationalist movement throughout its existence.

The issue of factionalism is a central theme in the study of the Korean American history. Indeed, the Korean nationalist movement was replete with bitter factional conflicts involving various individuals and exile organizations. Much of the existing scholarship typically attributes the clash of individual personalities and their personal struggles for political power as the primary causal factors for the rampant factionalism that plagued the Korean immigrant community. Such perspectives conclude that the movement for Korean independence was fatally flawed by the presence and misdeeds of select individuals in positions of power and leadership, suggesting that these flaws were avoidable had those individuals been able to overcome their petty personal differences or had different leaders been in power altogether. As a result, factional disputes are often cast off as disparate episodes of frivolous community bickering. By situating internecine conflicts within a diasporic framework, my study, in contrast, locates the factional strife in the Korean immigrant community as interconnected parts of a larger chain of events related to the challenges of statemaking in the diaspora. In doing so, this re-reading offers new meanings and significance to the profuse factionalism associated with the struggle for Korean liberation.

Following the breakdown of the KPG in the 1920s, Koreans had no supreme authority to mobilize and direct the diaspora. By 1930, the Korean independence movement was in complete disarray and deep retrenchment as the broad array of nationalist groups was splintered into multiple and opposing factions. Under these circumstances, struggles for political power from abroad became highly localized. For Koreans in America, the realities of living and working within a U.S. environment profoundly impacted their strategic visions toward the struggle for Korean liberation. Within the context of these shifting dynamics in the nationalist movement, a collective identity as ethnic Americans developed among Koreans in the United States, which came to be reflected in an unconditional acceptance of U.S. state power as fundamental to Koreans throughout the diaspora to achieving their national goals. Through their involvement in the Korean independence movement, Korean immigrants pursued not only the recognition of Korea’s national sovereignty, but also the recognition of Koreans as a distinct ethnic and political interest group in the United States. In effect, Koreans in America, without prior intention, were engaged in a process of ethnic identity formation that allowed them to become a viable political entity within the workings of the U.S. liberal state. Thus, Korean nationalism ironically facilitated the development of collective identities as ethnic Americans. These identities were not solely rooted in cultural ties to the homeland or imagined notions of a Korean nation-state, but also emerged from the daily experiences of living in the United States. That is, ethnicity was not an intrinsic cultural identification carried over from Korea that was to be preserved or maintained. Rather, it was an ongoing process emerging from the daily interactions between immigrants and the dominant host society as immigrants adapted to specific historical realities at particular moments in time. Only by constituting themselves as part of American society could Korean immigrants gain the “right” to make claims upon the U.S. polity, pressuring the latter to support their aspirations and efforts to recover Korea’s independence. In unexpected ways then, zealous commitments to homeland politics among Korean immigrants promoted the articulation of an ethnic consciousness that sought to exert a politico-legal presence within U.S. state structures and institutions to attain the transcendent goal of national independence for Korea.
These types of political activities were certainly typical among the numerous other diasporic groups in the United States who were also engaged in homeland politics. Like the Irish, Jews, Italians, Armenians, Poles, Yugoslavians, Hungarians, and Czechs, Koreans in the United States relied on a range of political means to access and influence American public opinion and government decision-making processes for various causes related to their own homelands. During World War I and World War II, in particular, an array of American immigrant groups, who came from stateless territories, inundated U.S. government officials in Washington D.C. with petitions for some sort of official diplomatic recognition or intervention on behalf of their respective homelands. The political activities of Koreans in the United States closely adhered to such forms of immigrant nationalism common among American ethnic groups.

At the same time, the experiences of Korean immigrants departed in crucial ways from most other diasporic groups in the United States. Korean immigrants were legally denied full membership in the national polity due to their status as racialized aliens ineligible for citizenship, which imposed severe constraints on their ability to participate in U.S. political processes. In contrast, other diasporic groups, such as the Italians, Irish, Jews, Czechs, Yugoslavians, and Poles, could readily take advantage of their right to vote and were thus seldom questioned as bona fide political actors in the mainstream of U.S. politics. Their potential electoral power provided them with the kind of political leverage that was not available to Koreans until after World War II. The political clout of Koreans was further limited by the fact that the largest concentration of Korean immigrants resided in Hawaii, which remained a U.S. territorial possession until 1959. Given these circumstances, my project stresses the distinctions between citizen-based and noncitizen-based diasporic nationalisms. While Korean immigrants employed highly conventional political tactics to access the U.S. political arena, they were a highly unconventional group to access the American polity through such means.

Given their status as racial minorities, one could reasonably anticipate that the development of an ethnic consciousness among Koreans in the United States could open new ties and new claims that contradicted the goals of the national independence movement. As seen in the anti-Japanese sentiments directed at Korean laborers in Hemet, Korean immigrants were subjected to virulent anti-Asian hostilities that uniformly racialized Koreans and Japanese alike. Korean immigrants, along with other Asian groups in the United States, contended with daily struggles against racial discrimination and class exploitation manifested in various legal and extralegal forms that included exclusionary immigration laws, denial of naturalization rights, discriminatory economic sanctions, and physical violence. In the struggle for the recognition and fair treatment of their status in the United States, the articulation of an ethnic consciousness among Korean immigrants could conceivably have drawn upon new loyalties and alliances that at times diverged from the goals and allegiances associated with the Korean nationalist movement.

The extant historical evidence, however, shows that no such alliances against racial discrimination and class exploitation coalesced in the years prior to 1945. This much was evident in the Korean community response to the Hemet incident. So how did Korean immigrants in the United States reconcile the apparent contradictions between their seemingly indefatigable support for American political values and ideals of democracy, freedom, and self-determination and the daily realities of an exclusionary United States that denied them rights to become full members and participants in American society? Political scientist Yossi Shain provides some useful insights in understanding how diasporic political action may have served to reconcile these contradictory discourses and ideologies.

[D]iasporic mobilization on homeland-related affairs, which takes place mostly through "official channels" of U.S. foreign policy...has the potential to direct ethnodiasporan energies in ways that are conducive both to the assimilation or reinforcement of basic American values, such as freedom and pluralism, and to overall diasporic integration into American society. The successful struggle for a legitimate foreign-policy voice is a process that relieves ethnic alienation by helping to create a more positive view of the American inclusionary process and of America's absorptive capacities.

As Shain theorizes in general terms, diasporic identification among Korean immigrants led to a process of political assimilation that defused "ethnic alienation" and reinforced the positive pluralist aspects of
American society, which in turn may have preempted the possibility of making claims upon the U.S. state that entailed racial and class alliances with other disenfranchised groups.26 Yet, as racialized ethnics who were constituted as not belonging to American society, ideologies of race and citizenship acted in concert to structure the nature of Korean immigrant political activities and their relationship to U.S. state institutions and society. Under such conditions, Koreans had no choice but to engage in a clientalist political model, as opposed to an electoral model, that depended almost entirely on competing for and securing the support of more powerful sponsors from the military, political, legal, academic, business, and religious realms of the U.S. polity. Though Korean immigrants were able to forge viable political spaces for themselves through these activities, political sponsorship for a group like Koreans was generally far less solid than for other groups who could pressure potential political supporters through electoral processes. Consequently, institutional support for Koreans was often ephemeral, creating a lack of stability and continuity over time. These inherent weaknesses in the clientalist political model ultimately undermined the overall impact and efficacy of Korean immigrant activities. At the same time, the reliance on the United States as the guarantor of the national goals of Korea subordinated Korean national interests to a hegemonic American worldview, evinced in a thinly veiled imperialist drive that sought to propagate American political and cultural values abroad through economic investment and trade, political manipulation and intervention, and at times direct military force. In the end, Korean diasporic nationalism could never fully liberate itself from the power structures of imperialism from which it so fervently struggled to free itself.
Notes


2 *Hemet News*, June 27, 1913, p. 1; *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1913, p. 11; *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 27, 1913, p. 8; *New York Times*, June 27, 1913, p. 9; *Sinhan Minbo*, July 4, 1913, p. 3.


4 *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 27, 1913, p. 8; *New York Times*, June 27, 1913, p. 9; *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1913, p. 11;

5 *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 27, 1913, p. 8


7 *New York Times*, April 5, 1913, p. 3.


9 *Sinhan Minbo*, July 4, 1913.


11 *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1913, p. 14; *Hemet News*, July 4, 1913, p. 1;


13 *Hemet News*, July 4, 1913; p. 1; *Sinhan Minbo*, July 4, 1913, p. 3.


In contrast to Shain, cultural theorist Sau-ling Wong critiques such outcomes emerging from diasporic identifications. Wong argues that a diasporic perspective, as it particularly applies to the field of Asian American Studies, privileges an ethnic-specific focus at the expense of a domestic perspective, which may preclude possibilities for cross-racial and cross-ethnic coalitions. While Wong sets forth a complex and sophisticated argument that is richly suggestive, she seems to overstate the dichotomy between diasporic and domestic perspectives. By historicizing the relationship between these two perspectives as they were understood and experienced by the ethnodiasporan groups themselves, my work seeks to problematize such dichotomous constructions by showing the ways in which the domestic and diasporic were mutually constitutive of each other at particular historical moments. See Sau-ling C. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads" *Amerasia Journal* 21, no. 1 & 2 (1995): 1-28.
Insofar as this chapter focuses attention on the contexts and politics of an understanding of diasporic masculinities, I am faced with an immediate problem—the translation of terms between the United States and the United Kingdom. Through a detailed narrative of Korean immigrant involvement in the diasporic state-making efforts of the Korean independence movement, I seek to unite these two thematic threads. In doing so, I reveal the ways in which politics and political participation constituted sites for the construction of Korean-American ethnicity. In effect, Korean immigrants not only pursued the recognition of Korea’s national sovereignty, but also the recognition of Koreans as a distinct ethnic group in U.S. Korean nationalism thus facilitated the development of a collective identity as ethnic Americans. By engaging with political structures and institutions in the U.S., Korean political participation enabled Korean immigrants to define their own sociocultural identities.