

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Korean American Identity Defined by LA Riots

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Last week's media coverage of events in Los Angeles 20 years ago shouldn't obscure the fact that the city still has major issues to address – even after the news cycle has moved on. This week are are re-posting articles from two newspapers which, unless you are within the communities they serve, you probably don't read. We have also posted an article from Our Weekly.

This article, in a slightly different version, appeared in the K-Herald, a weekly Los Angeles print-only newspaper. We re-post it with their permission, and that of the author, who has also given us permission to post full length versions of the two films described and a panel discussion that took place on April 25, 2012. These videos follow the article. – A.L.

Last week, in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Los Angeles riots, I gathered with other Korean American and members of the entire Los Angeles community to screen the feature documentary *Clash of Colors*, which I produced. The film offers unprecedented access into the most overlooked history of the 1992 riots through never-before-seen footage and interviews about Korean American experiences of the riots.

Through *Clash of Colors*, I wanted to show what people don't already know about the riots. There are extraordinary stories that go beyond the Rodney King incident. This is a part of American history that should not be forgotten.

The Los Angeles riots, the largest urban race riot in United States history, resulted in 55 deaths and over \$1 billion in property damages, close to one half of which (\$ 400 million) was suffered by over 2,000 Korean American shop owners in South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown. The riots, which erupted on April 29, 2012 following the acquittal of the four police officers charged in the beating of Rodney King, had immobilized the city for four days and three nights. The anarchy that ensued during those days was put down after both the National Guard and the Federal Troops were deployed throughout the city. It was the darkest hour in Los Angeles history and the complete breakdown of social order was broadcast live via satellite television screens around the world.



When the Los Angeles Police Department made the decision to retreat from the riots' flashpoint of Florence and Normandy, the emboldened street gangs took advantage of the chaos by looting and burning the Korean owned stores in South Central Los Angeles. Many shop owners, who had not been able to flee South Central when the violence erupted, were stranded in the stores. "We frantically called the police but nobody picked up. When they did they simply told us that there was nothing they could do about it," recalls one of the victims. While the Los Angeles media was

busy reporting the burning and looting of the stores, the Korean American media, particularly Radio Korea, which had switched to an emergency broadcast, were reporting about the family members who were still stranded.

The next day, the street gangs targeted the neighboring Koreatown, approximately 2 miles north of South Los Angeles. As the police, which had retreated from South Central the day before, began urging the Korean American shop owners in Koreatown to evacuate Koreatown because they had no intention of protecting it, Korean American shop owners armed themselves to protect the businesses from the looters. “Had they not done so,” recalls Professor Leo Estrada of UCLA in the film, “the entire town would have burned down like South Central the day before.” Estrada was a member of the Christopher Commission who at the time chose to drive through Koreatown in a patrol car made available to the commission members. “The police car was driving through Koreatown 60 miles per hour without stopping for traffic lights. [The police] were afraid.” One of the gang members later recalled in an interview with a Korean American television that they had been angered by the local television’s repeated playing of a Korean grocer Soon Ja Du coldly shooting Latasha Harlins in the back of the head. He said he had no idea that there was a fist fight which preceded the shooting because that had been edited out.

“Racial polarization is part of the fabric of this country,” said Ed Boyer, former Los Angeles Times Editor, who appears in the film. “[Korean Americans] paid with the losses of their businesses, with indignity and humiliation and that’s something that’s never really been put right.”

“It’s an apology that has never been made,” says Professor Mike Davis of UC Riverside who also appears in the film.

It is little known that 100,000 Korean Americans from all over Southern California converged in Koreatown three days after the riots to express their outrage and participate in a peace march that allowed Korean Americans to reclaim the town from the looters. Our film shows the heretofore unseen footage in the film.



“This [was] a tremendous event for Korean Americans and probably one of the defining moments for Korean American identity, because here was a group of people who [were] unfairly targeted and our response was not down with African American or down with America. It was we want peace, we are here to live in harmony with our neighbors,” says Dr. Helen Kim who also is interviewed in the film. She was a medical student from Tufts University who had come out to participate in the march after her parents’ store was looted by the mobs.

Clash of Colors draws on in-depth interviews from a balanced expert panel including Bill Boyarsky, former Los Angeles Times columnist, K W Lee, former Editor of Korea Times, radio personality Larry Elder, Councilman Tom LaBonge, former council members Mike Hernandez and Mike Woo, UCLA professors Ivan Light, Darnell Hunt and Leo Estrada, AME Church’s Rev. Cecil Murray, and more.

Clash of Colors also details unsung stories such as how Radio Korea became a lifeline of communication for Korean Americans when they were left to fend for themselves.

After the riots, the film explains, the politically powerless Korean immigrant community had to endure another act of discrimination carried out, this time, by the city’s elected officials when the Los Angeles City Council, in the name of public safety, violated Korean American’s constitutionally protected property rights by enacting ordinances which made it economically unfeasible to rebuild in South Central.

In short, the film exposes for the first time how Koreatown endured this tumultuous period, and how the event became a turning point for Korean Americans.

In conjunction with *Clash of Colors*, I also created a documentary short, *Koreatown, 20 Years*

After the LA Riots, which has also just had its debut.

Koreatown, 20 Years After examines the political advances achieved by the Korean American community, twenty years later, in its highly visible public participation in the redistricting process, thereby emerging as a new political voice in the city. The short illuminates the controversial redistricting process in which Korean American community's repeated pleas in the public hearings, in which Korean Americans, both young and old, showed up in large numbers, were completely ignored by the City Council.

Contrary to their wishes to be moved in whole to Councilman Eric Garcetti's 13th district, a district that contains Thai Town and Historic Filipinotown, which would have given the community a better opportunity to elect a council representative of its own, the new map annexed most of Koreatown's lucrative business core into City Council President Herb Wesson's 10th district, which ensured that Koreatown will remain a captive minority within that district with no chances of electing a representative responsive to the needs and wishes of the Korean American community. The short documents how, 20 years later, the newly awakened Korean American community is prepared to assume leadership role in challenging the system that is not responsive to the needs and wishes of the citizens of Los Angeles.

***Clash of Colors*, documentary feature (entire film)**

***Koreatown, 20 Years After the LA Riots*, documentary short (entire film)**

Clash of Colors screening reception and panel discussion with former LA Times columnist Bill Boyarsky and Councilman Bernard Parks, among others.

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