

Korean America and the U.S.–Korea Relations

ABSTRACTS

Session 1: Korean America in National and International Politics

From Diasporic Nationalism to Asian American Justice: The Durham Stevens Assassination and Chol Soo Lee Legal Cases

Richard Kim | University of California, Davis

This talk compares Korean American community mobilization around two historic legal cases in San Francisco - Chang In-hwan's murder case in the 1908 killing of American diplomat Durham Stevens in San Francisco and Chol Soo Lee's cases for the 1973 murder of a Chinatown gang leader in San Francisco in 1973. My talk argues Korean American responses and mobilization in both legal cases were instrumental in the making of Korean American political subjectivities, allowing us to explore what it means to be Korean American over time.

Police State, Police Action, Police Brutality: *Dongnip Sinmun* and *Freedom Newspaper* on the Korean War

Christine Hong | University of California, Santa Cruz

Framings of Saigu, the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, as a traumatic watershed for the Korean immigrant community, more often than not leave to the side the Cold War militarization of South Korea and the deployment of U.S. war power into American cities to quell domestic "disorder." No question, Korean American and immigrant businesses were significantly impacted, with over 2,200 Korean-owned businesses damaged or destroyed. Yet as a mass-mediatized spectacle, Los Angeles 1992 is often recalled, in identity-reductionist terms, as a violent "race riot" arising from "Black-Korean tensions." As avatars for Second Amendment zealots and white nationalists, the so-called rooftop Koreans have been transformed into a rightwing meme within the social media sphere, lionized as exemplary defenders of private property against Black and brown "looters" in the absence of police protection. Few of these celebrations of armed Korean merchants account for the fact that many of these men served as South Korean mercenaries alongside U.S. forces in Vietnam. Virtually none dwell on the fact that the operational plans to crush urban revolt in Los Angeles had their origins in Cold War-era domestic war strategies.

Not just "like a war," Los Angeles 1992 was, in more ways than one, counterinsurgent terrain, imprinted by the boomerang effect of Cold War U.S. military interventions around the globe and the ricochet of "civil defense" at home. The legacy of the media emphasis on the "Black-Korean conflict," in what novelist Ishmael Reed has called "divide-and-conquer TV," has obscured not only genealogies of U.S. militarized relations with its subimperial junior partner, South Korea, but also early Cold War-era anti-imperialist movement itineraries within the Los Angeles area that bound Black and Korean radicals in common antifascist cause. This

talk retrieves from history's ashbin two short-lived, small but mighty, anti-imperialist newspapers, *Dongnip Sinmun (Korean Independence)*, a bilingual newspaper published by diasporic Korean radicals in Los Angeles, and *Freedom*, Paul Robeson's Harlem-based newspaper, in order to raise to the fore their internationalist critique of U.S. police power in Korea and a rising domestic police state.

Unexpired: Time, Imperial Futurity, and the Undocumented Korean Immigrant Justice Movement

Ga Young Chung | University of California, Davis

In a post-9/11 era, a capitalist regime of imperial futurity has become increasingly entangled with the racialization of disenfranchised people of color in the United States. To survive, young undocumented Korean immigrants work hard to prove they were worthy of citizenship, tantalized by the state-indoctrinated fantasy of a better future marked by employability, law-abiding morality, and a patriotic spirit. However, this imperial futurity proved unattainable. Drawing on years-long multi-sited ethnographic study, I demonstrate how these young undocumented Korean immigrants' political reworking of betrayal into a productive critique of exclusive citizenship inspired creative and radical efforts to launch a movement dedicated to collective liberation. Focusing on their "Citizenship for All" campaign—which demands the state grant everyone unconditional and equal access to education, housing, and health care, regardless of background, class, race, ethnicity, religion, dis/ability, gender, and/or sexuality—I argue that they shifted the goals of the immigrant justice movement from achieving legal citizenship for individuals to building an emancipatory future, one that does not serve the desires of the powerful US state but rather liberates all the oppressed.

Session II. New Directions in Korean American Studies

Korea and Korean America: Convergent and Divergent Paths

Shelley Lee | Brown University

This paper examines the relationship between Korean American studies and Korean studies as a way of thinking through the blurring boundaries between Asian American studies and Asian studies more broadly, and the segmentation of area studies more generally. I write as a Korean Americanist trained in U.S. history and ethnic studies, and I address these remarks as an invitation to scholars of Korea and other non-U.S. fields. While "Koreans" and "Korean-ness" are shared investments across these fields, they developed largely in parallel, shaped by different political and institutional imperatives. I ask: how do questions of race and power travel into Korean studies, and how do the changing imperatives in Korean life and of the Korean state shape research about Koreans in America — and by extension, the wider fields of ethnic studies and American history?

Memory, Identity, and Shared Transnational Heritage: Rehabilitating the Young Korean Academy (Hung Sa Dahn) Historic Site in Los Angeles

Jong Hyun Lim | Heritage Smart Consulting Group

Over the past several decades, the Republic of Korea has developed a more systematic approach to identifying and managing overseas sites associated with the Korean independence movement. What began as documentation and survey initiatives has evolved into broader policy frameworks addressing preservation, interpretation, and long-term stewardship. Recent policy research reframes these sites as “shared heritage,” arguing that their meanings are co-produced across national boundaries rather than owned exclusively by a single state.

Within this national transformation, the rehabilitation of the former headquarters of the Young Korean Academy in Los Angeles provides a compelling case through which to reconsider Korean American heritage as transnational cultural history. Founded by Dosan Ahn Chang Ho, a leading figure in the early twentieth-century independence movement, the site embodies intertwined histories of anti-colonial resistance, immigrant community formation, and U.S.–Korea relations. It is also among the first overseas independence-related properties directly acquired and rehabilitated by the Korean government, marking a transition from symbolic recognition to material stewardship and cross-border governance.

This presentation situates the project at the intersection of public history, ethnic studies, and historic preservation. It conceptualizes overseas independence sites as multi-layered heritage spaces operating simultaneously within Korea’s national narrative, Korean American community memory, and local American preservation frameworks. Through analysis of U.S. legal designation processes, Korean commemorative policy, intergovernmental coordination mechanisms, and community-based programming, the project demonstrates how shared heritage functions in practice—as an ongoing negotiation among national memory, diaspora identity, and civic governance.

The Young Korean Academy rehabilitation reframes overseas independence sites not as peripheral commemorative outposts, but as central arenas in which national memory is actively reconstructed in transnational space. In doing so, it offers new directions for Korean American Studies and for preservation practice in an increasingly interconnected world.

Data-Driven Empowerment: Advancing Korean-American Communities through Data Analytics

Seon Ho Kim | University of Southern California

This talk presents the mission and activities of the SoDAVi Group, a nonprofit organization focused on empowering Korean-American communities through data analytics. As open data becomes increasingly available across various domains, there is significant potential to leverage these resources for community-informed decision-making. However, access to raw data alone does not guarantee meaningful impact. This presentation highlights how SoDAVi bridges this gap by transforming complex datasets into actionable insights through data processing, analysis, and visualization. We will discuss representative projects, methodological approaches, and the challenges of engaging underserved communities with data-driven tools.