Themes from *A Korean and Korean American History* (2026).

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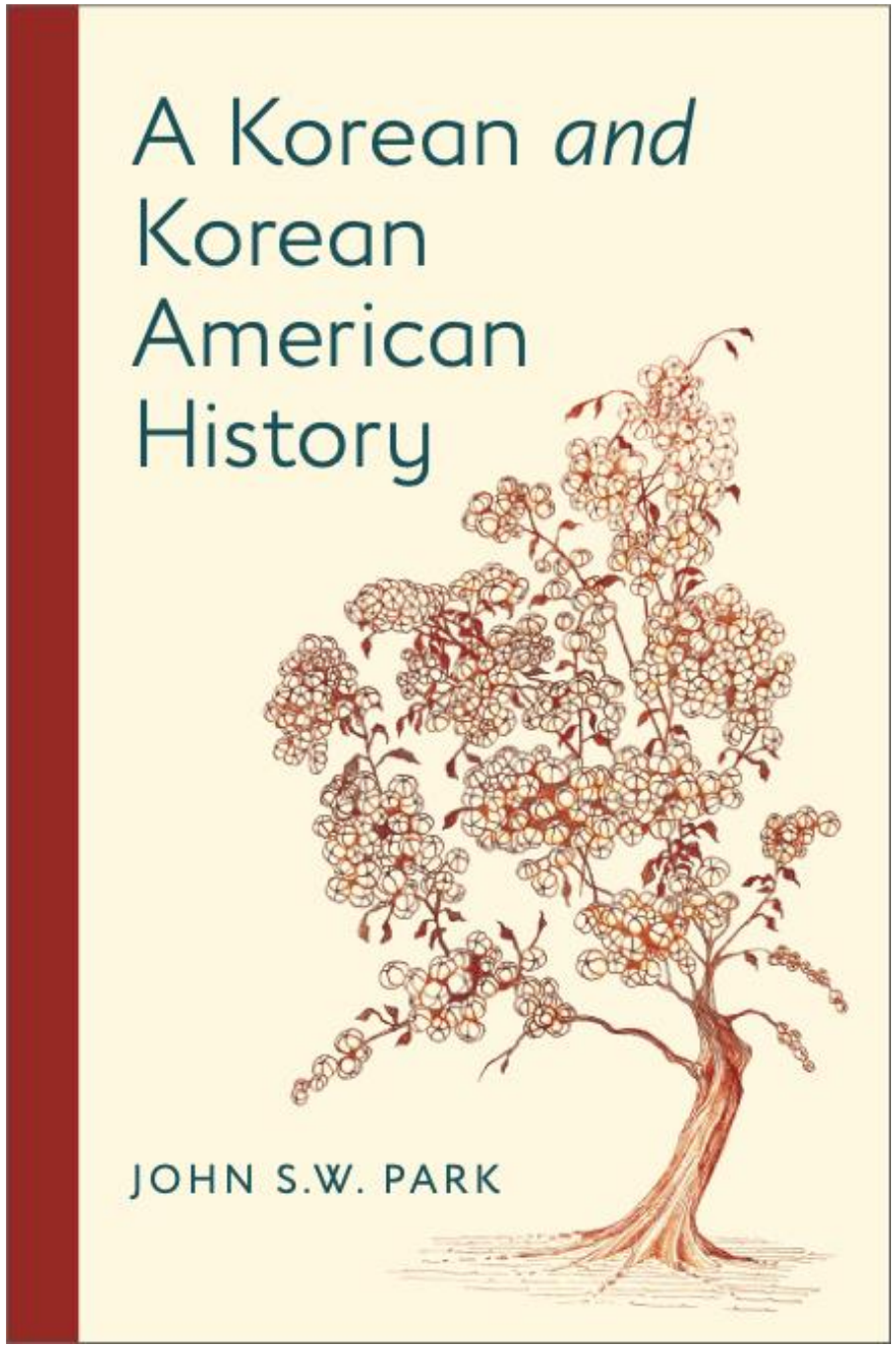
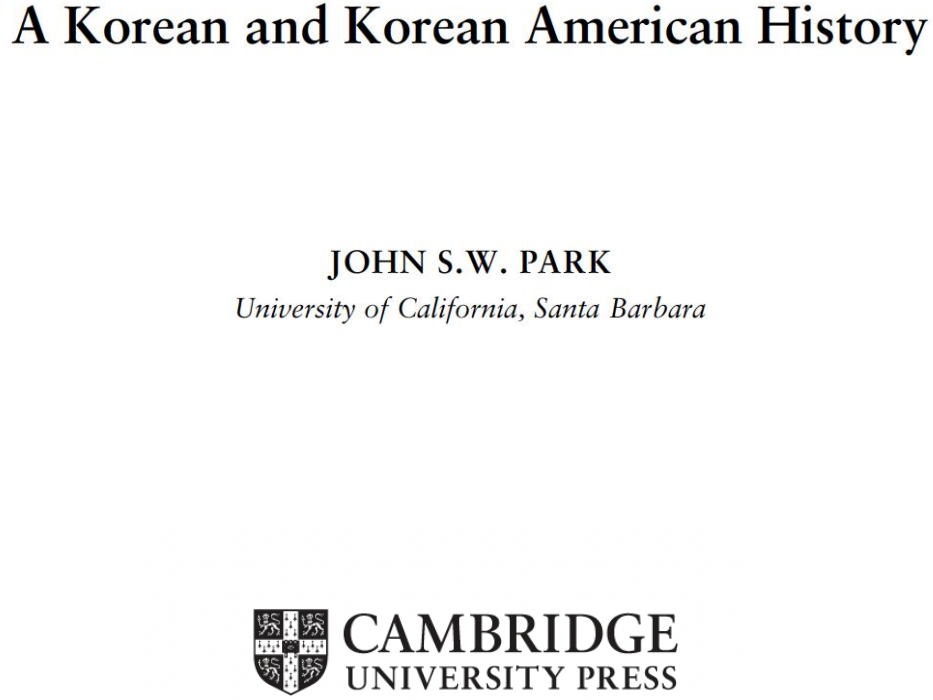




On this surface of things, this book is my fifth book, and like the other books, this is a history, I am a specialist in American legal history and in American immigration history. This book is about how Americans started coming to Korea since the late 19th century, and then how Koreans came to the United States until well into this century. It took me ten (twelve?) years to finish this book, and trust me, it's very scholarly: it has hundreds of footnotes and a super long bibliography, and it's been double-blind peer-reviewed under the supervision of Cambridge University Press, which is quite fancy.

But this book began as a set of conversations that I'd had with my wife Gowan, my brother Edward, and especially my kids, Zoe, Isabel, and Sophia. My own parents had passed away long before my children were born, and so my kids had always asked about my family and our migration to the United States, and yet in 2016, when we visited Korea as a family, we were all full of many more urgent questions: "Why are so many things in Korea in English?" "Why is English so common and so funny in Korea?" "Why does Seoul feel like Koreatown in LA?" "Why are there so many Taco Bells and Burger Kings in Seoul?" "Why did our grandparents ever leave this amazing country!?" And "Do you think maybe we retire here?"

Notes From Seoul, 2016

John S.W. Park

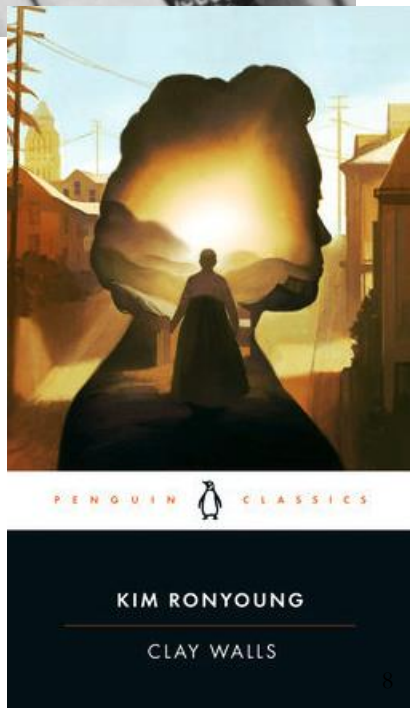
We kept thinking about Korea, and we kept going back, year after year…

That *first* trip, though, was a trip: for forty years, I had become an American, and I was educated in the United States and in American law and history, and so I myself simply didn't know as much about Korea or Korean history. Because my children were asking some of the best questions, I wrote letters and notes to the children in reply, and I did a good deal of research and reading before writing those notes. This was how the book took its shape, they were often very long notes and letters.

Even as I was doing archival work for this book, I was joining family and friends in Korea every summer after 2016, we went in fall and spring, too, and I felt as though I was becoming Korean (again) *and* American, and I understood much better what it meant to be Korean American.

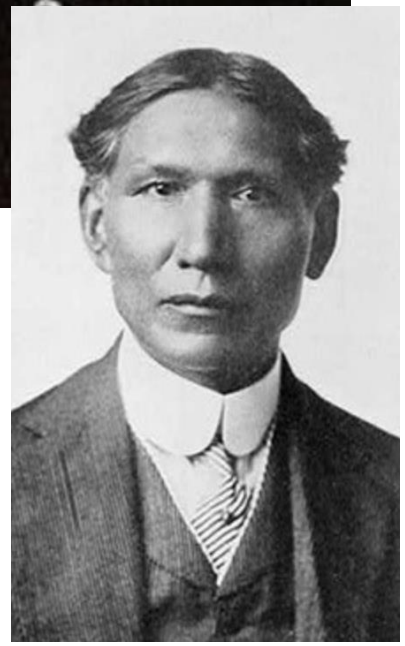
My brother Edward joked that I'd become a "born again Korean." My kids were amused, they enjoyed my letters and notes, they encouraged me to continue, and so, over many years, I read and re-read everything in Korean and Korean American history, I continued the archival work in California, Honolulu, and Seoul, especially at Yonsei University. I'd written scholarly books before, but I so *enjoyed* this one, and because I'd been tenured for a while, I took my time, I made sure that all the chapters were just so. And for the first time in my professional life, I knew why I'd loved writing this book: I was writing *for* my children, this book was about their grandparents and their families, it was about the generations of Koreans and Americans who'd reshaped both countries.

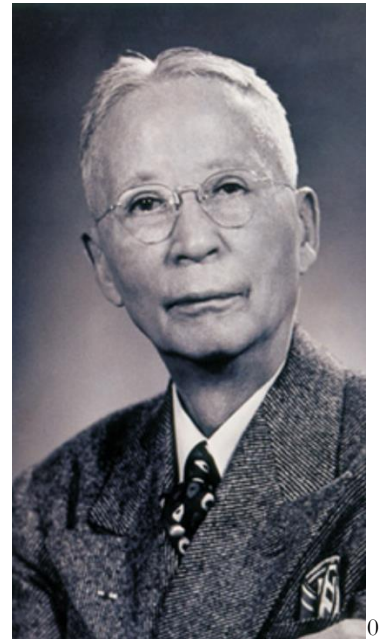
And I also learned that writing like this was not a new thing among Korean folk—some of my favorite subjects were also once avid letter writers, and their most poignant letters were for their loved ones, too. Ahn Chang Ho wrote dozens of letters to his wife and children; Dr. Sherwood Hall and Dr. Esther Pak exchanged many letters over many years; and Younghill Kang and Kim Ronyoung wrote novels that were essentially family biographies, they were like love letters and memorials about their loved ones.



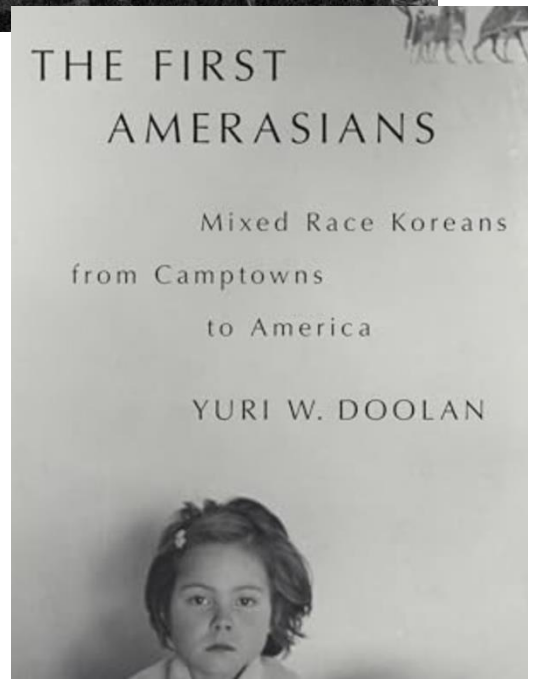
Weaving *their* voices into this book was both an honor and a pleasure—as a Korean American scholar, and as an American scholar in Korea, I so enjoyed learning these detailed histories. And I would highly recommend this experience: to the younger scholars in comparative ethnic studies, I hope that you'll also study and write for the people you love. Keep photographs of them nearby, as I did. Because I'd imagined my own children as my first readers, I edited away all the academic jargon, and I tried for a prose that might appeal to their empathies as well as their intellect. This was very important, if just because so much of 20th century Korean history was so deeply traumatic.

I found many things that I hadn't expected to find. For example, in the lives of many Korean American folk, I saw very obvious parallels in Native American History. Philip Jaisohn reminded me of Charles Eastman; Helen Kim reminded me of Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala Sa); and Young Oak Kim reminded me of Ira Hayes.





The Sioux delegation saw America at roughly the same time that the Joseon delegation saw America. The first photograph is from 1880, the second from 1883. In the late 19th century, Korean folk were not the only ones losing their homeland, many other people were trying to make sense of their place in the modern world.



Some of the more jarring mass migrations in Native American history have stark analogs in Korean and Korean American history. In the late 19th century, white American Christians were educating and often adopting Native American children; in the late 20th century, white American Christians were adopting children from South Korea in staggering numbers.

Korean immigrants before 1960 were living on the margins of American society, they could not legally pass into American citizenship. After 1965, they were "post-colonial subjects," they were coming to the United States as entire extended families, and they were often coming here because the United States had supported autocratic leaders in South Korea over many decades. The United States was a refuge, although sometimes it just wasn't.

The best histories are, of course, about other people in other times, and yet the best histories also invite our readers to place themselves *in history*, and to see themselves and the lives of others within a broader and richer context. My children will never meet my late mother, but after reading *this* history, I hope that they'll be able to *see* her, to see also the generations of Koreans before her, and to see why and how we became Korean Americans. Our stories were often sorrowful, but they're also triumphant and full of joy. They are surprising and unexpected—Koreans and Korean Americans have had a remarkable history, it's worth sharing with people of every variety.

And finally, as I've told my children and my students, we should think of books as parts of longer conversations. My own book took a long, long time, and it does cover many decades, and I'm grateful to those who will read it, but I also hope sincerely that these conversations in Korean and Korean American studies never end, and that this book and others like it will inspire *you* to think and to write and to consider the lives and experiences of the people you love. It's been an honor to write lesson plans in Korean and Korean American History for younger students in California, and to be part of a committee of scholars and educators who value these lessons as much as I do. I hope that all of you will join and contribute to such conversations.

Thank you for your attention, please feel free to write to me with any questions or comments, and please let me know if you'd like a copy of this presentation. (To find me, just search "John Park UCSB" online, and my whole life will flash before you.) A big thank you to the Korean Studies Institute, and to Professors Ruth Chung and Sunyoung Park at USC for helping us host this meeting. Thanks also to the members of the Korean American Studies Committee, especially Professor Edward Chang. Dr. Suzie Oh, and Dr. Carol Park, for keeping us together. And finally, thanks to our colleagues at the Consulate for the Republic of Korea in Los Angeles for their generous support for our work.