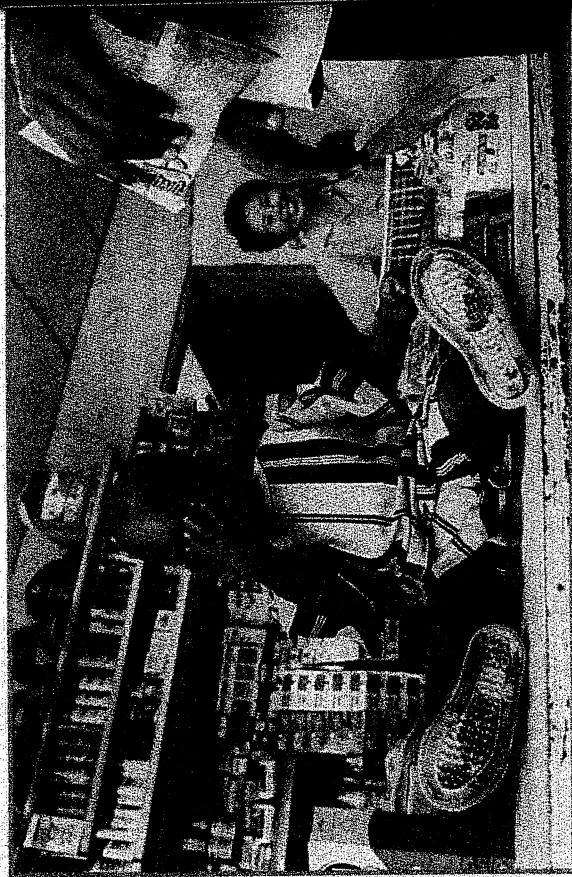


## Lost and Found in L.A.



At some point in my childhood a rumor took hold that those "Chinese Zia children" were "so very well behaved." It was my first lesson in cultural mythology because in truth my brothers and I were wildly undisciplined. Our main entertainment was chasing after one another and bombarding the sibling target of the moment with any available unsecured object. We were so unruly that while I was still in elementary school, my parents imposed a rule of silence at the dinner table and reassigned seats according to who was least likely to pummel his or her neighbor.

Dad and Mom used the enforced quiet to lecture us on various topics. Most often these contained some Confucian parable on the eternal obligation children have to their parents. My father had a special fondness for the tale of the boy whose mother beat him soundly with a stick every day, even after he had grown

*Los Angeles store owner Hua Ja Kim (background) jokes with customers in August 1993; two weeks later she installed a Plexiglas partition after the security guard was shot to death during a robbery attempt (Chang W. Lee)*

into manhood. Never did he raise his voice or hand in response. One day, his mother didn't hit him. The man-boy began to cry and brought the stick to his mother, begging her to strike him. "Mama," he cried, "please don't stop beating me. When you hit me I know you are strong and healthy." He realized his mother was too old and frail to beat him anymore, and his heart was filled with sadness.

Since Dad's own mother beat him daily and he was quick to anger himself, the story seemed a bit self-serving to his skeptical ABC—American-born Chinese—kids. But Dad carried his own sorrow, his failings in his filial duties. During Japan's invasion of China, Japanese soldiers occupied his home province of Jiangsu, raping and pillaging wherever they went. My father was stationed in Chongqing, a member of Chiang Kai-shek's staff. As he learned of the massacres in Nanjing and neighboring Suzhou, his home, he desperately tried to get news about his mother and elder brother. Finally, a courier brought word that their bodies had been sighted along a roadside, where they had apparently tried to flee to safety. He brought back a ring that my grandmother wore, convincing my father that his mother, brother, and sister-in-law were killed during the rampage at Nanjing. He was never able to retrieve their bodies. Dad often recounted this story during an otherwise silent dinner, his voice breaking.

There was no escaping the message of our own unspecified obligations, as Mom, too, exhorted us with many such stories of Chinese kids who willingly, enthusiastically, sacrificed body and soul for their parents. Over our evening meal, she'd tell us about the less fortunate families who had nothing to eat. How, in China, the truly dutiful daughter would cut off a piece of her arm and cook it for her parents, rather than watch them starve. Or the good son who used the warmth of his own body to melt a hole in a frozen pond, so that he might catch fish for his ailing mother.

I'd sit unconvinced, trying hard not to roll my eyes, repressing the urge to make some disrespectful comment. But it was impossible not to absorb the lessons in filial obligation: much was expected from us. My parents didn't have to tell us that they sacrificed for our sake; every day we could see how hard they worked in our family business to make ends meet. And we were expected to do our share.

Each kid had assigned tasks. When I was five years old, I tied ribbons and attached plastic white horses to the pink and blue merry-go-rounds my father sold to flower shops. As I grew older, I took on more challenging tasks. Henry, the oldest, made miniature bassinets and night lamps decorated with yellow

ducks, while Hoyt assembled the merry-go-rounds. Hugo painted and wrapped the pieces, while the two toddlers, my only sister, Humane, and baby brother, Haddon, entertained us. Mom usually stayed up way past midnight, cutting and sewing the satin tops of the carousels. The work took on a dreary monotony.

I'd pass the time listening to the Top 40 Pop/Rock Hits on the radio. Dad recited classical Chinese poems while he worked, telling us about his days as a rising young scholar in China, but how in America his education was worthless. He spent hours scheming to sue the government of Japan for reparations, to hold Japan accountable to families like ours, who had lost loved ones during the Japanese occupation. His anger and bitterness toward Japan was deep. Then he'd load up the family car with the merry-go-rounds, lamps, bassinets, and other "baby novelties" to sell to flower shops. Occasionally I went along with Dad on his deliveries. I loved to breathe the heavy, green smell of the flower shops, to admire the colorful flowers organized in their refrigerated showcases. If I was lucky, I might see one of our merry-go-rounds or bassinets filled with flowers, waiting to be delivered to a new mother. But it was painful to watch my proud father kowtow and scrape to his customers, making small talk and chitchat in strange fawning tones that he didn't use at home.

We never complained about the tedium—it was how we survived. But I knew this life making baby novelties wasn't for me. Dad's stories about the Chinese system of scholarships for bright students from poor families suggested a way out of an uninspiring existence. I studied hard—not out of filial obligation to my parents, but as a means of escaping the life they were consigned to.

When I finally left for college, I felt joyously liberated from my parents' Confucian sensibilities. But I also felt a sense of guilt, that I was no longer around to help carry the family load. No one said it out loud, but it was understood: one day my siblings and I would support our parents, when they couldn't work at the baby novelty business anymore. My first-generation immigrant parents had no pension plans, health coverage, life insurance. We were their future in America.

As I involved myself in issues that touched the various Asian American communities, I came to know many other Asian American immigrants like my parents. They are a self-selected group of pioneers, high-risk takers who made the difficult passage to America to satisfy a hopeful but uncertain vision. Once here, they navigate between two worlds, processing their American lives through an Asian filter, sifting the land of their past with the America of our present.

With time, my parents' connection to their American reality grew percepti-

bly stronger. Their future was so obviously here, with us. Their stories began to change, with different endings. Dad's voice still broke whenever he told the story of his family's wartime slaughter. He unsuccessfully pursued a lawsuit against the government of Japan—he even studied the Japanese language to better make his case. But at some point his rancor toward Japan ended when it came to Japanese Americans. When the campaign to seek justice for Vincent Chin was under way, he told me he was glad I was involved, that it was a good thing for Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans to work together for the common good. After all, he'd say, this is America.

**I**t's 8 a.m. at the busy street corner of Vernon and Arlington, in the heart of South Central Los Angeles. Outside of L.A., this mainly Latino and African American enclave is most known for the urban uprising centered here in 1992 following the not-guilty verdicts on four white police officers in the beating of motorist Rodney King.

The intersection is alive with parents walking their children to the nearby elementary school. Commuters wait at the bus stop by the steel-grated tire shop, across from the New Orleans Oyster Loaf House and a run-down motel. On the northwest corner is the newest building for blocks around: the One Stop Market, neat and trim in eye-pleasing pastel shades of green, yellow, and pink.

The parking lot is empty, closed off by a sturdy black metal fence whose gates are firmly anchored and padlocked. The textured cinderblock walls are capped by a fireproof tile roof that sports a matching black metal fence and coiled barbed wire around the perimeter, interrupted only by strategically placed floodlights. Heavy-gauge metal security doors cover all the windows and doors. Even the bottled water refill machine, a ubiquitous feature of Southern California, has a metal security gate to protect it.

Within minutes, a modest white two-door sedan pulls up. Jae Yul Kim, the stocky owner of the One Stop, gets out to unlock the various gates, while Pedro, his Latino son-in-law, picks up the bundles of newspapers for the day. Nina, Jae's diminutive wife, goes in first to open the side entrance. Their movements are stiff, slow with the weary anticipation of another long day, still tired from the one that ended less than eight hours before.

Jae looks much older than his fifty-four years. His face is creased by

deep furrows. The decades of building—and rebuilding—a livelihood that is low on profit, long on hours, with constant safety concerns, has taken a toll. Jae first arrived in the United States in 1974 as a university graduate, with \$20.22 in his pocket and no knowledge of English. He went to work for a Korean wig manufacturer, then moved on to pumping gas. He later got a job as a carpenter and an air-conditioning mechanic. He saved some money and, with the help of a Small Business Administration loan, in the mid-1980s bought a store with 600 square feet of space in the Hollywood area. The previous owner, who was Jewish, showed Jae how to run the store. "He told me, 'Don't worry, it's small, but I raised two lawyers and two doctors. You can, too,'" says Jae. A few years later, Jae moved to a larger store in South Central.

This new version of the One Stop was built in 1995. Its bunker design is typical of the stores built since the riots. When the Kims' shop was looted and torched on April 30, 1992, they lost not only a business but their extended family's income. In that one fiery moment, Jae's entire life changed—the externals of his family's livelihood, the business and their home, but also the internals, their hopes and dreams, the expectations they had for themselves in America. In the three years it took to secure the city approvals and financing to rebuild on the old site, the bank foreclosed on Kim's home; they survived on food stamps.

Inside the store, the tidy rows of shelves are filled with a variety of goods, from the usual canned foods and snacks, soft drinks, beer and wine, to pantyhose and jewelry, and hula hoops and toys for the kids. Fresh produce and meat are in the deli section, while the hard liquor and cigarettes are enclosed in a booth with the cash register behind thick bulletproof Plexiglas walls.

Before tending to his first customers of the day, Jae goes to the back and loads a clip into a 9 mm pistol. He wears it around his waist, along with a pair of handcuffs and a canister of Mace—mandatory paraphernalia for a licensed security guard, which he is. Jae covers it all with a cheery red *Forest Gump* apron. The city wouldn't permit him to reopen the One Stop unless he hired a security guard. He couldn't afford to hire a guard, so he obtained a license to be one himself. As he holsters the gun, he shrugs. One of his friends, he says, refused to keep a gun at his shop and was stabbed to death there. Until last week, Jae didn't wear a gun either, but an armed robbery attempt brought a change of heart.

One week ago at 3 p.m., a man came up to the cash register and flashed a gun under his T-shirt. Jae dived under the counter, but Nina screamed and ran for the back room. The man reached through the merchandise window cut out of the Plexiglas and began shooting at her. Jae was pinned under the counter, unable to reach the .32 near the cash register, or the shotgun in the back office. The shooter missed Jae and Nina, but struck several bottles of Seagram's Extra Dry Gin before running out of the store. A few of the bullet slugs remain imbedded in the Plexiglas, a silent reminder that Jae and Nina might have joined the other Korean storekeepers killed in their stores each year. In the year following the riots, fifteen grocers were killed in Los Angeles County alone.

A stream of customers pours in and Jae keeps up a cheerful banter. "Good morning—what's good for you about this morning?" he asks a regular. "It's good that I'm alive to say good morning to you," she shoots back. A Latina shopper approaches and, in the July heat, Jae teases, "*Feliz Navidad*." When she asks about some prices, he answers in Spanish. After a while, Jae tends to the deli section. A customer requests four slices of cheese; Jae runs the slicer and wraps the cheese, then stops to talk with her little girl, enfolding her in an affectionate hug. A hand-lettered sign says no deli orders under a dollar can be filled, but many orders are not much more than that. Jan, a rail-thin African American woman, saunters over to Jae and gives him a peck on the cheek. Jan asks if he can help her out today, and he slips her a couple dollars, saying he'd rather give money than deal with extending credit. "Before the riots, I never talk with my customers. They don't like me. Now we make jokes, we like each other. I learn to change—I have to."

Everything about life changed for Korean Americans on April 29, 1992. When the smoke cleared from the three-day uprising in Los Angeles, 54 people had died and some 4,500 shops were reduced to ashes. More than half of the destroyed or damaged businesses were Korean-run. Each shop represented at least one extended family. Tens of thousands of Korean Americans lost their livelihoods and years of sweat equity that day. Countless others who provided services to those businesses were also caught in the downward suction of the sudden impoverishment. Nearly half of the city's total financial loss of more than \$1 billion in damages was suffered by a single group: the Korean American mom-and-pop store-

keepers. The staggering devastation of that date became known by Korean Americans as sa-i-gu, pronounced "sah-ee-goo," or April 2-9.

The angry fracture lines and bitter divisiveness over those three days are evident from the divergent terminology that describe the event. To some observers, sa-i-gu was an urban rebellion, an expression of protest against the economic disenfranchisement of blacks and Latinos—with Korean merchants cast as the oppressor class. Other called it a food riot, a conflagration of inner-city poor and their frenzied plundering of all shops in striking distance, many of which happened to be Korean-owned. Still others, preferring a more subdued description, referred to the riot as a civil unrest, an upheaval that marked all Angelenos.

Most Korean Americans reject such references. To them, it was a SCUD missile attack with a very definite target. "An American pogrom" is how K. W. Lee, the venerable Korean American journalist, described the events beginning April 29. "Koreatown was a war zone. For us it was like the Jewish last stand in Warsaw, or the internment of the Japanese Americans. Sa-i-gu was a convenient way for mainstream America to deflect black rage," said Lee, who was editor in chief of the *Korea Times* English Edition at the time of the riots.

Sa-i-gu has become the reference point for Korean American life in the United States, in the way that the mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II was a defining moment for that community. Sa-i-gu has become the point at which all dreams, hopes, and illusions were stripped bare and burned to their essence. How real was their American dream? Was the image of the multicultural society and pan-Asian American unity just another myth? In the aftermath of sa-i-gu, a transformed community and leadership would emerge from the ashes, with a vision based on a cold new reality.

Before sa-i-gu, Korean Americans were invisible, subsumed in the generic Asian American landscape, blurred in with the more established Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. After sa-i-gu, Americans discovered Koreans in their midst. They found a different breed of Asian—more confrontational, less accommodating. Before sa-i-gu, Korean Americans, like most immigrants and most Americans, saw themselves as individuals on their own quests for their personal dreams, bystanders to American society. Those Asians who accepted the model minority myth found it easy to believe that hard work and a low profile would reap their

eventual rewards. Sa-i-gu exposed the myth. After sa-i-gu, Korean Americans were isolated and deeply hurt by the unspoken but widely held sentiment that they somehow deserved what they got. Starkly visible and alone on center stage, Korean Americans were forced to reevaluate their place and assert themselves in America.

If Korean Americans have been profoundly changed by sa-i-gu, the impact felt by other Asian Americans is no less significant, but less clear. Sa-i-gu compelled other Asian Americans to reconsider their own status in America, to alter the relationships between the various Asian American ethnicities as well as with communities of other races, even to recast who Asian Americans are. But sa-i-gu has not taken on the symbolism for Asian Americans of the Japanese American internment—at least, not yet. It took fifty years for Asian Americans to begin to see the concentration camps as emblematic for Asian Americans, beyond Japanese Americans. Where Korean Americans could not miss the implications of sa-i-gu for their community, many other Asian Americans have managed to avoid considering the broader meaning of that unpleasantness in L.A. Sa-i-gu was a hard teacher with lessons that have yet to be learned.

The warning signs of approaching cataclysm were evident in Los Angeles for months, even years. Before most Americans even recognized that Koreans existed in America as a growing and vital population, Korean Americans and many other Asian Americans were acutely aware of the explosive potential surrounding them. Two years before sa-i-gu, the divisive, year-long boycott of the Family Red Apple Market in New York City's Flatbush section sent shivers through Korean Americans across the United States, especially in states where Koreans had settled in large numbers—California, New York, Illinois, Texas, Colorado, Ohio, and Minnesota. In Los Angeles, unlike New York, Korean Americans and Asian Americans in general were better organized. But better organization did not offer solutions to the deepening tensions. Korean newspapers and grocers' associations in Los Angeles monitored the New York Red Apple situation closely and tried to learn from the incident, especially as African American newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Sentinel* ran numerous articles warning that Koreans were "taking over" the black community.

L.A.'s Korean American population increased from 8,900 in 1970 to 145,431 in 1990. In Koreatown, just north of the inner-city core of South

Central, their numbers had grown from 1,099 to 23,995 in two decades. Some 80 percent of the burgeoning Korean American community were immigrants who had arrived following the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. In 1990, only half had been in the United States more than ten years. Though the majority of men and women had graduated from Korean colleges, the largest employment category for Korean Americans was "self-employed."

Not all Korean storekeepers had shops in black neighborhoods. In his research, Professor Edward T. Chang from the University of California at Riverside found that only about 10 percent of Korean merchants in Southern California were in neighborhoods servicing a primarily African American clientele. But high-profile conflicts between Korean merchants and black customers drew greater attention to their presence. To many African Americans, the Korean American storekeepers were a maddening reminder of chronic poverty and economic injustice in the black community, while yet another immigrant group was advancing, at their expense. In their pursuit of the American dream, the new immigrants seemed oblivious to the African Americans' long history of struggle for their unfulfilled dreams. In Los Angeles as well as New York and other cities, black people bristled over incidents of disrespectful treatment and false accusations of shoplifting.

Some of the tensions spilled into violence. In 1986, in a single month, four Korean storekeepers in L.A. were shot to death by African Americans in separate incidents. Both African American and Korean American communities recognized the danger signs. That year, with the assistance of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, they tried to bridge their differences by creating the Black-Korean Alliance.

One of the first efforts of its kind in the country, L.A.'s Black-Korean Alliance (BKA) was to maintain an ongoing dialogue, even though conflicts had sparked between the two communities in several other cities. Discussions began with a group of black ministers, representatives from a few Korean American groups, and two consultants with the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission—Larry Aubrey, an African American, and Jai Lee Wong, a Korean American. But problems beset the BKA from the start. Though the alliance came together initially to address racial tensions and the death toll among Korean shopkeepers, some of the merchant groups didn't want any publicity about the killings, fearing that

attention would cause more trouble. The compulsion to "not make waves" presented a familiar quandary to Asian Americans, offering the tantalizing notion that if they kept quiet, they might escape further misfortune. At the same time, African American groups were also ambivalent about the BKA, as interracial relations with Koreans were a low priority among blacks. If the BKA's purpose was to encourage multicultural understanding, it was off to an inauspicious start.

As tensions escalated, the Black-Korean Alliance pulled in representatives from the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and, significantly, merchants and storekeepers from both African American and Korean communities. The reluctance of Korean storekeepers to speak to the media presented a problem. One of the BKA's goals was to draw the media's attention to positive efforts at interracial relations between blacks and Koreans, rather than the constant focus on conflicts. The BKA recruited Chung Lee, owner of the Watts Market, as the first Korean merchant to join the dialogue between the two communities. Lee was proud of his relationship with the black community of Watts, where riots were centered in 1965. He hired local workers, was involved in the Watts community, and, unlike other Korean shopkeepers, was willing to talk to the media. Seen as a positive role model, Lee and his work in Watts were often profiled in the *Korea Times*. However, some Korean merchants resented the publicity Lee received, and he drew criticism from Koreans for his visibility. After several months, Lee resigned from the BKA and another Korean storekeeper took his place.

The BKA continued with its mission to improve black-Korean relations. Other Asian Americans who worked with the L.A. County Human Relations Commission supported the Korean Americans and the BKA, but they treated the efforts as a Korean and black problem. When one of the former African Americans on the BKA, Mark Ridley-Thomas, ran for a seat on the L.A. City Council, Korean American grocers supported his campaign with enthusiasm and raised donations for his successful bid. Compared to other cities, Korean American immigrants in Los Angeles were taking positive steps to become involved in mainstream political life and a multiracial, multicultural alliance. As part of the BKA, Korean Americans met with key political leaders, including Mayor Tom Bradley, and city, county, and state officials. Both Korean and African American members of the BKA warned that unless substantial proactive measures

were taken, there could be dire consequences for Los Angeles. Few heeded their warnings. "Then the Soon Ja Du shooting blew everything apart," said Jai Lee Wong, of the Human Relations Commission.

Soon Ja Du was minding the cash register of the Empire Liquor Market on South Figueroa Street in South Central L.A. when fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins came into the store on Saturday morning, March 16, 1991. It was only thirteen days after Rodney King had been beaten by four white LAPD officers, their assault captured on videotape that aired repeatedly on the TV news. Racial tensions were high—and that was why forty-nine-year-old Soon Ja Du happened to be at the store that day. Her son Joseph was normally at the store on Saturdays, but members of the violent Crips gang had threatened him because he agreed to testify against them after another robbery attempt. To relieve Joseph from the stress and fear at the Empire Liquor Market, she took his place.

Something went terribly wrong when Harlins approached the cash register to pay for her orange juice. She had the money in her hands, and had already placed the juice in her backpack. Du grabbed the backpack and accused Harlins of stealing—a provocative charge that underscored persistent complaints of disrespect and scrutiny of African Americans by Korean merchants. Harlins punched Du, knocking her down twice, then turned to leave the store. As Du got up, she grabbed the gun that was under the counter. She fired the gun, and Latasha Harlins crumbled. Soon Ja Du's husband, Billy Heung Ki Du, who had been resting out back in their van, ran in and called 911. But it was too late for Latasha, killed by a bullet to the back of her head.

The entire episode was captured on the store's security video camera. Jan Jung-Min Sunoo, a federal mediator and then president of the L.A. City Human Relations Commission, reviewed the video with another federal mediator, who was African American. "I watched the video and saw a frightened Korean American woman whose gun went off accidentally. My black colleague watched and said, 'That settles that. She shot the girl in cold blood.'"

The Black-Korean Alliance issued a statement signed by the NAACP, the SCLC, and several Korean American organizations urging people to come together. "One case does not paint a true picture for everyone," said

Dennis Westbrook, the African American co-chair of the Black-Korean Alliance. "This incident is not indicative of the overall general relations between Korean merchants and their customers."

Though the BKA and the Human Relations Commission exhorted the police not to make the videotape of the Harlins shooting public because they feared it would further inflame racial tensions, the police released the tape to the news media anyway, a move that some believed was intended to draw attention away from the tape of the police beating of Rodney King. Their fears were justified: TV news programs repeatedly aired the tape of Soon Ja Du shooting Latasha Harlins. "The news media ran the story, 'Girl killed over \$1.79 bottle of juice,' over and over again. The coverage was irresponsible—we knew it could lead to a riot," said Jai Lee Wong. Many merchants were so angry with the *Los Angeles Times* for depicting the killing as a racially motivated incident representative of all Korean grocers that they refused to sell certain issues at their stores.

It wasn't the first time that the grocers had exercised their economic power. When African American rap singer Ice Cube came out with "Black Korea" almost a year before Latasha Harlins was killed, Korean American political groups launched a boycott of his CD. His rap warned that if storekeepers did not respect blacks, their shops would be burned to a crisp. The consumer boycott had little impact. Then members of the Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO) decided not to sell the malt liquor brand that was endorsed by Ice Cube, and the liquor manufacturer persuaded the rapper to offer an apology. But conflict resolution is not reconciliation, as University of Hawaii law professor Eric Yamamoto noted in his book *Interracial Justice: Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America*. He cited an editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* by Sheena Lester describing the Korean grocers as "poison-pushing merchants, who are apparently more outraged about being called names than they are about a dead Black child." The presence of so many liquor stores in South Central L.A. angered African Americans; some 682 liquor licenses were issued there, ten times more per square mile than elsewhere in the county, with about 30 percent of the independent liquor stores owned by Koreans. Conflict resolution without "action on underlying grievances, by both racial communities, seemed to inflame rather than heal racial wounds," wrote Yamamoto.

The killing of Latasha Harlins pushed an already charged atmosphere



to the brink in Los Angeles and other cities, where African Americans and Asian Americans were following the events closely. Soon Ja Du in particular and Korean merchants in general became the angry focus of pickets and media events organized by an African American group called the Brotherhood Crusade. Led by a media-savvy leader named Danny Bakewell, their aim was to shut down Korean-owned stores, then take them over at drastically reduced prices. "I can put any one of them out of business," Bakewell told author Itabari Njeri in her book *The Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black*. "If I got thirty organizations committing to twelve days a year [picketing a designated site], that means you out of business [sic]. That means, your number comes up, you're gone. You're history. You can't survive that. I only need to do that once or twice and I will have absolute, major control of this community." Bakewell initially picketed the Du family's Empire Liquor Market, but the store never reopened after the shooting. The Brotherhood Crusade hung a banner across the door: "Closed for Murder and Disrespect of Black People."

Every Korean American store was a potential target. The Watts Market of Chung Lee, the outspoken former member of the Black-Korean Alliance who was considered to have a model relationship with the black community, was surrounded by pickets. A baseless rumor circulated that Chung Lee's sister-in-law was related to Soon Ja Du. The market's black employees tried to dissuade the pickets without success. "He's being picketed because he's Korean," said one black employee; "they don't care if the rumor isn't true." Even if it were true, why should other Koreans take the blame for Soon Ja Du?

But other Koreans were blamed. Shortly after the killing of Latasha Harlins, two more Korean grocers were killed. A Korean girl who was in her parents' store was shot and critically wounded; the attacker reportedly said, "This is for Latasha." In the year following the shooting, 48 murders and 2,500 robberies were reported in L.A.'s Koreatown, and the number of hate crimes against Korean Americans topped all other anti-Asian incidents.

The situation went from bad to worse. Two and a half months after Soon Ja Du shot Latasha Harlins, an African American man named Lee Arthur Mitchell was killed during an apparent holdup attempt at Chung's Liquor market in South Central. Mitchell was shot to death by the store's

owner, Tae Sam Park, who incurred several broken ribs in a scuffle at the cash register. Police ruled it a justifiable homicide. A daily picket went up outside the store, which the Brotherhood Crusade was determined to shut down. As the tense communities awaited the outcome of the prosecution of Soon Ja Du, violent incidents against Korean Americans increased.

Tensions wore through the bonds within the Korean American community. Some Korean Americans were angry with Soon Ja Du. They felt that her tragic act placed their entire community in jeopardy. "We should not lose our tempers over a bottle of orange juice," said Young Kyu Yi, owner of a store in South Central. "Even if we are victims of theft many times over, we must control our temper and be patient." Another Korean American told the *Korea Times*, "I'm hard-pressed to find some justification for someone to shoot another person over orange juice." Still, some felt empathy for Du. Korean Americans identified with the great stress she apparently faced. Like many Korean immigrants, Du was deeply religious. A Seventh-day Adventist and a church deacon, she spent more time at church and supporting various charities than at the store. A hundred members of her church packed the courtroom at her arraignment.

Other Asian Americans were reluctant to act on a problem they saw as internal to the Korean community. But the strain was wearing down the threads of pan-Asian American unity. The Red Apple Market boycott in New York had exposed the inability of the old-style multiracial coalition to act in a 1990s conflict between communities of color. The influx of a more diverse population of Asian immigrants after the 1965 Immigration Act brought new sets of interracial dynamics and issues that Asian American activists had still not confronted. When I brought up the issues of black-Korean tension and black-Asian violence at one of the few meetings of the ad hoc National Network Against Anti-Asian Violence in November 1991, there was almost no discussion, as though no one knew what to say.

Even under the best conditions, the organizational and structural ties between the different Asian American ethnic groups were tenuous and informal. Asian Americans who had any access to the political system tried to bring attention to the impending crisis. Stewart Kwoh, executive director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, one of L.A.'s main Asian American advocacy organizations, was then serving as president of the Los Angeles City Human Relations Commission. After years of trying to get Mayor Bradley to hire a director and activate some kind of program, the

commission finally hired a director, nine months before sa-i-gu. "We issued a report saying that South Central was ready to blow up," said Kwoh. "We recommended that multicultural teams go into the community to work on the tensions." It never happened.

In October 1991, only months before sa-i-gu, Soon Ja Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter in the killing of Latasha Harlins. Judge Joyce Karlin suspended Du's sentence, placing her on five years' probation and ordering 400 hours of community service, \$500 in fines, and funeral costs for Latasha. Explaining her sentence, the judge noted that the gun's firing mechanism had been altered to have a hair-trigger touch, and said that Du, who was inexperienced with guns, would otherwise not have shot Harlins. She then advised the parties to use the tragedy as an opportunity to fight "intolerance and bigotry." The probationary sentence for Soon Ja Du stunned a nation, much as probation for Vincent Chin's killers had. For Asian Americans, the parallels were unavoidable. Though there were fundamental differences between the cases, it was hard to advance justice for Vincent Chin without also advocating justice for Latasha Harlins. But for Asian Americans to do so would be seen as a slap in the face of an already battered Korean American community, while to concur with the sentence would draw further wrath from African Americans. Any public statement might be misconstrued by the media, taken out of context in a volatile situation. The safest route was to say nothing. This was the course that many Asian American leaders took.

The Black-Korean Alliance offered a slim hope for Korean Americans and African Americans to defuse a racial explosion. Stepping up its efforts, the BKA changed to weekly meetings to keep up with the various pickets and the intensity of the media attention. Months before the riots, the BKA began to fragment. "We were spending too much of our time in constant battle with the media," said Bong Hwan Kim, a member of the BKA and executive director of the Korean Youth Cultural Center. "Reporters seemed satisfied to portray the matter as race hatred between two communities of color, rather than looking at the forces that brought them into conflict." The BKA ended up working more with the news media than its communities, trying to get the news to show more of the history and context of racism and the causes of poverty and economic disenfranchisement. Its members hoped that a greater understanding

would inspire some constructive approaches, but the momentum toward collision was too strong.

As the extreme positions of both the black and the Korean communities became more polarized and vocal, advocates of conciliation were attacked and BKA members of both groups were labeled race traitors. "No African American was willing to risk standing in front of a camera with a Korean American for fear of being called out as an apologist and sellout, and vice versa," said Bong Hwan Kim.

Kim himself came under heavy criticism from Koreans when, at a BKA press conference, he suggested that justice would have been better served had Soon Ja Du received jail time. Mainstream news media didn't find it newsworthy to report that a Korean American leader challenged the shopkeeper's sentence, but the Korean news media picked up the story and accused Kim of betraying his community. Kim's stand was a courageous one, when even Asian Americans outside the Korean community were silent on the subject of probation for the killing.

Under this pressure the fragile Black-Korean Alliance disintegrated. Jai Lee Wong recalls that an African American minister came to a BKA meeting and likened Koreans opening stores in Los Angeles to Europeans opening America with guns. "Everyone was pissed off. Korean Americans were at the table, but they were always on the defensive, having to prove they were worthy," said Wong. "It was as though the African Americans were doing Koreans a favor by meeting. The BKA had no unified voice, and the Korean community didn't have the sophistication or clout to say, Don't fuck with us. Some Korean Americans wanted to declare the killings of Korean merchants racially motivated hate crimes. African Americans disagreed—to do otherwise would be to admit that blacks could have prejudice," said Wong.

On the other hand, few Korean Americans would admit that prejudice played a role in the insensitivity to blacks that they were so often accused of. The Black-Korean Alliance finally disbanded, with bitterness on both sides, after six years of meetings.

Then sa-i-gu erupted. On April 29, 1992, a jury in suburban Simi Valley pronounced four white Los Angeles police officers not guilty of assault in the beating of Rodney King. The verdict uncapped all the pent-up anger over police brutality that was routine in Los Angeles, over the years of



empty talk about economic and social inequities, over the racial injustices that never got righted. Outrage and fury rushed onto the streets.

Much of that anger found a target: the neighborhood Korean-owned stores. "Our worst nightmare come true," said Jan Jung-Min Sunoo, of the L.A. County Human Relations Commission. As stores were looted and torched, Korean Americans desperately called 911 for assistance. But the LAPD let South Central, Koreatown, and the inner-city core burn. When the police did show up, they did little to stop the violence. Store owners like Yong Hwan Sul and his partner tried to keep looters from carting off their wares. As looters turned to beat his partner, Sul called to a line of thirty police who stood across the street and merely watched; Korean Americans suspected that the LAPD was relieved that the rage over police brutality had found another outlet.

Anxious Korean American families sat transfixed by news on Radio Korea, nervously listening to damage reports. A call went out for volunteer security brigades from the community, to protect itself where the police and the government would not. Both men and women tried to keep looters at bay. Korean American men, many of whom had served their mandatory time in the U.S.-supported Korean military, ringed their shops with barricades of shopping carts, cars, and refrigerators and other items that hadn't been carted away. Some shopkeepers took up arms and exchanged fire with arsonists. The jarring image of Korean American merchants with guns shocked an American public that knew little about the Koreans in their midst. Among the individuals who answered the call for volunteers on Radio Korea was an eighteen-year-old Korean American college freshman named Edward Lee. He was killed, apparently in cross-fire from other Koreans; dozens of shopkeepers and their family members were wounded.

"Cry Koreatown" read the banner headline of the *Korea Times* English Edition, which served as the English-language window on Koreatown. Businesses and property owned by all races and ethnicities were destroyed. The looters were also multiracial in composition, with some Koreans even participating in the spree. But Korean Americans overwhelmingly bore the brunt of the riot's devastation. With nearly 2,500 Korean-owned stores destroyed and more than \$500 million in damages to the Korean community alone, it was hard to recall a more devastating punishment meted out to a single group.

It didn't matter whether or not the Korean shop owners had good relations with their neighborhood. Chung Lee, the Watts Market owner and former co-chair of the Black-Korean Alliance, saw his store burn to the ground in spite of fifteen years of strong relations with the Watts community. Several of his customers tried to keep arsonists away, but they were outnumbered.

If Korean Americans had been invisible in America before, they were now in the full limelight. Asian Americans consider the riots to be the moment that America took notice of Korean Americans. Journalists did not know what to make of this Asian American population that suddenly emerged in their headlines. Even when news reports were quick to label the riots a black-Korean problem rather than one of police brutality, replaying images of Korean Americans with guns, few reporters ventured to Koreatown or bothered to interview Korean Americans. A post-riot survey of Angelenos conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* queried more than a thousand people on their feelings about the riots; the front-page results reported the views of "Whites, Blacks, Hispanics and Others." In explanation, Shelby Coffey, editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, said that Asians were not statistically significant enough to include, even though they made up 11 percent of the Los Angeles population, roughly the same percentage as African Americans. Ted Koppel of ABC News-dedicated two weeks of *Nightline's* programs to on-site coverage in Los Angeles, visiting with African American gang members and discussing black-Korean tensions. But Koppel didn't speak to Korean Americans. Finally, after complaints of bias by Asian Americans in Los Angeles, attorney Angela Oh was brought on *Nightline* for a few minutes as a lone Korean voice. Oh's strong appearance brought her instant prominence as one of the very few Asian Americans to speak on national television about the riots.

On May 2, as the embers of what used to be their livelihoods smoldered, more than thirty thousand Korean Americans marched through Koreatown, calling for peace and denouncing the police and criminal justice system in the Rodney King trial. The demonstration was historic, the largest protest ever held by Asians in America. "Why are Korean Americans the fall guys for social injustice?" read one sign that captured the crowd's sentiments. A special ire was reserved for the news media and their failure to present a Korean American view, even as some portrayed Korean Americans as a cause of the riots. "Media: Report the Tragedy of Koreatown,"

demand a protester. But the news media barely covered the historic march and rally.

Bitterness was not directed only toward the news media. Korean Americans noticed a striking absence of other Asian Americans. At the rally, besides Korean Americans, there were a few African Americans, Latinos, and Asian American individuals. But leaders of other Asian American groups were nowhere to be found. Only one, Lily Lee Chen, the former Chinese American mayor of Monterey Park, came out to support the Korean American demonstration. "I remember wondering, 'Where is everybody, for God's sake?'" said Brenda Paik Sunoo, then news editor of the *Korea Times* English Edition. Sunoo had spent years as an activist for Asian American causes. To find her community abandoned by the pan-Asian American spirit she espoused was a devastating blow.

In 1992, more than two decades after the Asian American student movement first gave a name to this new unity, some Asian Americans were trying hard to dissociate themselves from Korean Americans. As with the Red Apple Market boycott in New York, some Asian Americans did not want to be forced to take sides with Korean Americans against African Americans. Others didn't want to be perceived as the "bad guy" and to become a potential target themselves. A few, like Elaine Woo, an editor with the *Los Angeles Times* and the sister of city council representative Michael Woo, were honest enough to fess up. In an essay for the *Times*, she wrote, "I was afraid of being mistaken for Korean." The public revelation was a painful validation of what Korean Americans sensed from their Asian American brethren.

"Suddenly I understood the isolation that Japanese Americans must have felt when they were interned during World War II. Such a sense of cosmic sorrow," said journalist K. W. Lee. Lofty images of a pan-Asian American "family" in a multicultural America now seemed to be empty rhetoric.

Asian Americans had lost something, too. In a way, the "model minority" was taking a beating from blacks, whites, and Latinos who seemed only too glad to deliver their comeuppance. The extreme severity of the punishment meted out to Korean Americans suggested that sa-i-gu was not just for Latasha Harlins and Rodney King but also for Rockefeller Center, for Toyota, and for being the "success story." Korean Americans had taken the hit for all Asian Americans.

The wrongness of it added to the Korean Americans' *han*, their collective sense of bitterness. "Every Korean generation has acquired a sense of *han*, accumulated grievance and unquenched woe," explained Lee. "*Han* is a part of the collective psyche of Koreans, the grievance against external forces, like the Japanese subjugation of Korea, or the chauvinism of hundreds of years. And now this. The *han* is deeply imbedded." Yet *han* is also intrinsic to the Korean will to survive, through centuries of occupation by foreign rulers, and even the pervasive U.S. military presence for the last fifty years. Other dreams and ideals would have to be forged.

The riots precipitated a leadership crisis in the Korean American community. As in other Asian American immigrant communities, the mantle of leadership for Koreans unequivocally rested on the senior men of the immigrant first generation, following traditional hierarchical lines of age, gender, and class. Traditional leadership offered stability to itinerant populations far from home. At the time of the riots, Jae Yul Kim, the owner of the One Stop Market at Vernon and Arlington, and others like him were still in their prime, some not even in their fifties, hardly ready to hand over the reins to their inexperienced twenty- and thirty-something progeny.

Yet the rubble of Koreatown testified to the inability of the first-generation immigrants to lead the Korean American community out of crisis. Communicating their needs to politicians and the media in clear and persuasive English posed a problem. So did their schizophrenic "old country/new country" reality, with some storekeepers more ready to call the Korean government than to contact American local, state, and federal authorities. But the main problem was that the shops and grocery stores of the first generation were destroyed in the riots, and men like Jae Yul Kim had to put every ounce of energy into restoring their family's livelihood.

After sa-i-gu, Jae Yul Kim and his wife, Nina, lost their home. Nina cried every day. She stopped using her Korean name, Soon Ja, which might remind people of Soon Ja Du. They moved into a \$600-a-month apartment with two of their grown children, their children's Latino spouses, and their grandchildren. They relied on food stamps for the three years that Jae was out of work. In 1995 they finally reopened the One Stop Market, with \$500 in cash and only a few shelves stocked. They depended on their older son, a graduate of UC Berkeley, to work at the store, as well as on their daughter's husband. During that time, Jae volunteered at a Korean relief

organization for riot victims. Eventually he became involved with the Korean American Grocers Association, serving on its board of directors. But with his store opening like a new business, Jae no longer had time to be involved in groups like KAGRO.

The extreme duress of sa-i-gu forced a sudden transfer of leadership from the first-generation immigrants to the more acculturated 1.5 and 2.0 generations. The "1.5 generation," a designation coined by Korean Americans and sometimes used by other Asian groups, refers to those who came to the United States as children, while the "2.0 generation" was born in America. Unlike their parents, both were fluent in the ways of America. After sa-i-gu, in the historic demonstration of thirty thousand Korean Americans, the first-generation immigrants could march to City Hall and wave placards, but they could not convey their needs to the politicians and the media. It would be up to their young adult children, the 1.5s and 2.0s, to appeal to the hearts and minds of the American people.

Among the American-educated 1.5- and 2.0-generation Korean Americans who stepped up to the plate was Bong Hwan Kim, a member and executive director of the Korean Youth Cultural Center, who was thirty-four years old at the time of the riots. Kim took many strong public stands. He criticized attempts by some African American leaders to mobilize blacks by scapegoating Koreans and the failure of other black leadership to take a stand—in addition to his own questioning of Soon Ja Du's sentence. After sa-i-gu, he worked with other Asian Americans to convert burned-out liquor stores to alternate uses, such as Laundromats. Their effort was overshadowed by a broad movement to drive out the liquor stores without offering the owners any compensation for their businesses—and Bong Hwan Kim was again called a collaborator and a traitor to Koreans. Nevertheless, his leadership skills are still recognized and called upon by the community. "I was seen as a young upstart who wasn't sensitive to the needs of the first generation," said Kim. "But leadership is about taking risks."

Another of the community's leaders who emerged forcefully after sa-i-gu was attorney Angela Oh, celebrated for her strong commentary on national TV after the riots. She later became the only Asian American appointed to serve on the President's Initiative on Race during the Clinton Administration—and the Korean press criticized her for "benefiting" from the riots. A member of the 2.0 generation, Oh was born in Los Angeles, the Korean equivalent of a Chinese jook sing, or hollow bamboo. Without

speaking Korean, and presumed to lack an understanding of the culture, she has had to reach out to the first generation while facing the disdain of some of her elders. Even worse, Oh is female and outspoken, a hard combination for the more Confucian-bound elders to accept. "Her gutsiness grates on their chauvinism," says K. W. Lee. "In Korean culture, the Korean woman is lowest on the food chain. The gender *han* is the deepest grievance of all." For Oh, the criticism was not unexpected. "It's part of the deal: if you open your mouth, you will be criticized. But younger Koreans were excited to see that they might be able to play a role in the community and the nation. The riots woke them up," said Oh.

To younger Korean Americans, Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim are revered as role models. After sa-i-gu, twenty-something Krystene Park went to work in Koreatown. Park joined the Korean American Grocers Association as its director after finishing college. She sees herself as a link to the "American system" for people like her father, who runs the family's liquor store. "Being from the 1.5 generation, I know more of what's going on politically outside the community. I attend hearings on ordinances that will affect the grocers, who are too busy running their shops to follow what the government is doing," said Park. "I am a bridge for our community."

Other young Korean Americans such as Do Kim see an opportunity to serve their community and develop as leaders. A tough street kid from Koreatown whose mother worked in garment shops and whose father pumped gas, Kim came to the United States when he was three years old. He grew up speaking Korean and inner-city slang, but won a scholarship to Harvard. Kim saw the riots on TV in his dorm in Cambridge, feeling angry and helpless as he watched looters being interviewed only three blocks from his parents' home. "I had to do something," he said. Even before the riots, Kim wanted to make a difference, and he majored in African American studies. At Harvard, Kim got black and Asian students together to raise money for riot victims of all races. When he returned to L.A., he sought out community advocates such as Bong Hwan Kim and Jae Lee Wong to learn how he could become one, too.

"The 1992 riots served as a catalyst to bridge the gap between first- and second-generation Korean Americans," said Edward T. Chang, professor at UC Riverside. A specialist in black-Korean relations who came to the United States from Korea as a teenager, Chang is often asked by reporters to give a Korean perspective on the riots, but he says that a

Korean voice is often still lacking in the coverage because few of those interviews are ultimately used. "After the riots the 1.5 and 2.0 generations became much more aware and proud of what their parents went through, and the immigrants were grateful to the young Korean Americans who spoke up for the community. There's a new sense of Korean American ethnic identity and activism, and many younger Koreans have come back to the community," said Chang. "But the first generation still holds on to the traditional hierarchy and way of doing things. Whether the 1.5 and 2.0 generations stay in Koreatown in spite of the frustrations remains to be seen."

Some younger Korean Americans, like Do Kim, are certain that they will stay in Koreatown. "This is where the fight is. I wanted to be in on the fight," he said.

After sa-i-gu, the Asian American leadership had to undergo its own soul-searching and metamorphosis. Asian American history is rife with examples of one Asian ethnic group separating itself from another—each hoping that it will be the one that is accepted into American society, or that it can avoid being brushed by racism. While many Korean Americans felt abandoned by the rest of the Asian American community, "other Asians expressed an initial resentment toward Koreans, blaming Korean Americans for the increased racial tension they experienced," said Edward Chang.

Some Asian Americans worried that they might be targeted because they looked like Koreans—and some indeed were. Hundreds of stores owned by other Asians—among them, Chinese, Cambodians, Japanese, Indians, and Filipinos—were also destroyed, possibly because they were believed to be Korean-owned, or simply because they were Asian. Close to L.A., in the neighboring city of Long Beach, numerous shops of Cambodian Americans were torched. Deborah Ching, director of the Chinatown Service Center, recounted hearing Chinese say it's a Korean problem, not a Chinese problem. A Japanese American man was severely beaten during the riots, mistaken for Korean; the incident was caught on camera, but the Asian American community was silent about this and other attacks.

Years after sa-i-gu, there is still bitterness over the ambivalence revealed by Asian Americans in the face of the Korean American commu-

nity's greatest crisis. Brenda Paik Sunoo, then news editor of the *Korea Times* English Edition, was still angry about Asian American silence on the targeting of Korean stores. "For all the work on anti-Asian violence, the Asian American community didn't formulate the destruction of two-thousand-plus Korean American stores as hate crimes. Instead, we let the major media define the events," said Sunoo, a third-generation Korean American who grew up in L.A.'s Crenshaw area near South Central. "Asian Americans should have stood up and said these anti-Korean attacks are not acceptable."

Some Asian Americans did take stands, behind the scenes, sending letters to the mayor, submitting position papers to numerous officials and government agencies. In the months leading up to the riots, Stewart Kwoh of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center wrote columns published in the *Los Angeles Times* in which he called for an end to anti-Asian rhetoric. Part of the problem, said Kwoh, is that all Asian Americans have been invisible, not just Korean Americans. As a result, Asian Americans were often as ignorant of one another's actions as non-Asians. The more fundamental problem was that Asian Americans as a whole, despite totaling 11 percent of the city's population, lacked political clout and recognition in Los Angeles.

Another consideration is that there was no single Asian American organization or national leadership that could have offered support. Still, many Asian American activists recognized they could have done more as individuals. "There's a good element of truth to the Korean American feeling that Asian Americans didn't step up," said Warren Furutani, a fourth-generation Japanese American who was president of the Los Angeles Board of Education in 1992. But part of the problem was not only Asian Americans' lack of power but their inability to reach other people in power. "We had the same glaring problem when the Japanese American internment happened: no one was on the inside, where the decisions were being made, to represent our interests. Korean Americans expected more support and were shocked to find there was none. Asian Americans didn't have the political foundation to make it happen."

Sa-i-gu forced Asian Americans to take a hard look at their own status and lack of power. "1992 was a defining event for Korean Americans, and it was a wake-up call for Asian Americans," said Ron Wakabayashi, executive director of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission.

"For a lot of us it was the hardest lesson to experience. We thought we had been making progress, but we were not," said Deborah Ching, who, as head of the Chinatown Service Center, chaired the Asian Pacific Planning Council, a pan-Asian coalition linking some fifty Asian American social service groups.

What the pan-Asian American groups couldn't do politically they tried to provide in the form of organization and social services to the victims of the riots. The Asian Pacific Planning Council took on the crisis management task of locating and coordinating services for the thousands of Korean and other Asian Americans who were hurt by the riots. Disaster relief; emergency food and clothing; processing of claims to insurance companies and local, state, and federal governments; unemployment assistance; job placement and training; legal aid; health services and counseling—all were needed urgently, and in multiple Asian languages. "Assistance to our communities is often overlooked by government and private agencies because they don't perceive Asian American populations as needing the help," said Ching.

If the pan-Asian groups did not speak up loudly on behalf of Korean Americans before sa-i-gu, it became a necessity after the riots. "Some political leaders were unsympathetic, even antagonistic to Korean Americans," said Stewart Kwoh, founder and chief executive officer of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. When Ron Brown, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce, announced a large federal grant to Los Angeles after the riots, he noted, "Not a penny will go to the Koreans." Kwoh's group had to sue about one hundred insurance brokers whose carriers declared bankruptcy or otherwise failed to make good on the insurance policies purchased by many of the Asian American store owners. The legal center's staff increased from fifteen to twenty-five overnight in order to expand its services. Because of its pan-Asian mission, the center also served as a liaison between the larger social and political institutions and the Asian American community. "We tried to bring Asian Pacific Americans together to support the Korean community," said Kwoh. He met with the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board about the depiction of Korean Americans as greedy, gun-toting merchants and urged it to hire some Korean American journalists—an effort that contributed to the hiring of a veteran reporter, K. Connie Kang.

After sa-i-gu, Asian Americans had to confront the issue of obtaining

real political power. The human suffering from the riots magnified the cost of not doing so.

Beyond the issue of political empowerment, Asian Americans also had to reconsider their own conceptions of "Asian Americans." In the 1960s, most Asian Americans were American-born Chinese and Japanese, as well as some Filipino Americans. But the millions of Asian immigrants and refugees who arrived after 1965 brought profound changes to the Asian American population and its relationships with other communities. The new Asian Americans brought a diversity of cultures and sensibilities that the old-guard Asian Americans had not previously grappled with. Sa-i-gu forced leaders of the pan-Asian American ideal to accept a new understanding of diversity and inclusion.

For example, in Long Beach, just south of Los Angeles, the shock of sa-i-gu compelled the Cambodian American community to emerge as a vocal Asian American community. The fifty thousand Cambodian Americans of Long Beach found themselves caught in the destruction of Korean American businesses, as hundreds of Cambodian American businesses were looted and burned. The riots in Long Beach nearly shut down the United Cambodian Community agency of Long Beach, which depended on the financial support of local businesses for its survival. "Not only were community people hurt, but this agency almost collapsed," said Sovann Tith, its director. Tith, a 1.5-generation Cambodian, became executive director three years after sa-i-gu, at the age of thirty-two. In Long Beach, the community elders have turned over leadership to a younger generation that can be more effective in dealings with the American mainstream, learning from the changes occurring among Korean Americans. In turn, the pan-Asian American community is also evolving.

The young, outwardly focused leadership of people such as Sovann Tith brings a very different set of experiences and concerns to the Asian American movement. When Tith came to the United States, he was a fourteen-year-old refugee who had lost his parents and three older brothers in the "killing fields." "The life of the Cambodian people in the United States is unlike other Asians'. We are the Asian poor, the very poor. Most Cambodians here are farmers with only four years of education; now they live in urban America. I am the in-between generation, the bridge generation—old enough to have memories of the Communists, but also familiar with the American way. My generation has to be flexible with the culture of our

elders, but we have to bring our community into the American rule of law, or we won't survive."

After sa-i-gu, Kwoh organized a new coalition, Asian Pacific Americans for a New Los Angeles, to unify Asian American communities into a collective force. The linking of Cambodians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and other Asians from private, nonprofit, and public sectors had never happened in Los Angeles before.

Seven years after sa-i-gu, few Korean American storekeepers had fully recovered. Many were still pursuing government disaster relief loans or trying to collect from unscrupulous insurance companies. Some shopkeepers never recovered. Chung Lee, who owned the popular Watts Market, closed down his business for good.

According to Professor Edward Chang, the interaction between African Americans and Koreans hasn't changed much since the riots, though individual merchants have worked hard to improve relations. The spirit of the ill-fated Black-Korean Alliance has been resurrected in a new and broader coalition called the Multicultural Collaborative that, this time, includes Latinos, Asian Americans, whites—as well as blacks and Korean Americans. Such an approach, involving the entire Los Angeles community, may work better when new sparks fly, but there has yet been little resolution over the events of April 29, 1992. "Interethnic relations between blacks and Koreans are not a high priority. On a policy level, nobody wants to talk about it," said Chang, who has written a popular Korean-language book on African Americans and is thinking of writing another on Latino Americans. "But Koreans can never forget this. It is the worst situation that ever happened to Korean Americans in Korean American history. In the meantime, Korean Americans are moving on, to clo- sure, away from being victims."

Driven by their collective *han*, Korean Americans have been building on their strength and moving outward with considerable momentum. Since the riots, several new Korean American community organizations formed. Community members launched a fund-raising drive to create a Korean American History Museum. Business leaders have been trying to reshape their image, raising banners that effused: "Experience Koreatown: Smiles on our faces, love in our hearts."

Some groups, such as the Korean American Coalition (KAC), are

guided by a new vision that includes a working partnership with other Asian American organizations. That coalition is based on practicality and common goals, not simply on an Asian American ideal. "I don't blame any other leaders who didn't come forward after the riots," said Charles Kim, the group's founder and president. "We weren't ready ourselves. But next time we will be. We had always been saying that Korean Americans can't be an isolated island, but nobody listened. Then came the L.A. riots—the first generation suddenly realized they have to be a part of this society." In 1992, the KAC had two staff members; six years later, it had a staff of eleven and an office in Washington, D.C.

Pointing the way is a youthful new leadership, cued in direct response to sa-i-gu. Do Kim, the college student who went to work in Koreatown after graduation from Harvard, now runs a leadership training program for high school and college youth. One study found that 15 percent of college-age Korean youth had dropped out of school because of the riots. Several of Kim's graduates have gone to work in jobs that benefit the community. "I wanted to train leaders so that sa-i-gu wouldn't happen again. My generation is going to have to move things ahead," he said.

Through their trial by fire, Korean Americans have forged an intergenerational bond in their community with a younger leadership that is bent on projecting its voice in America. Their transformation has rippled through other Asian American groups, shaking up notions of who and what is Asian American.

At Jae Yul Kim's One Stop Market, his customers became worried after word spread through the neighborhood about the shooting and attempted robbery. Several customers called to inquire, "Is Ma and Pa okay?" says Jae, adding that, before sa-i-gu, nobody would have cared.

After he installed additional Plexiglas to prevent would-be shooters from firing through the windows, his customers asked if he didn't trust them. "I point to the bullets in the Plexiglas, they don't ask no more."

When Jae opens his shop at 8 a.m. each day, customers are already waiting. One early morning customer, an Afro-Latino man from Belize, tells Jae that he drives past seven or eight other stores to come to the One Stop because Jae is so friendly. Business has been picking up. In a good month, the store will clear about \$7,000 to \$8,000, before taxes. From that sum Jae pays his son and son-in-law, his loan, and the electricity. Jae esti-



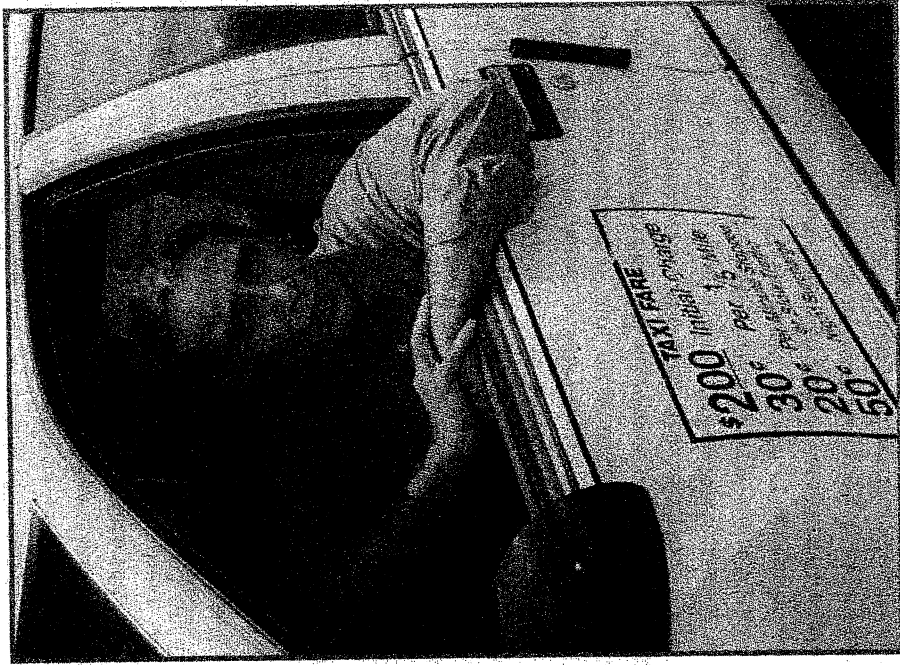
mates his own pay is less than \$2.50 per hour. But he has his livelihood again, and his dignity.

Jae says he doesn't like to carry a gun, but he sees firearms as an occupational necessity to defend his life and his livelihood. He has a grim reality about life, despite his cheery disposition.

"I'm still scared," he says. "When you run a business, people complain. I don't know what they might do." From his vantage point behind the meat counter, Jae observes the dynamics of American society. "I live here and I see that people count color," he says. "White people are together, black people are together. Latino people are together, too." Jae points to the pictures of his three grandchildren, stuck to the bulletin board, and notes that they are all half-Latino and half-Korean. His son and daughter met their spouses in school and are part of a wave of Korean-Latino alliances. Their children speak English and Spanish, not Korean.

For the present, Jae's dreams are about survival. But he is also thinking about how life could be different in his home, Los Angeles. "If Asian people could stick together, we could have more power," he says. "We Oriental people think we are all different, but we look the same. The Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Cambodians—everyone must learn cooperation. Otherwise we cannot have the things that are important to us."

## For Richer, for Poorer



A few times each year, Mom received a special letter in the mail. The tissue-thin paper and the deliberate, spidery lettering that looked drawn, not written, announced that it was a letter from China. Mom's face would light up with excitement. Using her sharpest scissors, she would gingerly cut the folds to avoid

*Taxi driver and labor organizer Javaid Tariq, at the wheel of his cab (Alan Raia/Newsday)*