

Korean Americans in Local Media During the Los Angeles Riots

The Los Angeles riots would come to be known as an interracial conflict representative of issues of race, class, and power in South Los Angeles. Most know it as the direct result of the Rodney King trial; King was unarmed when he was beaten by four LAPD officers and the incident was caught on tape. The officers were charged with assault and taken to trial, where they were acquitted of all charges. The verdict and subsequent rage surrounding the lack of justice, one that had been long brewing, sparked violence in what would come to be known as the L.A. riots. The most well-known narrative of the riots are of black-white conflict and police brutality, but often overlooked are the Korean American immigrants who had been moving into Los Angeles at the time. During the riots, Korean-owned businesses suffered about forty-five per cent of damages (Kim, 2012). Tensions between Korean and African American communities had been brewing for years in South L.A. Media propagated negative stereotypes of both groups, and newspapers consistently overlooked other immigrant issues in favor of covering the conflict between Korean store owners and black customers. The most prominent of these incidents was the shooting of Latasha Harlins, an innocent black teen who was shot by Korean store owner Soon Ja Du. Her murder and Du's subsequent light sentencing would exacerbate the already-high tensions and feelings of injustice in South Central L.A. Local mainstream media coverage of Korean Americans would portray them as one side of a black-Asian race war, a method of deflecting historical black-white power dynamics.

The media understood the Latasha Harlins shooting to be a symbol of black-Korean relations. In 1991, a year before the infamous Rodney King trial and the subsequent riots, Latasha Harlins was shot by Korean American immigrant and store owner, Soon Ja Du. Du

suspected Harlins of stealing a carton of orange juice when she assaulted, then shot the young black teen in her store in South Central L.A. The shooting of an innocent girl and Du's light sentencing would lead to the case becoming a symbol of interracial strife and injustice, as well as one of the relationship between black customers and Korean merchants in Los Angeles.

Local media would frame the Harlins shooting as a parallel to the Rodney King case. When the King verdict was announced, news stations broadcasted security footage of Du killing Harlins alongside footage of the King beating (Oh & Hudson, 2017). The events were conflated despite differences in the race, class, and power of the perpetrators. Korean Americans straddled a line between presumed privilege—supported by the model minority myth—and racial Otherness, being among the country's recent influx of Asian and Latino immigrants, neither English-speaking nor white. Thus the Harlins shooting became a symbol of systemic injustice, and though the Rodney King trial would later become synonymous with the genesis of the riots, Harlins' name was shouted alongside King's when rioting broke out on Normandie, April 29, 1992 (Stevenson, 2014). Media portrayal of the Harlins shooting was a continuation of the mainstream narrative surrounding Korean-black relations in Los Angeles, one that would endure into the riots themselves.

Media portrayals of Asian and African Americans would be built upon stereotypes of black customers as dangerous and criminal, and Korean store owners as greedy, exploitative, and untrustworthy. These beliefs contributed to the bitterness and violence between the groups, including the Du-Harlins incident; black customers suspected of stealing would be assaulted by Korean workers, and in turn, Korean store owners would be targeted in robberies and attacks (Stevenson, 2014). Both groups engaged with stereotypes of the other in ways that emulated

white American racism without benefitting from its privileges, and suffered violence at the hands of the other. This vicious cycle was only furthered by mainstream media, which depicted both racial minorities in dangerously stereotypical ways. Korean immigrants had been, like other East Asian groups, depicted as a model minority to discredit the Civil Rights Movement (Oh & Hudson, 2017). With high unemployment rates, a lack of resources, poverty, and police brutality in South Los Angeles, many African Americans saw incoming Asian and Latino immigrants as threats to economic security (Stevenson, 2014). Korean immigrants who had absorbed American ideas during the military occupation of Korea bought into racist ideologies about African Americans as criminal and parasitic (Cheung, 2005). As Stevenson (2014) writes, their immigration to America would be defined by striving to be successful (i.e., white) and not black.

What's more, local media contributed to interracial tensions by reporting far more frequently on incidents that supported a narrative of conflict. Prior to the Los Angeles riots, seventy percent of Korean American representation in *Los Angeles Times* articles revolved around racial tensions between Korean immigrants and other races (Ban & Adams, 1997). This would reflect a broader interpretation of Korean and Asian immigrants as a model minority at conflict with impoverished African Americans in South L.A. It aligned Asian Americans with white privilege in order to fracture inner city communities, all while neglecting to report on cooperative efforts between the two groups (Cheung, 2005). Ban and Adams' 1997 news study showed that since the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans had been both positively and negatively impacted by media coverage. In contrast to Asian and Latino immigrants who remained Others in American society by receiving little coverage outside of stereotypes, increased lifestyle coverage of African Americans in the news made them more likely to be seen

as "regular people doing regular things" (Ban & Adams, 1997). However, the same study found that reporting on unlawful activities by black Americans had also increased since the 1960s. Media reporting informed and influenced how social and racial groups in Los Angeles interacted with one another through the perpetuation of stereotypes.

During the riots themselves, mainstream media was a conduit for information for L.A. residents dissociated from the riots by physical and/or social distance, for whom the riots were more a "televised spectacle" than a threat (Ise, 2000, as cited in Kim, 2012). As a result, the presentation of the riots hinged on how they would be understood by a white audience; for Korean Americans, their portrayal relied on both white identification and disidentification. Korean Americans were constructed simultaneously as victim and oppressor for conservative and liberal readers (Cho, 1993). As Cho (1993) writes, conservatives understood Koreans as a hardworking model minority beset upon by African-American criminals. The depiction of Korean store owners as armed vigilantes acted as a "wish fulfilment" on the part of white conservatives, for whom the store owners were a "surrogate army acting out the white suburban male's American dream—bearing arms against Black men" (Cho, 1993). This depiction is evident in a 1992 *Los Angeles Times* article by Ashley Dunn, in which "the Koreans" take a stand against a faceless, implicitly black and Latino mob that make up the looters. "Firebase Koreatown" is filled with barricades and "scores" of armed vigilantes patrolling darkened parking lots, while "elite Korean marine veterans" communicate through radio (Dunn, 1992). Conservative media understood Korean vigilantism to be justified by presenting it in an context of an anti-black, stereotype-driven fantasy.

By contrast, liberal media depicted Korean Americans as dangerous and racist in order to deflect white guilt (Cho, 1993). The conflation of the Harlins and King cases again relied on the understanding of Asian Americans as a privileged minority, positioning them as another white surrogate. This time they were not victims, but oppressors capable of replicating white American racism. Cho (1993) argues that this presentation came about in response to guilt over the King verdict, after which liberal journalists spun Korean Americans as “the primary instigators of racism against African Americans.” This depiction exists simultaneously alongside conservative narratives in Dunn’s 1992 article; in the same article, a Korean store owner is quoted as having described the looters as “beasts.” “I’ll shoot and worry about the law later,” the man says (Dunn, 1992). The inclusion of these quotes serves to emphasize the violence that the Korean American store owners intend to enact on looters. There are parallels to the King beating and the officers who acted without regard for the repercussions. Whether conservative and liberal, Korean Americans were framed in ways to serve the needs of the media

The Los Angeles riots were a complex, multifaceted and multiracial event for which it is difficult to pinpoint a single portrayal of a certain ethnic group. Korean American representation in local media differed depending on the narrative that needed to be pushed. They were victims and oppressors, white proxies and scapegoats, and at other times, entirely invisible. Even into the present, Oh and Hudson (2017) understand the portrayal of Korean Americans during the riots as an act of “framing and reframing”—that the riots will always be reimagined to reflect a connection between the present and our histories. In the *Los Angeles Times*’ 10th anniversary reflection on the L.A. riots, the riots were understood as a symbol of the black-Asian conflict that precluded the economic struggles of a 2002 South L.A. (Twomey, 2004). Yet on the 25th

anniversary, the *Times* would present the riots as another incident in the country's long history with police brutality. The 2017 article would only briefly mention Korean Americans, instead presenting a timeline of Rodney King: from the acquittal of the LAPD officers involved in his case, his rise to a symbol of police brutality and injustice, and finally, to his death. The Los Angeles riots are constantly being reframed in media; the representation of Korean Americans, of Rodney King, and of racial conflict in Los Angeles in relation to the riots will always be tied to our understanding of their relevance to the ever-evolving present.

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