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Reflections on Racial Identity

My parents had always defined being "Korean" as a "did not" and "you aren't" situation. Korean people "did not" buy Japanese products, we "weren't" like those smelly Mexicans, I "wasn't" suppose to do badly in school, etc. I cannot remember a time when I was not conscious of my Korean-American identity. I lived in the largest Korean community outside of Seoul, South Korea, and my upbringing, was marked "things good Korean kids did". The "Korean" side of me was codified in a strict set of rules, expectations, and guidelines, while the "American" side of me was expected to help me succeed in America by learning the rules of game called the American Dream. Part of me looks back with askance at the amount of culture stuffed, if you will, into me; Korean school with its requisite elective class of calligraphy, language classes, Tae Kwon Doe, the Korean martial arts, mastering the abacus at the precocious age of 8, dancing with a Korean fan dance troupe in elementary school. Being Korean was a set of behaviors that was expected of us youngsters, and I was the "model Asian" that my mother's friends used to egg on their daughters. Certainly, being Korean was educational, wholesome in a mother's milk sort of way.

However, the xenophobic nature of my parent's generation in response to repeated invasions from Japan, China, Russia, with Korea as the "shrimp in the fight between whales", permeated my mother's attitude towards other races. After one memorable field trip to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, I felt compelled to bring up a discussion of race and racial issues. To my surprise, my mother, usually an extremely wise and levelheaded woman, began thumping out stereotypes. "Look, there goes the Mexican women. They're so lazy, they only reason they have so many children is because they are too lazy to work, and then they become fat…You should be careful when there are black people around you because they sometimes try

to steal stuff." Looking back, my mother's fears were grounded in her label as an "immigrant" in the eyes of Americans, being unable to speak English, although she read better than most, humiliation of her low socio-economic status, and of course, the Rodney King riots, and the Natasha shooting.

During my fifth grade year, the Rodney King riots sparked the first time I feared for my life because of my racial identity. Although I thought, acted, and spoke like an American, I was reduced to a "gook" and a "chino". My parents, fearful for our safety, placed us with our cousins deep in Orange County, and drove back to defend their store, which happened to be located in Watts. After, the Korean-American community came together, united by outrage and sorrow, and I participated in my first political rally as the 5th grader, along with my mother, chanting in her thick Korean accent, "We want peace", except it sounded like "We want piss" because of her accent.

I was privileged to attend an extremely diverse high school. It was like a small snapshot of Los Angeles, with a 40 percent Hispanic student body, and an equal number of asian and whites, it was a mini Los Angeles. And like Los Angeles, it sometimes blew up. But for the most part, we got on swimmingly with others. I explored more of my Korean roots, learning about the Korean War and the US involvement, my grandfather's role as a soldier in this war and my grandmother's courageous journey across the heavily fortified 38th parallel under heavy fire to escape to a better life. My parents spoke approvingly of my "purity" as a Korean, showing me an ancestral book of the Chang family line, and my place inside that illustrious family tree. As I grew older, I began to challenge certain implied Korean assumptions: that males were more important than females, that my brother could have a girlfriend in the ninth grade while my parents were squirming over my choice to have a boyfriend even as a junior in college. Part of the strict, conservative ways of Korean-ness included an obsession on maintaining the norm, and shunning personal "faults", one of which was considered homosexuality.

In both high school and here at MIT, I resent the implication that being Korean entailed a highly exclusive lifestyle. Hanging out with simply Korean friends and eating Korean food while listening to Korean music does not make me Korean. I resent my brother's accusation that I am whitewashed because I do not recognize the names of popular Korean artists and do not have many Korean friends. I consider my racial identity to be another facet of my personality, another dimension that adds perspective to my worldview, and a valuable asset. The wealth of experiences that I have been privileged to helps the older generation of Koreans to understand America and my generation, while allowing me to better understand other people's racial identities as well.