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## THE KOREAN WAVE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

*By Eunjung Lim and Dennis Halpin*

“Korean Wave” is a popular phrase in both East Asia and beyond depicting the increasing global cultural impact of not only “Gangnam style” dancing, but also Korean films, soap operas and popular music. Yet, an equally strong second Korean wave, which has swept like a tsunami over the American Congress in the past decade, has largely gone unnoticed. That is the movement of Korean Americans, following in the footsteps of other successful ethnic advocacy groups such as the Irish, Greek, Jewish, Cuban, and Taiwanese American communities. Their outstanding success in quickly adapting to the nuts and bolts of American grassroots politics was clearly demonstrated by the fact that twelve Members of the House, as well as one Senator attended the recent 2nd annual Korean American Grassroots Conference near Capitol Hill.

Major accomplishments for the Korean American community in the past decade include: the 2004 passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act (a similar bill has yet to pass the South Korean National Assembly); the 2007 passage by the House of House Resolution 121, calling upon an American ally, the Government of Japan, to formally apologize for the “coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as comfort women; the 2008 inclusion of South Korea in the US Visa Waiver program despite stricter visa policies after the September 11, 2001 attacks, adding South Korea to Japan and Singapore (Taiwan joined subsequently) as the only Asian nations with such status; and the 2011 Congressional approval of the South Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), despite growing anti-free trade, protectionist sentiment in the US following the 2008 financial crisis. These are no small accomplishments for an ethnic community barely seen on Capitol Hill only a decade ago.

For the US and its key East Asian allies, 2015 marks an unusual year of major historic anniversaries. The US celebrates the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War and the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. This year might be especially unforgettable for Japan, as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was granted the privilege of becoming the first Japanese leader to address a joint meeting of Congress. For South Korea-Japan relations, 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule and the 50th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Meanwhile, for Korean Americans, July 30, 2015 marked the 8th anniversary of unanimous passage of H.Res. 121 on comfort women, which is acknowledged as the cenotaphic victory of their grassroots campaign. Before this resolution was passed, unfortunately, comfort women did not get the attention they actually deserved. Even in South Korean society, comfort women were often marginalized and survivors’ sufferings remained underneath the surface for many decades despite Korean civil activists’ persistent efforts. The spirit of this activism is most graphically represented by the Wednesday Demonstration, a weekly event held in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul since 1992.

H. Res. 121 changed the dynamics surrounding this discourse by internationalizing the issue as a matter of universal women’s rights. Since the passage of H. Res. 121, the comfort women issue has become known globally and has become more relevant to contemporary issues involving human rights, violence against women in conflict situations, and women’s dignity. For example, the Nabi [Butterfly] Fund was established in South Korea by comfort women survivors and other women’s rights activists for current victims of sexual violence in

conflict. In 2012, the Nabi Fund donated funding to a program administered by Rebecca Masika Katsuva in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to assist an estimated six thousand victims of sexual violence in the DRC's civil war.<sup>1</sup> The comfort women issue is thus no longer a parochial quarrel between Japan and South Korea.

Again, the agent of change with regard to universalizing the comfort women issue was neither the South Korean government nor South Korean leaders. Those who advocated on Capitol Hill were American citizens of Korean descent. This community traces its roots back to trailblazers from over a century ago in 1903. This first group of Korean immigrants to the United States was composed of approximately 7,500 contract laborers who went to work on Hawaii's sugar plantations.<sup>2</sup> This pioneer generation of Korean Americans came almost one generation later than Japanese Americans, whose first generation also settled down in Hawaii. However, these two groups' paths were not convergent. Korean immigration to the United States has steadily continued into the present through various means, such as international marriage, adoption, family reunification, and international study. This immigrant inflow has been on a steady course while Japanese new immigration has continuously declined. Currently, the number of Korean Americans has reached 1.7 million, which comprises almost 0.6% of the total American population.<sup>3</sup> The Korean American community has become the fifth largest Asian immigrant community, after the Chinese, Filipino, Indian, and Vietnamese. While Japanese Americans are concentrated in California and Hawaii, Korean Americans are much more widely distributed all around the US. Though California still holds the largest population, Texas, Virginia, and Georgia are the top three states with the fastest growing ethnic Korean populations.

Another factor to highlight is that Korean Americans retain a more intimate connection with their motherland:

older Korean Americans feel nostalgic for their mother country, many identify as first generation or 1.5 generation immigrants, while others are concerned about South Korea's national security due to sporadic provocations from North Korea. Meanwhile, the younger generation of Korean Americans is greatly intrigued by Korean soft power: K-pop is very popular, Korean dramas demonstrate the flamboyant lifestyle in Seoul, and South Korean brands increasingly attract them. This might be another big distinction between Korean Americans and Japanese Americans who now blend into American society more seamlessly and do not have as strong of a bond with the archipelago from which their ancestors came.

In the last decade, Korean Americans have especially strived to link American national interests in a manner beneficial to their motherland. The KORUS FTA, signed in 2007, might not been ratified without Korean Americans' diligence in persuading American lawmakers. With growing confidence in their grassroots power, Korean Americans are now networking further to strengthen their political influence through enlightening themselves about voting rights, mobilizing the community for major elections, and encouraging the next generation to be more visible and active in Washington's political arena.

Korean American Civic Empowerment (KACE) started its annual conference, the Korean American Grassroots Conference (KAGC) in July 2014. This year's KAGC, held between July 21 and 23, was even more successful than the inaugural session last year. More participants and American political leaders attended and the thirteen Congressional representatives who spoke at the conference expressed enthusiastic appreciation for Korean Americans' cultural legacy and contributions to the richness of American society.<sup>4</sup> Now Korean Americans are accelerating their mobilization with a view toward the next year's presidential election, which is likely to be extraordinarily competitive.

The latest Quinnipiac University's swing state polling was released on July 22, the same day that the second KAGC was held in Washington. According to the poll, Hillary Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner, is currently narrowly trailing top Republican candidates, Jeb Bush (former Florida Governor), Marco Rubio (Florida Senator), and Scott Walker (Wisconsin Governor) in Colorado, Iowa, and Virginia.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, there are considerable numbers of Korean Americans in these three states: 82,006 in Virginia, 28,177 in Colorado, and 7,375 in Iowa according to 2010 US Census data.<sup>6</sup> A relevant factor is that the percentage of voter registration and the turnout rate for Korean Americans are still low.<sup>7</sup> This, however, indicates that Korean Americans can be the deciding factor in crucial swing states if they further mobilize themselves as KACE is attempting.

Considering the fact that the 2016 primary season is a little behind schedule compared with previous elections and given the large array of candidates (especially on the Republican side), intense competition is likely to persist until the last minute, which implies that key minority groups can collectively wield powerful leverage. Al Gore's narrow defeat in Florida by 537 votes in 2000 can be repeated in any of the above swing states. In addition, Democratic Senator Mark Warner won re-election in 2014 over Republican Ed Gillespie by less than 30,000 votes and there are an equivalent number of Korean American registered voters in Virginia alone.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Korean Americans have the potential to be a deciding factor in casting their ballots in a key swing state during the 2016 presidential election.

The 2016 US presidential election is already gearing up to be an extremely competitive event. Reviewing the political milestones and rising presence of the Korean American community is important to consider as Korean Americans have the potential to serve as an influential variable in determining the next US president. Analysts

and politicians alike would do well to pay extra attention to this group, especially as Korean Americans continue to increase their influence in the American political arena.

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Hwan-bong Jung, "Former Comfort Women Found Fund for Congo Victims," *Hankyoreh*, April 21, 2012, [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/529353.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/529353.html).

<sup>2</sup> Statistics from National Association of Korean American's website, <http://www.naka.org/resources/history.asp>.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics from The Asia Matters for America Initiative at the East-West Center's website, <http://www.asiamattersforamerica.org/southkorea/data/koreanamericanpopulation>.

<sup>4</sup> Hyun Park, "Miguk Washington 'Hanin Pulppuri Hwaldong Conference' Sunghwang ('Korean American Grassroots Conference' in Washington, DC Great Success)," *Hankyoreh*, July 23, 2015, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/america/701585.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Bradner, “Poll: Clinton Trails Top Republicans in Battleground States,” *CNN*, July 22, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/22/politics/hillary-clinton-marco-rubio-jeb-bush-polls/>.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics from the Asia Matters for America initiative at the East-West Center’s website, <http://www.asiamattersforamerica.org/southkorea/data/koreanamericanpopulation>.

<sup>7</sup> Hyung-jae Kim and Tae Hong, “Only 21 Percent of Registered Korean Americans Voted in June,” *Korea Times*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.koreatimesus.com/only-21-percent-of-registered-korean-americans-voted-in-june/>.

<sup>8</sup> Se-yong Park, “So-su-gye Pyoshim, Sun-geo Hyang-bang Zwa-wu (Minority Vote Is Likely To Determine Election,” *Korea Times*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.koreatimes.com/article/877010>.

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