

Koreans and Southeast Asians: Their Status in America

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Ethnicity

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In this essay I compare Korean immigrants to Southeast Asian immigrants. My task is to analyze a successful group and a not-so-successful group in an attempt to construct a theory of “making it” in American society. Approaching the subject cold, it became evident very soon into my research that things were not as simple as they had initially seemed. My first problem confronted me when began reading about Southeast Asians. These peoples (Vietnamese, Khmers from Cambodia/Kampuchea, and Hmong and Lao from Laos), each possess their own highly distinct culture, and hence each present their own unique problems and solutions in their orientation to American society.

The other main problem I encountered was the elusiveness of an adequate definition of “success”. As will be seen, success in one aspect of life often implies failure in another. Success by one culture's standards is often failure by another's. It is hoped that the reader will not view my hesitancy in making categorical claims as a “cop-out”, but instead will come to realize the complexity of the issue at hand.

The initial difference between Korean immigrants and virtually all Southeast Asian immigrants is the circumstances which led to their migration in the first place. Koreans who have come to America in the last fifteen years have been by-and-large true immigrants. They were not recognized internationally as being an oppressed people fleeing their land for asylum elsewhere. These Koreans are predominantly well-educated and middle class who came to America with the intention of “getting ahead”.

Southeast Asians however, are coming from much more dire straits. Except for the initial inflow, these people are almost exclusively peasants who have received little or no formal education. They have been uprooted from their homelands and have fled to seek asylum elsewhere. Unlike Korean immigrants, most Southeast Asians have refugee status, and are entitled to federal aid while establishing themselves in America. They are incorporated into an enormous and complex web of bureaucracy that affects not only their decision to come or not come to the United States, but once here, it affects many of their methods of approaching American society. The decisions of American bureaucrats, which can be lumped under the heading “policy” plays a major role in the refugees' new situation.

The primary goal of the United States refugee policy is one of “economic integration” and the establishment of “self-sufficiency” among refugees. There are different strategies employed at

the state or local level to achieve the goals of this policy. One emphasizes an initial preparation through vocational and language training, so that refugees can enter the job market at a higher level. This would benefit the refugees in several ways. First, it would enhance their likelihood of advancement, since they would have a reasonable command of English, and because they would not be starting at the very bottom of the job market hierarchy. Second, it would enhance the morale of refugees to see that they are legitimate competitors with other Americans. Third, it would increase the likelihood of economic integration and self-sufficiency, even if this self-sufficiency would not obtain immediately.

The other employable strategy is to encourage refugees to take the first available job. This would no doubt reduce the amount of necessary government aid, but would ultimately seem a more risky strategy; the probability of complete self-sufficiency would not seem as high.

There is a third consideration however, which is, tellingly, often overlooked. The refugees themselves have their own culture which has been shaped in part by the hardships which have been endured over centuries. Certainly these groups may have their own unique way of dealing with economic (and later we will see, social and political) problems which now confront them. The fact that policy has not always been flexible enough to consider indigenous strategies has been one of its major drawbacks.

For example, Vietnamese social networks, which are based in part on a complex familial organization, have been beneficial to recent refugees seeking to establish themselves stateside. There seems to be a higher "success rate" among those Vietnamese who settle in or near established Vietnamese communities, and who can thus enter these networks (Norman 1981). The fact that policy has striven for a dispersion of refugees throughout the country has merely led to a series of "second migrations" during which the refugees flock toward nuclei of ethnic activity. For Vietnamese, there exist nuclei in the southern states and in California.

One will note that these geographical areas are more climatically familiar to Southeast Asians. The mother of a Lao family settled in Maine began screaming in terror when her washed clothes were frozen stiff to the laundry line one November day (Norman 1981).

There is still another reason that nuclei are established. Appropriate housing is often difficult to find for refugees, and thus when found attracts great numbers who hope to establish a community. Refugees look for large dwellings to accommodate often extended families. They require low rent since they have a low income, and look for appropriate conditions of tenure: a flexible rental.

As refugee communities are established, certain problems are alleviated by the social networks which are formed, but certain other problems develop. Tensions often arise between the refugee community and the pre-existing residential community. Feelings of resentment and hostility, due in part to the fact that the refugees are federally supported, and due in part to the fact that they are "encroaching" on others "turf", has at times erupted into vandalism or violence.

If policy were to act in greater harmony with indigenous cultural practices, perhaps a higher success rate would be obtained. For example, in the Twin City Hmong community there exist communal economic savings organizations which lend money without interest. This is one attempt at reinstating a certain aspect of the social and economic life the refugees left behind in Laos. Resettlement organizations have begun to formally recognize these technically informal organizations, and have started working in harmony with them, advising them when necessary, but also paying heed to the community's personal priorities (Dunnigan 1982).

A less successful approach has been employed by San Diego's Hmong community. Western educated community leaders are employing a strategy which severs ties with the government, effectively sheltering the community from the goals of policy. These leaders are employing what Moynihan and Glazer term "the primordial approach" and "the circumstantialist approach" to maintaining an ethnic identity. The primordial approach focuses on a sense of ethnic pride in an attempt to enhance community morale. Say community leaders, the Hmong have a unique cultural heritage that should not be forfeited through assimilation. The common past is one of being oppressed, and surviving by working for the common good of the community. Surely, say the leaders, we should not lose sight of our heritage when we most need to embrace it. The circumstantialist argument views a separatist attitude as enhancing the political clout of the Hmong. If the Hmong are seen as a bloc; they will receive greater attention from governmental public administrators. Unfortunately, this isolationist policy, at least in San Diego where the Hmong experience a 77% unemployment rate, has not been successful (Scott 1982).

As stated earlier, unlike refugees, Koreans are not eligible for any initial government support, and there is little if any policy governing the terms of their adjustment to American society. Koreans must rely on their own resources and fend for themselves. Many Korean communities have employed a process that Hurh and Kim (1984) call "adhesive sociocultural adaptation". In this process the immigrants adopt certain components of the new host culture and affix certain social relations of the host society onto the immigrants traditional sociocultural structure, without modifying or replacing the old. In one study by Hurh and Kim in Chicago, they found that Koreans experience a low level of acculturation regardless of the amount of time they have been stateside. While nine-tenths of those interviewed had close Korean friends, only one-third reported having close American friends. Under one-tenth of those interviewed were affiliated with any American social organization, while most all were members of Korean organizations. Almost all expressed a positive attitude about their ethnicity.

There are several factors which contribute to the cultural isolation of Korean immigrants. Both voluntary and involuntary social processes have formed this divide. Ethnic pride may be a voluntary process, yet could be an involuntary response to a hostile stimulus. This hostile stimulus takes the form of social and occupational discrimination against Koreans. Bogardus has found that Americans are less accepting of Koreans than other Asians (Bogardus 1968 in Hurh

and Kim 1984). However, despite these and other obstacles, Koreans have successfully employed an adhesive sociocultural adaptation technique. A case study will be presented later.

Due to the fact that Koreans are to a great extent barred from favorable labor markets, and to the fact that unlike refugees they do not receive assistance from governmental agencies, they often experience job information deprivation. Although most Korean immigrants come from middle class backgrounds, almost all experience underemployment upon establishing themselves stateside. The jobs Koreans do hear about are more than half the time found through informal channels; i.e. personal Korean contacts. Kim, Kim and Hurh conclude "The segmentation of labor markets and containment of job information serve as a mechanism that seems to delay or block occupational assimilation of the Korean immigrants (Kim et al. 1984, p.230).

The lack of assimilating by Korean immigrants has prompted them to call upon their own resources, in effect lifting themselves up by their bootstraps, until they achieve a status which competitors are obliged to recognize. The Korean's success in the produce business provides a classic case study of adhesive sociocultural adaptation.

Koreans initially entered the produce business because it required relatively little investment to establish oneself. These founders provided employment for other Koreans, and through informal money lending channels helped establish other Koreans with their own markets. Thus we see the old cultural and social Ways being employed to establish the Koreans as legitimate competitors. But still, they were not recognized by the establishment at large, and in fact, were at times discriminated against -- dealers sold to them at higher rates, or sometimes not at all, and often they were accused of being affiliated with the Unification Church. In self-defense, the Koreans established the Korean Produce Association, in which they exchanged market information amongst themselves, and established a unified political stance decrying the "Moonie" accusations (Harris 1983). Thus the Koreans incorporated certain components of their new society by establishing an effective political bloc to defend their integrity, and they have maintained their cultural identity by employing traditional Korean strategies for market success.

Other groups have not always tread the fine line between tradition and assimilation as successfully as these Koreans. Vietnamese fishermen in Monterrey, California encountered similar obstacles to the Koreans when they attempted to compete in the fishing industry. But unlike the Koreans, the Vietnamese seemed less capable of compromising and less capable of an adhesive sociocultural adaptation.

Vietnamese have fished in the same way for hundreds of years. They are unacquainted with American fishing etiquette, and rely purely on their own methods of fishing, which are often in conflict with American methods. Americans resented the Vietnamese, feeling the shabby appearance of their vessels would be bad for American business.

Vietnamese did not obey conventional, if unwritten, safety standards, and worked “too hard” according to some American fishermen.

Unfortunately, attempts by governmental agencies to organize the Vietnamese into a bloc failed, as even among the Vietnamese there existed different norms due to educational, economic, and geographical factors (Orbach and Beckwith 1984).

There seems to be no clear pattern here. Government financial assistance has helped some groups, hindered others. Groups “going it alone” have found both success (e.g. Koreans) and failure (e.g. San Diego's Hmong). It would seem however, that the safest most reliable method of establishing a group stateside would be to employ both governmental agencies and the ethnic community's own resources. These two components are best mediated by appropriate professionals in the fields of anthropology, comparative sociology, folklore, and psychology, among other fields. This, as shown, has been a successful strategy employed in the Twin Cities' Hmong community. Besides catering to immigrant needs the professionals are better equipped to relate to the American public at large, and to acquaint people with the often different ways of these immigrant groups. And as for those immigrants with non-refugee status, for every Korean who succeeds in the produce industry, there are probably one hundred others who do not. If this country is going to accept people from foreign lands (and it should!), it must make the effort to provide for them and help them to establish methods of providing for themselves.

But it is still not that easy. As evidenced herein, there are a multitude of factors which come into play as an immigrant group strives for success. Not only broad cultural differences, but geographical and climatic differences, educational differences, moral and religious differences, differences in priorities, differences in family structure and hence the physical residential environment all come into play as an ethnic group strives for success in America. Coming from vastly different political systems, some immigrants are much better equipped to adapt politically so as to wield power as an interest group, while others are not.

“Success” too, is an elusive and evanescent concept to delineate clearly. Success on Laotian terms may very well be subsistence farming (I don't know). Surely that would not be regarded as success by American standards. Economic success may lead to social discrimination or worse, violent persecution. The government's concept of success itself (sufficiency) could easily lead to physical and mental exhaustion for immigrants.

To conclude, I see no cut-and-dried assured road to success for immigrants to America. The world's cultures are so varied and often so fundamentally different, and the circumstances by which immigrants arrive so diverse, that each group should be treated uniquely by specialists familiar with their ways. With ample government support, immigrant groups could perhaps achieve an acceptable balance through adhesive sociocultural adaptation.

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