

Characterizing south korean japanese relations history essay



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In characterizing South Korean-Japanese Relations, it is important to take into account the immense sense of national pride that dominates Korean society. Centuries of isolation had allowed Korean society to develop and evolve its own national identity independent of other Asians. The longevity and durability of its culture promoted an air of superiority among Koreans, which greatly added to the shame and injustice experienced by Koreans during the Japanese occupation.

A great deal of South Korean national pride originates from its having been a unified country since the 7th century. Since its unification, the Korean people experienced great strides in social reform, the sciences, and the arts.

Koreans took pride in their self-sufficiency and believed their culture to be indomitable. The Korean written language, Hangul, is probably the major source of Korean identity (L. o. C, 2004). The Korean oral language had existed since ancient times; however, half its vocabulary originated from Chinese and its written form relied on Chinese characters (L. o. C, 2004). In the 15th century, Korean scholars developed Hangul. Its advent was heralded as a great scientific achievement, even though it was sparsely used until the 20th century. The written language helped to distinguish Koreans as a separate and independent people in East Asia. During the Japanese occupation, Koreans emphasized the use of Hangul instead of Chinese in order to maintain and protect their Korean identity.

For the many centuries leading to the Japanese occupation period, Koreans felt themselves superior in East Asia in terms of social reforms, scientific developments, and its national achievements. Koreans, with their devotion to neo-Confucianism, considered their society as the most refined. Korean

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society placed a high premium on wisdom-even going as far as implementing nation-wide civil service exams for government jobs. People of all classes participated in the exam, under the concept that the government should be led by the wisest-displaying social mobility and freedom rare for its time in Asia. Such movements toward reform and refinement of existing social practices convinced Korean society of its own self-sustainability. Koreans thus shunned foreigners, considering them unrefined “barbarians” (L. o. C., 2004), and tried to remain isolated for as long as possible. Their ability to remain isolated seemed only to support their self-appointed superiority. They had successfully rebuffed about 900 foreign invasions (Vedpuriswar, 2003) and as Westerners approached the Korean peninsula, Korea rejected all attempts at contact and negotiation. Catholicism had managed to infiltrate Korean society, but was soon banned from Korea citing the religion’s failure to worship ancestors properly (L. o. C., 2004). And after witnessing the atrocities of the Opium War in China, Koreans shut its doors completely.

History of South Korean-Japanese Conflicts

South Korean-Japanese relations have been dominated by conflict. Korean-Japanese conflicts date back to the end of the 16th century, when Koreans successfully repelled two major Japanese invasions. Koreans managed to remain relatively isolated for centuries afterward; however, Korea caved in to Japanese threats in 1875 and signed a treaty in 1876 that opened up a few ports to the Japanese (L. o. C., 2004). In order to alleviate the Japanese threat, Korea opened up its doors to Western powers, hoping to protect itself by playing one power off another.

However, the Tonghak Rebellion of 1894-95 marked the end of Korean independence. Koreans invited foreigners to send troops into Korea in order to crush the rebellion. China and Japan both sent troops over, which eventually resulted in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Japanese victory forced out Chinese influences out of Korea and allowed Japan to establish hegemony over the Korean peninsula (L. o. C., 2004). The Japanese implemented their first policy changes in Korea through the Treaty of Shimonoseki. The products of this treaty were initially considered beneficial to the Korean people in the eyes of the outside world. Class distinctions were abolished and slaves were liberated.

In 1895, the Japanese assassinated the Korean queen, who had opposed the Japanese, sparking mass outrage among the Korean people against the Japanese (L. o. C., 2004). The Korean king retaliated by enacting many reform measures that supported the Russians. However, the Japanese defeated the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 that gave Japan complete control over Korea. In 1910, Korea was annexed as a Japanese colony.

It is important to remember that Korea had been an independent unified country for more than twelve centuries up to this point. Korea had been by no means a perfect society; however, Korean society and culture including their shortcomings were distinctly Korean. Having been conquered by the “inferior” Japanese crippled Korean national pride and created major anti-Japanese sentiment. The changes implemented by the Japanese were initially considered beneficial, such as the disintegration of class distinctions through the Treaty of Shimonoseki. However, the sudden abolishment of class

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distinctions sent Korean society into political chaos, adding fuel to the anti-Japanese fire.

Japanese Policy in Korea and Korean Resistance

Korean reactions to the Japanese occupation was initially mixed but later consolidated into a massive anti-Japanese movement near the end of Japanese rule. The Japanese at first treated Koreans as a separate entity, theoretically allowing the Koreans the same rights as the Japanese although restricting free speech and other liberties to curb anti-Japanese sentiment (L. o. C., 2004). However, as the Japanese entered their expansionist phase leading up to World War II, Japanese policy toward Korea shifted toward complete assimilation of the Korean people. Korean resistance to Japanese rule was violently crushed. Most Koreans began to focus on preserving the Korean culture and identity in hopes of gaining a measure of revenge in the future (L. o. C., 2004).

Most scholars consider the early Japanese policies in Korea as actually beneficial and even as the catalyst to Korean development and modernization. As mentioned earlier, the first changes implemented by the Japanese was the disintegration of the class system. Moreover, the Japanese abolished slavery in Korea and modified the tax structure to relieve the tax burden suffered by the majority of farmers in the rather agrarian colony (L. o. C., 2004).

After Korea had been officially annexed, Japan implemented further “benevolent” changes in order to quiet Korean resistance to Japanese rule. The Japanese allowed labor unions to organize and began improving the

infrastructure in Korea (Vedpuriswar, 2003). The colonial government also developed a manufacturing sector in the highly agricultural colony and enhanced farming technology in order to increase rice output from the farmlands (L. o. C., 2004).

However, although a few chose to cooperate with the colonial government, most Koreans by no means welcomed Japanese rule (L. o. C., 2004). Most of the economic developments endowed little or no benefits to Koreans themselves since most business ventures and farmland had been taken over by the Japanese (L. o. C., 2004). Many Korean farmers were forced into sharecropping as more and more land fell into Japanese hands. Much of the rice production was actually exported for consumption by the Japanese Imperial Army. Koreans, meanwhile, saw a shortage of food quality and supply and were forced to import poor quality grains from China in order to prevent mass starvation (Vedpuriswar, 2003).

Korean animosity toward the Japanese increased even more as Japan mobilized Korea for the War effort. Many young Koreans were enlisted by the Imperial Army and many women were forced into the role of comfort women-prostitutes to alleviate the tension among Japanese soldiers. In order to maintain maximum output from the colony, the Japanese adopted a policy of completely assimilating the Korean people. Koreans were forced to change their names for Japanese ones. Koreans were also forced to worship at Shinto shrines. The use of the Korean language was also banned, which in effect shut down Korean newspapers as well. Korean history books were even burned (Vedpuriswar, 2003).

Until their liberation, Koreans fumed at the injustice of having been denied the right to their national identity. Koreans were horrified to find their children adopting Japanese values and speak better Japanese than Korean. They were in essence witnessing the complete annihilation of their prized culture and national identity. However, most resistance movements were forced underground, since the colonial government violently crushed any outward shows of resistance (L. o. C., 2004). Many Koreans died in the name of national pride, giving the Koreans more reason to hate the Japanese.

The Korean War, Division, and Blaming the Japanese

As conflict in Korea deepened after Japanese occupation, so did Korean animosity toward the Japanese. The end of World War II marked the end of Japanese rule in Korea. However, Korea continued under foreign rule, this time by the Soviets and the Americans, and to a lesser degree, the United Nations.

Korea was fated to be divided ever since. Upon Japanese surrender, Korea was divided into two control zones, with the Soviets in the north and the Americans in the south. The plan was to allow the Korean people some time to develop an independent government; however, disagreement over the plan led the United States and the Soviets to install separate governments in the South and the North, respectively. Cold War tensions eventually precipitated into a bloody war that resulted in a permanent division of the Korean people.

Soon after the installation of governments in the North and South, the armies of the North invaded the South in hopes of unifying the country. One of the

bloodiest wars in history ensued, with China and United States joining the war. In the end over a million Koreans, North and South, perished, half of them civilians (W. J. U., 2003). Thousands of civilians were massacred by both armies. Most buildings and infrastructure on both sides were destroyed (Vedpuriswar, 2003). Korean was essentially left without power or the ability to grow its own food. The greatest loss was perhaps the signing of the armistice in 1953. The cease-fire agreement left the two sides technically still at war, permanently dividing the north from the south, and also the peoples of both sides.

The losses suffered by the Korean people were intensified by their culture and history. The Korean peninsula had been a unified nation since the 7th century. Throughout the centuries since, Koreans as a unified people had withstood about 900 invasions. This image of endurance and unity had been a major part of the Korean identity. Moreover, Korean society had been founded on neo-Confucian principles, which emphasized the importance of family. The division created by Soviet and American occupation had separated millions of families in Korea. Despite their physical separation, most Koreans still considered their situation as “one people, two nations” (L. o. C., 2004), revealing the strong sense of Korean identity that had survived through Japanese occupation. However, the war forced Koreans to fight one another. Often, family members fought on opposing sides. Over a million casualties later, the Korean people found themselves permanently divided-divided for the first time in 1300 years. In the end, both Korean independence and unity had fallen at the hands of foreigners, causing much anguish in the Korean people and wounding Korean national pride.

Although Cold War tensions seemed to be primarily responsible for the Korean War, most Koreans attributed most of the blame to the Japanese. Koreans often argued that had the Japanese left Korea alone, the Korean War would not have occurred. They argued that the Japanese presence had destroyed all semblance of social order in Korea, effecting an era of great political turmoil. The political chaos created by the Japanese, they argued, prevented the formation of a unified government following liberation, creating the effect of adding insult to injury.

Lingering Hostilities Following the Korean War

Hostility toward the Japanese continued long after the end of Japanese occupation. Perhaps the most telling of the hostility is the way Koreans dealt with Koreans who had cooperated with the Japanese colonial government (L. o. C., 2004). Even as Korean citizens, many were executed or assassinated (L. o. C., 2004). Those who were pardoned were doomed to wear the label of sympathizing with Japan and were subjected to much discrimination and hostility-similar to the adversity communists faced in America during the Communist witch-hunts.

In the two decades following the Korean War, South Koreans bitterly witnessed the Japanese economy rapidly develop and become a major power while South Korea plunged into deep recession (Vedpuriswar, 2003). The Korean War had destroyed or damaged most of the industries and infrastructure in Korea, and South Korea found itself as one of the poorest nations in the world. Even the Communist state of North Korea experienced temporary growth and prosperity, adding to the bitterness.

Following the Korean War, Koreans sought to restore its national pride by establishing its national history and eliminating Japanese influences in Korea. In the 1980's, the Japanese government revised their school textbook guidelines in order to soften the image of the Japanese during its imperial era, including its occupation of Korea. This action sparked much outrage in Korea, which reacted by erecting in 1987 Independence Hall, which graphically depicted the atrocities of Japanese occupation (L. o. C., 2004). The Korean account of its national history also gradually adopted harsher language when depicting the Japanese. Meanwhile, the South Korean government also banned many cultural imports from Japan, including art, film, and music (L. o. C., 2004). Ironically, Koreans opted to keep the groves of cherry blossoms planted by the Japanese during the colonial era, citing their natural beauty. The presence of cherry blossoms perhaps had symbolic significance in Korea, as Koreans began to realize that despite all the hostility, Koreans had to cooperate with the Japanese in order to restore and build its economy.

Koreans and the Japanese opened diplomatic relations through an agreement in 1965. Under the agreement, the South Korean government granted Japanese fishermen the right to fisheries near the South Korean shore in exchange for much needed capital (L. o. C., 2004). In addition to the deal, the Japanese government agreed to pay some reparations, but without admitting guilt. The capital, coupled with loans and trade helped to fuel economic and industrial development in the south. Due to the infusion of Japanese (and some American) capital, the Korean economy experienced rapid development and growth during the 1960's and early 1970's.

Despite the benefits of the economic cooperation, hostilities toward the Japanese still lingered as the agreement was considered a “sellout” (L. o. C., 2004). Massive demonstrations protesting this deal and other government policies plagued South Korea for years under the Park Chung-Hee regime, culminating in his assassination. Koreans felt slighted by the amount of reparations the Japanese government offered through the deal. The Koreans would wait until the 1990’s before the Korean and Japanese governments began renegotiating the amount of reparations to be paid by the Japanese.

Cultural Factors Promulgating Hostilities

The hostilities Koreans harbored toward the Japanese were augmented by the nature of Korean culture. The highly centralized nature of Korean culture seemed to amplify the anti-Japanese rhetoric spewed by politicians and civil movements alike. The rhetoric soon took on a propagandistic character and worked its way into the family and the Korean conscience.

The Korean people had never known freedom of speech. Since its foundation, Korea as a nation had been dominated by a class system that emphasized Confucian values. Confucianism in principle demands obedience and reverence toward elder and superior people, and violations of such rules of conduct were swiftly and harshly punished (L. o. C., 2004). During the Japanese occupation, free speech was severely restricted. Newspapers were shut down and any resistance against the Japanese colonial government was severely put down (Vedpuriswar, 2004).

A “liberated” Korea under its first few governments found little improvement in the area of free speech. Under the Rhee, Park, and Chun regimes that

spanned almost four decades, government opposition groups were heavily censored and opposition demonstrations were violently crushed. Korea was under martial law during this span. Artists and poets were often jailed for depicting corruption in the government. The extent of government censorship showed in full force during the Kwangju Uprising in 1979. About 50, 000 protestors had participated in the demonstration to protest the Chun regime coup among other political issues. The “ uprising” was crushed in two hours by an army division, resulting in about 200 deaths (L. o. C., 2004).

The restriction of free speech over the centuries played a major role in the centralization of Korean culture. The restriction of free speech allowed certain ideas to get streamlined in Korean culture, especially during the four decades after “ liberation”. There had been some alternative movements in Korea, such as the Sirhak movement of the late Choson dynasty; however such movements often reinforced or refined traditional values instead of changing them.

Moreover, cultural isolation further enhanced this streamlining effect. Korea had remained isolated for about 1200 years, rebuffing invasions and rejecting foreign attempts at contact. As mentioned earlier, the nationalistic movements in Korea led to the expulsion of foreign cultural products. The commonly held perception of the Korean people as “ one people” also implied a collective Korean conscience-as if all Koreans adhered strictly to the neo-Confucian code. The lack of differing points of view in Korea allowed certain ideas to dominate the culture. Debate and free speech could not exist in an isolated, censored nation under martial law.

The geographic distribution of peoples in South Korea further intensified the centralization of Korean culture. As Seoul became the only major metropolis in Korea, accounting for about 12 million of the 35 million people nationwide, Korean culture became dominated by Seoul-specific values. Korean politics became dominated by Seoul interests, as most new and modern businesses as well as the conglomerates operated out of Seoul. Korea was home to only a handful of major media outlets, including only two television stations, all of which were based in Seoul. These media outlets were controlled by conglomerates which had large stakes in the government. Thus much of the news received by the Korean populace was heavily influenced by the government.

One of the ideas streamlined by the government was anti-Japanese sentiment. Politicians often used the Japanese as a vehicle for mobilizing the popular support. And the populace embraced such rhetoric while remembering the atrocities of Japanese occupation and the Korean War. Anti-Japanese rhetoric found its way into the education curriculum. History books became geared to enflame animosity toward the Japanese while parents, remembering the injustices suffered at the hands of the Japanese, taught children to distrust the Japanese at home. Eventually, Anti-Japanese sentiment became a part of the Korean collective conscience.

Korean-Japanese Cooperation in the Modern Era

However, as memories of the Japanese colonial era started to fade with time, Koreans and the Japanese experienced greater cooperation in East Asia.

1979 marked the beginning of a new relationship between Korea and Japan, as the two agreed to an informal alliance regarding matters of security and <https://assignbuster.com/characterizing-south-korean-japanese-relations-history-essay/>

defense (L. o. C., 2004). In 1983, Japan agreed to loan Korea about US\$4 billion with low interest, a loan which Korea used to develop its industries, improve its credit rating and recover from the oil crisis of the late 1970's. The loan was signed off by a Japanese delegate in South Korea, marking the first time a Japanese official had visited South Korea since the end of World War II (L. o. C., 2004).

Korea has also received financial cooperation from Japan on other major projects. Japan offered financial and security assistance for the 1988 Olympics held in Seoul. Moreover, Japan and Korea jointly hosted the 2002 World Cup. Both events helped to establish Seoul as an economic power on the global level.

Korea's transition toward global economic prominence led to the nation's increasing dependence on foreign trade. As a major economic power, Korea could no longer ignore Japanese pleas to balance its trade. Korea eventually freed up Korean-Japanese trade and removed bans on Japanese goods. Whereas in the 1990's Koreans driving Japanese automobiles were persecuted, it is now common to see Koreans driving Japanese luxury automobiles.

Regardless of their history, Koreans and the Japanese faced similar challenges in economic recovery. Both countries found themselves stripped of much of its industrial capacity following the end of World War II. Both countries had to rebuild their economies using foreign capital. Both countries experienced rapid economic growth and were both considered economic miracles in East Asia. Despite the hostilities, Koreans could not hide their

appreciation for Japanese technology and economic prowess, and vice versa (Vedpuriswar).

The similar economic experiences shared by Korea and Japan may help to explain the trend of increasing economic cooperation between the two countries. As Korea and Japan both became dependent on export, they both recognized the need to cooperate in order to compete against the other major powers such as the United States and China. The formation of the European Union further encouraged Korean-Japanese cooperation. The two countries now cooperate either directly or through ASEAN. Although Korea and Japan are not official members of ASEAN, ASEAN summits often features ASEAN +3 summits, which include the two countries (K. O. I. S., 2003). In effect, East Asia came to be identified as its own entity, especially with the formation of ASEAN.

In the modern era, Korean-Japanese relations are often described as “amicable” (L. o. C., 2004). The two countries have held ministerial meetings annually since normalizing their relations in 1965. The two countries have had their share of problems over the years, including a brief termination of diplomatic ties over the content of Japanese history books. Moreover, Korean-Japanese relations came under further strain due to the abduction of Kim Dae-Jung in 1973 and the discriminatory treatment of the Korean minority in Japan (L. o. C., 2004). However, the two countries have made great strides in according many productive agreements, including economic cooperation, security measures such as cooperative sea-rescue, and the increase in Korean-Japanese student exchange programs (Kim, 2004).

It is important to record the attitudes of the younger generations since they represent the future in Korean-Japanese relations. Many young peoples from Korea and Japan visit each other's countries, helping to create a thriving tourist industry in both countries. Moreover, the bilaterally supported Korea/Japan Student Convention promote friendships and cooperative learning, hoping to improve Korean-Japanese relations (Kim, 2004). The hostilities created by the Japanese occupation seem to be in decline as the older generation who actually witnessed the Japanese occupation decreases in number and the younger generation grows increasingly indifferent to Korean-Japanese conflicts of the past.

The Asian-American Experience

In studying the historical origins of ethnic prejudices within Asia, and exploring how environmental factors can dramatically shape the biases people have about each other, it begs the question of how these same prejudices play out when removed from the geographic, cultural, and socio-political environments from which they developed. It is precisely this scenario that occurs in America, a more heterogeneous, relatively unbiased setting where these same prejudices, rooted in the same political occurrences of the last 110 years, manifest themselves in truly unique ways. In present day society, many of the aforementioned prejudices still exist with great intensity in the respective Asian countries, but in America, this animosity between Asian groups is severely diminished, and people of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds can to some degree, peacefully co-exist. In this section, we strive to identify the critical factors that have shaped the way prejudice is manifested in the United States, and

highlight the differences with the cultural counterparts in Asia. We begin by exploring the general issues that formulate this unique dynamic, and continue by examining Korean-American-Japanese-American relations in the United States as a case study.

One of the most cohesive forces in the United States that brings together these previously antagonized groups is the whole notion of unity and identity through shared struggle. Because all of these different ethnic groups essentially shared the same experiences of migrating to the United States and facing the same obstacles associated with being lumped into the “Asian” or “Asian-American” category by the greater American society, they find that they have more grounds to relate with one another and more incentive to unite and cooperate to overcome these socio-political hindrances. Because the dominant, primarily-white society does not characterize them specifically as Taiwanese-Americans or Korean-Americans or Japanese-Americans, all of the different ethnic groups find themselves pigeonholed into the same stereotype-enforced category. This draws a striking difference from the situation in Asia where each of the different ethnic groups comes from completely different social, economic, and political situations, so there is very little chance for them to see eye-to-eye. Essentially, the shared experience and shared “enemy” really bands all of these East-Asian-American groups together on the basis of necessity and new shared commonalities.

Another critical facet of American society that encourages different Asian-American groups to overcome their prejudices is the heterogeneity of the American ethnic demography. When large numbers of homogeneous
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communities are geographically centralized, isolated, and all exposed to the same media messages and taught to think essentially the same ways, there is little room for open-mindedness about other cultures and other foreign points of views. In America, the different ethnic groups are forced to not only be exposed to other cultures, but also live around people from other backgrounds. It is precisely in this ethnically heterogeneous landscape that the power of exposure can help overcome ignorance and encourage peaceful co-existence. There are, however, specifically clustered ethnic communities, but these do generally still retain some level of ethnic mixing. For example, San Francisco's JapanTown does not have a statistically significant increase in Japanese-American residents as compared to the rest of San Francisco. Furthermore, these ethnic clusters are typically commercially-based, not residentially based. So, even though there is a plaza or chain of Asian restaurants, this does not necessarily mean that the owners or patrons of these restaurants live in that area. On the whole, the Asian-American experience has facilitated the lessening of ethnic ignorance by not only allowing, but forcing various ethnic groups to witness and understand the true manifestations of the cultures that they are taught to hate in their homelands.

As generations of Asian-Americans pass in the United States, each generation exists further and further from the actual historical conflicts from which the prejudices arose in the first place. Asian-Americans born in the United States grow up without being surrounded by the constant propaganda of the Asian homeland (although American propaganda is a different story), and attend schools with children of varied ethnicities. While their parents,

grandparents, or ancestors may have had first-hand accounts to the atrocities and occurrences of the past, each passing generation is much more removed from that historical precedent, and as a result, they begin to grow prejudices relating to the American or Asian-American experience, while letting go of many of the prejudices held by the previous generations of their families. Essentially, as new generations grow up in different environments, the prejudices they hold most deeply are a function of the society in which they grew up and are immersed, and less a matter of their historical ethnic biases.

Finally, in addition to the shared struggle, ethnically heterogeneous communities, and growing generations of Asian-Americans, taking action upon historically based ethnic prejudices within the United States is prevented simply by the role of the American government and law officials as intermediaries. As a third-party mediator, Americans do not relate with inter-Asian animosities and subsequently, do not tolerate violent or forceful manifestations of those prejudices. With the combination of these American cultural factors, Asian-American groups are immersed in a society that encourages the overcoming of these prejudices and demands a commitment to a peaceful heterogeneous community.

The Korean-American Experience Along-side Japanese Americans

Korean-American/Japanese-American relations in America are analogous to Korean-Japanese relations of the modern era as outlined in the earlier section. Despite a long history of conflicts between Korea and Japan, and despite initial tensions between Korean-Americans and Japanese-Americans, <https://assignbuster.com/characterizing-south-korean-japanese-relations-history-essay/>

the circumstances in the United States and the common experiences shared by Korean-Americans and Japanese-Americans led to the eradication of Korean-Japanese tensions in the American setting. The emergence of the Asian-American identity promoted Korean-American and Japanese-Americans to cooperate in the fight for greater prosperity in America.

The first wave of Japanese entered American in the late 19th century, followed by Koreans in 1903. The Japanese, who came to work the farms in Hawaii and California, faced great animosity among the poor working classes of America. The poor working class of America depicted the Japanese essentially as strikebreakers for working for low wages. As the Japanese improved working conditions and wages for themselves, the new influx of Koreans into the United States seemed to have the same effect on the Japanese as the Japanese had on the American working class. Japanese-Americans resented the Korean immigrant workers for undermining organized strikes and lowering wages. As Koreans continued to come into the United States through Hawaii, more and more Japanese began to move to the mainland and into California.

Meanwhile Korea had been annexed by the Japanese, causing some tension among their emigrants. The Japanese had even prevented Koreans from immigrating to the United States to prevent Japanese-American wages from falling (L. o. C., 2004). However, the tensions between Korean-Americans and Japanese-Americans throughout their stay in America were considerably less than those experienced in Asia. Korean-Americans and Japanese-Americans had other issues to worry about such as fighting discrimination,