

Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The aim of this investigation is to gain an understanding of how past events have affected the relations between African Americans my community as an Asian American. As a result, my research question focuses on one event and has become the following: **To what extent did the Korean American community face unjustified violence and oppression in the Los Angeles Riots in 1992?** The research question will investigate through many ways including first-hand verbal and written accounts of Korean American shopkeepers and online articles, both taken from when the event occurred, a few books discussing the power dynamics between Korean Americans and other minority groups at the time, and then several reliable online sources.

The first source "Korean Store Owner On Arming Himself For Riots" is an interview between *NPR News* host Michel Martin from *Tell Me More* and Kee Whan Ha, a Korean shopkeeper who owned his store with the riots occurred in 1992.¹ The purpose of the interview was to give an account from the Korean American perspective, often referred to as the "middle man" community within the riots. As Ha reveals his experience, the content becomes extremely valuable in seeing how the community as attacked by African Americans and how they were neglected by the police force. Although this is a primary source, it lacks objectivity which can be seen in Ha's as well as Martin's responses which evoke a certain tone of pity and victimization, a feeling that may not be entirely reciprocated by other communities in the riots and is being used to influence the reader. A limitation in the content is that there is no account from the African American community, so the reader does not receive a holistic perspective on the issue.

¹ "Korean Store Owner On Arming Himself For Riots." NPR. April 27, 2012. Accessed September 29, 2016.

The second source is "RIOT IN LOS ANGELES: Pocket of Tension; A Target of Rioters, Koreatown Is Bitter, Armed and Determined," an article by Seth Mydans in 1992, a writer and correspondent for Asia for *The New York Times*.² Likewise, Mydan's purpose is to discuss the Korean American perspective and to give a historical background to how the community increased in Los Angeles. In terms of content, Mydan also gives several first-hand accounts of citizens and shopkeepers alike. However, Mydan, as the Asian Correspondent for *The New York Times* could have a biased inclination towards the Asian American community. As mentioned before, the lack of perspective from other minority groups limits a holistic summary of events and implies that there was only one community at fault for the riots.

² Mydans, Seth. "RIOT IN LOS ANGELES: Pocket of Tension; A Target of Rioters, Koreatown Is Bitter, Armed and Determined." *The New York Times*. May 03, 1992. Accessed September 29, 2016.

Section B: Investigation

The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 stemmed from acts of police brutality against African American Rodney King on March 2, 1991 and how the enforcement, consisting of one Latino and three white officers, was acquitted from their crime a year later. Despite how the situation appears from the surface, the participation by Asian Americans, more specifically Korean Americans, in the riots came to be a surprise since many saw it as strictly a conflict between the African American, Latino, and white community.³ Even before the riots erupted, distinct tensions between the respective minorities held true in that there was a hierarchy even within each marginalized group.⁴ Asian Americans were deemed the “model minority” which can be defined as a minority group that despite their disadvantages has become successful and productive members of their society.⁵ While this stereotype has underlying negative implications, it gave a positive perception of Asian Americans to the white population but simultaneously fueled resentment from other minority groups that were not as successful in terms of socioeconomic class and overall living despite living in the United States longer than most Asian immigrants.⁴

Regardless of their success in finding the American Dream, the ideology held by many Korean Americans at the time became shattered on April 29, 1992 once news of the acquittal of the police officers was released. The riots began and Korean American businesses were targeted, looted, and burned by African Americans.⁶ Although the model minority myth is one cause of

³ Lee, Shelley Sang-Hee. "Asian Americans and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots/Uprising." *American History: Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. 29 Sep. 2016.

⁴ Chang, Edward T. "Korean American Community Coalesces." *Los Angeles Times*. April 29, 2012. Accessed September 29, 2016.

⁵ Chow, Giselle W. "Independent School Magazine." *The Model Minority Myth*. Accessed September 28, 2016.

⁶ "How Koreatown Rose From The Ashes Of L.A. Riots." *NPR*. April 27, 2012. Accessed September 29, 2016.

resentment between the marginalized communities, the murder of 15 year old African American Latasha Harlins by Korean American shopkeeper Soon Ja Du two weeks after King's death exacerbated the issue.⁷ Harlins attempted to purchase juice from Du's store; however, Du mistakenly believed Harlins had intentions to steal which resulted in a minor altercation. Frustrated, Harlins gave up and turned to leave the store, but Du shot the girl in the head. It was later proved that Harlins, with \$2 in her hand, actually had intentions to pay for her juice.⁷ Pleas of unfair treatment and racial profiling erupted from the African American community against Du's actions and further stirred tensions between the two groups.

Many consider the death of Harlins to be the spark for the targeting of Korean American businesses and people during the LA riots. Korean Americans refer to the riots as *Sa-i-gu* which translates to April 29 in Korean.⁴ UCLA professor Brenda Stevenson claimed that "...a young man who talked about being from South Central Los Angeles...said, bravely...'I went to Koreatown to burn it because of Latasha Harlins.'"⁷ People were irate from the treatment of African Americans from all groups whether majority or not, and members of the community resigned to violence and destruction of property. With the riots, it was a symbol of frustration and grief of not being heard, of being silenced instead because of the power dynamic. Conflict is necessary for social and political change; therefore, some justify the violence and oppression of Korean Americans during the riots. However, although Korean Americans were involved with the causes of the issue, the conflict of violence posed a greater gap in the bridge amongst minorities in Los Angeles and did not directly target the system that had been the main oppressor.

⁴ Chang, Edward T.

⁷ Duran, Leo. "The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins." Southern California Public Radio. August 26, 2013. Accessed September 29, 2016.

Despite the fact that the anger behind the riots is justified, the actual destruction of people and property to a group that was not directly in power in terms of systematic oppression contained larger implications and consequences. A large mentality within the Korean community is that the only road to the “American Dream” and economic success is to own small businesses which were consequently in poorer neighborhoods because of the cost of property.⁶ Many Korean Americans lost their means of living when their businesses were burned down and/or looted by rioters. The Korean American community feared not only for their lives but for their main source of income being snatched from their hands. Michael Kim, a storekeeper during the riots, said, ““We took 15 years to build this up, and in two days it is gone.”²

Another shopkeeper, Kee Wan Ha, discusses his frustration in an interview with NPR on the negligent police force during the riots: “From Wednesday, I don't see any police patrol car whatsoever. That's a wide-open area, so it is like Wild West in old days, like there's nothing there. We are the only one left, so we have to do our own.”¹ Both Kim and Ha faced a lack of police and government help and were forced to defend themselves by their own means: using violence against violence. Shopkeepers and their families, friends, and employees stationed themselves in and on the store with series of guns and rifles in an attempt to scare away rioters from coming onto their property. Ha said, “Actually, we are not shooting people. We are shooting the - in the air, so make afraid that these people coming to us. You're not actually targeting people.”¹ Although Ha claimed he and his shooters used the appearance of the weapons

¹ "Korean Store Owner On Arming Himself For Riots."

² Mydans, Seth.

⁶ "How Koreatown Rose From The Ashes Of L.A. Riots."

as more of a shield rather than a sword, there were many Korean Americans in other businesses that resorted to violence when faced with rioters. Yumi Park faced guilt and indecision when it came to fighting fire with fire: "I don't know if I am wrong or not. People say I am wrong. What am I going to do? Just sit down and die? I am going to protect my store and my family and myself."²

The little to no help to the Korean American community given from the police force says volumes on the power dynamic between the majority and minority. Unfortunately, the Korean Americans were used as a sort of scapegoat and an easy target for the riots resulting in less destruction in other areas that the people in power deemed important. While the minority groups fought, police forces came either several hours late into the riots faced with torn down buildings, or they just didn't come to the aid of the Korean Americans at all. The ideology of the "American Dream" and for hope and freedom for many people in the community was picked apart after the LA riots.

Rather than resulting in systematic change, the violence towards the Korean Americans only fueled more hatred between minority groups leading to further division. Shelley Sang-Hee Lee chalks it up to the Korean Americans being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but Korean Americans played a subconscious role in the system and racial hatred against the African American community.³ In addition to being deemed the model minority, the idea that success is only through following the orders of those in power forced the Korean American community to see themselves above the African American community which again led to tensions and influenced the interactions between both groups.

² Mydans, Seth.

³ Lee, Shelley Sang-Hee.

Despite the Korean American's involvement in the cause of the riots, they are not the only ones to blame but a small part of a larger picture. The violence and oppression they faced by the African American community is largely unjustified but with reservations. The Korean Americans faced large loss of property and lives, but within the actual system, they had no real power to make the change that the African American community was seeking. Since the Korean population was seen as a convenient and local target, many used Harlin's death as an example of racial profiling and misuse of power to attack the community. The African American community poses another perspective with the idea that Korean Americans are to blame because of their mistreatment against African Americans within the community. Although the anger is justified, the actual actions against the Korean community not only pushed progress farther back, but never actually made systematic change within the people in the majority that had the ability to do so. Ha reflects years after the riots and says, "We know that we cannot survive ourself. We have to have a relationship with other communities, as well as the politics, all these things..."¹

¹ "Korean Store Owner On Arming Himself For Riots."

Section C: Reflection

In my investigation, I used methods such as reading interviews with victims and participants and consulting articles that were written either the event occurred or years later. Through my investigation, I learned that a limitation of my methods was that since the first two options were primary sources, it lacked objectivity and the people speaking and writing may have still been in a state of heated emotion from the riots. The third option included secondary sources which gave a dry, general summary of the events; however, the news source from which those were written could have had a perspective either against or for the plight of the Korean Americans and could have affected my view point on the issue. There is no source that is 100% objective which serves as an issue for the historian.

It was also difficult to find diverse sources and information on the issue from the Korean American perspective since Asian American history is seldom discussed in general. From the historian perspective, this would be a relevant issue when regarding events in history that lack credible, numerous sources. Another perspective to consider is that since I am an Asian American myself, I am more likely to empathize with the Korean Americans and their fight for survival. It affected my perspective even before I began my investigation, and may have led to confirmation bias. With my own research and through the sources I viewed, I believe that there is no possibility for an explanation of a historical event to be unbiased. Everyone has a certain perspective that has cumulated from their personal experiences, environment, socioeconomic class, race, gender, sexuality, and several other identities, so it is difficult for one to pose their investigation and results as purely objective.

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