Observation of AM-KO Oriental Food & Gifts: February 12, 2007 (5:30 pm)

Since my topic approaches a Korean American identity through the study of space, I decided to begin by making a simple observation of a very well marked Korean American Spaces: an oriental grocery store.

Observing the outside of AM-KO around 5:30 pm, the parking lot was fairly full. The AM-KO is identified by most students to be a Korean grocery store, its full name AM-KO Oriental Foods & Gifts, serves perhaps as a means of appealing to a larger market of consumers that extends beyond Koreans and Korean Americans (Figures 1 and 2). Entering the store, I noticed that the majority of the patrons shopping at the time included a majority of whites—two students who spoke French to one another and a girl and her (I’m assuming) boyfriend, and a middle aged woman—and three Asian males including myself.

Observing the food items available, I noticed that in addition to Korean food items there was an extremely large selection of Thai, Japanese, and Indian food items as well. Most of the items contained several languages—the noodles and Siracha sauce I picked up contained Thai, Chinese, and English writing on the packages. A large number of the shelves and walls also contained hand written signs in English made of laminated construction paper to help shoppers.

In addition to food, AM-KO also carried a large amount of other products including household appliances and cookware. All these items, however, were exclusively Korean. In the southwest corner of the store I noticed an extensive DVD collection (I am assuming) of Korean soap operas and TV shows for rent. None of these contained any English writing and were simply labeled in Korean with a marker or felt pen. Advertisements found on the front wall by the door were also exclusively in Korean with the most repetitive of ads being those for phone cards.

Reflecting on my trip to AM-KO, it is clear that the store is meant to serve a wide demographic of consumers. As the sign indicates, AM-KO is an oriental food store that
provides not just Korean food, but all sorts of oriental foodstuff. In addition to a wide selection, handwritten signs and multiple translations on food packages allows many different consumers access to oriental food.

While the food products available appeal to Koreans and Non Koreans alike, many aspects of the store still focused primarily on Koreans and Korean Americans. The availability of Korean appliances and cookware that could be purchased at stores like Wal-Mart for a much lower price suggested that such products were meant to appeal to international students. Perhaps in buying Korean brands, students from overseas were able to feel closer to home. Likewise, other products that were printed only in Korean also allow international students to reconnect with home—these include the Korean TV shows for rent as well as the phone cards that were advertised.

Overall, my trip to AM-KO really revealed the diversity of this campus let alone Korean America. Given the amount of time for this project, I may need to narrow my research topic to limit either the spaces I am going to explore or pick a specific segment of Korean Americans. Right now, I’m thinking of focusing on constructing a Korean American identity based on places associated with food. I like food…

Figure 1: AM-KO Parking Lot
Figure 2: AM-KO Store Sign