My space study of Korean grocery stores on campus has yielded very promising results thus far. Reflecting on my recent visits to AM-KO Oriental Food & Gifts, Green Onion Oriental Deli & Market Organic Foods, and Lee’s Oriental Food, it has been interesting to see the similarities and differences each store possessed, and from them, attempt to extrapolate what kind of statements they make of the Korean community and the UIUC community in general. All of the stores observed in my study possessed at least some mechanisms in addition to offering oriental food which specifically catered towards Korean-speaking Koreans with any differences amongst the stores stemming directly from the degrees to which this was done. These mechanisms suggest that in addition to simply providing oriental food to consumers, Korean grocery store owners also provided ethnic spaces where Koreans could reconnect with Korea. This, however, is where store owners were faced a dilemma. While use of Korean language on shelves and advertisements served as a means for Koreans to better reconnect with their identity, they also served as means of alienating and discouraging non-Korean speakers from shopping there. Each of the stores observed deals with this dilemma differently in attempting to find a balance between catering exclusively to Korean-speaking Koreans and catering to the general public.

Beginning with the most basic aspect of each store, the most striking similarity that I noticed was the use of the word “oriental” in each of their names. While some may feel that the use of “oriental” is offensive “because it connotes images of the passive, the exotic, and the foreign” (Lee, p. 44), others feel that use of the word continues to be acceptable so long as it is not applied to people (it’s okay to have oriental rugs, oriental jewelry, and in this case, oriental stores). Use of “oriental” for AMKO, Green Onion, and Lee’s is significant because it indicates the store owners’ attempt at appealing to the general public. Since “oriental” itself does not indicate a specific country or peoples, including it in their store names avoids any alienation that might arise from using “Korean” which could be dissuade potential customers from entering for various reasons (perhaps lack of familiarity with Korean food). Like the Oriental Chicken Salad one
might order at *Applebee’s* or the *Oriental Flavored Ramen* one might buy at the grocery store, the term “oriental” in each of these stores creates a sense of broad ambiguity that is more appealing for the average American. Although one could argue that the word “oriental” might alienate Koreans, since a Korean shopper would undoubtedly pick up a package of *oriental ramen* and immediately recognize the absurdity of such a thing, again, the use of “oriental” in the context of a store name stores is acceptable since it is understood that all stores carry at least some products from Asian countries other than Korea. Thus, use of the word “oriental” serves somewhat as a compromise for store owners. While it would make sense, for all the stores to go ahead and replace “Oriental” with “Korean,” “Oriental” allows for a greater appeal to the general public while remaining acceptable for Koreans.

In addition to use of “oriental,” all three stores provided similar means for customers to reconnect to Korea including food products, specialty products, Korean dramas, and Korean advertisements. In terms of products offered, the majority of products in all three stores were mostly Korean products with AMKO offering the largest variety of products ranging from Thai, Japanese, and Indian food items. Green Onion offered much less variety in comparison, while Lee’s offered the least variety with almost no non-Korean products. In addition to selling mostly Korean food, all three stores also carried specialty products that seemed to target Koreans who have lived in Korea in the past. These specialty products included appliances, pots and pans, and phone cards imported from Korea which could be purchased at American stores for a much lower price. Because these items can be purchased in American stores, it seems that Koreans who choose to pay extra for Korean products are doing so in order to participate in reconnecting to Korea through the consumption of Korean goods. Korean dramas and Korean advertisements also catered to Korean-speaking Koreans who wished to remain up to date with the latest Korean dramas and trends.

In addition to purchasing and renting Korean goods, the experience of shopping in Korean grocery itself served as a means of means of reconnecting. Green Onion is by far the best example of this. Sporting the modern department store look seen in South Korea, one cannot be helped by feel reconnected to South Korea by simply walking around.
Green Onion’s use of Korean (both written and spoken) by cashiers, on signs, and rewards cards and forms, also strongly support this notion.

While use of Korean language in Korean grocery stores do well in creating a place where Koreans can feel renewed connection to South Korea, they also alienate segments of the Korean population who do not have command of the Korean language. The practice of using Korean by stores like the Green Onion generates notions that one must be able to speak Korean in order to be considered Korean (a notion shared by my Korean adoptee informant Rachel).