Korean American College Application Process
Jane Lee

EVOKE
About the Ethnographer
Jane S. Lee is currently a graduate student at UIUC in the College of Communications under Advertising. She attended UIUC as an undergraduate and received a Bachelor of Science in the aforementioned department and college. She entered as a very wide-eyed and nervous freshman in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences as a puzzled Undecided major. Her parents were helpful and involved throughout the college application process and she is thankful for their continued interest, and further maintains that they were far from “helicopter parents”. She wonders if language poses a significant obstacle or barrier for other students, and in the context of this inquiry, 2nd generation Korean American students. Her minor as an undergraduate was in East Asian Languages and Cultures and her interest in this region and in the respective studies remain strong and hungry. She is currently learning so much in Professor Nancy Abelmann’s course, AAS 450 Korean America and appreciates the professor’s help in narrowing her very broad project. She remains very much interested in ethnic or racialized identification as well as intra-racial and –ethnic othering. She feels very green in this area and finds that the more she learns, the more there is to learn.

iLabs #1: A DOCUMENT
Asian American Association "About" Page:
<https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ro/www/AsianAmericanAssociation/index.html>
I critically reviewed the “about” page to look into what the mission statement might be for an Asian-interest group. The mission states is as follows:

* To serve and promote the needs of Asian Americans at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.
* To educate the university and community on current Asian American issues.
* To promote awareness of Asian American heritage to the University and community through programming on Asian American history and culture.
* To provide social activities for Asian American Association members.
* To support and work in coalition with other groups who serve and protect the Asian American community

Their mission statement is pretty standard fare for a university club or extracurricular organization. Its tone is conversational and welcoming. AAA does not define who would be included in the Asian American categorization but perhaps that was an intentional measure to not limit their membership to those only of Asian ethnicities. This could encourage non-Asian Americans to come by and see what the organization promotes or embodies.

The language assumes that the readers of this mission statement or “about” page will have enough cultural or academic background to know who Asian Americans are and
what issues (i.e. challenges or progress) necessitate their attention. The mission statement seems to almost draw its arm in, to convey the insular intentions of serving the Asian Americans on campus or in the community. There doesn’t seem to be any strong intention to inter-mingle with other groups (e.g. hyphenated Americans or minorities). It is about protecting and supporting a community of Asian Americans and less about spreading awareness outwards to those with no previous Asian or Asian American experience.

I was drawn to the first and second objectives, “to serve and promote the needs of Asian Americans” at UIUC and “to educate the university and community on current Asian American issues” because these are significant and difficult goals to achieve, especially so because of the abstract and varying interpretations of the language. Whose standards are they assuming when they say they will support and promote awareness or education, meaning whose agenda and what goals? However, they do provide some limitations; the mission statement reads, implicitly and directly, that theirs is less of a political or economic interest group and more of a community and cultural or historical agenda.

There appears to be a contradiction or at the very least a few statements that have not yet been met in the mission statement; if the first three statements have been addressed in some way, I retract this allegation of contradiction due to my oversight. My impression of AAA (based on their "about page" and website) was little more than superficially engaging Asian Americans. If the AAA online photo gallery (https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ro/www/AsianAmericanAssociation/pictures.html) is any proof, it is fair to assume that clearly there are social opportunities for AAA members. The organization does a good job or providing a community in which Asian Americans can congregate and share discourse, fun, experiences, support and make "collegiate" memories. They also do a good amount of introducing each other to one another’s cultures; but that seems to be limited to inter-ethnic education, meaning among other minorities included in AAA, not with people who are not of some degree of Asian background or experience.

For example, I don’t see any efforts to co-sponsor an event with another organization with minority-interests such as the African or Arab student associations. I’ve seen their social events (i.e. the fashion show) and parties, but I haven’t seen their impact or agenda shaping curriculum or scholastic issues. Nor have I personally witnessed how they educate the university and its student and faculty bodies about “current Asian American issues”. There seems to be a “disconnect” between the intended mission and the reality of meeting those goals.

I see anti-war groups with images/symbols spray painted on the quad. This past weekend some students protested the further deployment of troops to Iraq. Some participants of the protest were even quoted in the Daily Illini saying that Bush and his executive committee involved in this particular decision should be tried for war crimes and that the US has no business interfering in how Iraq should govern itself without being charged with imperialism. Yet, I see little on issues that are Asian-centric and that fervor is quite dim in comparison. Several years ago, when two South Korean girls were killed in South
Korea by a tank during a US training exercise, there was a stir that even reached the UIUC campus. Since then I have not seen much effort from AAA in terms of education or educating Asians and non-Asians about related news or interests (other than social or philanthropic car washes and soup kitchen volunteering).

I did examine the other tabs on the website and I see ways to be involved in the Asian American campus body and events but again a dearth of information on the history of the club or what they have accomplished previously, because that is also important in terms of building credibility and reputation.

EXPLORE

Question
What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?

iLabs #5: HOW MY QUESTION HAS CHANGED/BEBEN REFINED...
My question has not be changed or refined (yet).

However, without having done any additional interviews, I am considering and playing with the idea that individual ambition or family philosophy and economic status may have more to do with than language affecting the college application process.

I'd like to ask the following questions in an interview (ideally):

1. Native language? Proficiency with English and Korean?
2. Language spoken at home?
3. Parent's preferred language?
4. Parent's English proficiency?
5. Parent's education level? (Jr. High, High School, GED, Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's, PhD degree) International educations? (Did parent(s) attend school outside of Korea)?
6. Parent's advice or involvement in college application process? Proactive? Supportive? Did they only provide input when asked by the student/child?
7. How independent did the applicant feel during the process? How lost did they feel?
8. Did they feel they could talk to their parents about college? Or did they have other trusted adult/older figures to talk to?
9. Did they feel if the college application decisions were primarily self-made? How much of the decision would they consider their own doing?
10. Did they have tutors or attend "hagwon" or after school schooling (e.g. SAT prep or
math academies)?

11. Did the parent feel discomfort or anxiety about unfamiliarity in the US college educational application system/process? Were they emotive about their lack of English proficiency, if applicable?

12. Was the college application process stressful considering the importance of education in Korean culture?

13. Did the parent's (in)ability to guide effectively cause distress or other developments?

14. How helpful was the University's website or personnel about providing information to immigrant parents/international students? Is there bilingual staff or information available?

15. Did you get the impression of diversity in actuality and it being sought out, or that it was just an attractive, status quo banner?

16. How did language factor into the college application process if at all? Did they speak to others in Korean or English or both? Whose information did they "trust" more? Who did they go to for help?

iLabs #2: AN EARLY QUESTION (Revised 2/11/07)
Since the question I wanted to examine cannot be done, I'm scrambling to find something that interests me within the confines of the given parameters.

If it is feasible, I would like to look into the level of authority that is lost by immigrant Korean parents who depend on their children for English translations and clarification. I'd direct questions to US-born Korean Americans who have had to teach English to their parents and what that experience was (or is) like. Is there erosion of respect when this happens? How do they feel about their parent's English proficiency? I'd also like to see if they speak Korean, at what level of proficiency, and how they think they are viewed by Koreans in S. Korea and non-Korean Americans in terms of their proficiency with their "mother's tongue".

OR...
Though it does require some whittling, I'd like to explore the commodification and commercialization of Korean culture. Often in a globalization context, there is this emerging taste for the exotic, foreign, or different.

Does "Hallyu" (wave of South Korean popular culture proliferation) have a negative or positive effect on the gender, class, or race norms? Does Hallyu perpetuate or challenge current misrepresentations? Does Hallyu essentialize or racialize Korean culture? How does Hallyu reflect on Korean Americans? How is it perceived by America as a whole and by the Korean American community?
Plan
How will you go about answering your inquiry?

iLabs #8: FUTURE PLAN
To have more legitimacy and credibility, this study would be enhanced by more surveys, more interviews, and more varied representation in the interviewees.

This study could also have a control group to strengthen or confirm the accuracy of its findings. By interviewing white American students and parents, since they are viewed as the normative template or standard, one could see if there actually is an advantage in having parents who do not struggle with English because it is not their first language.

ECONOMIC CLASS AND HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION/RESOURCES:
The two students and the first interviewee "A" were all residents of a northern suburb of Chicago and students of a suburban high school.
Perhaps having a more varied sampling of the students in terms of educational experience, SES background, parent(s)' education, involvement in church or temple if any, etc. would provide a more balanced view.
Aside from language proficiency, I think that this ethnographic study can investigate how socioeconomic class, geographic location, and schooling affects the college application process more than if not in conjunction with ethnicity.

FIGURING OUT WHAT COULD BE MORE HELPFUL TO PARENTS AND THOSE WHO SPEAK ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN/SECOND LANGUAGE:
Since based on the preliminary findings, the students themselves might not have problems filling out applications and deciding where to go, once they've determined they are going to pursue higher education, perhaps this language barrier is more an issue for those who are not native English speakers or non-American (e.g., international students, 1.5 generation, immigrant parents, etc.).
Also, future plans could consider interviewing parents and international students about what they would find more helpful for those with limited English proficiency. The University could be interviewed about their plans, if any, to hire more bilingual staff or information (i.e., at least provide brochures, written information or a section of their website to be translated in various languages).
They could also possibly write information for parents in various languages for high school recruitment offices so that the parents could also have information about admissions requirements and expectations.
This could assuage any questions and anxieties parents have not having been through the U.S. educational system or being fluent in English.

OTHER INTERVIEWS:
In addition to interviewing 1.5 and more 2nd generation KA's, Korean immigrant parents, 2nd generation KA parents who have attended school in the US, and white American students and parents, the college recruiters and high school contacts should be interviewed to see how they handle language barriers in applicants and their families.

iLabs #4: AN INITIAL PLAN
I seem to be changing my mind and my project everyday, but for now I am going to tackle the more feasible query about the college application process and parent-child communication because it is more relevant to this course and to this campus.

Considering that every student on this campus had to have gone through the application process since otherwise they would not be attending this university, there is no dearth of potential participants in this research for the information-gathering phase. Even narrowing this research down to Korean Americans, there would still be a huge number of students that would be difficult to manage.

For the purposes of this project I plan to try to interview equal numbers of 2nd generation, 1.5 generation and yuhakseng (international students) to get a fair mix of responses from each of the larger types of Korean Americans.

I could do a snowballing/convenience sampling meaning I'd use a base of already known acquaintances or friends to start my research. I would rely on their further assistance in connecting me to other previously unknown Korean Americans. I think I could also try randomly approaching people who appear Korean ethnically, but that could end up being a debacle or a sticky tactic.
I could also try contacting an organization on campus but I think that could be limiting in reaching only a certain amount or specific type of Korean American.

If possible, I'd like to also speak with a few non-Koreans (i.e. white or black Americans) OR Korean Americans who have been here for 3 generations or more because then the parents would have gone through the college application process themselves and their children may have had a different experience than 2nd generation, 1.5 generation or yuhakseng.
This would serve as my "control group" so there is something to compare the Korean American's experiences against. It'd be interesting to see if they have communication problems or anxieties from not knowing "proper behavior" or protocol for the application and college decision process.

Without referring to it specifically, I'm hoping the subjects will be responsive to some "prodding" to discuss the differences in their experiences as Korean American college applicants.

Ideally I'd like to begin by discussing language in the home. The use of or preferred language at home, the parent's proficiency at English, the child's Korean speaking ability, and the overall ability to communicate could be an interesting and substantial effect on decisions made, such as applying for school.
Considering their displaced knowledge as an emigre (what knowledge they have may possibly be specific to Korea, while other information may be more universally applicable) and the importance of education in Korean culture, what was the college entrance preparation process like? Was the parent's unfamiliarity (even if they hear about it or read about it, they did not personally go through it) with language or the application process especially emotive, challenging or not an issue? Did the parent's (in)ability to
guide them cause crises or stresses or other developments?

I'm not sure what would be a good number of interviews to conduct or surveys to pass out, or if I can even meet those goals, but I'm aiming for about 10. I'd like more. Maybe about 10 interviews but supplement them with surveys?

OBSERVE
What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?

iLABS #6-B: INTERVIEW 2

Interviewee is a female, 2nd generation Korean American (KA).
She is 23 y.o. also.
My analysis of this interview is that for this participant, she did feel that she could talk to her parent(s) about anything, but she did not discuss or ask questions about the college application process b/c she felt they didn't know or couldn't understand the language/application.
She did not feel lost except when she was working on the FAFSA application.
She did not go to her parents for help even if she wanted to, but her parents also felt and trusted that she could do it all by herself b/c she is highly motivated.
She trusted publications (e.g. books) and her high school academic advisor with whom she made about 3 appointments.
For her the language was not an issue, and she continually updated her parents on her progress.
She does believe that language would have been a problem for her parents and therefore, she never went to them for help.
Her parents were supportive, but not highly involved or proactive about providing her with guidance during the application process.
She navigated this process and made decision on her own.

The Interview:
Her native language is Korean, meaning she was born here, but she learned how to speak Korean first when she was very young.
She describes her English as fluent and her Korean proficiency as K-1st grade Korean skills and basic conversational abilities.
At home, she speaks English, her mother speaks Korean.
Sometimes she speaks in Korean and her mother speaks in English.
She says her parent's preferred language was Korean.
The parent's English proficiency is described as having a heavy accent, but able to communicate everything she wants to in English. The mother does misunderstand English sometimes or she means to say one thing but says something else.

Both her parents have a Bachelor's degree.
Her mother also attended nursing school.
They did not attend school in the US; only in S. Korea.

She said that she navigated the college applications process by herself, "even FAFSA".
The only help she got from her parents was when they provided a copy of their tax returns. She did not even ask for help even if she wanted help b/c didn't think they could help anyway or understand the applications. She was somewhat "pissed off" and "stressed out" b/c looking at the terms on the FAFSA form for the 1st time and she vocalized that "white parents would have been able to help" more or did it for their children b/c they'd have done it before or knew what to do.

She said she did not feel lost with the regular applications part but was a bit confused when it came to the FAFSA form, but filled it out right anyway.

She said that she could talk to her parents about college but in an "informative" way, meaning that she would fill them in but couldn't and wouldn't ask for help from them.

She said she relied on the high school academic advisor for answers to questions. She remembers being advised about what to say in the personal statement or essays, what colleges to expect to see in admissions, etc.

She also asked an older guy at church about what it is like at Columbia University.

She feels that college application decisions were conclusively self-made.

She did not have any tutors, attend after school schooling (hagwon) or SAT prep schools. She used vocab cards (flash card type) and possibly Barron's, or some book to teach herself and prepare for the SATs.

She says her parents and particularly her mom is different from "typical" or "other Korean" moms because she was very liberal and didn't pressure her about grades. Her mom didn't worry about her getting into college or doing well in high school. She thought that my interviewee worried too much about grades and should loosen up. Her mother didn't/wouldn't mind if C's were to appear on report cards apparently.

The participant said that the parent did seem frustrated when they couldn't communicate in general but was not necessarily anxious about their unfamiliarity with the US educational system or college application process.

She says that aside from FAFSA there was no distress due to the parent's inability to guide her through the college process. She did say that there were times when she wanted to ask when you went through this, how did you do it, or what happened, etc.

She says that she doesn't know if a website let alone a bilingual website for parents or int'l students existed, but she believes that they didn't need to know anyway b/c she was the one applying to school and therefore only she needed to know.

She said the school seemed big, but didn't seem as diverse b/c she didn't see Koreans or
Blacks for example, but she hypothesizes that it may have been b/c she was in a prominent sorority in the Greek system and was in a particular dorm.

As for whose information she trusted most, she relied on published stuff, people who she thought were smart, people who were in the schools she wanted to get into, and not her brother b/c she thinks "he's an idiot".

iLABS #6-A: INTERVIEW 1
I interviewed a recent graduate from UIUC who is currently employed in Chicago at a large well-known firm.
At the time of this interview, she is 23 y.o.
She has both her Bachelor's and Master's from UIUC.

Jackie (name has been changed) is a 2nd generation Korean American (KA).
Her native language is English and therefore is fluent.
According to her, her proficiency with Korean is described as "beginner" and she does not write or read Korean either.
The language spoken at home is a mix of both Korean and English--her parents speak Korean to each other and to her, and she speaks in English to them.
They do not have communication problems usually if any.
Jackie says her parent's preferred language is Korean and that her parents English proficiency is more than basic/functional since they are employed as a nurse and a works in an American corporate company.
Both her parents have a Bachelor's degree, and she thinks her father has a Master's as well.
They have not attended schools themselves outside of Korea, so there was no experience of their own in the US educational system.

Her parents had already determined that Jackie should only apply to UIUC b/c of the good price and good education it can provide.
So her parents were involved in that part of the decision of what school to apply to, but the rest of the process was navigated by herself.
She did not necessarily remember ever feeling lost or "alone" even if she was actually on her own; there was no feeling of hopelessness, unmanageable confusion, abandonment.
Communication and input from parents was open and occasional.
She would say that she and her parents brought up college in conversations 50/50.

She did not feel that the application process was hard at all.
Especially since she was only applying to UIUC and the application itself was pretty straightforward.
Also, she mentioned that if she had any questions about the actual filling out of the application she could easily see her high school guidance counselor for advice.
She could usually figure things out without much difficulty once the guidance counselor answered some questions.

She did say that she was scared of her parents, specifically her mother, who was the
primary disciplinarian and authority figure, but still felt she could talk to her parents about college. However, the person she most trusted to talk to about the college application was her sister who provided anecdotal advice about college life, but did not actually help with the actual application process.

She did feel her college application decision were primarily self-made despite the fact that her parents determined she should apply to UIUC. She considers the decision to apply to be 70% hers, b/c even though her parents wanted her to come here, she did want to come to UIUC also.

As for SAT prep, she enrolled in Princeton Review. She said that PR did not provide any advice or information about applying to college. It only provided information about the actual exam.

She did not feel her parents necessarily felt anxiety or discomfort about their unfamiliarity with the US college application process because her older sister had gone through it previously. She did think that there was the possibility that her parents might have felt helpless or guilty b/c their knowledge of the education process was displaced since they only went to school in Korea. She postulates that to some degree she thinks her parents would have felt bad b/c they would have wanted to help if they could. However, she did not expect them to know about the application process here, so she said it was not like she was disappointed.

Jackie did not feel as thought the college application process was more stressful than say a white student's. She said that there was only the normal stress having to do with the waiting process and hoping for admission.

As for the helpfulness of UIUC's website providing bilingual information for her parents, she said back when she was applying, people were on 56K dial-up modems and using AOL 4.0 probably and there was no information and she didn't use the university's website anyway. She used resources like US News and books on the "best colleges".

She also knew when she was applying that the campus was known for its diversity.

As for the language factor, her parents didn't look at the application itself, but if they had, there might have been stuff that she thinks her parents would not have understood.

Based on our interview, I'd surmise that she thought that language was a barrier in spite of her parents' educations, obvious qualifications and proficiencies. However, I do not feel that she thought that she was lost and unguided in her college application process, especially with older authority figures (e.g., guidance counselor),
parental support, access to other resources (e.g., books and magazines), and her sister to seek for guidance. She said that for her, regardless of her parents' English proficiency she did not find the application process difficult.

iLabs #5: WORKING HYPOTHESIS (Based on class discussion, classmates' input, and class readings)
Considering that this is the week before spring break and everyone seems to be on tight schedules to submit papers and take exams, this particular entry won’t elicit new information from interviews. This entry will be based on observations, personal experience, a class discussion and class readings. This project will evaluate and interview the college applicant processes of current students and alumni of UIUC specifically. Furthermore the scope of this project will be narrowed down to 1.5 generation and second generation Korean American experiences, their non-Korean American peers and their Korean (immigrant) parents.

Hopefully, interviews will take place over spring break when people will have more time to share.

Based on class readings that described underlying motivations for Korean immigration, children’s educations were an important factor. To extend this broadly, (college) education is generally viewed as a positive and important aspiration if not unremarkable expected standard. It would be interesting to see if how language is used in the home and the proficiency of English among immigrant parents affects the college application process and an individual’s experience during.

There are many different parenting styles and levels of involvement in a student’s education and upbringing. There are those parents who are adamant, micro-managing, heavily influential (e.g. only want their children to be doctors or engineers because of family tradition) and those who are more relaxed and do not want to force decisions upon their children, even if they have good information to share. Ultimately, it is the child, the actual applicant, who makes these important decisions about which college and how to best apply to them.

From a class discussion, it was mentioned that this particular student (who is incidentally non-Korean American) was not convinced that he received a large (if any) advantage in having parents who were racially Caucasian and had English proficiency. Parents can be supportive and encouraging, try to advise or find someone who can provide guidance in the application process, but often they are unable to be helpful (meaning providing reified advice). Unless the parent is a high school guidance counselor or advisor, it is difficult even then to say conclusively what a student applicant should do. Additionally, most parents are not in this line of work and therefore can only share their personal experiences and anecdotes they have heard from others in their social or professional networks.

College applicants and attendees are in a transitional period when they are expected to
make more important decisions, simply because others cannot choose for them necessarily. Individuals are expected to and actually often do navigate this college application process on their own, and this applies to children across racial boundaries. Parents do not (and should not) be filling out applications and writing essays, nor can they apply to a school in their child’s stead. They cannot do more than nudge or advise and encourage their children.

However, the advice and the information that a parent can provide may vary if they hold a college degree or multiple ones. In spite of being raised in different educational systems and cultures abroad, there are fundamental shared experiences and “pearls of wisdom” that transcend national borders. These parental experiences and guidance can be helpful to a student who is US-born and has at times felt left to figure things out on his/her own because their parents did not share the experience exactly. Also, it is likely that these parents with college educations have informational networks that can match that which is found in American school systems.

Being resourceful isn’t a trait that is monopolized by white America. It is arguably found globally. While language can be a barrier or an advantage for parents and children, if students can be expected to make choices about choosing colleges and majors, then they can be entrusted to navigate themselves with parental and adult (e.g. advisor or counselor) supervision during the application process.

However, as Jamie Lew discusses in her book “Asian Americans in Class: Charting the achievement gap among Korean American Youth” the parents involvement, resources and English proficiency can affect this application process. I am inclined to believe that more than the language barriers of parents, economic obstacles are harder to overcome because they can affect the type of information that they receive from their networks and the level of respect they are given from authority or expert figures (e.g. teachers, administrators, counselors, etc.).

Without enabling the “culture of poverty” I would like to optimistically believe that given hard work and effort one can escape the SES and language barriers that one is born into by at the very least reaching the right informational resources. Individual ambition mixed with parental guidance can be effectual in the college application process even if the parents’ native language is not English.

iLabs #3: AN INTERVIEW/OBSERVATION
"A" and I met unsure about what to talk about because the original topic of interest could not be done.

However, in talking with "A" there were two interesting suggestions: the issue of role reversal as educators between Korean immigrant parents and the US-born child(ren) and ensuing displacement or evolution of authority, and the beginning of what appears to be a trend to import S. Korean films and make Hollywood, mainstream adaptations of them.

"A" believes that due to the Confucian grain in Korean tradition that it is uncomfortable
for the parent to rely on their children for English translations or instruction. In doing so it was debated between "A" and I whether there was a perceived or actual loss of authority and respect.

However, in a more democratic setting, Confucianism aside, whoever is best suited to advise is the one who teaches or guides the other. How well this transfers into the Korean American family is uncertain; some families simply see it as a necessity with which there is no embarrassment. Others are ashamed of their level of English proficiency and their need to rely on their children, who they feel should be learning from parents, not teaching them.

Sometimes, the children are enthusiastic "teachers" but other times can also be frustrated or annoyed that they have to go through such perceived "basic" or "easy" language skills. They can berate or shame their parents about their inability to speak perfect English.

Interestingly, US-born Korean American children do not hold their inability to speak Korean, even "basic" Korean, as something to be embarrassed about. If they were to go to Korea and speak their broken Korean, of say, a 3rd grader's level, they would not necessarily feel shame since they fluently speak a more "superior" language. This may be distinctive of Americans as they are often portrayed and in some cases actually are that arrogant about their global acceptance or that ignorant.

As for the Korean films that "A" brought up, "Il Mare" starring Ji-hyun Jun and Jung Jae Lee was refashioned into "The Lake House" with Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves. However during its promotion there was little attention focused on the country of origin. The Korean movie that is broadly known as "My Sassy Girl" (originally "Yupki-juhgin Geu-Nyuh") is also in production in Hollywood and casting Jesse Bradford and Elisha Cuthbert. "A" has not seen "The Lake House" and obviously could not have seen "My Sassy Girl" which is in production still. She has seen the Korean versions of both films.

In 2004, "Taegukgi hwinalrimyeo" known also as "Taegukgi" or "Brotherhood of War" was released in its original Korean format in select cities in America and received some critical acclaim in S. Korea as an anti-war film. It was also a commercial success in Korea. On some level, it was also well received by critics in the States. On a Chicago radio station the DJ was even remembered to observe that some "grown ass big white guy" came out of the theater crying. This may have been an exaggeration on the DJ's part, but goes to show that the plot and the theme were not necessarily ethnically bound or exclusive.

There are other movies that received less attention such as "Volcano High" which was shown on MTV with dubbing by Mya, Snoop Dogg and Andre Benjamin of Outkast, among others.

I'm wondering what does all this mean? Is it simply a form of broadening palates or seeking "exotic", an alternative to white male hegemonic values? Is it the arrival of Korean filmmaking on the global scene (case in point "Old Boy" at the Cannes Film
Festival taking the Grand Prix)?

Is Korean culture mimicking Hollywood or American/European culture? Is it "authentic"?

**DISCUSS**

*Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data*

**iLABS #9: RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

**Abstract**

This inquiry is to see if and how language (and language proficiency) influences the navigation and experience of the college application process for Korean Americans on the University of Illinois campus. Language being an obvious marker of difference can be a challenge for Korean immigrants and Korean Americans beyond a college campus or the application process as well. Language, specifically English proficiency in this case since this research is situated in the US, affects experiences, identity, collectivity, and disassociating formations. The research may indicate that language may not be as large of an influence, and show that there are other necessary considerations to be made in terms of affecting the application experience.

**I. Statement of Research Problem**

Knowing the inadequacy, frustration and hardship of adopting a second language after childhood, immigrants experience various difficulties because of their English proficiency or rather their lack thereof. Even if the immigrant parent has a college education or multiple degrees (i.e. Master’s, Doctorate or various professional degrees) they may or may not have much experience with the US educational system themselves. There are literature and opinions that believe that there is a normative white experience and that as a Korean American, their experience is decidedly different and potentially more difficult because their parents do not share the same language, culture or past experiences. The college application process can be a confusing time for any high school student of any race, but the question is do 2nd generation Korean American students and their parents experience particular difficulties due to language barriers during the navigation of the college application process? This research hopes to be able to suggest ways to relieve problems that stem from language if this is the case.

**II. Statement of Research Plan**

**A. Pilot Research**

The objective of this research was to interview 2nd generation Korean American students or alumni to discover how big of an impact, if any, language had on the navigation of the college application process, especially that of the parent’s grasp of the language. In order to address this inquiry I needed to ask the following questions to my interviewees:

- Did the language difficulty provide barriers in access to or understanding information resources or create more stress or anxieties for the student and the parent(s)?
- Did language matter at all?
- Was the process self-guided or was it directed by parental involvement?
- Did the student have proficiency with both English and Korean languages or were there
any communicative barriers between that of the child/student and the parent(s)?
• Does the language spoken at home influence the process of college applications?

Originally, there had also been plans to set up an interview with the University of Illinois’s Office of Admissions as well, to ask questions about how language barriers are seen to pose problems, if any, and how the university is managing them.

This is but a narrow slice of the broader question of how language or ethnicity can create challenges for the immigrant and the 2nd generation, in their adoption of the dominant language and culture to survive, to acculturate or both. Furthermore, do the students on this campus (and even at other college campuses in the US) identify themselves or view their experience as ethnically or racially marked or different than their white or black or Latino/-a counterparts and vice versa?

B. Preliminary Findings
From the input of Korean American and non-Korean classmates and the alumni interviewees, it appears that the college application process is highly characterized by self-made decisions with varying degrees of parent involvement. Very hesitantly (since I have only a few interview sources and limited ethnographic research) I suspect that cultural and ethnic or racial implications may be inflated in the college application process, especially in middle to upper class families (across races). Ethnic factors may matter less in upper to middle class households. While ethnic background and cultures undoubtedly influence language, identity and other experiences, there needs to be room for the possibility that there is less of a concern for parent(s)’ language proficiency impeding the children than broadly believed. Meaning while parent involvement and experiences may be enriched, since the college applications and decisions are often and ultimately the child’s choice, language proficiency of the parent is not necessarily an obstacle to this application process so long as the child is fluent in English and has a well-informed academic advisor or sources of information.

Even where parents are involved in determining what schools or that the student will pursue university education, the student eventually and conclusively has to make many of their decisions on their own, since they are the ones to attend the school. While the parents of the interviewees admittedly have language barriers and different knowledge and experiences than that of their children, it seems that the potential confusion during this application process is not limited to race or ethnicity. There appear to be more factors such as socioeconomic class, parent(s)’ education levels, family philosophy, and the informational networks based on the high school (e.g. academic advisors, counselors, etc.), older siblings or people who are looked up to, and the financial and emotional support that stems from their parents.

C. Proposed Research
Through my research I shall attempt to examine how language (or perceived ethnic markers) affect the college application experience on the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign campus.
I further argue that there are more issues to consider in the Korean American experience than simply the language proficiency of the parent—peer and informational networks, school resources and advisors, access to books (e.g. US News ranking of schools), and economic status are important influential factors as well. Lastly, individual or family philosophies and parenting styles might play a significant determining role.

Given more time and resources this research could build on the pilot research through the number of interview participants and the range of those represented to extend to 1.5 generation KA, international students, KA high school students and Korean parents, as well as white American college applicants, students, alumni and parents. The white American interviews could function as a control group to see if the KA experience, which seems to be defined by language and ethnicity is largely different or “harder” than a white counterpart. Even if ultimately, the child makes the decisions, this research could be used to provide insight in the anxieties that Korean immigrants have about their children’s educations, college applications and language capabilities. The resultant insight could lay the foundation for the body of information available for parents who do want to be involved and assuages the language barriers. It could also require that the scope of viewer encompass more than the language proficiency in the navigation of college applications.

Additionally, it would be worth interviewing UIUC’s Office of Admissions about the unrequited questions from the initial research.

III. Significance of Research
This research though not expert or everyone’s experience will be valuable for its contribution to how ethnic groups such as the Korean Americans and their Korean parents perceive their experiences to be racially or ethnically marked. Language is one of the more obvious and readily available factors to observe and identify as a unique ethnic influence in the college application process. The findings may help form a body of answers for non-native parents whose children are applying to universities. The research may also indicate (and find it is in agreement with existing literature on this topic) that there is more beyond language in the factors that determine this college application experience and that there might not be an imagined white American normative complement.

IV. Links to course readings:
A. Jamie Lew- Are schools structured to advance those who are “whiter”? Middle or upper class immigrant parents can overcome language barriers through economic resources or with college educations. Lew’s book seems to address class as an issue more than race, and this is a welcome interpretation because sometimes there is a tendency to over-racialize or “ethnicize” the discussion.

My preliminary research findings refine this body of literature because it appears that in addition to economic ability, social or informational networks, or acculturation, a variety
of other factors have to be considered (e.g. parenting styles, family philosophies, individual personality, prior experiences with schools and peers, etc.)

B. In-Jin Yoon- The emphasis of education in Korean culture and society is apparent. This is useful because it may explain why Korean immigrant parents’ lack of English proficiency might not necessarily equate to additional stress for the student applicant. This reading also situates why this research should be done particularly on a college campus since the culture values education.

C. Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumaut- The Portes and Rumbaut reading alluded to the fact that a large number of children of immigrants speak languages other than English at home (34). The children’s English proficiency also surpasses that of their parents and so often they have to make the decisions about their education by themselves. It was also interesting to think about the question of whether or not the “preservation of parental language” is related to better intra-familial relations (Portes and Rumbaut 39).

D. Karen Pyke and Tran Dang- imagined “American” normative family or experience. While it is still early, there does seem to be an implicit belief that there is a normative American experience or at least that an American family would approach and experience things such as college applications differently. Does this idea of white American normalcy face the assumption that white Americans are better equipped to navigate the college application experience? If the research is continued and shows that there are more factors to weigh in the college application process than language alone, then it may also find that the capital (i.e. social, cultural and economic) of the white American normalcy can be matched with other resources of Korean immigrant parents.

E. Lisa Lowe- “They” (i.e. Korean Americans/Koreans) are different, their experiences are the ones that deviate from normative Americana.

iLABS #7: DISCUSS
Based on the 3 interviews I have done of which 2 were specifically on the college application process inquiry, I have found some interesting views and experiences.

My first interviewee had had some involvement from her parents in that they had already determined what school she should/could apply to, which was UIUC. She attended Princeton Review and had some input from her sister as well as her high school academic advisor. She was/is "afraid" of her mother. She felt that she could talk about the process with her mother but like my second participant was more of informing their parents what they were doing and where they were in terms of progress.

Neither interviewees felt helpless, directionless, or lost even if they were primarily making their own choices during the application processes. They did think that their parents would have possibly been able to help more and wanted to help answer questions the applicants had if the parent(s') English proficiency had been
better. Both used high school academic advisors/counselors as a source of information. Incidentally, they both attended the same high school in a northern suburb of Chicago.

Neither felt the college applications were difficult at all.

I hypothesize that their SES provided them with a certain educational background and possibly self-esteem about their ability to go to college. Additionally, they had other peers and older siblings or older acquaintances that they could turn to, and not only seek advice, but observe a normative standard of college attendance, which would make it seem like "Oh, everyone goes to college. Maybe I should too." It was more of an issue of what kind of schools they could attend (e.g. Ivy League, Big 10, public, private, out of state or in-state, etc.) than whether or not they could go at all. Their parents and their peers at school and in their neighborhoods largely assumed that they would automatically go to college as well.

English proficiency figures into the equation, but in a less direct way and less significant way. It cannot be considered causal necessarily, but those with lesser English proficiency tended to or coincidentally have less economic opportunities and resources. Their job schedules and other variables such as having access to a car, might have limited the parent and the child's access to informational resources, but even then the particular school that the interviewees attended provided a lot of help to the students, even the 1.5 generation. Nonetheless, it seems most of them went to college after high school. The school and the area that it was in allowed free school resources and guidance for the students to receive assistance or answers to questions if confused.

Clearly, because these particular interviewees were native English speakers and US-born, they did not find the actual application process to be very difficult. They also knew about schools through older people who went through it, through books and publications that rate/rank colleges/universities. They probably also heard from parents who discuss colleges, not in terms of application processes and requirements but anecdotally among immigrant adults about whose son/daughter went to what school. Korean newspapers also discuss schooling, SAT prep, and what colleges like to see in an applicant, etc.

The second applicant applied to more colleges-- e.g. Columbia University, Northwestern University, etc. (the latter which she was accepted into).

The difference seemed to lie in the second interviewee's parenting style and approach to education and that the second applicant thought that having a white parent who attended college or was part of the educational system in the US would have been able to help during the FAFSA application.

It is my hypotheses that there might be a perceived ease that is associated with having a
white parent(s) to seek for guidance during the application process, b/c not only white Americans but non-whites broadly think of "American" in terms of "whiteness". It seems based on the interviews that there is varying levels of anxiety, helplessness or guilt, if any, on the parent(s)' part about not knowing more about the educational system or their English proficiency.

Communication in general is affected by English proficiency. Parental involvement and how responsible they feel to be engaged and providing resources to their children seems to boil down to family philosophy, which is important to note can often be influenced by cultural values (e.g. Confucianism, Protestant work ethic, laissez-faire, meritocracy, etc.)

Also, the physical spaces and the social and informational networks of which they are a part of may be an influential factor to consider--the two applicants are from a competitive public high school in a middle to upper-middle (possibly even upper?) class neighborhood, both of their mothers are nurses, and the first applicant's father is employed at a large American corporation.

They also both attended (different) churches, with a congregation that was predominately similar in background and (college) aspirations, so perhaps without even realizing it they were influenced by each other.

Also, they seemed to not have the difficulties that Lew mentions in terms of rowdy, unfavorable classroom/learning settings, being unable to speak English or communicate with their parents, or not being prepared by their education or academic advisors.

Though the interviewees attended a public school, they seemed closer to the Magnet High Students in terms of SES and experience.

**REFLECT**

**Link**

Connect with other resources and materials
iLabs #7: MORE LINKS TO READINGS
Karen Pyke and Tran Dang, "FOB" and "Whitewashed": Identity and Internalized Racism among Second Generation Asian Americans"

Based on what my second applicant said about how her white school peers probably had more help from their white parents on the FAFSA applications, there does seem to be an imagined "American" normative family or experience.

The parents of my interviewees may not have had this experience or not remember it, but the first initial interview with "A" showed that she felt that immigrant parents and their peers may inwardly deal with a guilt, anxiety, inadequacy or wish to be able to do more for their child(ren). "A" felt that white students/families may have an advantage in being "American" and having done it before in previous generations, therefore 2nd generation children had to compensate another way or at least learn how to do things for the first time.

Yoon, In-Jin, "The Social Origins of Korean Immigration to the United States, 1903 to the Present"

This reading situates education as important culturally for Korean immigrants and motivations to move abroad for educational opportunities.
This high priority of education as a key to upward social and economic stability, maintenance, or mobility may have been ingrained in the students (2nd generation KA) from an early age. However, it seems also that where they were raised in terms of the particular suburb they are from seem to show that regardless of ethnicity, there was a high expectation of and high emphasis on education also. How much of it is actually ethnic/cultural influence and how much of it is based on the middle to upper class neighborhood or standards would be interesting to further research.

[http://www.dmi.uiuc.edu/stuenr/]
I took a look at this website to see the demographic breakdown of the student population. From Fall 2001 to Fall 2006, the self-identified Asian population seems to remain unchanged in terms of percentage. Both years averaged out to be about 10.9% Asian out of the entire campus population (graduate and undergraduates). According to those years in comparison, there seems to have been no growth in terms of proportion of Asians to the general campus.

Looking at the 2006 data on international students, it seems South Korea, China, India and Taiwan make up the substantial body of students. Undergraduates from South Korea were larger in number compared to all the other countries listed. China and South Korea had the highest number of graduate international students as well. This wasn't so much related to my research but it was interesting to see and with further research may implicate the emphasis on education in those ethnic cultures/countries.

iLabs #7: LINK TO READINGS
[Jamie Lew "Asian Americans in Class: Charting the Achievement Gap Among Korean American Youth"

Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut "The New Americans: An Overview"]

The Lew reading and the Portes and Rumbaut reading both relate to the EUI project because it talks about the support and guidance that parents can or cannot provide due to language barriers. The Portes and Rumbaut reading alluded to the fact that a large number of children of immigrants speak languages other than English at home (34). The children’s English proficiency also surpasses that of their parents and so often they have to make the decisions about their education by themselves. It was also interesting to think about the question of whether or not the “preservation of parental language” is related to better intra-familial relations (Portes and Rumbaut 39).

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[Margaret Cho "I'm the One I Want" & Elaine Chun's "Ideologies of legitimate mockery: Margaret Cho's Revoicings of mock Asian"]

There is an allusion to the relationship between US-born children and their émigré parents however (e.g. Cho and her mother) and how communication at home can affect societal manifestations and behavior.
It might be noteworthy to see if there is a difference in the types of social benefit and information sources one can glean from their church or temple. Is being part of Buddhist temple not as advantageous or critical in constructing a “successful” life or college application guidance since they are “less helpful and involved” than Christian pastors and church members (“Being Buddhist…” 170). Immigrants at Sa Chal even said that “When I first came to the U.S. and went to Sa Chal, we didn’t know where anything was!” (173). It seems that already there is a disparity in the information one can receive from Buddhist temples and leaders.

**Implications**

_Could your findings have broader implications beyond this inquiry?

iLABS #9: RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to the University and/or others:

1. To the University:

   If parental guidance and involvement is encouraged during the navigation of this college application process, it would be in this university’s interest as well as any and all other educational institutions to provide multilingual staff or departments that dealt with a specific language to answer inquiries. However, it is not lost on me the great financial investment and funding that would require. A more feasible plan would be to provide multilingual information on the school’s website and in print for those with limited or no Internet accessibility. This could help on the high school contact and college recruiter end since information that they cannot otherwise communicate can be shared with parents of students who are starting or undergoing the college application process. Presumably, this would not be a large financial burden since fieldwork and surveys could collect anticipated questions among parents and students and ergo provide a Frequently Asked Questions body of information. Students with bi- or multi-lingual capabilities could do the actual legwork of this research and they can be given a small stipend or school credit in the same vein as those students receiving university credit/hours for their internships. These questions should be as exhaustive and comprehensive as possible so that a multilingual staff does not have to be maintained throughout the academic year. However, every summer this information can be updated or tidied up so that the website/print materials are addressing relevant and integral questions to the current applying class.

   If UIUC could also spearhead an effort to make a more general informative packet (online and in print) about the usual expectations of this particular or general universities in the US, it might help parents who want to be involved and more informed in this
application process. It could tell them what colleges are looking for beyond grades and SAT/ACT/SAT II or TOEFL/TOEIC scores, such as leadership in community or in club organizations and school activities. Also, a general introduction to life on a campus since some parents cannot come to the campus to see for themselves, in various languages.

2. To Others who are interested in this inquiry:
Most obviously, the findings would be more reliable and legitimate if there were a greater body of students interviewed. Also, I interviewed only 2nd generation Korean American college alumni from a specific Chicago suburb who attended the same high school, but perhaps interviewing a wider range of participants would strengthen and provide much more varied insight. I would suggest interviewing not only 2nd generation KA college alumni, but actual college students since their high school experience as an applicant may be fresher in their minds. It would be interesting to interview 2nd generation KA students but also 1.5 generation and international student applicants, as well as white American students and applicants as a control group or comparison. Researching high school students and guidance counselors in this project could be useful. Lastly, arranging an interview with the school’s Office of Admissions would be recommended to see where the university currently stands in terms of helping parents and applicants with language barriers and if they have any projected goals.

OTHER
A space for other notes, findings, comments, etc
iLABS #10: RESEARCH REFLECTIONS
I think that this course (AAS 450) and this inquiry project is a really exciting step for students to be involved in ethnographic research but also prepares and ignites the mind to start thinking differently about naturalized, unquestioned, unnoticed behaviors, ideas, practices in our culture and society.

I enjoyed the opportunity to do the preliminary research for the question of how language matters to immigrants and their 2nd generation US-born children. What I liked was how we were steered to start seeing the connections and the discursive field, which also includes unearthing and becoming conscious of one's own thoughts on a subject.

Earlier, I did not understand what it meant that our questions and topics were too broad, and grappled with doing something that was more feasible instead of something I was really interested in, but I am so glad I did it because I really like what I am learning.

I thought that the readings in class covered a large and varied rich range of subjects, which worked nicely. The readings were sectioned off under various subtitles and there were links that connected to our topics because they are interrelated and potentially causal. Reading a range of readings that might not have been related also helped me decide what was not a contributing factor to my inquiry and come across really interesting and fascinating ideas and bodies of work. It also facilitated a lot of really insightful discussion within the class and I learned a lot from very smart classmates who had a lot to share.