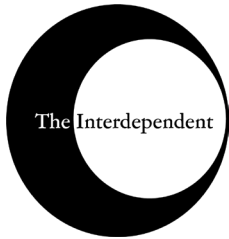


The Bumpy Generation: An Exploration of Cultural Tensions for Second-Generation Korean Americans



Julie Yi | jhy400@nyu.edu

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Abstract

Culture permeates many aspects of our lives, even in ways that we may not be conscious of. This article examines the way culture produces tensions for second-generation Korean Americans due to contrasting value systems in American and Korean cultures. More specifically, it explores the tenacity of Korean culture as it influences the everyday experiences of second-generation Korean Americans as they navigate their lives in American society.

Keywords

Ethnicity Performance; Second Generation; Korean American; Cultural Tension; Honorifics; Identity

On a cold Tuesday night in New York, I sat outside across from a bar called Ni-Na-No in the West Village. I was on the phone with my Dad when he called me an “American-Korean,” a label that I had never thought of before. When I say American-Korean aloud, it has a strange ring to it, like calling a big black dog a black big dog. Being called an “American-Korean” threw me down a rabbit-hole of questions. Why was it “Korean-American” and not “American-Korean”? Aside from any grammatical implications, does being called an American-Korean change its meaning? To my Dad, I would say that it does. He specifically called me an American-Korean to imply that I was first and foremost an American and that my Korean side was secondary. In his eyes, I am more American than I am Korean but Korean enough to retain that conjunction. After I hung up the phone, I sat there for a minute and deliberated on whether I agreed with him or not. Am I more American or more Korean?

I purposefully avoid the use of hyphens when referring to Korean Americans. Fuhrmann argues that “hyphens serve to divide even as they are meant to connect.” The use of hyphens in “racial and ethnic identifiers can connote an otherness” and insinuates that people of color are partially American but are not, and will never be, fully American (Fuhrmann). That said, this article does not focus on the conflicts that emerge from Othering or the racial tensions in our society, though they are pertinent aspects that shape ethnicity performance. Rather, this is an exploration of Korean and American identity that focuses on how *cultures* produce tensions. This article examines the difficulty that second-generation Korean Americans, like myself, face in their performance of ethnicity as they navigate their lives in American society with two different value systems.

The Power of Culture: “Culture is to society what memory is to individuals”¹

A couple months ago, I wrote a formal email to an academic advisor regarding a minor application. It took me 20 minutes to press “Send” because I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to address them. Was I supposed to address them by their first name since they signed their last email

¹ Marieke de Mooij, *Consumer Behavior and Culture: Consequences for Global Marketing and Advertising*. 2nd ed., Sage, 2005, 36.

by their first name? Was I supposed to address them by Mr. and use their last name? It may seem small and maybe even insignificant, but to me, addressing someone older than me by their first name seemed very rude. I didn't realize why I was having so much difficulty until I recognized that it may come from the cultural differences in Korean and American society. In Korean culture, calling someone by their first name is usually seen as disrespectful unless you are similar in age. The Korean language uses honorifics which establishes a clear-cut way of how you are supposed to address someone with respect. However, in English, I feel like the lines can get blurred. Though I have no trouble calling my friends or peers by their first name, I tend to feel uncomfortable calling my professors or friend's parents by their first name. I find myself actively deliberating on how I should address them.

It is small, everyday decisions like this that have led me to scrutinize aspects of my identity. It has given me both reason and drive to investigate the root of these dilemmas and to answer the real question: Why do I find difficulty in performing my ethnicity? In my eyes, this question is at the heart of my investigation and has led me to first define and explore what ethnicity means. The term "ethnicity" became popular in the mid- to late-twentieth century, naming the process by which individuals and groups came to be understood and differentiated from others. Ethnicity is defined by the contents of a group's culture, including social practices like language, religion, rituals, and other patterns of behavior. The emergence of ethnicity theories allowed for scholars to divorce cultural differences from racial categorizations. While race categorizes people based on physical characteristics, ethnicity differentiates people based on cultural traits (Yu 100).

Sociology professors Peter Burke and Donald Reitzes describe identities to be symbolic and reflexive as it is through "interaction with others that these self-meanings come to be known and understood by the individual" (84). In other words, we perform our identity and define who we are through the actions and decisions we make in our everyday interactions. Similar to identity theory, John Clammer explains in his article, "Performing Ethnicity: Performance, Gender, Body and Belief in the Construction and Signalling of Identity," that ethnicity is an aspect of the self we constantly enact and reproduce rather than something we are simply born with (2159). Clammer

also explains ethnicity in relation to performance. He defines performance as “the creation, presentation or affirmation of an identity (real or assumed) through action” (2160). He goes on to explain that “ethnicity itself is ‘performed’- expressed through various recognizable behaviours, cultural activities and forms of bodily presentation” (2160). Clammer’s explanation of performing ethnicity provides a scholarly perspective for active decisions I make in daily life, just like writing that email. It is similar to the way I hesitate in front of older adults when we first meet, not knowing whether I should extend my arm out for a handshake, go in for a hug, or bow my head out of respect from a comfortable distance. I always thought that perhaps these small dilemmas when meeting people may be due to a cultural difference, considering that handshakes are typical greetings in American culture while bowing is more of the norm in Korean culture.

Cultural sociologist Joane Nagel considers culture to be one of the fundamental building blocks of ethnicity (Nagel 152). Culture is a word that is often used colloquially but is difficult to define in one universally accepted way. Culture encompasses “shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles, and values found among speakers of the same language who live during the same historical period in a specific geographic region” (De Mooij 26). Culture is an important component to the analysis of ethnicity as it provides “the content and meaning of ethnicity” (Nagel 162).

One of the prominent models used to differentiate and describe cultures across the world is Geert Hofstede’s Five Dimensions of Culture. It is a particularly useful model in my analysis of Korean and American culture as it indicates the stark differences between the two cultures based on five dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation (De Mooij 33-35). Of the five dimensions, I particularly focus on two: power distance, and individualism vs. collectivism. These two dimensions provide a framework for examining differing practices and values between Korean and American culture that contribute to the struggles in ethnicity performance. Though Hofstede’s model is based on generalizations about cultures, it is still a widely used model in the discourse of culture and can be beneficial in explaining the dynamics of cultural practices and values.

Power distance measures the “extent to which less powerful members of society accept

and expect that power is distributed unequally” (De Mooij 33). Power distance can be described as a measure that evaluates the degree of social stratification in a culture based on class, seniority, or age. In cultures with a high-power distance, like Korea, individuals believe that everyone has a rightful place in the social hierarchy, and therefore have a high acceptance of authority. In cultures with a low-power distance, like the United States, the culture stresses equality in rights and opportunities (De Mooij 34). Power distance refers not to how stratified a society actually is, but to the social acceptability of hierarchy.

Kenneth Kong-On Kim applies the power-distance dimension of Hofstede’s model to practices seen in Korean culture. He states that the single most important aspect that contributes toward the patterns of Korean interpersonal relationships comes from Confucian principles. By Confucian principles, Kim is specifically referring to Confucius’s Principle of Five Relationships which states that the relationship between the king and subjects is based on justice, between parent and child is based upon love and filial piety, between the old and the young is based upon the respect for the old, between spouses is based upon the differences in roles, and between friends based upon trust (K. Kim 202). These principles articulate the foundation for legitimate hierarchical relationships. While Confucian principles may certainly be a factor that influences the dynamics in social interactions, it is not feasible to credit *all* patterns of interpersonal relationships in Korea to come from Confucius.

The potency of power distance in Korean culture is exemplified in an example that drew attention from both Koreans and Americans. In the late 1990s, Korean Air was regarded as an “industry pariah” as it became notorious for several tragic plane crashes that led to hundreds of deaths. In 1997, a Korean Air flight from Seoul crashed in the Pacific Island of Guam, killing hundreds of passengers and crew members (Stanley). In an interview with *Fortune* magazine, Malcolm Gladwell theorized the reason for this crash to be from the large power distance in Korean culture. He explained his theory by stating that Korean culture is hierarchical which requires members of Korean society to feel obligated to be “deferential toward...[their] elders and superiors in a way that would be unimaginable in the U.S.” (Ohlheiser). This dynamic in Korean

culture is carried into Korean Air's cockpit, meaning that "when captains gave orders to their first officers, or co-pilots, they expected unquestioning obedience" (Stanley). On this particular flight to Guam, the plane ran into some troublesome weather conditions. When the pilot made an error, the co-pilot didn't speak up to correct his superior. Gladwell interpreted the situation and the co-pilot's decision not to correct the pilot, as a demonstration of Korea's uneven power dynamic (Han et al. 322). The evidence supporting this claim were the quiet communication records in the cockpit, indicating that there was little to no communication at all (Ohlheiser).

Korean Air realized that their problem was cultural, leading them to remediate their issue by mandating all communication in the cockpit to be in English, a more neutral language that is "relatively free of power-distance underpinnings" (Han et al. 322). By adopting a new language policy, Korean Air hoped that their cockpit culture would be free from the large power distance and honorifics system rooted in Korean culture. By doing so, they hypothesized that it would leave co-pilots to feel more inclined to communicate and speak up. Their theory panned out. The safety records of Korean Air flights significantly improved after this change (322). This case study highlights the impact of power distance in Korean culture and emphasizes the low power distance reflected in American culture.

The second dimension of Hofstede's model, individualism vs. collectivism, describes the value orientations of a culture. Individualistic cultures are defined as cultures that value differentiating themselves from others and prioritizing oneself, while collectivistic cultures prioritize the harmony between in-group members (De Mooij 34). Kim explains collectivism, or "strong ingroup solidarity," to be a prominent cultural characteristic in Korea. In fact, just knowing that two people are from the same school or hometown is enough reason to form an immediate bond (K. Kim 203). It is important to note that all of Kim's assertions are generalizations of interpersonal relationships in Korean culture. Kim not only equates cultural values with an individual's values but also fails to account for the progression of cultures and how they might evolve over time and through generations. That being said, there is some truth in his arguments. Values of collectivism found in Korean culture are factors that affect an individual's actions and decisions.

According to De Mooij, most Asian cultures are generally collectivistic and Western cultures are generally individualistic (34). In my analysis of American and Korean values, I took a historical perspective in order to avoid essentializing and to better understand where ideas of individualism and collectivism originated. Historian Yehoshua Arieli declares that the concept and term “individualism” first carried negative connotations. Arieli explains that the Old World defined individualism to be “synonymous with selfishness, social anarchy, and individual self-assertion” (193). According to Ellwood Johnson, the word “*individualisme*” was coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in his writings on U.S. democracy. It was a word that described the “turning of every man inward upon himself away from historical, social and religious traditions” (Johnson 230). Tocqueville used the word individualism to describe a “modern mass society which destroyed all distinctions and all organic forms of communal life and loyalty, and created free, masterless individuals who desired absolute independence and absolute equality of status and rights” (Arieli 195).

Individualism was the concept used to sum up the philosophical progress and liberty in the founding of the U.S. (Arieli 191). The term was “closely related to the Jeffersonian ideas of self-government, free society, and the rights of man,” and eventually became accepted as a fundamental aspect of American society (Arieli 192). In the United States, individualism represented “self-determination, moral freedom, the rule of liberty, and the dignity of man” (Arieli 193). Scholars like Eric Mount argue that individualism is inherently American: “Nothing is more American than individualism” (Mount 362-362). Therefore, it is no surprise that values of individualism are echoed in today’s American culture.

Unlike the definitive explanation of individualistic values, accounts of the origins of collectivistic values evident in Korean culture vary between scholars. Similar to Kim’s argument on power distance, Sleziak attributes values and hierarchical models of communication to Confucianism, and argues that the Korean peninsula “consciously follows the ethnolinguistic, philosophical, and moral principles of Confucianism” (207). He asserts that values of Confucianism in Korea “embody the set of rules by which an individual is bound in his or her interactions with

the rest of society” (209). He also states that the system of honorifics in Korea reflected in “the relationships between the speaker and listener, their individual statuses and the spatial-temporal setting of their conversation” is influenced by Confucian values (218).

However, Kwang Hyun Ko questions scholars like Sleziak who attribute collectivistic ideas in Korean culture to Confucianism because “Confucianism was not widely disseminated in the time of Confucius himself” (Ko 91-92). Confucianism was a social ideology that nations, like Korea, chose to adopt because of their collectivistic agriculture (Ko 92). Evidence of rice agriculture was uncovered in Korea after finding carbonated rice seeds that have been dated back to 3,000 years ago, long before the written language was developed. Unlike wheat farming, rice farming requires an extraordinary amount of labor. The yearly workload for each wet-rice farmer is estimated to be 3,000 hours (Ko 88). Rice farming involved the construction of intricate fields, the removal of light seeds that float, and year-round weeding (Ko 87). Farmers relied on their family and other villagers during busy seasons of the year in order to perform the arduous tasks of farming rice. Rice farming required the collaboration of many people which fostered a collectivistic attitude.

Arguably, this collectivist mindset from rice farming has greatly influenced customs, traditions, and the overall structure of language in Korea. The development of language occurred alongside the development of agriculture as the need for documenting prices and keeping records of crop distributions became necessary. According to Ko, stones and stakes were raw materials used by peasants in agriculture and the creation of proverbs inferred “meanings to events that occurred in rural life” (90). Korean proverbs like “A protruding stone meets chisel” is associated with the lifestyle of rice agriculture that encouraged harmony between people and discouraged individuals from standing out (Ko 90).

Ko further argues that the interdependent psychology of rice farming influences Asian immigrants who travel across Europe and the Americas, despite the fact that they may have never directly participated in rice farming (88). His argument suggests that the collectivist mentality of Asian immigrants can be passed down through generations and spread across the world to people like me. Though I wasn’t born in Korea, my parents, grandparents and other extended

family members who were born there have passed down their Korean values and traditions to me, thus shaping and influencing the performance of my ethnicity. Their impact is what causes me to deliberate for 20 minutes about how to address someone in an email and what stops me from immediately pressing “Send.” Nevertheless, the question of how and why cultural values are passed down when they are no longer necessitated by social needs still remains.

Kibria states that second-generation Asian American individuals possess two kinds of identity dilemmas (Kibria 86). The first involves one’s identity to be “American” which consist of one’s ties to U.S. society and culture. The second consists of one’s “foreignness” which are the preconceived notions about the character and strength of their ties to an ethnic culture (Kibria 86). I serve as an example of how culture persists through generations and how aspects of culture impact daily life. I attribute my difficulties in ethnicity performance to be rooted in the balancing between the two cultures that I belong to through citizenship and familial ties. The contrasting values of individualism and collectivism in American and Korean culture, respectively, along with differences in power distance, etiquette, and language, are all factors that influence the decisions and actions I make in my everyday life. These elements impact my performance of ethnicity and my overall identity.

The Power of Language

It was a sunny day in NYC and I decided to sit in Washington Square Park. I noticed an elderly woman slowly approaching and getting turned away by bench sitters. I was her next target, but before I could decide whether to stay or leave, I found her in front of me asking for my name and number. She was a Korean elder, perhaps in her late 60s, attempting to give out pamphlets of scripture and gather contact information so she could pray on their behalf. Living in New York has naturally made me more aware of “stranger danger.” In most circumstances, I would have walked away or given a stern response to indicate that I didn’t want to be bothered. However, I felt inclined to behave in a different manner with her. I found myself speaking in Korean, knowing that it would be the easier language for her to communicate with me. I immediately began speaking to this

Korean stranger with honorifics, despite the fact that I never wanted to engage her in the first place. Why did I give her my name? What was it that made me switch to speaking Korean instead of ignoring her completely? The Korean elder evoked my Koreanness and, in following the cultural codes of respect in Korean culture, I performed my ethnicity for her.

To get a better understanding of how individuals perform their ethnicity, I conducted interviews with seven second-generation Korean Americans. The age of my participants ranged from their early to late twenties, with one participant in their early thirties. Two participants were male and the rest were female. The duration of the interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on how participants responded and how much they were willing to share.

From my interviews, I found that respect was the most frequently used word to describe Korean culture. After asking to describe Korean culture, one participant responded by saying, “There’s a lot of aspects of having respect for elders.” Having respect towards elders is considered to be a fundamental building block of Korean culture—not just in terms of sitting up-right or refraining from spewing rude comments, but rather showing respect through specific mannerisms and speech. The adherence to honorifics, “a system that encodes one’s deference towards speaking partners who are viewed as superior in age or in social standing,” can be traced back over a thousand years in Korean history and is an expression of power distance (A. Kim 176-177).

One interviewee discussed her time in Korea and the differences she noticed compared to the U.S. She remarked that she regularly saw younger individuals give up their seats for the elderly when they got on the train. It was a normal occurrence in Korea to prioritize the comfort of older people, but in New York she feels that it is “every man for himself.” Small acts like this show one’s respect or politeness towards the elderly. Her comments speak to the differing cultural perspectives on aging as the elderly are often positioned at the top of Korea’s social chain while this is not generally the case in the U.S.

Apart from bowing and other mannerisms that relate to showing respect, speech and language play a significant role in Korean culture. The honorifics system in Korean language is important because of the way Korean society is “strictly stratified as to levels of seniority and social status”

(Wang 197). This intricate structure mandates speakers to choose fitting speech levels depending on several factors such as the context of the conversation, the subject of the conversation, and who they are speaking to. The system of honorifics goes hand in hand with the underlying social rules and norms in Korean society. Korea's social structure is described to be "hierarchical and vertical" which is mirrored by its honorifics system demanding Korean speakers to "make choices for every single sentence depending on the relationship with their interlocutors and/or with their referents" (Yoon 194). It creates varying power dynamics between the speaker and listener that change based on numerous factors including age, gender, social status, seniority, etc. In that way, the Korean language reflects a strict hierarchical order that reinforces power dynamics, affecting the interpersonal communication and relationships between individuals in Korean society.

There are six possible levels of honorifics in the Korean language and they are generally classified into two categories: deferential vs. informal. Deferential speech, or formal speech, is used when the speaker is addressing someone who is of higher status such as a parent, elder, teacher, or employer. It can also be used when the "speaker perceives a substantial psychological distance between him/herself and the addressee" like with an acquaintance or stranger (Han et al. 323). Meanwhile, informal speech is typically socially acceptable in two scenarios: when addressing someone whose social status is equal or lower to the speaker or if the speaker is familiar with whom they are addressing like to a friend or a child (Han et al. 323). There may be varying factors to these two scenarios, like if a friend is older or has a higher-status job, but in essence, it is up to the individuals in conversation to determine which speech levels they will be using to address one another. Categorizing the differing speech levels into two categories, deferential and informal, is an extremely simplified way of looking at it.

The classification of the six speech levels in Korean honorifics has created "considerable controversy among researchers." For the purpose of this article, I will reference Lee and Ramsey's model below. It demonstrates three formal speech levels and three informal speech levels (A. Kim 197):

- (28) *Speech levels in the imperative mood (I. Lee and Ramsey (2000: 250)¹⁴*
- | | | |
|---|----------------|------------------------------|
| A | Formal (max-H) | -(u)-sip-sio |
| B | Polite | -(u)-si-eyyo (→ (u)-sey-yo) |
| C | Semiformal | -(u)-o |
| D | Familiar | -e-yo/-a-yo |
| E | <i>panmal</i> | -e/-a |
| F | Plain (zero-H) | -e-la/a-la |

Although hierarchies based on age or social status may be fairly straightforward, it's common to find complications in situations that are more ambiguous. Let's say a CEO and an intern of a company are having a conversation. If the intern's age is the same age as the CEO's father, what speech levels are they supposed to utilize when they speak to one another? The CEO is at the top company's hierarchy but the intern, whose position is usually the lowest of the low, is significantly older than the CEO. One of the ways that Korean speakers deal with this dilemma is by varying their speech level and deliberately choosing different honorific suffixes that correspond to differing speech levels as listed above. The CEO has various options he can adopt depending on how much older the intern is and how the CEO wants to come across to his employee. In this case, the CEO would most likely use the polite speech level (B), since the intern is significantly older than him. If the intern was younger, then the CEO would use *panmal* (E), also referred to as 'crude talk' (A. Kim 197).

When asked to describe Korean culture, one interviewee highlighted the importance of determining hierarchies when meeting someone for the first time. For example, it is important in Korea to first establish who is older and who is younger to have a clear understanding of the power dynamics in the relationship. To illustrate a scenario of establishing hierarchies in Korean media, I turn to the 2021 Korean Netflix drama *Vincenzo*. Towards the end of episode 17, two men, Man A and Man B, meet in front of their boss and acquaintances. Happy to discover that they work in the same organization, Man A jokingly shoves the shoulder of Man B. Man B goes on to grab Man A's ear as a sign of dominance, assuming his superior position as he asks what year Man A joined the company using informal speech levels. At that moment, the boss steps in and tells Man B that Man A actually joined the company before him, making Man A automatically superior in status.

Immediately Man B changes his behavior towards Man A, putting his hands together as a gesture of remorse and excusing his presumption because Man A looked so young. Now that the hierarchy between the two has been established, Man A knowingly changed his behavior by asserting his superiority to Man B by mimicking military style commands. Accordingly, Man B also assumed his position as the subordinate, subtly whining but nevertheless, obeying Man A's commands. This scene is as illuminating as it is comical. With its timely sound effects, the scene dramatizes the establishment of hierarchies in a humorous manner, making it relatable to the audience who is familiar with the awkwardness that may arise in their own lives. Though not all hierarchies are established in this manner or by who joined the company first, this scene provides insights to dynamics associated with both honorifics and politeness in Korean culture. More importantly, it shows how one's behavior changes based on their place in the respective hierarchy.

The duty to constantly be respectful to elders can be burdensome to some. One of my participants, Alice, feels like she cannot act fully herself around older Korean adults. She much prefers being around the parents of her American friends more than the parents of her Korean friends. With older American individuals, Alice feels a sense of freedom where she can make jokes and express her opinions without having to censor herself. She isn't compelled to act formally and be proper at all times. Among Korean adults, she feels a sense of duty to show respect which represses her ability to be herself as she becomes more reserved in efforts to avoid being labeled as disrespectful.

However, not all of my participants find difficulty with honorifics. One interviewee, Nate, noted that he does not find the honorifics system to be arduous because it is a system he has gotten used to. It is what he grew up learning so it became natural for him. He has no trouble navigating between American and Korean culture and their differing value systems. He states, "I don't think I have a Korean personality/American personality...depending on who I hang out with, I am just going to be me." Another interviewee commented on how it is automatic for her to use honorifics with others, it is instinctual. However, she admits that she feels uncomfortable at times in ambiguous or informal settings in American society. Some individuals are able to seamlessly

oscillate between Korean and American values and language while others internalize things in different ways by attributing some of their difficulties to come from being a byproduct of two cultures.

The honorifics system is both reassuring and burdensome in that it clearly delineates roles and values but also creates a sense of distance. As the youngest in my family, the honorifics system taught me the joy of taking care of others while it made others feel diminished by their inability to connect with older Koreans. Without this system of honorifics and the values that it reinforces, one could imagine Korea's values to change over time or even fade away. As my research highlights, however, these values do not fade away, even as they come into tension with the American values of individualism and egalitarianism.

The Pressures to be the Ideal Child

In order to find out how the contrasting value systems in American and Korean culture affect my interviewee's identities, I asked them: "How would you describe the ideal Korean daughter or son?" I compared their responses with a follow-up question: "How would you describe the ideal American daughter or son?" These two questions were perhaps the most revealing in understanding exactly how their competing value systems may clash. More importantly, the questions demonstrated the ways in which those clashing viewpoints affect their lives. The aspiration of being a good child affects the way one lives their life, both presently and in the future. It gives us a glimpse of the type of person one aspires to be and the pressure that one feels. Does the "ideal" child, however one may describe them to be, have the same qualities across cultures? In what ways, if any, does this ideal affect the performance of ethnicity for second-generation Korean Americans?

In Lyla's description of the ideal child she stated:

As of recently, I think it's becoming a little bit more of a thing to value happiness, but I feel like especially in past years, parents wouldn't really value happiness. The typical Asian stereotype like 'oh do all these extracurriculars, get all these high grades and get a job [and] become a doctor [or] lawyer.' Unfortunately, it's a stereotype for a reason. It came from

somewhere and part of it is based in truth because I feel like even if the child doesn't really want to be a doctor or lawyer, they have that pressure from their parents, especially if they are immigrant parents, [to] live up to that expectation. So, even if they don't like it, you kind of just suppress that happiness, but I feel like in American culture there's a lot more support to actually pursue what you genuinely enjoy.²

There are many key aspects of the second-generation Korean American experience Lyla touches on in her response. The stereotype that she refers to is one that I, and other participants, are familiar with. The pressure from parents to succeed is a mutual feeling that many children of immigrants recognize and it is tied to the idea of the model minority myth. The concept of the model minority positions Asian Americans in our society as the "other," and more specifically, the inferior other. By doing so, the model minority myth reinforces the "established racial inequalities and places second-generation Asian Americans within a precarious defensive dilemma in which they must constantly prove their worth as 'real' Americans" (Park 136). This stereotype perpetuates the image of Asian Americans as both the foreigner and model minority. It stresses the idea that Asian Americans are culturally, and perhaps even genetically, different from Americans, thereby casting them as forever outsiders (Ng et al. 98). Asian Americans are considered to be "interlopers in... [the] Black/White racial discourse," constantly in tension with people of color and shunned by the White majority (Ng et al. 96). Sociologist Lisa Sun-Hee Park claims, "For Asian Americans, deviation from the model minority ideology implies not only a moral shortcoming due to their own individual failure, but also separates them from the American norm, thereby reinforcing their foreigner status" (136).

There has been significant discussion surrounding the racial implications of such a myth, but my focus lies on the ways this stereotype affects people as they have to face not only the racialized expectations of America but also the expectations of their parents and of themselves. Casting the racial implications aside, there is a "sense of profound cultural difference that underlies the model minority stereotype" (Ng et al. 98). This is where my focus lies. This stereotype affects Lyla's

² All quotes have been transcribed and modified for clarification.

outlook on education and she considers it to be one of the major differences between Korean and American culture. The pursuit of happiness is never a part of the equation when striving for success. Success, though normally a subjective word, takes on a distinct meaning to me, Lyla and my other participants. The path to success is a particular one: getting all A's, attending a prestigious college, getting a high-paying job, and becoming financially independent. Being successful means having the ability to support not just oneself but also the rest of the family (here come in the collectivistic values). It means giving parents the ability to brag about their child and their accomplishments. It means giving parents an envelope of cash every now and then, not specifically for their financial support but for the symbolic meaning of gratitude that the gesture evokes.

Jessie attributes the tumultuous family dynamic between her and her parents to this difference in values. Jessie considers herself to be more American than Korean. She acknowledges that her parents grew up with certain expectations about success. The life her parents lived was filled with school and studying hard in order to achieve an acceptable level of success. It was what they knew because those were the values taught to them at the time they were growing up in Korea and they followed that same mentality when raising her. Like Sally, Jessie would often ask herself, "Why do I have to do this when all my friends don't?" By "this," Jessie is referring to the amount of time and effort that she was pressured to commit to studying. It is not just their view on education that causes riffs. There are also differences in religious and political views that cause her and her parents not to see eye to eye. She states, "it's hard for us to understand each other's experiences because even though we are part of the same family, we come from different cultures. Mine's like a hybrid, but theirs is strictly Korean." By acknowledging this difference in cultures, Jessie claims to be more open-minded when it comes to issues or arguments because she feels the need to understand the perspective of others. She understands that cultural differences heavily affect someone's outlook on life and that it is important to consider their respective culture and why they think a certain way.

Aside from education and success, beauty was another characteristic that the ideal Korean child possessed. It had not occurred to me that beauty would be one of the qualifiers since my

definition of the ideal Korean child was smart, healthy, and successful. Beauty never made it on to my list. However, when I think about the number of times I am bombarded with comments about my appearance by my family, perhaps being beautiful should be added to my list. In Korean culture, making comments about someone's appearance is a common practice. Before a hello, before a hug, my family often greets me by addressing whether I have gained or lost weight. Several people mentioned the need for the "ideal" Korean child to fit into the Korean standard of beauty. The ideal Korean woman has fair skin with an oval head, double eyelids, large eyes, and a pointed nose. They need to be skinny and just tall enough, perhaps 5 '4-5' 5. There seemed to be a uniform description about the characteristics of a beautiful Korean woman. This is not to say that the United States doesn't promote a certain type of beauty. I don't need a particular source or scholar to tell me that the U.S. values women who are skinny, white, and tall. However, I do want to acknowledge the broader notion of beauty in the United States. Lyla commented, "American culture is a lot more accepting of different types of beauty" whereas everyone looks very similar in Korean society. There is a very concrete, definitive expectation to look a certain way in Korea. The loosening and evolving beauty standard is something that Lyla appreciates about living in a diverse American society. Conversely, the lack of diversity in Korea, it being a homogenous society, results in a static portrayal of what the standard of beauty entails.

In 2013, a viral GIF [Graphics Interchange Format], known as the "Miss Korea GIF" gained media attention as it consisted of still images of the faces of beauty contestants quickly morphing into one another. The GIF made the contestants look as if they had the same facial features, literally, the exact same facial features. It was to the point where *Jezebel*, a U.S. feminist website, came out with the headline, 'Plastic Surgery Means Many Beauty Queens but Only One Kind of Face' (Lee 1). It turns out that the Miss Korea GIF was photoshopped. However, the fact that it was photoshopped does not discredit what the GIF signified; if anything, it raises even more flags. Korea is well known for its plastic surgery industry. This GIF acted as a symbol of "Korea's plastic surgery mayhem" as "such characterizations pathologize Korean cosmetic surgery consumption as a push toward racialized uniformity defined by a singular national beauty aesthetic across diverse

Korean women's faces" (Lee 1). What does this say about Korea's beauty standards and how does this impact second-generation Korean Americans?

Coinciding with what my participants described to me, this "one kind of face" that *Jezebel* discusses has fair skin, a narrow nose, small head, pointed chin, double eyelids, and big eyes (Stewart). Unsurprisingly, Koreans "consume plastic surgery at the highest rates per capita globally" (Lee 9). On one hand, Korean culture values a singular type of beauty while as of recently, American culture has begun to promote a relatively more diverse sense of beauty. As I said earlier, commenting on body size and appearance is considered to be a cultural norm and many of my participants, despite disliking those judgmental comments, take it for what it is, an ingrained part of Korean culture. However, for Jessie, these contrasting beauty standards took a large toll on her mental health.

Lisa Sun-Hee Park claims that the second generation lives a life filled with "constant doubt and justification of their reasons for being in, not a foreign land, but their own land" (134). This manifests in the lives of my participants in different ways. Take Jessie for example. Due to the environment she was raised in, she felt like she needed to assimilate. She "grew up in white suburbia" and felt the need to fit in as much as possible. In order to do so, she wanted to shed every part of her Korean identity by intentionally refusing to learn and speak Korean despite her parent's wishes. Disassociating with her Korean culture was her method of fitting into American society as a kid. Nowadays, she feels a little guilty for rejecting it for so long.

Similar to Jessie, Hannah also mentioned how she feels like she prioritized her Americanness for the majority of her life and is now trying to sit deeply with her Korean side. Hannah noticed that she has frustrations living in American society. She says, "to me, collective values and collective well-being is so obviously second nature. It's not hard for me to think like, 'oh what is good for you is also good for me.'" However, in American culture, with its individualistic values, not everyone thinks the way she does. At times, she gets irritated living in a society that promotes individualism and prioritizing oneself first over others. The Korean values instilled in her affect how she views American society, deeming it too selfish at times. In addition, she notices tension when she tries to

describe the cultural differences to her non-Korean friends when they can't fully comprehend the sense of duty and obligation she has to her family. That obligation is a product of the collectivistic values in Korean culture that would be difficult for those outside of the culture to understand, especially if her non-Korean friends have never felt the pressure of familial responsibility.

However, not everyone feels the same way as Jessie or Hannah. Kylie never viewed herself to have trouble balancing between her Americanness and Koreanness. In fact, she considered herself to be at the exact intersection between the two cultures. She says, "I feel like on the spectrum of not assimilating at all and assimilating completely, my family was very much in the middle. So, I wouldn't say I really lean one way or the other." In addition, Kylie challenged the very terms of the questions. When I asked her if she ever had any difficulty navigating the value systems of two cultures, she responded by saying that she cannot separate which of her values came from what culture. Pinpointing what your values are is already a hard task. Understanding and taking the time to figure out why you hold certain values is a whole other obstacle. In contrast, Hannah claimed that being a second-generation Korean American forced her to learn how to "code switch" between her Americanness and Koreanness. In other words, she learned how to oscillate between performing her American and Korean sides. Hannah's code-switching between two cultures is something that resonates with Alice as well. Alice spoke about her trouble in navigating between Korean and American values. She says in Korean culture, "you tend to be timider in your opinions" so that you do not cause issues for others. She aims "to make everything as easy as possible to everyone" in order to be respectful. On the other hand, she describes American values to be "straightforward" and more headstrong about expressing opinions. She claimed, "you kind of have to find a balance of learning how to stand up for yourself so others don't walk all over you, but [also] knowing when to step back." Alice seems to touch on the balancing of collectivistic Korean values and individualistic American values. While her Korean values refrain her from speaking out too often, her American values urge her to speak her mind.

So far, I have discussed many different aspects of how individuals perceive Korean culture in the context of American society. Some find difficulty in their ethnicity performance,

while others remain unbothered, or perhaps unaware, of the ways they navigate between two cultures. The varying responses shed some light on the multiplicity of perspectives on ethnicity performance and how American and Korean culture manifests differently in one's daily life. The stories of individuals are unique to their perspective and perceived relationship with culture and ethnicity, but these stories as a collective speak to the need to negotiate between different cultural frameworks in order to maintain one's relationships and establish one's identity.

Conclusion

The cultural tensions explored throughout this article reveal the discrepancies between the value systems of American and Korean culture, and explore the ways they affect interpersonal relationships for second-generation Korean Americans in their everyday lives. The Korean language acts as a powerful enforcer of Korean culture through its honorifics system and continues to impact individuals even as they come into tension with American cultural values. Along with the expectations and pressures from family to be the ideal child, second-generation Korean Americans are left with the task of reflecting and defining what these cultural tensions signify to them.

One of the positive things that these cultural tensions produce is a reflective space and a chance for individuals to come to terms with their ways of thinking and to recognize how they actively decide on performing their ethnicity. It provides a new sense of autonomy, both freeing and burdening as it is up to the individual to establish their relationship to American and Korean culture. This article is a testament to my acknowledging the issues I have in my performance of ethnicity. And to my comfort, I am not alone. More than anything, this project has been a personal journey as I researched aspects of my ethnicity and reflected on my overall identity. I was able to put into words what the root of my difficulties are in order to better understand them and why they occur. In doing so, I was able to identify problems I didn't fully understand I had. I have yet to come up with solutions for the tensions that arise from the clashes of two cultures. However, by engaging in a dialogue about our shared troubles and differing viewpoints, I hope it gets us one step closer to dealing with the problems.

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