The city's super-immigrants slaved and scraped to give their children the American Dream. There's only one catch—the kids are turning into Americans.

THE SOUL OF THE NEW KOREANS

By Jeffrey Goldberg
The Overachievers

Korean immigrants made almost superhuman sacrifices to give their children the American Dream. They never expected them to become Americans in the process. A tale of the new melting pot. By Jeffrey Goldberg
Judge Yellen is no easy mark, certainly, and on this particular morning, Henry Jung, an assistant district attorney, is about to understand that. Jung is asking Judge Yellen to issue an order of protection to keep a defendant from harassing a woman; the judge evidently believes Jung is straying from the point. "You have to give a reason for an order of protection, Mr. Jung," she snaps.

"Our policy is—"

"Your policy does not impress me, Mr. Jung."

"This case involves a man standing before a woman displaying a broken bottle—"

"There is no reason to believe that these people will ever come into contact again," the judge says, shutting down the discussion. Jung moves to his seat, shoulders hunched, and shakes off the defeat. A crackhead's snoring echoes through the courtroom.

As a child in South Korea, Henry Jung dreamed of an America that straddled the world like a great tiger. Brooklyn Criminal Court has bled the 34-year-old of some of his idealism, but he knows, fifteen years after he moved to America, that he lives in a remarkable place. What other country would have let a 20-year-old immigrant participate in a government prosecutor? There's no glory in Brooklyn Criminal Court, but it's a respectable first step for an ambitious lawyer.

Several miles southeast of Judge Yellen's courtroom, on a tired side street in Sheepshead Bay, Eyo-Soon Jung, Henry's mother, stands behind the register of her failing grocery store, waiting for the rare customer. The old Jews who bought borscht and herring here have died; the Russian immigrants who repopulated the neighborhood in recent years do their shopping in Brighton Beach. The government, too, has hurt business—after Mrs. Jung let an old man buy a bar of soap and a can of beer with food stamps, the US-
DA kicked the Jungs off the program. Mrs. Jung is soft on old people who try to buy beer and soap with food stamps, but this old man is a undercover government operative. "I don't want the government's money any- way," she says. "That's why I have children."

Faded signs taped to the windows advertise soaps and snacks the store no longer carries. The Jung's store is a poor cousin to the high-volume, 24-hour Korean-run groceries ubiquitous in Manhattan. Yet there's no dust on the shelves—that would be an embarrassment. And when a customer does happen by, Mrs. Jung musters a gentle smile and some soft words. But mostly she waits.

Business at the Korean markets throughout the city has slowed, but it's even slower here. Two years ago her husband died, and Mrs. Jung is running the store with the help of her younger son, Chang-keun. Henry helps on weekends, but it's still a burden, and Mrs. Jung doesn't seem to mind her recent decision to run her stock down and close up for good. She sits on a milk crate outside the still-open store, and while she professes to agonize about everything—"I never stop worrying"—her manner suggests a good deal of confidence in the future. "I always wanted Henry to be a lawyer," she says, taking in the sun, "and now he is one."

It's an odd and poignant victory. Mrs. Jung is a music teacher by training, and she took a giant step away from white-collar success when she came to America to sell and stack and sweep and count. Soon, she won't even have that. But her son Henry is a lawyer.

Here are thousands of Koreans in New York like Hye-Soon Jung, bright, cultured people who have sacrificed dreams of professional glory to ensure their children's success. A complex combination of factors persuad ed Koreans to emigrate—the rigidity of Korean society, terrible overcrowding on the Korean peninsula. But when Koreans are asked why they came here, almost to a person they say it was to give their children a chance to learn in the best universities in the world. This is why Koreans may be remembered as the most instantly successful immigrant group in American history.

An old joke asks: What's the difference between the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the American Psychiatric Association? The answer: One generation.

The joke is a comment on the quick march of immigrant Jews to professional glory, and it applies with equal relevance to the Koreans, because no group has replicated the Jewish formula for business and educational success with such efficiency.

In just three decades—before 1965, the year large-scale Asian immigration began, there were no more than 500 Koreans in the entire metropolitan area—the Koreans have changed the face of commercial New York, opening thousands of stores, rescuing whole neighborhoods from decay, and inventing entirely new retail industries in the process. In the New York region, Koreans own 1,400 produce stores (85 percent of all such stores in the area), 3,500 groceries, 2,000 dry cleaners, 800 seafood stores, and 1,300 nail salons, according to one Korean business group. "They are New York City's most productive community," Emanuel Tobler, a professor of economics at New York University, tells us unironically. But their museums, their art galleries, their neighborhood restaurants and schools—"and churches, those old Korean temples, today's hot spots such as Cardozo and Bay, side in Queens serve as petri dishes for Korean success, the role Erasmus and Midwood played in the golden age of Jewish academic advancement.

Historically and religiously, of course, Jews and Koreans have no common experience, but in twentieth-century America they overlap in an extraordinary number of ways. Both groups produce excellent violinists; poor black shoppers frequently despise them; in different ways, both feel marginalized by mainstream society; and Harvard Yard runs thick with them. Korean-Americans have even taken over deserted Jewish camps in the Catskills. They're used for church retreats.

The Jews hacked the widest path for immigrants culturally predisposed to mercantilism and educational overachievement, and it is because of this that many Korean-Americans have an almost psychological dependence on the Jewish experience. Some Korean-Americans even refer to themselves jokingly as "Kews."

There is a conscious choice here, one that reveals much about the changing dynamics of the melting pot. The Korean Students Association at Columbia University, for example, is the only minority group unwilling to participate in an umbrella body known, so awfully correctly, as the United Students of Color Council. The president of this Korean group, John Min, a pre-medical student from Washington State, explains why. "I'm not sure what agenda we have in common. My skin color—his scratches his hand for inspection—"is closer to a Jewish shade than an Indian or black shade."

"We know that the Jews have been there before," says Grace Lyu-Voichhausen, a community activist and an unofficial ambassador of the Korean community to the outside world. "There's similar values, similar behaviors, similar experiences in America. There's a sense of determination in the Jewish community we can understand."

But Korean history in New York reads like an abridged version of the Jewish; Koreans are skipping whole chapters as they suburbanize and assimilate. They were never stuck in airless ghettos like the Lower East Side, and unlike Jews in the great waves of immigration 80 or 90 years ago, the Koreans were pulled here more than they were pushed. They arrived with college degrees—60 percent, by some estimates, have come with at least B.A.'s—and they've always been viewed as a "model minority" by the white majority.

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the passage of the act that allowed full-scale Asian immigration, and it should be an occasion for the Korean community to mark its obvious successes. But instead of celebrating, Korean New York is dogged by anxiety.

It is not racial strife that causes worry, though race is the prism through which the outside world most often sees the Korean community. The 1990 boycott was certainly frightening—many store owners feared that the picketing of a Flatbush grocery by blacks would inevitably mean a citywide boycott and violence which it didn't. The Los Angeles riots felt more threatening, but they were experienced vicariously in New York.

The hair-pulling problem of the moment is economic, growing from the belief that New York's retail economy, struggling for breath since 1990, will never be robust again, and that City Hall, so concerned about seducing neighborhood-busting megastores to open here, is unaware that hundreds of Korean-owned stores, like the grocery owned by Hye-Soon Jung in Brooklyn, are forced to shut each year.

"We're in the middle of a tragedy," says Sung Sook Kim, president of the Korean-American Small Business Service Center in Flushing, the capital of Korean New York. "Last year, we had 700 stores open but 900 closed. Growth has completely stopped. We're having 15 percent turnover every year. People are closing up," Times are so tough, some Korean businessmen say, that one of the linchpins of Korean success in New York, the k'texas, or revolving-credit system, is itself in a state of slow collapse. (The k'texas rely on regular contributions from a group of neighborhood merchants. A communal pot. One of them receives the full amount each month, then donates as seed capital.) In 1986, 57 percent of the people we interviewed said, But..."
cash registers aren't growing now. People can't afford to give.'

These setbacks are quickly percolating through the Korean community. "I just saw in Flushing 300 or 400 older Koreans lining up to get government cheese and butter at a senior center," says Jonathan Kim of the Asian-American Federation, a nonprofit advocacy group.

Long before Dan Quayle posited his thoughts on family values, Confucius had formulated his, and his teachings—which permeate all layers of Korean life—hold duty to family as a paramount virtue. Honor the men, support their families; dishonorable ones don't. But, Jonathan Kim says, "It comes to a point: where you forget about honor and you just go collect your cheese."

This sudden vulnerability is causing some first-generation Koreans to register a more fundamental anxiety: Why are they here at all? Many Koreans say that they feel essentially powerless: powerless in their own homes, as they watch America turn their children into people they don't fully understand—that is, Americans, powerless outside their homes, in the un navigable world of coalition politics; powerless in their own businesses, where they find they don't control the larger levers of economic success.

The Koreans seem to dominate whole sectors of New York's economy. But this apparent hegemony is deceptive, because they often have little control over the means of distribution or the buildings they sell from. At the Hunts Point market in the Bronx, where many Koreans go to buy produce, the overwhelming majority of wholesalers are Italian-American or Jewish. Even in the garment center, where 300 Korean-owned sweatshops employ thousands of Latino laborers, the notion of Korean power is chimera. The sweatshops owned by Koreans, mixed in with shops owned by Chinese and other immigrant groups, are actually small contracting outfits that do the bidding of the big Seventh Avenue manufacturers, who in turn work for the designers and department stores.

In a gray building on Eighth Avenue near 37th Street, one of more than 60 nameless buildings that house, all told, 3,000 individual sweatshops, the Korean owner of one such shop talks about the choice he made to enter the garment industry. He asks that he be identified only by the name Kim, which is shared by a quarter of all Koreans. "I was educated at Yonsei University in South Korea," he says. Yonsei is the equivalent of Princeton. Only two schools, Seoul National (Harvard) and Korea University (the Yale), are similarly prestigious.

Around Kim sit fifteen or so Hispanic women, sewing madly. Many of them, he admits, are undocumented aliens. The windows are blackened over, and lack of ventilation gives the room a dank, tight feel. Kim admits that his workers take home as little as $3 an hour and shakes his head ruefully when he says how much he takes home a week—$300. "Owning is not very profitable."

The small contractors are apparently so pitiable that they've even gained the sympathy of labor organizers. "A lot of times, the workers aren't getting paid by the contractors, but that's because the contractor isn't getting paid by the manufacturer," says Francisco Chang, a Korean-born ILGWU organizer.

The manufacturer's tactic is to put the contractor against the wall and twist his arm. Many of these manufacturers will have auctions where they'll hold up a blouse and say, 'Five dollars.' The contractors will bid against each other, driving the price down... The contractors see the manufacturers and the building owners, the Jews, as very powerful," Chang says. They perceive that it is not worth the fight.

This is the flipside of the Korean-Jewish relationship, seldom if ever-talked about. Officially, Korean-Jewish relations are grand—it is Jewish organizations, especially the Jewish Community Relations Council, that are helping the Korean community organize politically; and Jews and Koreans find comfort in each other's troubles with African-Americans. But, says Professor Pyong Gap Min, a Korean-born sociologist at Queens College, "many Koreans have ambivalent feelings about the Jews. They try to take the Jews as a model. On the other hand, they see the Jews as very stingy."

This sub rosa antipathy extends to the grocery stores, where a common bit of Korean folk wisdom held that opening a store in a Jewish neighborhood is a losing proposition, because Jews are cheap. Hyo-Soon Jung, Henry's mother, remembers hearing this when she and her late husband looked to open a store in Sheepshead Bay.

"There was a prejudice against opening up in a Jewish neighborhood, because the Jewish reputation is stingy," she says, perch on her milk crate. "This is not true. It is actually Jewish people who are the biggest spenders, as long as there is quality. As long as we sold high-quality fruit, the Jews came."

Not anymore, though. Jung looks down East 17th Street, toward Kings Highway. "There's a pathmark down there. That's where the Jewish ladies go to shop now. They're smart."

Everyone knows a Korean, and nobody knows a Korean. It's a weird conundrum of New York life. Here's a group that in less than 30 years has transformed New York's commercial culture and, with other Asians—most notably the Chinese—is saving the city's educational institutions from mediocrity and worse. Yet it's impossible to name a famous Korean in New York. There are no Korean judges or police chiefs, no City Council members or assemblymen. Economically struggling, the Koreans are politically stunted. They raise money for non-Korean politicians—Rudy Giuliani was a favorite—but they have few effective lobbyists and no plausible candidates for public office.

A new, much-anticipated novel by a 29-year-old Korean-American writer named Chang-rae Lee tells the story of a Korean-born member of the New York City Council, a mayoral candidate who is worshiped by his multiracial Queens constituency. Native Speaker—the first novel by a Korean-American to be brought out by a major publisher—is an artful meditation on ethnic identity, fractured loyalties, and cultural confusion that is bundled inside a not-entirely-plausible political spy thriller. Perhaps the most improbable aspect of Native Speaker is the very idea of a Korean-American running for mayor of New York. In 1995, this is sheer fantasy.

"What happens is that the narrator is so amazed that a Korean man of his generation could imagine a public identity for himself," Lee explains.

It is not that Korean immigrants don't want to join public society. If they felt they had to run for office to survive they would: the decision to build a citywide monopoly on 24-hour groceries was itself a rational response to their marginal status as just-off-the-ship immigrants. (It is a common stereotype that Korean culture is essentially meritocratic, but in fact, their cultural traditions afford little special status to the business-oriented—"If one is guided by profit in one's actions, one will incur much ill will," Confucius wrote in The Analects.) As New York's Korean community becomes savvier about American life, it may find that there is much to gain in following the African-American model of exerting influence through electoral politics. In California, which has a much larger Korean community, Jay Kim, a San Bernardino Republican, in 1992 became the first Korean-American to be elected to Congress. And the upcoming Republican presidential primary will undoubtedly lead to a minor media frenzy on the issue of Koreans; Wendy Gramm, Phil Gramm's wife and an economist, is a third-generation Korean-American from Hawaii. She is about to become the most famous Korean in America.

Even if he weren't married to a Korean-American, Phil Gramm would prove strong interest among first-generation Korean immigrants—his small-government, deregulation message speaks to a community that has suffered economic nicks, weekly outside the recession. Many Koreans in business and industry have complained that they are "City do not derive their brutal, to a small extent, from the business community, with its OSHA inspectors and sanitation police, and tax-collect-
Koreans run hundreds of sweatshops, but they are as much exploited as exploiters

FRANCISCO CHANG, GARMENT-WORKERS' UNION ORGANIZER

'Even with the husband of a Korean-American in the race, however, it's unlikely that older immigrants will choose en masse to retrofit their public profiles. 'Many Koreans don't unpack their suitcases when they get here, so they don't have confidence in their ability to become Americans,' says Grace Lyu-Volkhausen, the activist.

'Lyu-Volkhausen has unpacked her suitcases, but she is an unusual case. Though she is a member of the pilgrim generation of Koreans in New York—she arrived to study in 1960, when there were fewer than 200 Koreans here—she stands outside the circle of first-generation leaders. She is a woman, for one thing, and she is married to a white man, and thus put more in tune with the children of the immigrants, many of whom see their parents' generation as atomized and exhausted. Some younger Koreans, say half-kiddingly that they wish they had an Al Sharpton of their own.'

'I want people who can go fight for us,' says Wayne Ko, who runs the Korean Community Service Center of Brooklyn. 'We have some inside Al Sharptons, but I want an Al Sharpton type of person to break outside.'

This is, of course, a cultural impossibility—no one who acts like Al Sharpton would ever gain the respect of traditional Koreans. But many second-generation Korean-Americans—and the category known within the community as the '1.5 generation,' people now in their teens, twenties, and thirties who came to America as children with their parents—say they are growing tired of marginality.

'A lot of people come here and feel overwhelmed at a point that they decide they want to insulate themselves from mainstream society,' says Jonathan Kim, the nonprofit advocate, sitting in the Manhattan law offices of his friend Michael Yi. 'As Kim speaks, Yi nods sympathetically. But when it is suggested that the language gap stands in the way of assimilation—and that...
immigrants working seven-day weeks don’t have time for English lessons—Yi responds with unusual bluntness: “They’ve been here 20, 30 years already. They don’t have an excuse anymore.”

Yi’s snappiness reflects the growing exasperation the second generation feels toward the first, a feeling returned by the elders, who see their children defying them in the most awful ways.

The most extreme manifestation of Korean generational rebellion can sometimes be seen at the 105th Precinct station house in Flushing. The parents stand there, waiting patiently for attention, the father red-faced, the mother crying into her hand. They’ve come to report a missing child, or to collect a son, or even a daughter, arrested for running with a gang. This is another way in which the dynamic of the melting pot has changed: Assimilation is no longer the exalting process once imagined by fifties and sixties liberals. For many morally upright immigrants, it now means watching sons and daughters turn into miscreants, petty criminals, or worse. “The families are just crushed,” says William Nevins, a police expert on Asian gangs.

The idea of Korean gangs defies all the stereotypes of Korean diligence, but the gangs are there (if still in small numbers)—Korean Puk Ching, Korean Power; Korean-Taiwanese Boys—shooting in Flushing and Elmhurst, extorting money from stores in Koreatown in Manhattan; Even in Port Lee, an Asian equivalent of Jewish Great Neck, the gangs trolled successfully for initiates, police say. They even reach the children of ministers, the most respected members of the community. There is still a feeling of disbelief in Queens, where the son of one of the community’s most prominent ministers was arrested in 1991 and later convicted for running with a gang of push-in robbers.

“These kids don’t fit the typical profile,” says Frank Hancock, a criminal-defense attorney and gang expert. “You’ll get a child at the top of his class who comes from an industrious family, more often than not in private business, working sixteen hours a day. The problem is that these kids come home to an empty house. The parents aren’t aware of how trouble can creep up on you here.”

The Korean gangs take as models the larger Chinese gangs, which they sometimes find themselves battling, as was the case in 1989, when gangs from Chinatown tried to shake down businesses along West 32nd Street, the heart of Manhattan’s Koreatown. The Korean gangs, which had already locked up the extortion racket, posted sentries on the corners of Fifth Avenue and 32nd Street and fought off the Chinese interlopers.

No one is even guessing how many Korean businesses fall under the “protection” of gangs; Koreans, like many immigrant groups, are loath to involve the police in their affairs. But the man who led the Korean Power gang through the early nineties, Tony Kim, speaking to a reporter for the first time, provides a rare look into the world of renegade young Koreans.

“There are three kinds of extortions,” he says, explaining the methods he employed. “One, basic robbery: ‘You don’t pay me money, I’ll break you up.’ The second is, ‘I have people, young kids, in the gang, and I need to keep them off the streets, so get them food. You will give me money because I help them.’ The third kind is police extortion: Police come; they want to arrest us; they threaten us. We were in the second kind of extortion.”

Tony Kim came to America at the age of 15. He was charged with a robbery; he says he didn’t do it. A leader of Korean Power, 15. He was the one who drove the extortion business and became associated with more serious crimes.

“We do it the Korean way. We talk to the owner and say, ‘You
...use our security; we work in your bar, maybe we could help keep other gangs from extorting you.' If they say, 'We didn't bring the money,' we'll go to [their] house with [them] to get the money. We'll even pay for the taxi. Sometimes they just see us as little brothers and want to give us something to eat, so they give us one, two hundred dollars.'

The police, unsurprisingly, are less sanguine. "Five KP guys beat a guy up in his store just recently," Nevin says. "They told him that if he had security, this wouldn't happen. These are hard-core guys."

Tony Kim—ponytailed, scarred, and affable—says he's out of the gang life now and is running his new beeper business. He does not seem like a typical gang leader. Though he carries himself with the self-assurance of a man who knows his orders will be followed, he speaks deferentially and in complete sentences. He even apologizes for his fine English. And while he might be a nightmare vision to every Korean parent, Tony Kim expresses a deep abiding loyalty that Americans would find astonishing.

"When my father goes back to South Korea, I'll go back with him, give my time to him," he says, fiddling with his thumb ring. Right now, he's helping his father run the several dry cleaners the family owns in Queens. "My parents came here for a better lifestyle. For better education. Now they're thinking twice."

"WE MUST FIGHT THE REPRESSIVE MECHANISMS OF THE PATRIARCHAL WORLD," the Reverend R. Yon Pak says as many of the 60 or so congregants nod in agreement. Many of them are in jeans; some have their ears pierced five or six times. One woman chews gum loudly as the minister speaks. "Before we came to America, my mother took us to visit our ancestral village, and there is a book there—this is my father's ancestral village—and it lists all the fathers and all the sons," she says. "My name wasn't in there."

There is a story in the Gospel according to Luke, Pak tells the congregation, of the "bent-over woman" who is miraculously cured of her ailments by Jesus, despite the opposition of the authorities at the time. Pak, a sunny-faced woman who speaks accented English, talks of the bent-over woman as an outcast, ignored and reviled by her community until Jesus sets her free. "We must not just believe in the suffering Christ or the glorified Christ, but in the confronting Christ who never avoids social conflict."

For one in a Korean church especially, Pak's sermon is revolutionary. But the English Language Ministry of the Korean Methodist Church and Institute, near Columbia University, is catering to the assimilated. Across 115th Street, in a much larger hall, the Reverend Wontae Choi, a respected and senior Korean-American theologian, leads the same church's main service, in Korean.

Pak is a guest preacher, invited by Albert Hahn, the 26-year-old minister to the English congregation. Pak was asked to speak this Sunday morning in honor of Women's History Month.

"Chu, needless to say, is not celebrating Women's History Month. We don't do that," he says, chuckling. "The street between us is very symbolic. Sometimes it's a barrier. Back across the street, Hahn explains, "in the traditional Korean, Confucianist culture, God is the teacher, someone you look up to." Hahn is a soft-spoken, modest overachiever—Vassar, Princeton Theological Seminary. He arrived in America when he was 15. "That is how Koreans also perceive the pastor. When the pastor says something, that's the word. When people come to church, they are coming with respect. Korean-Americans see God as a friend we can relate to and admire but also complain to. It's a different outlook."

The cherubic Hahn is asked whether Chu and his supporters like what he is doing. "They pay my salary," he replies coolly.

Chu's congregants would almost certainly be displeased by what happens later in Hahn's service. A woman in her mid-twenties gets up to introduce her new fiancée, who is white. The congregation cheers. It's a willful denial of the hard feelings interracial marriages engender in more conservative parts of the Korean community.

Curiously, both ministers describe themselves as adherents of liberation theology, placing themselves to the left of the mass of Korean American ministers in New York. Hahn speaks of the "diseases of capitalism" and analyzes Korean-black tensions in quasi-Marxist language. "The problems between Koreans and blacks are set up by the racist system," he says.

This is a rarity. Churches keep the community glued together, but they rarely conceive of their mission in political terms. Though more than 60 percent of Koreans in the New York area describe themselves as Christian, an even higher percentage attend one of the region's 300 Korean churches. Many go just for the opportunity to socialize with their fellow émigrés. To the extent that ideology comes up at all, most churches encourage a brand of apolitical conservatism. Chu says, "They don't teach them how democracy is a part of Christianity."

Michael Yi, the lawyer and activist, puts it more confrontationally: "It would be against the interests of the ministers to make people part of society. Keep them alienated from mainstream society is the thinking."

OF THE POLITICAL ISSUES THAT divide young Koreans from their parents, race is a concern. The understanding gap may be the widest. American-born Koreans tell of their shame at the things their parents sometimes say about blacks. None would imitate their parents by speaking for attribution.

"In Korea, the image of blacks isn't positive," one young professional says. "My parents came over with an image of blacks as violent, and then they hear about the problems their friends have with blacks in the stores. They basically think they're scary. They think they have a low mentality."

"Blacks and Koreans were, of course, destined for trouble. The relationship began in the early sixties, when Korean wig sellers started visiting Harlem to sell thick Korean hair, which was then popular in black beauty salons. Louis Winick, a researcher with the Council on Foreign Relations, the City of New York, says that the Koreans noticed a large number of empty stores, many freshly abandoned by Jewish merchants. The Koreans moved in, graduating from wigs to..."
dry goods and produce. The rest is strife-torn history. SHOPPING BLACK DOLLARS is the headline on a recent story about Korean merchants in _Emerg_ e magazine, the usually solid black monthly that on this issue decided to let the raw antipathy fly.

Wayne Ko, a round, slightly befuddled man with a mission to reform his community, says he understands the sentiments behind these racialist feelings. "I tell my people, 'Do not think all the time about money,' " Ko says. He's seated at a table in a Blimpie restaurant on Flatbush Avenue. "We should learn more about"—he looks around and drops his voice to a whisper—"black people." The coast is clear. "We have to learn the customs in the black neighborhoods."

It was tried before, with mixed success. Part of the problem is cultural—Korean society is so reserved that during the 1988 Olympics, radio and television announcements reminded residents of Seoul to smile at strangers. When Confucian coolness collides with "How ya doin'?" American openness, the results can be dangerous.

"In Korea, we can't smile too much; it looks insincere," Ko says. "The way we grow up. But we should learn to smile."

In Korean society, too, women seldom look more especially strangers, in the eye. To do so would be to express extreme emotion. Here, though, averted eyes behind the counter can signify disrespect, especially to people looking for sights. In the Korean-owned stores along Flatbush Avenue and in the grocery store that was the focus of the 1990 boycott, the merchants seem to be Americanizing their customs. They put money directly into the customers' hands—in Korea, money is customarily placed on the counter—and they smile and say thank you. One recent afternoon, though, a broom-wielding employee vigilantly followed a young black woman through one store, his body language suggesting that he expected the woman to grab something and run. She quickly left, and the employee, gripping the broom tightly, mumbled, "Always stealing, always stealing."

In Chang-rae Lee's _Native Speaker_, the narrator recalls the way his father, a taciturn shopkeeper, reacted to blacks: "With blacks he just turned to stone. He never bothered to explain his prices to them. He didn't follow them around the aisles like some storekeepers do, but he always let them know there wasn't going to be any funny business here. When a young black man or woman came in—old people or those with children in tow didn't seem to alarm him—he took his broom and started sweeping at the store entrance very slowly, deliberately, not looking at the floor."

Another grocer offers up his theory on black shoplifting. It's wildly, preposterously racist, but not without a trace of first-stage empathy. "The blacks pick apples and bananas from the store," he says. "A long time ago, in the fields, the blacks took food off the trees, so this is why they take apples and bananas. Sometimes they forget not to take fruit." His statement leads to an extended discussion about declining banana prices.

"We need to understand the black people better," says Michael Lee, waving his bias hand. "I don't want to hurt other people, and I don't want to get hurt."

Outside, the sun is setting as hundreds of people stream out of the Flatbush Avenue subway station. The few Koreans caught in the crowd of tired black workers keep their heads down and move swiftly, as if they're trying to beat their own shadows to safety.

The four undergraduate women who make up the Columbia University Korean Modern Hip-Hop Dance troupe take the stage at Korean Culture Night 1995. Their flowing fahs in denim pants and their denim pants in confusion. According to the culture-night program handout, the hip-hop dancers were booted out of the Korean fan-dance group at Columbia for engaging in what the group disapprovingly called "outrageous dance antics." They decided to form the new group to demonstrate "how to be young, hip, and Korean."

There are maybe 500 students in the ballroom, all young, nearly all Korean, and quite a few unhip, though not for lack of trying. The boys, gangly and intense, keep their bangs long and wear striped ties; others dress as if they're heading to Wall Street interviews right after curtain call. The women, more self-assured, glide through the room in sleek and expensive black dresses.

The program this Saturday night is a celebration of Korean culture, and a statement of Korean permanency at Columbia. The 500-member Korean Students Association has organized for the evening one of Columbia's largest ballrooms. Tonight is a chance for students who otherwise lead textbook American lives to remind themselves who they are, though they tend to do this in the generationally correct style. After one student finishes playing ancient folk music on a _kayagum_, similar to the Japanese _koto_, a student emcees sneers that "every time I hear the _kayagum_, I get so emotional." In case you missed the irony the first time around, she begins to snivel into the microphone.

The hip-hoppers are greeted more enthusiastically. "Go girls!" someone in the audience screams.

But the hip-hoppers seem acutely self-conscious, and they smirk as the music—edge-free, watery Korean pop—reverberates through the room. Dressed in baggy jeans, Pumas, and bandannas, they make a stab at rump-shaking. This homage to black street culture is yet another (if more benign) manifestation of the new melting pot. But this is no booby video in the making. After the show, many say they're going home to study.

Theirs is an uneasy rebellion. Most of the kids in this hall, after all, came to Columbia emotionally in a blanket of responsibility. "Growing up, you know the air you breathe in your house is not free," John Min, the premed student, says. "When your parents come home at night, you know they weren't out at clubs. They come home and they can't put food in their mouths fast enough, and then they go to sleep so they can wake up six hours later to go back to work. They're not working sixteen hours a day to get a Mercedes. There's easier ways to get a Mercedes. Their blood, sweat, and tears fund the success of the next generation. It's not luxury they're looking for."

Second-generation Koreans tell astounding stories of their parents' obsession with the Ivy League: Marie Lee, a Brown-educated fiction writer; tells how her father wrote away for Harvard applications; the days each of his three children were born. "When my oldest brother got into Harvard, my father was in Turkey, so he bought a Muslim prayer rug in celebration," she
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obviously, not all second-generation
Koreans land in graduate school. There are special pressures for those who neither drop out entirely nor excel. Few Korean parents want to see their children follow them into small business, even if the child shows an ability to make a business grow. Susie Rhim is one such case. She is the Susie of Susie's Kitchen, a sprawling new deli and salad bar on Park Avenue South, near 30th Street. Susie is 27 and runs the deli with her mother, Koh Ja Rhim, and her father, Soon Il Rhim. Susie has a younger sister, Helen, at Brown University.

Her mother, who runs a cash register, was trained to be a violinist at Seoul National University. Her father, whose specialty now is spotting shoplifters, studied literature at Yonsei. It is the end of the day; the lunch rush is over, and the Rhims uncomplainingly hide their fatigue.

Why did they go into the deli business?

"Do you know what it costs to go to Brown University?" Soon Il asks.

"Twenty thousand dollars a year?"

"No." He shakes his head.

"Twenty-five thousand a year?"

"No," he says again, his voice filling with pride.

"Thirty thousand a year?"

"More than $30,000 a year."

Though Susie and Helen are only eight years apart, the Rhims talk about them as if they are from different generations, and they are. Susie vividly recalls her family's struggles. "I remember being woken up in the middle of the night to go to the market. I remember sweeping avocados in the apartment," she says. By the time Helen was born, the Rhims had turned their ghetto grocery store into a going concern (they left Williamsburg in 1974 for Manhattan). "They didn't have money to send me to tennis camp like they did with Helen," Susie says, showing no resentment.

Susie, who attended Boston University and then New York University, but didn't graduate, seems happy with the choices she's made. She's engaged to a Southerner named Patrick Nation, who helps manage the store. Susie's parents seem pleased with Patrick and happy with her work in the new store, but not overjoyed. "She'll finish school," her father declares.

It's hard to imagine, sometimes, why a violinist and a man who loves literature chose to spend their days chopping vegetables and chasing shoplifters. Can a child's education cancel out everything?

Chang-ae Lee, the novelist, says that for many parents, their personal pleasure is irrelevant. "I guess they would say that the suffering is not an issue; there's no need to talk about that," he says. "Why complain if my children's lives are better?"

But the children worry nonetheless. The weight of their parents' sacrifices can be crushing. Sitting in a Sizzler by the water in Sheephead Bay one Saturday afternoon, Henry Jung admits that he could never find the courage to ask his mother whether she now regrets her decision to come to America. "Very good question, but I don't want to ask," he says.

[The end of the answer]