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# **Imperial Citizens**

## **Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA**

Nadia Y. Kim  
(Stanford University Press, June 2008)

"A masterful demonstration of the globalization of white racism! Nadia Kim's interviews with Korean immigrants and their children reveal integral links between U.S. global hegemony and immigration. This book depicts the human tragedy of Korean American hyper-conformity in a nation that perpetuates white supremacy: preference for white beauty leading to plastic surgery; women preferring white men who exoticize or abuse them; and Korean internalization of white-racist attitudes toward Americans of color."

—Joe R. Feagin, Texas A&M University

The presence of the U.S. military in foreign countries creates not just an outflow of resources (and often bullets) but also of culture. American ideas about racial hierarchies can cross oceans on the backs of American soldiers, and the prejudices they introduce into other societies change that society's own racial lines forever.

*Imperial Citizens* does what other books rarely do: ventures to an Asian country and studies how racial inequalities have been forged by a U.S. military presence over several generations since World War II. Nadia Kim argues that American imperialism has been a significant source of ideas and attitudes about Asian/Asian Americans as well as Whites and Blacks in South Korea. Using a global framework, extensive interviews and ethnographic data, she examines how notions of White superiority and Black inferiority have been transmitted via the U.S. military and have changed how South Koreans view themselves.

Paying close attention to history, Kim argues that these racial concepts were reinforced by the U.S. military during its occupation of South Korea by its introduction of everything from Hollywood movies depicting White Americans as rich, heroic, happy, and beautiful to double eyelid and nose cartilage surgeries designed to fix Korean "deformities." These racist American influences, combined with violent military abuses (i.e. rape of Korean women by U.S. soldiers), solidified the inferior status of Koreans in their own minds.

As a result, Koreans imagined themselves as non-White and therefore inferior but also non-Black and therefore as both "above" and "below" Black Americans. Koreans, in part, were culturally primed to see themselves as above Blacks because of their Confucianist ideas about natural hierarchies and assumed truths about Korean's well-endowed bloodline. But they also saw themselves as below Blacks because Blacks were seen as agents of the U.S. occupation and therefore politically more powerful. To this day, Korean Americans

experience a great deal of tension with Black Americans because of these conflicting racial experiences that began in South Korea.

Kim goes on to describe how these racial stereotypes traveled with Korean immigrants back to American soil. When Koreans began immigrating to the U.S. in significant numbers, their learned stereotypes influenced how they positioned themselves within U.S. society. While they saw themselves as inferior to White Americans, they understood that they were socioeconomically more powerful than Blacks but politically *less* powerful than them owing to Blacks' more "American" status. That is, Asian Americans have long been the so-called forever foreigners.

Kim pays attention to both the invisible dimensions of foreignness as well as the immigrants' everyday struggles with being *visibly* foreign. But she shows how Korean Americans resist these inequalities and prejudices: "Indeed, [Korean American's] long-standing struggle with external powers like 'America' and attendant inferiority issues have in many ways readied them to defend their honor, a fight that some of them expect to wage. For those who do not expect it, however, the contradiction of American democracy and American racism inflames resistance."

With interviews, ethnographic observations, and newspaper analyses, Kim illuminates how U.S. imperialism has resulted in injustices and social problems for both Korean and American society. *Imperial Citizens* is further evidence that the U.S. occupation of other countries (not just lands, but human bodies and minds) have serious consequences for everyone involved.

*Nadia Y. Kim is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Loyola Marymount University.*

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