
Sample Lesson 21: Korean American Experiences and Interethnic Relations

Theme: History and Movement

Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 2, 4, 6

Standards Alignment:

HSS Content Standard: 11.11.1

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 2, 3, 7; W.9–10.1; SL.9–10.1

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

Overview: Koreatown in Los Angeles is a transnational enclave whose formation and development are an integral part of America's multicultural history. The heart of Korean America is in Koreatown Los Angeles. Koreatown was a central hotspot of violence during the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest/Uprising, and Korean Americans were thrust onto the national and international scenes where they were scapegoated, marginalized, and discriminated against. The media inflamed the so-called Black–Korean conflict at the time, exposed the deep-seated interethnic issues plaguing inner-city communities. The shooting of Latasha Harlins on March 16, 1991, happened about two weeks after the beating of Rodney King. Harlins and King were both African American. The murder of Harlins by liquor store owner Soon Ja Du stirred the interethnic conflict between Korean Americans and African Americans. The case went to court, and Du received a light sentence and no jail time. The African American community was outraged, and tensions mounted between the two communities. Interethnic relations and conflicts, racism, and police brutality against African Americans fanned the flames of unrest in 1992. When the court found the police officers involved in the case of the beating of Rodney King not guilty, inner-city community residents rose up and protested.

Today, the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising resonates strongly with communities of color whose voices are being channeled through the Black Lives Matter movement. Studying the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising provides a framework for students to understand and apply to current events. The manufactured interethnic conflict between Korean Americans and African Americans, created by the racially systemic lack of resources and coupled with socioeconomic issues and police brutality issues, are relevant to this day. The interethnic, socioeconomic, and police brutality issues that African Americans protested against in 1992 are the same issues the BLM movement is fighting against now. Thus, it is important to include such a major event in ethnic studies curriculum because the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising is a perfect case study in the field and is applicable to current events. In

the aftermath of the uprising, the Korean American community transformed and became visible by exercising their political, social, and community voices.

The goal of this lesson is to provide an overview of the historic, ethnic, political, and sociocultural background of Koreatown to understand the formation of the Korean American community as we know it today. The goal is also to introduce concepts in interethnic relations and studies through the lens of Korean Americans during the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising and contextualize this with current events. The lesson uses the voices of Korean Americans, articles, textbooks, documentaries, and interviews.¹⁵

Key Terms and Concepts: Korean Americans, oral history, Koreatown, 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising, 1965 Immigration Act, Los Angeles, interethnic relations

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Better understand the diverse experiences of Korean Americans by engaging a range of primary and secondary sources, including oral histories, textbooks, documentaries, and scholarly articles
- Introduce concepts in interethnic relations and studies through the lens of the so-called Black–Korean conflict and contextualize this with current events
- Conduct an interview of someone who experienced the LA Civil Unrest/Uprising or who is Korean American; develop and ask questions that explore the lived experiences of the subject being interviewed; transcribe the interview; and write a short essay on what they learned about the Korean American community through the interview—in doing so, students will gain key skills in how to develop and structure interviews, transcriptions, and essays

Essential Questions:

1. What is the history of Koreatown and its formation?
2. How did the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest/Uprising affect and transform the Korean American community?
3. Why is the Korean American experience important to understand within the context of Asian American studies and US history?

¹⁵ In addition to this lesson, teachers can discuss the causes of events in Los Angeles in 1992 and African American experiences during this tumultuous time.

Lesson Steps/Activities:

1. The teacher tells the class: If anyone here has experiences or knows someone with experiences that they feel could help others better understand this content, feel free to add to our discussions.
2. The teacher tells students that they are going to learn about Korean Americans and focus on three essential questions, then reads essential questions 1–3 aloud.
3. The teacher presents some basic information about Korean American history and identity via PowerPoint or another presentation method. The teacher asks students whether they have questions about Korean Americans and writes them on the whiteboard. The class watches *Arirang*, a documentary on Korean American history by Tom Coffman (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link220>).
4. The teacher leads a read aloud of the Quick Fact Sheet About Koreans in the US (located at the end of the lesson). Alternate choral reading—the teacher reads one fact, the whole class reads the next fact, while the teacher walks around the room.
5. The teacher and students discuss the quick facts and determine which of the essential questions were answered by the information presented. The class goes through the questions and answers together.

The teacher leads a deeper discussion about the Korean American experience in the US, focusing on the essential questions. The teacher shows a short history video about the Korean American community. The teacher asks students to think about the hardships and difficulties immigrants experienced coming to the US and to take note of how the film addresses racism and discrimination. In the Korean American community, the Los Angeles Civil Unrest/Uprising is remembered as Sa-i-gu (April 29 in Korean). For the Korean American community, Sa-i-gu is known as its most important historical event, a “turning point,” “watershed event,” or “wake-up call.” Sa-i-gu profoundly altered the Korean American discourse, igniting debates and dialogue in search of new directions. Many believe that as Los Angeles burned, the Korean American was born—or reborn—on April 29, 1992. The riot served as a catalyst to critically examine what it meant to be Korean American in relation to multicultural politics and race, economics, and ideology.

6. The class watches “Footsteps of Korean Americans,” a short (37-minute) documentary about the experiences of Koreans in the United States. The film gives a concise overview of when, how, and why Koreans came to America. The film also identifies major moments in Korean American history that helped define the United States and discusses the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising,

racism, marginalization, and discrimination. The film touches on the so-called Black–Korean conflict that was fueled by negative media coverage and the lack of economic resources brought on by systemic racial redlining and lack of understanding. The documentary’s narrative shows the development of the Korean American community within the context of race relations in the United States. The film ends on a positive note with an overview of how Korean Americans are facing and dealing with the racial divide in the US and, at the same time, learning to deal with the community’s newfound identity. The teacher should warn students that some images in the video could be disturbing (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link221>).

7. The teacher shows two to three videos from the Korean American Oral Histories Project Archives hosted by the Young Oak Kim Center for Korean American Studies at University of California, Riverside. In the videos, Korean Americans talk about their lives and experiences in the United States. As students watch them, they should think about how these individuals have developed their identity as being Korean American within the context of race and identity. Suggestions on which oral histories to show include Ralph Ahn, Cindy Ryu, Julie Ha, and Philip Yu (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link222>).
8. After the videos, do a think, write, pair/share, group share exercise. Students think about this question: How do these Korean Americans describe their experiences and how racism and discrimination affected their lives? Students think quietly for about a minute, then write individually for two to three minutes. Afterward, students share their thoughts with a partner. Students can be put into breakout sessions for online courses or paired in class at random for in-person teaching.

Some important things to point out in the discussion:

- Being caught between two worlds, Korean Americans (immigrants) feel the pressures and the divide in the US along racial lines, especially as they enter small businesses and inner-city communities
- Koreatown’s development over the century; its evolution from a small unknown community to a recognized ethnic enclave
- The racial inequalities and mistreatment of Korean Americans during the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising, the historic nature of this scenario, and how it applies to other Asian American communities
- The racial and socioeconomic disparities that exist in the United States for minority communities, including Asian Americans, African Americans, and others

- Learning how Korean Americans embraced their new host society and became visible after the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising and how Koreatown emerged from the ashes of the violence and became a hotspot for culture, food, and all things Korean in America
 - Developing an identity of their own as proud Korean Americans
9. Students read pages 57 to 62 in *Memoir of a Cashier: Korean Americans, Racism, and Riots* by Carol Park. As they read, students should think about this question: What was it like to be a young Korean American during the tumultuous 1990s and during the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising?
- a. As students read the excerpt, they use the Annotation Chart (included at the end of the lesson) to annotate as they read, adding a symbol next to a sentence that corresponds to their thinking or feeling about the text. Student should be ready to answer the question using evidence from the text.
 - b. The class has a reflective discussion on the following question: According to the author, Carol Park, what was the Black–Korean conflict?
 - c. Some important things to point out in the discussion:
 - i. Similar to other minorities, Korean Americans were marginalized and discriminated against throughout US history.
 - ii. The invisibility and categorization of Asian American and Pacific Islander groups as model minorities needs to be recognized and discussed.
 - iii. Korean American history is important and should be taught because of pivotal moments like the 1992 LA Civil Unrest/Uprising.

Making Connections to the *History–Social Science Framework*:

Chapter 14 of the framework includes a section (pages 297–299) on California’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, discrimination, modern immigration, and the state’s post-1965 Immigration Act demographics. The chapter asks two essential questions which could also be relevant to the Korean American experience and the LA Civil Unrest/Uprising in the Asian American studies curriculum:

- What did protests and frustrations expressed by Californians in the late Cold War Era reveal about the state?
- In what directions is California growing in the twenty-first century?

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10. Assessment—To show evidence of what students have learned the teacher can choose one of two assignments:
 - a. Students write one to three paragraphs of five to ten sentences answering each essential question using evidence from the sources in the lesson.
 - b. As a discussion group exercise, in groups of two or three students collectively write a paper about the Korean American experience, answering the two essential questions. Each student in the group writes one paragraph.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection:

See step 10 above.

Materials and Resources:

“Footsteps of Korean Americans” – A short documentary on Korean American history, identity, the LA Civil Unrest, and current issues

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link223>

Carol Park. 2017. *Memoir of a Cashier: Korean Americans, Racism, and Riots*. Riverside, CA: Young Oak Kim Center for Korean American Studies at University of California Riverside.

Korean American Oral Histories Project – A series of video interviews with and documentaries on Korean Americans in the United States discussing their immigrant experiences, the LA Civil Unrest, and more

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link224>

Legacy Project – An oral history project preserving the collective history of Korean Americans <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link225>

“Global Perspectives: Angela Oh” – An interview with Angela Oh, a civil rights attorney

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link226>

“Angela Oh’s Views on LA Riots, Five Years Out”

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link227>

Quick Fact Sheet About Koreans in the US (below)

Think Write Pair/Share Group Share handout (below)

Annotation Chart (below)

Additional resources for teaching Korean American studies can be found at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link228>. These resources include lessons on Colonel Young Oak Kim, Dosan Ahn Chang Ho, the Korean independence movement, Dr. Sammy Lee, and Korean pop culture in the United States.

Quick Fact Sheet About Koreans in the US

- The Korean American population is about 1.8 million today. The heart of Korean America resides in Los Angeles, where Koreatown flourishes amid a diverse demographic. Official Korean immigration to the United States began on January 13, 1903, with the arrival of 102 Koreans in Hawaii.
- In March 1920, Korean Americans establish the Willows Korean Aviation School/Corps in Willows in Northern California. Today, the school is considered the origin of the Korean Air Force. Many Korean Americans donated to the foundation of the school, including Kim Chong-lim, the first Korean American millionaire.
- On April 12, 1960, Alfred Song is elected to the Monterey Park City Council. He later becomes the first Korean American admitted to the California Bar and the first Asian American elected to the California State Legislature.
- On October 3, 1965, the Hart–Celler Act of 1965 opens the door for immigration in the United States. Koreans immigrate to the United States, and the population of Koreans grows from 69,150 in 1970, to 354,953 in 1980, and 798,849 by 1990.
- On April 29, 1992, the Los Angeles Civil Unrest/Uprising erupts. Koreatown is burned and looted and businesses are destroyed. Korean Americans are left to fend for themselves and are marginalized and scapegoated by media. This moment in US history is considered the birth of the Korean American identity as we know it today.
- On November 4, 1992, Jay Kim is elected to the US House of Representatives and becomes the first Korean American to be elected to the United States Congress.
- On September 14, 1994, the sitcom *All-American Girl*, starring Korean American actor Margaret Cho, premieres on ABC and is the first network sitcom to feature a predominantly Asian American cast.
- Korean American Day is declared by the US government in 2005.
- In 2015, David Ryu becomes the first Korean American elected to the Los Angeles City Council.
- At the 2018 Winter Olympics, held in Pyeongchang, South Korea, Korean American Chloe Kim becomes the youngest woman to win an Olympic gold medal in snowboarding.
- At the 2020 Academy Awards, *Parasite* wins four Oscars—for best picture, best director, best international feature, and best original screenplay. It was the first foreign language film and the first Korean film to win best picture.

Sources:

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Think Write Pair/Share Group Share

Essential Question: (See sample essential questions from the Making Connections to the History–Social Science Framework section above).

Think for one minute about how the source had details that answered the essential question.

Write for one minute about the details and facts you can remember from the source that address the essential question.

Pair/Share for one minute per person. Share out your thinking and writing about the essential question using the sources provided. Be ready to share out the information your partner provided if the teacher calls on you.

Group Share for five to ten minutes. After group share, the class will share out information, giving you a chance to present to your peers.

Annotation Chart

Symbol	Comment/Question/ Response	Sample Language Support
?	Questions I have	The sentence ... is unclear because ...
	Confusing parts for me	I don't understand what is meant when the author says ...
+	Ideas/statements I agree with	I agree with the author's statement that ... because ...
		Similar to the author, I also believe that ... because ...
-	Ideas/statements I disagree with	I disagree with the author's statement that ... because ...
		The author claims that ... However, I disagree because ...
*	Author's main points	One significant idea in this text is ...
	Key ideas expressed	One argument the author makes is that ...
!	Shocking statements or parts	I was shocked to read that ... (further explanation)
	Surprising details/claims	The part about ... made me feel ... because ...
o	Ideas/sections you connect with	This section reminded me of ...
	What this reminds you of	I can connect with what the author said because ... This experience connects with my own experience in that ...