Residential Patterns of Korean Americans in the Chicago Metropolitan Area:
A Longitudinal Study of Spatial Assimilation in a Multi-Ethnic Context

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ABSTRACT

The city of Chicago is home to the third largest concentration of Korean Americans in the United States. It is estimated that four out of five Korean Americans in Chicago live in the suburbs. In this paper, the authors examine the extent of spatial assimilation of Korean Americans with both the “mainstream” American populations, namely, the Caucasian, Black and Hispanic populations, and also their residential patterns vis-à-vis other dominant Asian sub-groups in Chicago—Chinese, Indians and Filipinos. Their analysis examines spatial assimilation of Korean Americans in terms of their residential segregation/integration from 1970 to 2010 in a multi-ethnic context. Results indicate that in general Koreans are becoming more integrated (less segregated) with the White population over the forty year time period in every major county where they were clustered, while they are generally more segregated from the Black and Hispanic populations. Among the dominant Asian sub-groups, Korean Americans tended to be more integrated with Chinese and Indian populations, and more segregated from the Filipino population.

KEYWORDS
Korean Americans, Residential Segregation, Spatial Assimilation

INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of the 1965 U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, Chicago’s early ethnic mosaic started to undergo major shifts. The new immigration act, by abolishing the National Origin Quota system, triggered massive migrations from Latin American and Asian countries. Among Asian immigrants, the size of the Korean population increased substantially, making them the fourth largest immigrant group in Chicago MSA by 1990 (Park et al., 2006). Between 1970 and 1980, the total
number of Korean immigrants increased almost up to ten times the level of the previous census, and slowed down a slightly in the latter years, but they, by and large, experienced significant population growth from 1970 to 2010.

This paper investigates how residential patterns of Korean immigrants have changed over the last four decades, and how it is associated with, or segregated from, other major ethnic groups—White, Black, Hispanic, on the one hand, and other dominant Asian subgroups, on the other—in the Chicago MSA. Have Koreans become more residentially integrated with the majority white population over time, as suggested by theories of spatial assimilation? What is pattern with regard to the dominant minority groups—Blacks and Hispanics? Are Koreans becoming more or less segregated from these two groups over time? Furthermore, we seek to understand contemporary patterns of residential segregation between Koreans and other Asians, by unpacking the “Asians” category into the dominant subgroups—Chinese, Asian Indians, and Filipinos—and examining segregation between Koreans and these groups.

SPATIAL ASSIMILATION VS. RESURGENT ETHNICITY

The racial and ethnic diversity brought on by immigration, coupled with increasing rates of suburbanization among Whites, has led several studies, both empirical and theoretical, to address the broad question of whether or not there are any differences between the residential patterns of early immigrants (European immigrants, Black) and the more recent non-European immigrants. Some studies stress fluency of the host language, familiarity with the host culture, and increasing socio-economic status as having an impact on immigrants’ assimilation into the main stream society, while others recognize structural factors like fiscal and social problems of inner cities or discriminatory practices such as blockbusting and red lining as driving, or sometimes constraining, population movement. In this section we look briefly at two theoretical frameworks—spatial assimilation and resurgent ethnicity—to provide explanations for residential patterns of immigrants.

Spatial assimilation theories broadly argue that residential segregation is a spatial outcome of disparities in socio-economic status and the level of acculturation among different racial/ethnic immigrant groups (Massey, 1985). Gordon (1964) distinguished between ‘structural assimilation’ which hinged on one’s socio-economic status including educational attainment and income, and ‘cultural assimilation’ which is signaled by fluency in the host language and culture as evidence of the same. Segregation is seen as a failure to either assimilate structurally, or culturally, or both. For them, socio-economically impoverished inner city ethnic enclaves are nothing more than a temporary shelter for new immigrants with low assimilation, and hypothesize that a minority racial/ethnic immigrant group will eventually move out of inner city ethnic enclaves, seeking more integration with the dominant host group as they advance economically and integrate culturally (Massey & Denton, 1985).

Empirical evidence of spatial assimilation theory is heavily indebted to European immigrants in the early twentieth century (Chung, 2009). Given that the 1965 Immigration Act and subsequent changes in immigration policy resulted in bringing far greater diversity among recent immigrants in terms of race and ethnicity, language skill, and socio-economic status, the traditional melting pot idea—envisioning the complete residential integration of new immigrants with the major group, while losing their ethnic traits and identity—may no longer be able to capture the whole dynamics of residential segregation patterns resulted from this new immigration trend. Fong et al., (1999) showed that socio-economic variables, though effective in explaining residential segregation patterns of early European immigrants, is less effective for understanding the experience of new immigrants residing in Toronto and Vancouver. Farley (1995), looked at the role of income and housing cost on
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