

## Rethinking Los Angeles Koreatown: Multi-scaled Geographic Transition since the Mid-1990s

Kyonghwan Park\* and Youngmin Lee\*\*

### 로스앤젤레스 한인타운 다시 생각하기: 1990년대 중반 이후의 다중스케일적 지리적 변동

박경환\* · 이영민\*\*

**Abstract** : During the last decade, Los Angeles Koreatown experienced unprecedented changes transforming it from an immigrant ethnic enclave into a transnational economic space. Alongside of the city government's redevelopment plans and local Korean Americans' grass-root efforts to regenerate Koreatown, transnational Korean actors have aggressively invested in property as well as business sectors. However, despite these multi-scaled geographic transitions, Koreatown remains one of the poorest and most crime-infested inner-city communities in the City of Los Angeles. This paper, based on a 'place-based' bottom-up approach, investigates contradictory geographies of Koreatown in which multi-scaled network of hegemonic transnational, urban and local development actors has developed representational, un-lived economies. This research points out that the recent urban regeneration of Koreatown has not only excluded but also exploited local community members such as transnational Korean/Latino workers in the area. This paper conclusively suggests that the sustainable future of Koreatown's development would stem from place-based community consciousness that crisscrosses racial and ethnic boundaries.

**Key Words** : Los Angeles Koreatown, multi-scaled geographic transition, development actors, network, hegemony

**요약** : 로스앤젤레스 한인타운은 지난 10여 년에 걸쳐 소수민족 이민자들의 엔클레이브(enclave)에서 초국적 경제공간으로 변모하고 있다. 도시정부의 재개발 계획과 지역 한인들의 경제재활성화를 위한 노력이 진행됨과 동시에, 한국으로부터의 초국적 행위자들은 기업부문뿐만 아니라 부동산 시장에 공격적으로 투자하고 있다. 그러나 모순적이게도 이러한 다중스케일적 지리적 변동은 한인타운을 로스앤젤레스에서 가장 빈곤하고 위험한 내부도시의 하나로 전락시키는 데에 기여하고 있다. 본 논문은 장소에 기반한 아래로부터의 접근을 토대로 이러한 공간적 모순의 본질을 탐색하는데, 특히 헤게모니를 쥔 로컬 행위자들, 도시정부, 초국적 행위자들이 형성하는 다중스케일적 네트워크가 최근 한인타운이 지니는 일상적 삶과 유리된 재현의 경제를 발달시키고 있음을 지적한다. 또한, 본 연구는 이러한 한인타운의 도시재생이 이 구역에 거주하는 한인들과 라티노 노동자들을 포함하는 커뮤니티 구성원을 배제시키고 착취하고 있음을 밝히고자 한다. 결론적으로 본 연구는 한인타운의 지속가능한 미래는 민족 담론을 극복하고 인종, 민족을 횡단할 수 있는 '장소 기반' 커뮤니티 의식에서 논의되어야 함을 주장한다.

**주요어** : 로스앤젤레스 한인타운, 다중스케일적 지리적 변동, 개발 행위자, 네트워크, 헤게모니

\* Full-time Lecture, Division of Social Studies Education (Geography Major), Chonnam National University, kpark3@gmail.com

\*\* Associate Professor, Department of Social Studies Education, Ewha Womans University, ymlee@ewha.ac.kr

## 1. Introduction: a Paradoxical Ethnic Space

An increasing number of urban studies report that major American cities have experienced 'new' urban development operating at multiple geographic scales. First, at an urban scale, faced with the limits of horizontal spatial expansion, city governments have diverted urban development efforts from housing-oriented suburbanization to economic revitalization and rehabilitation of downtown areas (Dear, 2000; Soja, 2000). At a local scale, community organizations have become major participants in the procedure of urban planning, which had been conventionally led by the city government and private developers (May, 1996; Swyngedouw, 1997; Marston, 2000; Raco, 2000; McCann, 2002). Finally, at a global scale, the socio-economic process of transnationalism has conspicuously enhanced the roles of transnational capital, migrants, and institutions in US urban spatial transformation (Knox and Taylor, 1995). These synchronous conditions have spawned new urban geographies in major US cities, complicated by the paradigmatic emergence of multiculturalism, a strategic emphasis on place-identity, aesthetic symbolization of the built environment, and an emphasis on the commercial-consumption sector rather than the housing sector.

In this context, recent urban redevelopment in immigrants' communities has been one of the principal concerns in these urban studies, because it is a conspicuous nexus in which complex interrelations of global, urban, and local development actors are articulated (Lowe, 1996; Portes, 1996; Lin, 1998; Zhou, 1998; Ong and Gupta, 1999; Zhou and Tseng, 2001). Beyond

documenting the physical expansion and growth of the urban realm, these studies have focused on analyzing dynamic urban geographies of the ways in which the city governments and local communities cope with urban crises caused by shrinking inner city economies and the subsequent deterioration of the built environment. However, urban sociological studies have sometimes downplayed the significance of geographic scale and consequently failed in explaining the multi-scaled nature of unprecedentedly dynamic geographies in the inner city (Light and Bonacichi, 1991; Ong *et al.*, 1994). These studies also underestimated the geographical dimensions of migrant ethnic enclaves, such as landscape and spatial identity, considering such spaces merely as the spatial 'result' of immigrants' social adaptation process, not as key elements that influence their social and cultural practices. Third, they often misconceptualized ethnic enclaves as internally cohesive, socio-culturally homogeneous, and rather isolated from globalization (See for example, Min, 1996; Yoon, 1997). It is for these reasons that the multi-scaled geographical perspective has emerged as one of the most salient and paradigmatic leitmotifs in contemporary urban studies.

In the context of globalization, Los Angeles Koreatown is an exemplary site to explore the dynamic relational geographies of transnational, urban, and local development actors. Often termed a 'proto-postmodern metropolis', Los Angeles is undoubtedly a paradigmatic world city in which urban and local geographic changes are complicatedly entangled with the transnational movement of capital, migrants, and institutions (Soja, 1996; Dear and Flusty, 1998; Dear, 2000, 2002). Especially, Los Angeles Koreatown has

emerged as one of the most thriving immigrants' ethnic communities in the US (Portes and Rambaut, 1990; Lee, 1995). It is not a typical ethnic enclave such as Chinatown and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, formed in the historically long process of social and cultural segregation in the US. Rather, Los Angeles Koreatown is a vibrant economic space imbued with a strong spatial identity, representing one of the largest and most prosperous immigrant ethnic economies in the US. Located about 3 miles west of downtown Los Angeles, Koreatown houses about a quarter (41,745) of Korean population in Los Angeles County and contains at least 3,200 Korean-owned firms (Kanter, 1997). Alongside of the latest Korean restaurants and bars, the area has also added a number of financial firms, professional businesses, and large-scale shopping centers in recent years. Furthermore, since the 1997 financial crisis in South Korea, Koreatown has been attracting a huge investments in property from Korean corporations and immigrant investors. After all, beyond being an ethnic enclave, Koreatown is undoubtedly a global urban space in which transnational capital, labor and culture are converged (Park, 2005a, 2005b).

We observe at least three explicit, but complicatedly related, characteristics of the shifting urban geographies of Los Angeles Koreatown. The first observed characteristic concerns Koreatown's unprecedented cultural closeness to contemporary South Korea, although the number of Korean immigrants has been overall decreasing since 1987. Many Korean Americans in Los Angeles have easy access to up-to-date popular Korean culture, such as music, film and trendy fashion, and entertainment facilities in Koreatown, which

collapses the spatiotemporal distance between Los Angeles and South Korea. The cultural simultaneity based on such time-space compression is not just a consequence of South Korea's transnational entanglement in Koreatown, but has emerged as a central strategy to regenerate the area as an inner-city ethnic space.

Second, Koreatown has recently experienced the construction of large-scale commercial and entertainment complexes such as the Aroma Wilshire. These facilities specifically target at middle or high-income Korean American customers. Alongside these gigantic commercial businesses, Koreatown functions as 'the' center of Korean professional businesses including law offices, banks, accounting businesses, and insurance companies in Los Angeles. Witnessing an increasing concentration of Korean professional businesses and capital investment into Koreatown, one of our interviewees, working as a realtor, argued that "it is too inappropriate to call this area as Korea-'town'. Using your geographic term, this is the CBD for Korean Americans in Los Angeles". Recent economic boom of the area is more propelled by the influx of transnational Korean capital and suburban customers since the late 1990s. As the *Los Angeles Times* put it, contemporary Koreatown is a mecca for suburbanities and wealthy immigrants" (Kang, 2004).

Finally, along with frequent Korean festivals and cultural activities in the area, Koreatown now contains newly constructed or renovated symbolic, monumental spaces such as the Korean Pavilion Garden, the Seoul International Peace Park, and the Korean American Museum. In general, these urban landscapes evoke a strong sense of cultural place-identity and

community solidarity. The Los Angeles Korean American Festival, originally a Korean immigrant annual cultural feast to commemorate *Chu-Seok*, is now transformed into a large-scale Korean festival since 1999. It is sponsored by the South Korean governmental agency, the city government of Los Angeles, and South Korean transnational corporations such as Hyundai and LG. It seems a legitimate suggestion that contemporary Koreatown is “Koreatown that never was ... where big Korean money goes these days” (Quinones, 2001).

After all, Koreatown has undergone spatial transformation from an immigrant ethnic enclave filled with small business clusters to a cultural identity-enhanced, transnational economic space. Such spatial transformation seems significantly different from the conventional development process led by individual immigrants' small business economy. These cultural, economic, and political changes, however, should not be seen as a bottom-up process of community-grounded reconstruction resulting in a monolithic Korean neighborhood.

We propose at least two principal reasons for this argument. First, despite the increasing economic investment in Koreatown, many pre-existing buildings, clusters of small businesses, and apartment buildings remain in poor condition or even further deteriorated. We suggest that newly constructed large shopping malls have caused severe competition among small businesses and led to downward pressure on employees' wages in the local small business sector. Second, unlike other ethnic enclaves in the US, Korean population in Koreatown is only a small portion of the total population in the area. According to the 2000 US Census, Koreans in Koreatown account for 20.8 percent in 2000,

while 65.7 percent of the total 40,746 residents in 2000 are Hispanics. In the aftermath of the 1992 urban riots, many Korean business owners and landlords moved to suburban areas such as Burbank, Garden Grove, and Glendale (King, 1996). Also, low-wage Hispanic workers employed in Korean owned businesses have been concentrating in the old rental housing within Koreatown (Lin, 1998).

Based on the discussion above, this paper investigates recent geographic transitions and the urban politics of re/development in Los Angeles Koreatown from a 'place-based' geographic perspective. We particularly focus on how the multi-scaled network of transnational, urban, and local development actors have structurally developed 'new' Koreatown since the mid 1990s, what social, economic and cultural problems are internalized in Koreatown, and what suggestions would be possible for constructing a more viable space.

## 2. Mapping Korea-town's' in Los Angeles

Los Angeles Koreatown is a space of imagination especially for those who are not familiar with the geographies of Los Angeles. Many of us imagine that Koreatown is a geographically unified 'urban community' in which local Korean immigrants do their businesses and live together. Yet, almost all of those who first visit the space are stunned by the fact that Koreatown is a commercial district rather than a neighborhood community. Such surprise is doubled by unexpectedly viewing the co-existence of Korean commercial signs and Latino pedestrians on the street. Yet, many whites who first visit Koreatown also express their surprise

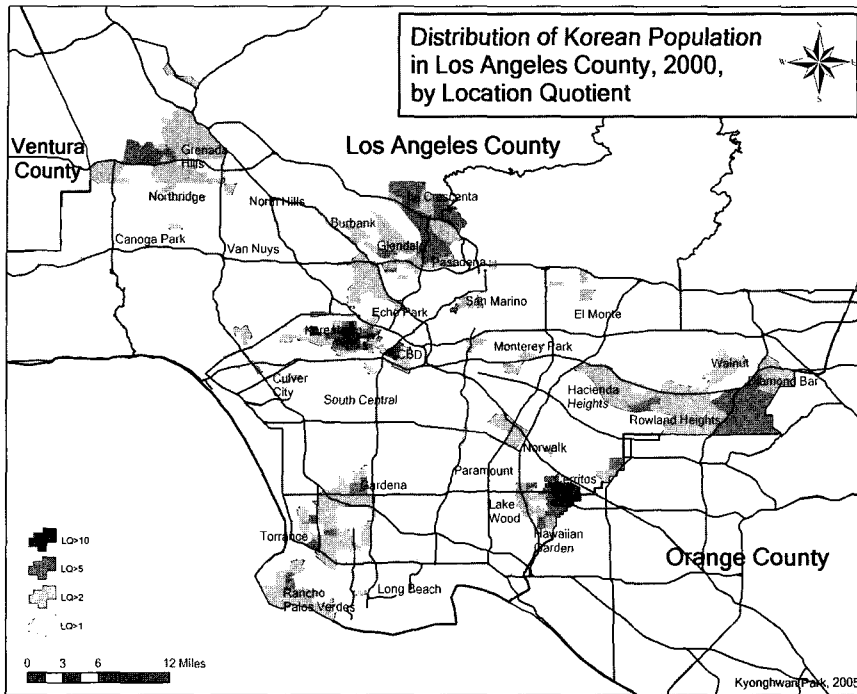


Figure 1. Distribution of Korean population in Los Angeles County by location quotient

Source: 2000 US Census

on the large-scale Korean businesses, especially along Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue, which they hadn't expected to witness.

According to the 2000 US Census, Los Angeles County housed 195,152 Korean Americans in 1999, accounting for about 34 percent increase since 1990 (145,424). Koreatown remains as a central place containing 41,745 Koreans and 3,200 Korean-owned businesses. However, although Koreans residing in Koreatown in 1990 accounted for around 30 percent of the total Korean population in Los Angeles County, they only accounted less than 23 percent of the population in 2000. Such statistics imply that Koreatown began to lose its centripetal stance in terms of the number of Korean population. Simultaneously, at a larger scale, suburban areas in the county continued to witness high increases

in Korean population. The decentralization of Korean residential areas in the county became more intensified since the 1990s.

In terms of 2000 census tract data, Koreatown is not a single, dominant urban space in which Korean populations are concentrated in the county. The suburban areas including La Crescenta/Glendale to the north, San Fernando Valley area to the northeast, Rowland Heights and Hacienda Heights to the east, Torrance to the south, and Cerritos near the Orange County have newly emerged as Korean residential areas that strongly pull Korean Americans in the county. We employed 'location quotient' for analysis so as to compare a specific area's share of particular demographic statistics with the area's aggregate share (Haggett *et al.*, 1977; Kim, 1986).

Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of location quotients of the Korean population in Los Angeles County in 2000. The areas showing the location quotients greater than 10.0 include Koreatown and its vicinity, regenerated residential areas in the west of downtown LA, newly developed Cerritos/Hawaiian Garden bordered by Orange County. As we would examine later, these two areas are also the central business districts for Korean Americans in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The areas showing the location quotients between 5 and 10 include Burbank and Glendale to the north, Hacienda Heights, Rowland Heights, and Diamond Bar to the east, and the San Fernando Valley area to the northwest. Yet, in general, the

area where location quotients are high is Koreatown and its vicinities.

And, by identifying the census tracts whose location quotients of Korean population are larger than 1.0, we drew a map showing the spatial clusters of the principal Korean residential areas in Los Angeles County (see Figure 2). Each cluster was defined by the geographic proximity of a core Korean residential area to its surrounding areas. Based on the map, we assume that there are six principal geographic clusters of Korean-concentrated residential areas in Los Angeles County.

The socio-economic characteristics of the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster in which a large number of Korean populations are

Table 1. Demographic statistics of Korean population in principal Korean-concentrated geographic clusters in Los Angeles County, 2000

Index	Koreatown & downtown LA	Glendale, Burbank & La Crescenta	Cerritos & Norwalk	Torrance, Gardena & Long Beach	Rowland & Hacienda Heights	San Fernando Valley
Korean population	57,629	21,704	19,764	19,104	14,823	11,750
Total population	428,194	328,925	260,131	301,790	213,572	242,397
Percent Korean population	13.46%	6.60%	7.60%	6.33%	6.94%	4.85%
Average household size	2.55	3.57	3.61	3.18	3.45	3.71
Percent of foreign born population: male(female)	82.63% (84.82%)	74.22% (74.06%)	71.87% (74.65%)	74.62% (78.77%)	73.85% (77.19%)	72.71% (74.81%)
Year of immigration: 1995~2000, male (female)	27.08% (25.36%)	23.24% (20.76%)	13.17% (15.31%)	18.33% (13.47%)	20.78% (24.73%)	18.60% (13.99%)
Average of median household income	\$24,815	\$54,002	\$53,142	\$52,167	\$48,047	\$58,209
Percent of self-employed income households	18.65%	39.99%	33.25%	28.86%	33.27%	29.65%
Percent of owner occupied housing	12.50%	50.68%	57.88%	33.48%	54.30%	70.17%
Median gross rent for housing	\$706	\$985	\$1,008	\$973	\$970	\$996
Percent of population below poverty level: Under 1.0 (0.5)	23.21% (14.03%)	11.09% (6.10%)	9.80% (4.45%)	10.7% (6.61%)	14.85% (9.22%)	10.60% (6.89%)

Source: 2000 US Census

concentrated are different from the other clusters. Table 1 shows the demographic statistics for these six residential clusters, based on the 2000 US Census. The median household income of Korean population in the Koreatown and downtown Los Angeles cluster amounts only \$24,815. The statistics are at least 50 percent lower than that of the other five principal suburban clusters, which range from \$48,047 to \$58,209. Also, per capita income is lowest in the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster among the six principal residential clusters. The difference in per capital income between the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster and the rest is smaller than in the median household income between them, because the average household size of the Koreatown and downtown LA area is smaller than that of the rest clusters.

We suggest two significant implications from these statistics. First, there is an increasing economic polarization within Korean American populations. The term 'Korean Americans' are highly problematic in the sense that socio-economic differences between ethnic groups might not be greater than within a specific ethnic group such as 'Korean'. We hence argue that it is urgent to analyze the internal political economy of a specific ethnic economy and deconstruct how the evocation of ethnic collectivity conceals a significant internal socio-economic fragmentation within the ethnic community. Second, such polarization is simultaneously spatialized in terms of the geographic pattern of Korean residential areas. The Koreatown and downtown LA cluster represents a space of downward polarization, in which poor Korean residents are concentrated. Meanwhile, other Korean residential clusters are mostly composed of middle- or high-income Korean households. In

terms of poverty level, the Korean population below poverty level in the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster amounts to 23.21 percent of the total population in that area, while Koreans in the other residential clusters show only 9.80~14.85 percent. After all, the census statistics show that, despite the flourishing ethnic economy of Korean Americans in Koreatown and downtown LA, the area remains one of the poorest urban communities in Los Angeles County.

The statistics of the housing sector also show a striking contrast between the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster and the other suburban clusters. In terms of home ownerships, only 12.5 percent of the total housing in Koreatown and downtown LA is actually resided by the owners, which is far lower than in the suburban residential clusters. As we shall examine in the following sections, a majority of homeowners in Koreatown are the landlords who restructure their houses into a myriad of smaller cell-type apartments, rent them to low-income local Koreans, and make profits from such rental strategy. While the median gross rent for housing in Koreatown and downtown LA is about 27.2~29.7 percent lower than in the other clusters, such difference doesn't tell the relative cost of housing which considers the household income level. In other words, because the median household income in Koreatown area only amounts to 42.6~51.6 percent of the other five residential clusters, the appropriate level of rent in Koreatown and downtown LA should have been close to \$414~\$520. Therefore, the reality signifies that low income households in Koreatown and downtown LA cluster pay approximately \$186~\$292 to their landlords more than they might have been expected to per

month in terms of their income level.

As we addressed, Koreatown houses at least 3,200 Korean-owned small businesses, accounting for more than a half of the number of total Korean-owned small businesses in Los Angeles County. However, the number of Korean households owing small-businesses in Koreatown and downtown LA only accounts for 18.65 percent of the total households in the area. Meanwhile, those self-employed households amount to 28.86~39.99 percent of the total households in the other five suburban residential clusters. Such disparity between the large numbers of Korean-owned businesses in Koreatown and the smaller numbers of self-employed Korean households in the area imply that a considerable number of Korean businesses in Koreatown are owned by Koreans living in suburban areas.

The statistics in Table 1 also show that many of the residents in the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster have their work places in nearby areas. Around 45 percent of the Korean population living in the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster travel less than 20 minutes to their work places, while this is the case for only 17.09~27.16 percent of the Koreans in other suburban clusters. Therefore, it is strongly assumed that a lot of Korean residents in Koreatown are employed by businesses in the same or nearby areas. It subsequently implies that the structure and characteristics of employment in Korean-owned businesses in Koreatown are inseparable from the ways of life of many Korean residents in Koreatown. Such assumption is also proved by the percent of foreign born population in the Koreatown and downtown LA cluster, which is over 80 percent and at least 10 percent higher than in other

clusters. Also, 27.08 percent and 25.36 percent of foreign-born males and females respectively immigrated into the US within the last five years, which is also more than 10 percent higher than in other suburban areas.

After all, if we mean 'Korea-town' as a space in which Koreans are principally populated, then it is more correct to suggest that there are several Korea-town's'. Alongside of what we vernacularly call Koreatown, there are other Korean-concentrated urban neighborhoods in LA. However, there are significant social and economic disparities between Koreatown and other Korea-towns. By scaling down our perspectives on Korean American communities, we need to be aware of the various differences submerged in what we generally term the 'Korean American community in Los Angeles'. Koreatown is undoubtedly a symbolic place that represents the thriving ethnic economy of Korean Americans in Los Angeles. However, Koreatown is simultaneously an 'othered' space in which low-income Korean employees live and work for Korean businesses. Yet their economic contribution has been by and large neglected by those who consider Koreans in LA as entrepreneurs or small business owners. In the following section, we will examine the concrete economic reality of Koreatown in which the lives of these 'othered' subjects are confined.

### **3. Los Angeles Koreatown as 'a' Korea-town**

Perhaps, one of the most fundamental contradictions surrounding contemporary Koreatown arises from the very basic difficulty in recognizing and defining the area itself. Where



does it begin and end? Which area does it include and exclude? Such questions themselves are wrong, because they automatically presuppose the existence of clear-cut spatial boundary, which doesn't exist in reality. But by exploring possible answers for these questions, we could better understand the geographic reality in which what is called 'Koreatown' is located. In general, the term Koreatown signifies at least two meanings.

First, the term Koreatown signifies the area where Korean Americans are more densely populated than in other areas. In this case, we used the location quotients of Korean populations, and selected the census tracts whose location quotients are over 1.00. Such tracts statistically indicate that in those tracts Koreans are geographically concentrated more than the county average of the percentage of Koreans to the total population. Figure 3 is a map of the distribution of Korean population by location quotient. The census tracts whose location quotients are greater than 1.0 are mostly concentrated within the area bounded by Freeway-10 in the south, Freeway-2 in the north, Freeway-110 in the east, and Fairfax Avenue in the west. Except several tracts near the intersection of Beverly Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue and the western part of downtown LA bordered by Freeway-110, most of the census tracts whose location quotients are over 10.00 are concentrated around the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue. Considering the fact that Olympic Boulevard was the conventional main street for Korean American businesses in Koreatown, we suggest that it is a remarkable geographic shift of the Korean residential core from the southern part of Koreatown including the south of Freeway-10.

Second, Koreatown simultaneously means 'Korean American business district'. While the census-based analysis of the Korean population is an approach to clarify what is vernacularly called Koreatown, what is called Koreatown is only recognizable for many first-time visitors 'visually' by Korean-language commercial signboards, Korean pedestrians on the street, Korean business establishments, and Korean style buildings. In this sense, alongside of the Korean residential population, Korean-owned business district is the other geographic meaning of Koreatown. We don't suggest that such apparent and visual aspects of Koreatown just are a meaningless 'crust' concealing the real geographies of Koreatown. If Koreatown as a residential area signifies a 'lived space' that contains both local labor force and consumers sustaining Koreatown as an economic space, Koreatown as a Korean-owned business district is a space of production and consumption that provides job opportunities, commodities and services to the local dwellers in 'lived' Koreatown.

In this context, principal commercial areas packed with Korean signboards and businesses produce a strong sense of ethnic identity in this area, and could be consequently a measure to define the Koreatown area. Especially, at night, numerous Korean-driven cars, sometimes causing traffic jam within the Koreatown area, flock together to major shopping and recreation centers which shine with densely-packed Korean neon signs. It is not uncommon to witness Koreans in a long line waiting to enter popular restaurants, bars, and night clubs especially along 6<sup>th</sup> Street in Koreatown. The cultural landscape of consumption during the night time provides a clear sense to recognize the overall territory of

Korean commercial areas. In terms of the principal commercial areas containing a high concentration of Korean businesses, contemporary Los Angeles Koreatown expanded to the east and west along 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Wilshire Boulevard, 8<sup>th</sup> Street, and Olympic Boulevard, and the north and south along Western and Vermont avenues.

In tandem with Korean-owned small retail stores and consumer service businesses, Koreatown has also recently added a number of professional businesses and producer services. Koreatown houses over a half of the Korean businesses in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, such as CPA offices (75.1%), travel agencies (71.60%), night clubs/bars (66.13%), law offices (65.65%), community service centers (62.12%), media companies (59.80%), community organizations (52.76%), and Korean banks (52.58%). Despite a considerable increase in Korean business districts in suburban LA, Koreatown's centrality in Korean businesses has been recently more strengthened.

The north-west business district of Koreatown, principally including Wilshire Boulevard and 6<sup>th</sup> Street between Wilton Avenue and Vermont Avenue, is the fastest growing Korean-owned commercial area with newly constructed or renovated businesses. Sometimes regarded as the 'main street' of Koreatown by many local residents, Wilshire Boulevard contains a series of high-rise office buildings, such as Equitable Plaza, Paramount Plaza, and Wilshire Financial Tower. These buildings house professional service businesses including banks, insurance companies, travel agencies, law offices, accounting offices, trading companies, and media companies. As Wilshire Boulevard within Koreatown looks like a separate and sizable

CBD, Koreatown is sometimes called the 'mid-Wilshire' or 'Wilshire Center' especially for non-Korean business owners, city government's development agencies, and some local politicians.

According to Charles Kim, Executive Director of the Korean American Coalition, many local Koreans call the business areas along 6<sup>th</sup> Street between Wilton and Vermont avenues as the '*Jul-um-eu-gu-ry*' meaning the 'street of young generation' in Koreatown. 6<sup>th</sup> street in Koreatown contains up-to-date and fashionable Korean-style bars, clubs, coffee shops, and restaurants, where young Korean students and second generation of Korean immigrants hang out together especially at night. Some Korean clubs in Koreatown attract quite a number of non-Korean customers. Finally, along Western Avenue, newly constructed gigantic shopping malls such as the Koreatown Plaza and the Koreatown Galleria not only attract thousands of Korean customers in Southern California but also generate economic spillover effects in adjacent commercial areas.

However, in comparison to booming business districts on Wilshire Boulevard and 6<sup>th</sup> Street in northwestern part of Koreatown, there are some deteriorating commercial areas especially in the southern part of Koreatown. Korean business and property owners in this area left for either northwestern Koreatown or suburban Los Angeles. Such transition is in parallel with the expansion of nearby black community which has crossed Interstate 10, Washington Boulevard, and Pico Boulevard, and now come close to Olympic Boulevard. Several Korean business owners that I interviewed explained to me that Korean customers would not come to their stores because the presence of African Americans on the street evokes a sense of danger and crime to

Korean customers.

Similarly for many Korean residents in Koreatown, the business districts in southern Koreatown are viewed as situated in-between the thriving core Koreatown where property prices and rents are extremely high and the South Central area where early Korean immigrants in 1970s and 1980s once opened beauty shops, swap-meet shops, and liquor stores for African American customers but which were severely devastated by the 1992 riots: Southern Koreatown is in this context considered as a transitional zone for Korean business owners and residents. Because of the increasing withdrawal of Korean businesses in this area, we observed that even some stores along Pico and Washington boulevards remain closed during the weekdays or are empty altogether.

Koreatown is a central place for Korean Americans in LA, providing co-ethnic job opportunities, basic social services, and local information for new Korean immigrants. Yet, recently Korean Americans began to aggressively purchase office and apartment buildings on Wilshire Boulevard (Light, 2002), changing its core from the intersection of Olympic-Vermont to the intersection of Wilshire-Western. However, for many Koreans, Koreatown was not a place where settle down permanently but a 'toehold' or social incubator for new Korean immigrants to get newly experienced in small businesses, be fit in ethnic networks, and accumulating capital for opening their own businesses. For this reason, although Koreatown was considered as the home for Korean American in LA, living away from Koreatown and settling down in a suburban area were a symbol of status and an evidence of economic success for most Korean immigrants in Koreatown (Kang, 2004). The contemporary

geography of Koreatown in which poor Korean workers and thriving Korean businesses coexist together implies that the area is not simply a diasporic Koreans' ethnic space but a transnational economic space in the context of globalization. In the following section, we would examine how Koreatown internalizes socio-economic and cultural differences beyond ethnic boundary.

#### **4. Unmaking the Placeless Ethnic Economy: Disentangling Los Angeles Koreatown through the Aroma Wilshire Center**

Set between the Byzantine Revival dome of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple and the dancing neon lights of the Art Deco Wiltern Theatre, a new landmark is taking root along the storied avenue. With its futuristic glass facade and two-story television screen flashing Korean ads, the Aroma Spa and Sports Center is a stark visual contrast to the neighborhood's faded gems like the Ambassador Hotel and Bullocks Wilshire department store. But it is a sign that luxury is returning to Wilshire, and that Koreatown itself is on the move. (Kang, 2004)

On June 21, 2001, about 300 people attended the grand opening ceremony of the Aroma Wilshire Center, a luxurious \$35 million spa, mall, and golf complex located at the heart of Los Angeles Koreatown (see Figure 4). Representing the network of development actors generating this facility, the core attendees in this opening ceremony included the Chairman of the South Korea-based Hanil Development

Corporation, Los Angeles City Mayor, Korean Consul General in Los Angeles, Los Angeles City Council members, the Chairman of the Korean American Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles, and the President of the Los Angeles Korean American Association. Along with representatives from local Korean American newspapers, these attendees celebratorily dubbed this facility “one of the greatest achievements in the history of Korean immigrant communities in the U.S” (Vincent, 2001). They also considered the Aroma Wilshire Center an ambitious landmark for revitalizing Los Angeles Koreatown, an area that had witnessed popular businesses leaving either for downtown or emerging suburban markets since the 1980s and that was severely damaged by the 1992 riots.

During the ceremony, project architect Christopher Park, a renowned Korean American architect in Los Angeles, announced “we are proud of the fact that the Korean [American] community is mature enough to take on a project of this magnitude, [and] we hope this will show other developers to look at this area as a viable market” (Vincent, 2001). What these attendees such as Christopher Park commonly celebrated was the Aroma Wilshire Center’s signification of the achievement of Korean immigrant communities and its contribution to economic regeneration in Koreatown.

It is not rare to witness local residents including Korean Americans themselves showing certain antagonistic emotions against the presence of this commercial facility. A membership to use the fitness center in this facility requires a 500 dollar fee plus 300 dollars per month and the lifetime membership fee is 22,000 dollars plus 30 dollars per month. Aroma Wilshire Center has a membership capacity of

2,000 including 500 VIP slots. At the beginning stage of its service in 2001, Aroma Wilshire Center had sold 300 memberships, 80 percent of which were VIP and mostly held by Koreans (Vincent, 2001). Peter Kim, a 41-year-old Korean owning a small computer store near the intersection of Western Avenue and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street complained, saying:

I have been working in Koreatown over ten years, but we have no idea who are those lucky guys driving such luxurious vehicles and playing golf in Aroma [Wilshire Center]. Comparing to those guys, we are nothing but beggars. ... Even if I have enough money for the ticket [meaning the membership card of the Aroma Wilshire Center], I don’t believe they will not associate with me. ... It’s basically the game of money. But, here in Koreatown, you need more than money to join the game. (Personal interview)

What Kim tried to emphasize was the power of ‘invisible hand’ that he argued consists of wealthy Korean entrepreneurs owning large businesses, those who consider themselves to be Korean community leaders, and high-income professionals such as lawyers. He complained that their strong network governs Koreatown and considers it simply their ‘play ground’. At the end of our chatting about recent changes in Koreatown, Kim concluded that “the direction to which Koreatown moves is undoubtedly the way to which these guys [meaning hegemonic Koreans in Koreatown] want to go”. While Kim’s observation focused on who has the socio-economic accessibility to the Aroma Wilshire Center, he illustrated how relatively disempowered groups in Koreatown understand the social implication of this luxurious facility.



Figure 2. The Eastward Facade of Aroma Wilshire Center, 2004 (Photo by author)

Simultaneously, such a response implies that there is a significant social stratification among what is stereotypically called 'Korean American entrepreneurs' or 'Korean American community' in Koreatown.

In addition to the Korean corporations' transnational investment in Koreatown, such as that by the Hanil Development Inc., there have been an increasing number of middle-and upper-class Koreans who are concerned about domestic economic instability since the 1997 financial crisis and invest in California's businesses and real estate. As the real property market is overheated by recent South Korean investors, prices for houses and small business stores have doubled for the last five years (Lee, 2004). These new Korean migrants usually have an investment visa, known as an E-2, which enables them and their families to stay in the US by investing around 200,000~300,000 US dollars in businesses. Unlike the immigrant EB-5 investment visa, the E-2 visa is based on the 1997 amendment of the US Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which provides "non-immigrant status" to a foreign investor who (i) has invested or is actively in the process of investing a substantial amount of

capital in a bona fide enterprise in the US, as distinct from a relatively small amount of capital in a marginal enterprise solely for the purpose of earning a living; (ii) is seeking entry solely to develop and direct the enterprise; and (iii) intends to depart the US upon the expiration or termination of treaty investor (E-2) status (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 1997). Conventionally, many Korean immigrants to the US applied for the EB-5 visa, which required minimum \$500,000 investment in business but provides an opportunity for permanent residency. However, recent 'transmigrant' investors prefer the E-2 visa because it requires a relatively small amount of money and gives flexible and renewable status to investors.

An increasing number of Koreans choose to migrate into other countries including the US, Canada, and Australia, because of the skyrocketing living costs and overall economic depression in Korea in the aftermath of the IMF-led structural adjustment policies since 1997 (Kang, 2004). The US has been attracting the middle- and upper-class Koreans, who are principally concerned about extraordinarily high educational expenses for their children and their pressured peer-competition in South Korea. For example, along with those from Australia and Canada, the US embassy in Korea has participated in recent Korean Emigration Fairs and advertised its investment visa programs. Some of the stores located in the Aroma Wilshire Center are owned by these Korean migrant investors. 38-year-old Gil-Soon Jung, who operates a retail shop in this facility and lives in Burbank, purchased the property and immigrated to the US in 2002 along with their two elementary school kids. Her husband who currently runs a restaurant in Seoul decided to

remain in South Korea in order to not risk potential financial insecurity of their family in the US. Yet she said that he would also come to Los Angeles within the next couple of years. According to Jung:

You know that the soaring *sa-gyo-yuk-bi* [meaning private educational expenses] is crazy in Korea. When I lived in Seoul, for my two kids, I spent around 1,500,000 won [equivalent to approximately \$US 1,500] per month for teaching English and extracurricular courses after school. Here, you don't need to worry about it, do you? At the same time, I think my children are no longer under so intense stress from school and love to go school. After paying out rent and wage in every month, I make only around 3,000 dollars per month which is a little less than my expectation. But, I believe that it's better to make 5,000,000 won in Korea. ... In that sense, Koreatown is *the best area* for business purpose. I don't speak English well enough, but you see I own my business and am making enough money for my family even without helping from my husband. But, at the same time, this area must be one of the worst places for educating my kids. (Personal interview, original emphasis)

As Jung mentioned, Koreatown is the 'best' place for recent investors running businesses but, simultaneously, one of the 'worst' places for living in and educating their children. Before her immigration, she already had information from her emigration agency and guide books not only on Koreatown but also on which neighborhoods in Los Angeles have safe and good schools with 'a higher percentage of the white population': the number and geographic location of whites was a dominant measure for Jung in identifying safe

and 'good' spaces. Yet, what is more important was that such dualistic opposition as well as geographic imagination is a learned discourse structurally produced by the immigration agencies, which makes current investment-based, corporation-assisted transnational migration different from previous immigration patterns. Also, together with foreign embassies such as those of the US, Canada, and Australia, local governments, schools, and firms in Vancouver, Los Angeles, and Sydney frequently join bi-annual emigration fairs held in major cities in South Korea (Korea Trade Fairs, 2005).

No one knows how many E-2 visas are issued to Korean nationals, because the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Services, does not maintain statistics by visa holder's national origin. However, a local Korean real estate agent suggested to me that two out of three who have recently consulted him to purchase retail stores located in Koreatown are South Korean visitors interested in living in the US. One of the predominant types of advertisement that mostly fill in local Korean-owned daily newspapers such as *KoreaTimes* are real property including houses, apartment buildings and retail stores. Benjamin Hong, President and Chief Executive of Nara Bank, estimated that up to a third of the assets of the eight Korean banks in Los Angeles come from South Korean investments (Kang, 2004).

One of the agents in a realty company located in Koreatown revealed about a Korean investor who purchased a small coin laundry shop in Koreatown. The average market value of the shop was around US 160,000 dollars, generating around 2,500 dollar net profits per month. But the Korean investor requested to pay over

200,000 dollars for the shop, saying that he didn't care about the amount of sales of the laundry shop. Later the agent found out that the Korean investor was planning to apply for E-2 visa and the lawyer advised him to invest over 200,000 dollars in order to assure the issuance of the E-2 visa. Korean investment in the property market of Koreatown has been unprecedentedly thriving since the late 1990s. The average price of the randomly selected 27 three-bedroom and two-bath houses in Koreatown amounts to about \$513,000. According to one of my informants working for realtor, such properties had allegedly cost \$250,000~\$350,000 five years ago. New Star Properties Co, one of the largest Korean American real estate agents based in Los Angeles, established its transnational branch in South Korea, so that it could attract more South Korean buyers in 2002. As a real estate agent announces, it's the age of "bye Korea and buy Koreatown".

However, the Aroma Wilshire Center was not an ungrounded transnational commercial space. But, its material existence as well as service is impossible without its grounding on Koreatown which is one of the poorest urban communities in the city of Los Angeles. A number of employees working for the Aroma Wilshire Center are young Korean, especially female, immigrants. According to an employee working for the facility, a considerable number of these young Korean workers are illegal, undocumented migrants, especially those who originally entered the US with student and tourist visas but decided to stay further.

Jay Suh, a Korean transnational worker, was happy when he found a temporary job in a restaurant of the International Food Court in the Aroma Wilshire Center. At a wage of \$8.00 per hour without overtime payment, he worked as a

cashier and cook for the store from 9:00 AM to 7:00 PM from Monday to Friday and 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM on Saturday. He was also asked to run personal errands for the Korean owner. Let alone his hard working condition, what most discouraged him every day was to encounter his affluent Korean customers face to face in ways that automatically brought his own poor circumstances to mind.

What Jay was especially angry about was the way that wealthy Koreans treated him in his restaurant and show off their power. He complained that some of them were very arrogant and didn't even use honorific Korean language when they ordered from him. In his theory, wealthy Koreans visiting luxurious facilities in Koreatown like Aroma Wilshire Center and spending lots of money are those desiring to distinguish themselves from other Koreans and prove that they are better-off people. However, further interviewing with Jay proved that such an antagonism against wealthy and haughty Koreans, however, was based on his positive identification of the US represented by white Americans. According to him:

Americans [meaning 'whites' to him] neither act and nor need to act like that way, because they are white and everybody knows that whites have better social status than non-whites. But, as you know, whether they're wealthy or poor like me, on the street, Koreans are just Asians to people's views. So, I believe that they want to be 'wealthy Asians', not Asians, Koreans, or even wealthy Koreans. ... You're from Seoul National University, but on the street, they don't know you're from the university and even they have no idea what the university means in Korea. ... [Those wealthy] Koreans are so ugly and pathetic. And, as a

Korean, I really feel shame on being Korean, particularly being Korean in this place [meaning Los Angeles Koreatown]. But, you see, [white] Americans are kind, rational, and modest. They don't care about how they are viewed or considered by others. You know why? Because everybody knows by appearance that they are advantaged people. (Personal interview)

Jay's critical consciousness on Koreans, especially wealthy Koreans, is based on the normative and positive image of white Americans. Actually, for many Koreans in Koreatown such as Jay, 'white' was not a color. Rather, it was a signifier of transparency. White Americans play the role of a transparent mirror on which Jay reflects and objectifies Koreans. His subject consciousness is constructed by objectifying Koreans including himself and thus alienating his body from his subjectivity. I suggest that the process of this Korean consciousness was pretty common in many Koreans living in Koreatown. Jay also distinguished Koreans from 'Korean Americans' who Jay meant are the US-born second? or third-generation of Korean immigrants.

After nine weeks of hard working in Aroma Wilshire Center, he hurt his back in the store by accident and couldn't work for a while because of stabbing back pains. After a week, he came back to the restaurant to work again, but the employer said that he hired a new cashier. Jay was pissed off but couldn't do anything because he was afraid of his being an illegal resident alien. He quit the job on the day he was noticed, saying "see ... he is Korean... I didn't trust him from the beginning". I asked him whether he also didn't trust me, and he responded that "you're not LA Korean". About two weeks later

he found a new job in a Korean-owned textile manufacturing company located in Java Market of downtown Los Angeles. At a wage of 1,500 per month, he decided to work as an assistant manager in handling the company's trade affairs with a subcontracting company in China.

Alongside of these young Korean workers, the majority of workers maintaining this commercial complex were Latin Americans working as floor cleaners, safe guards, busboys, kitchen workers and other back-office workers. Many of them were migrant workers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Oaxaca in Mexico, but their Korean employers just call them 'Mexicans'. The term 'Mexicans' stereotypes diverse the Hispanic populations in Koreatown as uneducated, dangerous, and 'lacking-common sense' people: The term itself is a violent discourse circulated and reproduced among a large number of Koreans in Koreatown. Working at a minimum wage, most of these employees live in nearby areas within Koreatown. Most of these groups are at the bottom of Koreatown's socio-economic hierarchy. While many illegal Korean immigrants are single, these Hispanic workers include a large number of married couples with several dependants. Yet, as the majority of them are part-time employees in Korean-owned businesses, they usually have two or more jobs within walking distance in Koreatown so as to meet the daily living expenses for their families. The local social structure of Koreatown is like above based on both working and living conditions.

In the Aroma Wilshire Center, Latino workers were employed as security guards, parking guards, maintenance workers, garbage collectors, and dish washers. According to a business owner, many of these Latino employees are part-time workers and paid by hour. One of them



was Miguel, who worked as a cook for one of the restaurants in the food court of the Aroma Wilshire Center. He was the only person preparing food ingredients, seasoning raw meats, and cooking food for around 80~120 customers per day in the restaurant. Lunch time is the most difficult time for him, as customers make a long line in the store. With such hard work, his wage was \$7.25 per hour which was only 50 cents higher than the minimum wage in California. Miguel was living in a one-bedroom apartment with the other three Latino roommates in the southern part of Koreatown. They were paying 720 dollars for the old apartment, which amounted only 550 dollars per month three years ago. Although those apartments built before 1978 in Los Angeles can increase their rents only by 3~5 percent by law, many landlords in Koreatown increase more than the legal maximum. Simultaneously, since the late 1990s, refurbished apartments and homes in Koreatown have continued to lure young business persons, professionals, and especially newly immigrated Koreans. As a result, the overall rents, especially for the housing owned by Koreans in Koreatown have increased 60~120 percent from 1997 to 2000. After all, the housing market within Koreatown is clearly segmented and divided into (1) the Latino-occupied inexpensive old apartment buildings; (2) the Korean-occupied refurbished apartment buildings and renovated rooming houses whose rents are recently skyrocketing; and (3) the gentrified middle-class houses whose market price amount to at least \$400,000.

Alongside of such a correlation between low-paid, insecure local labor market and Latino-occupied deteriorated housing in Koreatown, it is also important to address that there is also a

structural contradiction between small-business owners and property owners. The office vacancy rate was over 30 percent in the aftermath of the 1992 riots, but currently the rate has decreased into as low as 6~8 percent (Lee, 2002). The dramatic decrease in vacancy rates means that there is an increasing demand for office spaces as well as apartments. The average rent for office space in the commercial buildings of Koreatown was around 1.2~1.6 dollars per square feet in general about five years ago. However, he argued that most of buildings along Wilshire Boulevard require at least 2.0 dollars per square feet. Based on my interviews with several store managers and owners in Aroma Wilshire Center, I found out that the average rent in this facility was 3.0~4.5 dollars per square foot per month.

The transnational and local conjunction of the Aroma Wilshire Center is simultaneously articulated with local politician, developers, and politicians at an urban scale. First of all, the construction of this facility was actually a part of urban redevelopment projects implemented by the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA/LA). Although the Aroma Wilshire Center was not a redevelopment implemented by the CRA/LA, the five-year redevelopment document addressed that the Aroma Wilshire Center was a critical development project 'to boost the local economy of Koreatown' (CRA/LA, 1995). The CRA augmented existing zoning rules in a fashion that invited investment, particularly along the Wilshire Boulevard, the area's corporate anchor (Alexander, 2005). Hence, transnational developers such as the Hanil Development Corporation can newly build high-rises and implement large-scale renovation projects in Koreatown (Alexander, 2005).

Interestingly, Christopher Park, Chief Designer of Aroma Wilshire Center, was not only the owner of the Archeon International, a private development and planning company located in Koreatown, but also the Lead Planner for the Wilshire Center/Koreatown Redevelopment and Revitalization Project (Archeon International, 2003). He is also the Chair of the Board of Zoning Appeals in the City of Los Angeles, which frequently put pressure to convert residential zones in Koreatown into commercial zones. The involvement of Park, an owner of private urban planning/development company, in CRA/LA as well as the city government implies that what is called 'public' has no clear distinction with 'private' at least in the case of Aroma Wilshire Center. In this case, the public-private partnership in development itself is a politics that certainly excludes disempowered local residents, employees, and small business owners.

Alongside of such political relationship, such hegemonic Korean American organizations as the Korean American Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles and the Korean American Bars/Restaurant Association have recently constructed a closer relationship with local politicians. For example, Nate Holden, City Council Member representing District-10 (that covers the southern part of Wilshire Boulevard), who was "a crusader against inner-city liquor businesses after the 1992 riots", changed his way to clear the way for dozens of bars and nightclubs to open in Koreatown, many backed by his Korean campaign contributors and represented by Korean business lobbyists with close ties to him (Hong, 2002). According to *Los Angeles Times*, considering the bars and nightclubs as "generators of economic growth and desirable businesses for the community", he

helped more than 40 zoning permits involving alcohol sales in the Koreatown portion of his council district despite a rapidly increasing crime rates in the area (Hong, 2002).

Although no one knows the connection between such politicians and local Korean businesses owners in Koreatown, it is certain that there are more reasons for local politicians to call the opening of Aroma Wilshire Center special event. The Office of the City Clerk has a file recording the council meeting related to the construction of the Aroma Wilshire Center. While the Aroma Wilshire Center was mainly financed by the Hanil Development corporation, the construction project was institutionally as well as financially assisted by the city government and council moved by Nate Holden.

According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Section 108, also known as the loan guarantee provision of the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, is one of the most public investment tools that HUD offers to local governments (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1998b). Section 108 funds allow local governments to transform a small portion of CDBG funds into federally guaranteed loans large enough "to pursue physical and economic revitalization projects that can renew entire neighborhoods" (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1998b). The HUD continues to address that such public investment is often needed to inspire private economic activity, providing the initial resources or simply the confidence that private firms and individuals may need to invest in distressed areas (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1998b).

Although the allocation of Section 108 funds to

the Aroma Wilshire Center was based on the city council's argument that the facility was "necessary and appropriate to accomplish the city's economic development objectives", the geographic reality of the Aroma Wilshire Center proved that such argument was a political rhetoric, or discourse, of development. Also, the report from the city council mentioned that the Aroma Sporex Center meets the 'national objectives of the *Housing and Community Development Act*'. However, Aroma Wilshire Center is not a 'housing' or 'community development' project. Simultaneously, the facility has neither contributed to providing better opportunities to poor households in Koreatown, nor is it welcomed by the grassroots members of Koreatown community. In this sense, the Aroma Wilshire Center represents a problematic conjunction of development actors including investors, developers/planners, and politicians, whose discourse and discursive practices of 'community development' were appropriated for serving their own ends. A recent article from the *Los Angeles City Beat* illustrates such a contradictory reality of Koreatown that Aroma Wilshire Center embodies in a clear way.

## 5. Conclusion

The construction of the Aroma Wilshire Center illustrates the intersection of multiple contradictions in which geographies of Koreatown since the mid 1990s have been formed. The first contradiction is in the political economy of different transnationalism's'. Recent neoliberal restructuring in South Korea has not only caused the exodus of domestic capital seeking more stable and profitable markets but

also generated a large number of transnational migrant workers desiring better or larger economic opportunities. At the same time, the increasing influx of transnational migrants from Latin America adds another dimension to socio-economic stratification in Koreatown.

The second contradiction lies in the discordance between the transnational and the diasporic, which could be expanded into the tension between spatial mobility and place-based historicity. Aroma Wilshire Center, believed to be a great achievement of Korean American community in Los Angeles, is actually the direct result of the massive influx of South Korean transnational socioeconomic forces. Despite its apparent contribution to Koreatown's local economy, many Korean Americans cast questions on this commercial complex's substantial ties to Koreatown residents or Korean American communities in Los Angeles.

Third, the construction of the Aroma Wilshire Center exemplifies the articulation of transnationalism with the contradiction stemming from the ethnic and racial power relations not only between Koreans and Latinos in Koreatown and between Korean American community and what local Koreans call the 'mainstream society'. On the one hand, hegemonic developers and entrepreneurs frequently employ ethnic and racial discourses for segmenting and subjugating local labor market. On the other hand, in collaboration with powerful local politicians and institutions, they ideologically justify redevelopment projects symbolizing their entry to the mainstream society. Consequently, in the case of Koreatown, the duality of internal and external ethnic relations generates a certain hybrid spatiality in-between the 'lived' space as a multicultural community itself and the

'representational' space as an ethnic theme park, that is, a part of the multicultural mosaic of Los Angeles at a larger scale.

After all, what is the nature of 'reconstructing Koreatown' which engenders a series of these interrelated contradictions? We found a clue from the attendees who came together to 'celebrate' the opening of Aroma Wilshire Center: transnational capitalists, corporations, and organizations; the city government and its redevelopment agencies; and hegemonic local subjects, organizations, and mass-media. A set of these actors and their relationships is what we call the 'multi-scaled development coalition'. And the coalition is far from the place-based, bottom-up community efforts.

In conclusion, while the Aroma Wilshire Center was brought to bring a 'new' sense of place to regenerate Koreatown and attract external further capital as well as customers, the facility ironically is grounded on and reproduces the pre-existing sense of place of Koreatown stigmatized as poor, crime-infested, and exploitative economic space. What is more problematic is the way in which this new developments are discursively planned and implemented by a close political network of hegemonic groups, that cover not only local Korean business owners and professionals but also the city government's redevelopment agency, local and urban politicians, and South Korean transnational investors and corporations. Without breaking such a problematic chain of development organized at multiple scales, we suggest that the struggle of local residents and laborers in Koreatown are doomed to fail in engendering a better sense of community and place. We just hope that this paper would contribute to changing Los Angeles Koreatown in a more community-oriented, mutually-benefiting,

and socially sustainable way.

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- Correspondence: Kyonghwan Park, Division of Social Studies Education(Geography Major), Chonnam National University, Gwangju, 500-757, Republic of Korea (e-mail: kpark3@gmail.com, phone: +1-82-62-530-2385)
- 교신: 박경환, 500-757, 광주광역시 북구 용봉동, 전남대학교 사범대학 사회교육학부 지리전공 (이메일: kpark3@gmail.com, 전화: 062-530-2385)

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