

# Korean Americans in Houston: Building Bridges across Cultures and Generations

By Haejin E. Koh

What do an oilman, a schoolteacher, a lawyer, a community advocate, and an energy guru have in common? They are among the 11,813 Korean Americans living in Harris County, although community leaders believe the number is twice as large.<sup>1</sup> The Korean American landscape is sometimes summarized by a list of organizations such as the Korean American Association of Houston (KAAH), the Houston Korean American Chamber of Commerce, and the Houston Korean School, but it goes beyond that. The five individuals highlighted here have lived in Houston for decades, with similar and dissimilar junctures in life. In many ways, they resemble anyone in Houston, attending school, attending church, working, changing careers, raising children, taking care of older parents, participating in the community, reaching for something better. Yet their stories demonstrate the diversity within the Korean American community.

## JOHN H. KIM: 1960

At six-foot-two, John H. Kim is a Texas oilman as big as *Dallas*'s J. R. Ewing. John was born in Austin in 1959 when his father was studying at The University of Texas (UT), having arrived with "just a few bucks in his pocket." In 1960 the family moved to Houston where John's five siblings were born. In the 1960s and 1970s, "the big Korean Catholic family" attended the city's only Korean church, which met in a borrowed building. As John's father served as the second president of KAAH, founded in the



The Kim family at a picnic in Hermann Park after attending the Korean church, 1970. Photo courtesy of John Kim.



Kimchi Fest, 2007.

Photo courtesy of Kristopher Ahn.

early 1960s, John remembers its annual Christmas and social gatherings.<sup>2</sup>

He spent his childhood in an all-white neighborhood, and he and his siblings did "typical American stuff" such as participating in the Boy Scouts, where he was the only Asian American scout in his troop. Nevertheless, following Korean tradition, the Kim children had to learn an instrument Korean parents favored (piano, violin, and cello).

John learned to read and write in Korean while the family lived in Korea in 1967. When they returned, the Houston Korean School had not yet opened, and he lost those literacy skills. His conversational Korean falls into the "kitchen Korean" category, sufficient for communication with relatives but not for the professional arena.

After graduating from UT, John returned to Houston and jumped into leadership roles in the Korean American and Asian American communities. In 1985 he became the founding president of the Korean American Young Professionals Association (KAYPA), which provided networking opportunities for Korean American college graduates and united second-generation members with their first-generation elders. As John recalls how KAYPA was "so well supported by the first generation," his voice and demeanor exude respect for his parents and the parental figures in that first generation. With fifty-plus members, KAYPA became a rousing success but was eventually replaced by the Korean American Society of Houston (KASH), a younger group with younger members.

In 1990 John co-founded the Asian Chamber of Commerce with eight members and a \$5,000 budget. A membership drive brought in twelve members; years later future mayor Annise Parker joined. The chamber is not limited to those of Asian descent, and today about half of its members are non-Asians, which seems to be a point of pride.

John chaired the Asian Pacific Islander campaign for the United Way, leading to an unprecedented \$62,000 in contributions. The first second-generation officer, John served as KAAH vice president in the early 1990s while it made an effort to “reach out to the second generation.” He recalls the kindness of elders who treated him well and did not dismiss him for lacking Korean language proficiency. KAAH’s membership remains largely first-generation Korean Americans whose first language is Korean. Thus, business is conducted in Korean, and its website is in Korean.

Today, John is a proud father and a dutiful son, having relocated near his aging parents to more easily visit them. Instructed by his parents to “give back to the community,” John has instilled this same sentiment in his children. “I am so proud of Houston,” he says, “and I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else in the world.”

### DR. SOON DUCK LIM: 1969

An energetic and talkative woman who seems at least a decade younger than she is, Dr. Soon Duck Lim came to Houston in 1969 with her husband and two young daughters. Her husband was in graduate school at the University of Houston (UH), so she says, “To make myself happy, I went back to school.” Having previously taught high school in Korea, she entered the UH College of Education in 1971 and in two years had earned a master’s degree and given birth to their third daughter.<sup>3</sup>

While Soon was in graduate school, her mother came to visit to help with the household, as is common for grandmothers to do in Korea. Even then Soon says, “It was so hard to do everything at the same time.” But her strength seems to belie her words – a SuperMom before the term became popular.

She read in the newspaper that math teachers were in demand. Fortunately, math was one of the fields she was certified to teach. The Houston Independent School District hired her and assigned her to teach at a school in Third Ward, a predominantly low-income, inner-city area. Reflecting on the myriad of challenges, she points out that she grew up during the Korean War and “had seen everything in Korea,” enabling her to survive anything in Third Ward.

In 1975 her husband’s job took the family to France for two years. Their two older daughters attended an American school with classes conducted in English. The youngest daughter, only three years old, enrolled in a French school, immersed in a French-speaking environment despite having no French proficiency. When the family returned to Houston, the school tested the youngest daughter, then age five, for hearing problems and English deficiency, but ruled out both. She was in fact trilingual, speaking Korean with her parents, English with her sisters, and French at school in France. Nevertheless, her trilingual ability was not recognized as an asset, and school officials placed her into a speech class, a move Soon seems to doubt was necessary.

In 1987 Soon earned a doctoral degree in education. In 2000, after twenty years at Reagan High School, she retired and enjoyed her newfound freedom until one day in 2004, when she saw an ad in a local Korean-language newspaper. The KAAH had a part-time administrative position open. She approached the president and told him that she could



Family portrait including Dr. Lim’s mother, seated, 1973. Photo courtesy of Soon Duck Lim.

take the position for no compensation if given the flexibility to travel to see her children and grandchildren.

The KAAH accepted her generous offer, and today she continues to volunteer as the office manager at the Korean Community Center of Houston (KCCH).

Occupying

the front desk, Soon is the first face one sees at the KCCH, thus, making her an unofficial representative of the Korean American community. Her official role is as a member of the KAAH advisory board, although the two organizations are separate entities. Before retiring, she did not participate much in the Korean American community, other than attending community-wide events commemorating Korean holidays. Yet Soon’s daughters went on to hold leadership roles in the Korean Student Associations (KSA) at their respective universities, and she beams with pride saying, “The kids are living well, better than me.” This, one might argue, is the realization of the Korean dream in America.

### KRISTOPHER AHN: 1975

Kristopher Ahn still remembers his family arriving at the Houston airport in 1975 with his suitcase containing two big bags of *kochugaru*, a red chili powder used to season Korean dishes, including *kimchi*, in case they could not find the spice in the United States. In the mid-1970s, the Korean American community in Houston, as a cohesive unit, was “non-existent.” In the Bissonnet area, Kris’s family found one Korean grocery store and one Korean travel agency. Sometimes his parents asked strangers, “Are you Korean?” The Ahns invited anyone who answered affirmatively into their home, and they remain friends today.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually the area’s Korean American population grew, and Kris mentions the proliferation of Korean churches, which number more than fifty today, as an example. The church served as a gathering place “to meet Korean people, to speak Korean, and to eat Korean food.”

An outgrowth of his time as president of KSA at UH, by the mid-1990s, Kris had become involved in the Korean American Chamber of Commerce, which was founded in 1974. At that time, another Korean organization with a similar purpose and overlapping membership had also been active, but it became apparent that sustaining both organizations would be difficult and perhaps unnecessary.<sup>5</sup>





*Kristopher Ahn, right, at the Kimchi Fest, 2007.*

Photo courtesy of Kristopher Ahn.

Thus, as president, Kris consciously shifted the chamber to an English-speaking organization with meetings conducted in English. In 2006 the two organizations came to serve separate constituencies and flourished. The chamber, for example, supported Korean Airlines in creating a nonstop route between Houston and Seoul, which began in 2014.

Another Chamber achievement, under Kris's presidency, is the Kimchi Fest, first held in 2007. After two years, it became the much larger Korean Festival, held annually at Discovery Green and headed by KASH.

Another recent achievement includes establishment of the Korean Community Center of Houston in 2011, thanks to local fundraising efforts within the Korean American community and funding provided by the City of Houston and the Korean government. The center houses the KAAH, the Houston Korean School, the Korean Cultural Center, and a branch of Houston Community College (HCC).

At Kris's law office, one hears both English and Korean spoken by Kris, his staff, and clients. As Kris and I talk about language, he modestly informs me that he recently was named the chair of the board of directors of the Houston Korean School. The school holds classes on Saturday mornings for about 170 students taught by sixteen teachers, most of whom had taught in Korea. His teenaged daughter speaks Korean very well, and he admits that years ago he bribed her to watch Korean television. After just one episode of a Korean drama, she was hooked and continued watching of her own volition. Watching television helped improve her Korean language proficiency, a testament to the power of K-pop and K-drama.

## *GIGI LEE: 1976*

Gigi Lee came to Houston with her parents in 1976 and her twenty-five years of service to Houston and its Korean American community could fill this magazine. A former newspaper reporter and beauty queen, she also served in the Office of the Mayor under three administrations. Today she is a legislative aide for Texas Senator John Whitmire.<sup>6</sup>

Gigi estimates that in 1976, the Korean American community had fewer than 500 members. She remembers that the one Korean church was the place for social gatherings, and her family had to shop at a Japanese grocery store.

Gigi's father wanted her to learn "what it's like to [work to] earn money," and she remembers working at a supermarket, earning minimum wage but thinking it was "big-time money." Things have "dramatically changed," she says.

A few years later, a bachelor's degree in Spanish literature from UH turned this immigrant schoolgirl into a trilingual speaker, valuable in professional and civic circles. With no hesitation, she contends that her Korean language skills were critical to her professional success and achievements.

A dutiful only child, Gigi helped her parents who owned an electronic sales and repair shop that she was expected to run someday. She took classes at HCC to learn the trade and became a manager, supervising five technicians.

In her free time, Gigi volunteered at a Korean-language newspaper. Her stories were the type of light fare shown on the morning news, such as a baby elephant born at the zoo. Then, in 1993, to her surprise, Mayor Bob Lanier accepted her request for an interview. The next year, she accepted a job as special assistant to the mayor and first lady. She humbly credits this appointment to luck, saying that she was there "at the right time."

Her presence in the mayor's office benefited the Korean American community in several ways, such as the installation of a stop sign near a Korean church and a stoplight in the Harwin area, home to many Korean-owned businesses. In 2002 when the World Cup soccer championship featured South Korea and Japan, local Korean American community leaders organized a TV-watching event in the parking lot of a Korean restaurant. About an hour before the crowd arrived, someone realized that no one had applied for a permit.

Fortunately, Gigi was able to facilitate the issuance of the permit through the proper channels.

Over the years, Gigi has been involved in various community organizations. As the vice president of the KAAH, for example, she secured a grant from AT&T to fund the Korean American



*Gigi Lee at martial arts training in Galveston, 2014.*

Photo courtesy of Gigi Lee.

Grassroots Internship, now in its second year. The thirty-two-week internship is part of the KAAH's Civic Empowerment project, which aims to cultivate future leaders for the Korean American community and to promote active participation of Korean Americans in the political process.

Today Gigi expresses appreciation for her bicultural and bilingual upbringing, "I'm not just Gigi Lee. I'm Gigi Lee, a representative of the Korean American community."

## DR. SAM JAE CHO: 1981

Dr. Sam Jae Cho and my uncle attended the same middle school and were in the same grade in Korea. Years later, without knowing it at the time, both came to the United States in the same year. In 1976 Sam entered graduate school at UT, where he earned a doctoral degree in petroleum engineering, and in 1981, he, his wife, and their two sons moved to Houston.<sup>7</sup>



*Dr. and Mrs. Sam Jae Cho, March 2008.*  
Photo courtesy of Sam Jae Cho.

In the 1980s, Sam says, Houston had few Korean restaurants and “no Korean community to speak of.” His family attended a Korean church a couple of times a month. About the size of his living room, the small space, overcrowded with benches, served as the only Korean “community center for fellowship” and annual holiday gatherings.

That small room also served as a classroom for the Houston Korean School. Although Sam’s two sons did not like going to Korean school, “We forced them,” he recalls. I probed further, asking a seemingly simple but complex question: Why? Sam paused for a moment and did not answer. “That’s a good question,” he said. After another pause, Mrs. Cho answers, “They need [to know their] identity and family roots.” Today both sons possess excellent Korean language

proficiency. Their older son also took Korean language courses at UT and spent a year studying at Yonsei University in Korea. Naturally, in this immersion environment, his language skills improved dramatically, and Sam observes, “He became very strong mentally. He became proud of being Korean. He found his roots.”

Today Sam is the CEO of TexaKor Energy LLC and remains active in professional circles and the Korean American community, often combining these two spheres. He served as president of the Houston-based Korean-American Energy Exploration and Production Society and the South Texas chapter of the Korean-American Scientists and Engineers Association. In addition to professional activities, both organizations fulfill a social function with informal gatherings and events.



These five individuals and their families are ordinary, in one sense of the word, and yet, at the same time, extraordinary. They symbolize the diversity of Houston’s Korean community as well as the city’s larger ethnic mix. They or their parents came here for new opportunities and have found ways to hold on to their Korean culture while making strides for both the local Korean community and the city. Reflecting on his life, Sam Jae Cho philosophically sums up the experience, “[We] first-generation [immigrants] know how to push. We had to push to survive. Life was tough [then]. Today life is beautiful.”

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## Remembering the early days...

During the Korean War, Ronald M. Smith, a member of the First Marine Division, met and married Pang Ja Chung in Korea. They had a daughter, Sonia, but when it came time for Ronald to return to the U.S. in 1954, Pang Ja and Sonia were required to wait a year before joining him in Houston. Like many Houstonians then, the Smiths had no air conditioning, and Pang Ja soon became ill from a kidney infection exacerbated by the heat, humidity, change of diet, and homesickness. She found no relief until they heard about a Korean doctor at Methodist Hospital, Dr. Yong Kak Lee, who had also served



*Ronald Smith and his wife, Pang Ja Chung.*  
Photo courtesy of the Korean Community Center of Houston.

in the First Marine Division. Dr. Lee came to their home, and Ronald recalled Pang Ja “instantly felt better,” drawing strength from the knowledge that other Koreans lived in Houston.

Pang Ja enrolled in English night classes at San Jacinto High School where she connected with other Koreans. From the early 1960s, the University of Houston’s foreign student advisor notified Pang Ja whenever a new Korean student registered. The Smiths gladly offered whatever help they could to any new arrival, returning Dr. Lee’s kindness. Ronald reminisced, “We were a small group who helped each other and talked to each other and picnicked a lot together. It was a good time.”<sup>8</sup>