WHO ARE THE 1.5 GENERATION KOREAN AMERICANS?

The 1.5\(^1\) generation, or *ilchom ose*\(^2\) as it is called in Korean, is a concept that originated in the Korean community to describe immigrant children who are not quite first- or second-generation Korean. It was in the early 1970s that Charles Kim, a reporter for *Koreatown*, the *Korean Times/Hankook Ilbo* English edition, wrote an article describing people like himself, who are neither first nor second generation, as “1.5” generation, or *ilchom ose*. Demographically, of course, the notion of a 1.5 generation is impossible; someone born in Korea is technically considered first generation, and anyone born in the United States is considered second generation. The term 1.5 generation, however, is significant when it is used in reference to certain sociocultural characteristics and experiences of pre-adult immigrants.\(^3\)

The idea of an in-between generation is common around the world. The Chinese refer to children immigrants as *juk sing*.\(^4\) The Japanese, Chinese, and South Asian groups refer to this group as the “knee-high” generation.\(^5\) The expression *ilchom ose* was first used in the Korean community by first-generation Koreans as well as those in Korea to describe the youth and young adults who immigrated as children. As the generation of 1.5ers
progressed, so did the intergenerational and cultural issues. A Korean soap opera titled *Ilchom Ose* that aired in Hawai‘i for several months characterized this generation as one that is marginalized, confused, and in conflict with their first-generation parents.

Scholars who study this generation have yet to agree on what constitutes a 1.5er. Broadly, the term *Korean American 1.5 generation* has been used as an informal demographic marker to differentiate immigrant children from their parents (first generation) and from American-born (second generation) Koreans. The Korean 1.5 generation has been generally described as those who are bicultural and bilingual and who immigrated to the United States during their formative years. They are socialized in both Korean and American cultures and consequently express both sets of cultural values and beliefs. Aside from this broad demographic definition, there has been no clear consensus on what it means to belong to the 1.5 generation. For example, bilingualism in this group has been defined in several ways—as referring to Korean American 1.5ers who are (1) fluent in both Korean and English, (2) more fluent in English than Korean, (3) more fluent in Korean than English, or (4) not fluent in either. Portes and Rumbaut describe the four different types of bilingualism as follows. Fluent bilinguals know English very well and know a foreign language at least as well. English-dominant bilinguals have fluency in English but much weaker knowledge of a foreign language. Foreign-dominant bilinguals speak the native ethnic language well but are less fluent in English. Finally, limited bilinguals have lost fluency in their native tongue and have yet to acquire a full command of English.

Communication, and especially language, is central to transmitting Korean culture from one generation to the next, for it enables shared understandings between the parents and their 1.5er children. Through maintenance of the Korean language and the learning of English, 1.5ers develop bilingualism, which has become one characteris-
tic of this generational group. Furthermore, because the Korean language uses honorific talk and carries cultural significance, the language is connected to culture as well. The family plays a significant role in maintaining and extending Korean culture through the celebration of Korean holidays, the enforcement of filial piety, the cooking and eating of Korean foods, and the transmission of this culture through language. Because language and culture are tied to identity, being bilingual and bicultural shapes the way 1.5ers see and express themselves.

However, the level of bilingualism is contingent on several factors: whether the child immigrant was raised in an ethnic community, the role of the family in sustaining the native language at home, the relationships established with peers, and personal views about other Koreans. To say that all those who immigrated at an age between 6 and 15 are considered 1.5 generation would ignore the fact that those socialized in communities devoid of other Korean-speaking children or adults will most likely become limited in their bilingualism and biculturalism. Some children who immigrated at an early age may actually identify as 1.8 or 1.9, meaning that they don’t necessarily feel in between first and second generation, but closer to second generation. However, it becomes increasingly clear that geography or locality plays a large role in how one’s ethnic identity is formulated. Just as there are children who immigrate at age 3 who can’t speak any Korean, there are others who are more fluent in Korean than English largely because of their immediate surroundings and support system. Thus, there is more to the 1.5 generation than age, but their social, economic, and cultural experiences affect their degree of biculturalism or bilingualism.

Sally, a 31-year-old, immigrated to Hawai‘i when she was 3 years old. When speaking to her, one would guess that Sally was either second- or even third-generation local Korean. However, she identifies herself as Korean. She grew up in government-assisted homes with her
mother, who spoke only Korean. Most of her immediate neighbors were Korean, she attended a high school where her friends were predominantly Korean and local, and she works in a hotel that is run and owned by Koreans. Although she speaks Konglish\(^8\) with her Korean American friends, at work she speaks primarily Korean. Sally shows how defining the 1.5 generation is complex.

Sonia, a 39-year-old Korean American, immigrated to Oregon at age 12; however, her parents instructed her and her siblings not to speak Korean and to speak only English. Her parents felt that in order to succeed in the dominant white culture, their children had to perfect the English language and never let out that they are immigrants. Consequently, Sonia and her siblings do not speak or understand Korean. She states, “You know, I really feel like I’m just American. Yes, obviously I’m Korean. I mean look at me. But I don’t speak Korean, don’t eat Korean food, don’t date Korean men . . . I’m really just superficially Korean.” The pressure in the continental United States to assimilate pushed Sonia and her family to leave their culture behind and to become “American.” However, the pressure to be American is not as strong in Hawai’i. The influence of local culture makes adapting to dominant Hawai’i culture easier for many Koreans and other Asian immigrants, although there is still pressure to shed their immigrant status by becoming local.

Won Moo Hurh, one of the first to write about the 1.5 generation, argues that the formative years in attaining functional bilingualism are postadolescence and pre-adulthood, which he categorizes as between 11 and 16 years of age. He argues that during these years, children immigrants are able to make the transition from Korean to English and have developed ways to cope with the changes. To Hurh one of the key characteristics of the 1.5ers is that they are marginalized and isolated from both the American and Korean cultures due to their role in both cultures. Although there is the potential for identity crisis, there is also the potential of benefiting from

---

THE 1.5 GENERATION

---
the “best of both worlds.” The lack of information on the 1.5 generation has much to do with the lack of empirical studies conducted on this group.9

The 1.5ers are a heterogeneous group shaped by their experiences and, more specifically, by their gender, class, sexuality, and geography. It is through their own experiences that they construct what it means to be a 1.5er in Hawai‘i. The sociocultural experience of gaining an ethnic identity is important to examine.

Characteristics of 1.5 Generation Korean Americans

Korean American 1.5ers have not always claimed 1.5 ethnic identity; as child immigrants, they are technically first-generation Korean Americans much like their parents. However, because of their age at the time of immigration, their experiences vary significantly from those of their parents. During the process of their resocialization in Hawai‘i, they concurrently renegotiate and reexpress their ethnic identities to accommodate varying cultures and values.

Thus, it may be argued that age at the time of immigration is not a key factor in typifying the 1.5 generation; rather, what is key are the process, the experience, and the sociocultural environment—specifically, the role of family, education, and community in forming and constructing a 1.5 ethnic identity. Although the minimum age of immigration is not important in defining 1.5ers, they must be foreign born with memories of Korea and an understanding of the culture. The maximum age, however, is significant in characterizing a 1.5er when considering Korean child immigrants who migrated in their teens. Individuals in this group are more likely than the preteen immigrants to have Korean accents, and thus are less likely to “pass” as native speakers of English and less likely to switch between generational boundaries.
Although location and environment play a role in language acquisition, teen immigrants are more likely to have difficulty passing as native born. Thus, the Korean American 1.5 generation is conceptualized here as those who immigrated with their family before 13 years of age, have memories of Korea, and are consciously bicultural. In addition, they are fluent in English and can speak conversational Korean; are able to intermingle Korean, “Korean American,” and local\textsuperscript{10} ethnic expressions; and have an appreciation for Korean culture.

Three main characteristics shape and construct a 1.5 ethnic identity. First, 1.5ers are conscious of being bicultural; that is, they feel that they can identify with Korean, American, and local cultures and are conscious of their Koreanness, Korean American-ness, and localness in varying situations. The degree of identification is not measured here; many Korean American 1.5ers may feel that they can relate more to the “American” or local culture than the Korean culture, with the measure of identification depending on the age at the time of immigration and how the person is received by both the Korean and dominant cultures. For example, a 1.5er who arrived at age 3 is more likely to adapt to Hawai‘i’s culture and in return be accepted as part of the local culture, whereas a 1.5er who came to the United States at the age of 13 may try to adapt to local culture but will be perceived as an immigrant because of the Korean accent marking his or her immigrant status. Younger immigrants are more likely to have little to no Korean accent when speaking English; thus it is easier for them to pass as being “American” compared with those who immigrated at a later age, who may carry the audible marker of being a product of ESL (English as a second language).

Geographical location also plays a significant role in the identification process. Some Korean American children may grow up in a predominantly white neighborhood, which limits their interactions with other Koreans or Asian Americans. When Korean Americans live in a
neighborhood with predominantly Korean neighbors, they may share a continued sense of Koreanness. The family also plays a critical role. Some families may promote and encourage the maintenance of Korean traditions, language, and culture. Other families may encourage their children to assimilate and become as “American” as possible, which often means not speaking the language, not participating in traditional festivities, and so on.

Korean American 1.5ers possess a second characteristic that makes them different from first- and second-generation Korean Americans. The 1.5ers identify with Western (American and local) and Korean cultures and values to varying degrees; but more important, they are able to switch their generational identities from first, 1.5, and second generation and their ethnic identities depending on who they interact with and the particular situation. That is, they are able to present themselves in varying situations as first, 1.5, or second generation or as Korean American, local, or Korean. Depending on the situation, the individual can “fit in” relatively with different groups, become conscious of the new identity, and concurrently express the conscious identity. In some instances, they may be conscious of even being Korean, but depending on the situational experience, 1.5ers have the option to construct and negotiate the generational boundaries. For example, 1.5ers when with non-Koreans may express themselves as more American, but when with first-generation Koreans may switch to being more Korean. The expressions of being Korean, Korean American, and local are presented through language, body language, cultural etiquette, and so on. The 1.5 generation thus are not really caught in the middle between the first and second generations, as Ryu contends, but are in actuality flowing between generational and ethnic identities in varying situations and contexts.11

There are, however, constraints on their ability to traverse generational boundaries. Because Korean American 1.5ers are conversationally bilingual, they are often seen
as second generation by first-generation Koreans and, therefore, not really Korean. If 1.5ers interact with first-generation Koreans at a conversational level, they may be able to pass as first-generation Korean; however, if the conversations become formal, the first-generation Koreans are likely to recognize them as 1.5ers. It is, however, easier for 1.5ers to pass as second generation or local to first- and second-generation Koreans and non-Koreans. Because they are fluent in English, it is more difficult to detect whether a 1.5er is an immigrant or second generation. Thus, under some situations, 1.5ers may claim ethnic identity but may not be accepted by first-generation Koreans, but at the same time may benefit from “American/local” privilege.

Consequently, 1.5ers must be bilingual—fluent in English but able to speak conversational Korean. Conversational Korean is necessary for 1.5ers to maintain their language ability, which allows them to converse at home and with other Koreans and Korean Americans, but they may not be literate in Korean. In daily life activities, conversation more than writing is used to communicate and to express oneself. Although some Korean American 1.5ers may be literate in Korean, the key marker is that they are able to communicate verbally with other Koreans and Korean Americans speaking Korean. Granted, the majority of 1.5ers are more fluent in English, largely because this generation received most of their formal education in the United States. It is important to note, however, that there are Korean Americans who, through Korean language schools, Korean courses at college, or summer school programs in Korea, become conversant and literate in Korean. Although 1.5ers may be more fluent in English than Korean, they are able to converse and communicate in Korean.

What is also significant about the Korean 1.5 generation is their ability to “code-switch,” that is, to speak in both Korean and English in the same sentence. Some
Korean Americans refer to the language of code switching as “Konglish,” a combination or fusion of Korean and English. The practice of code switching occurs primarily when Korean American 1.5ers are with other 1.5ers, but it also occurs to some extent with their parents and siblings.

Although speaking Konglish occurs within the family, it is with other 1.5ers that they express being 1.5. Because of their ability to switch the expression of being Korean to that of being Korean American or local depending on the group, 1.5ers are able to switch from one identity to the other, flowing between culture and generation. For example, when 1.5ers are with first-generation Korean Americans, they revert to honorific talk, bow when meeting an adult, serve tea to the eldest, and show signs of filial piety to their parents. When they are with non-Koreans, they interact in a more egalitarian manner and speak English. However, with other 1.5ers, there is no need to cross cultural or generational lines; they are free to just be 1.5. With other 1.5ers, they identify with the sociocultural experience of growing up in Hawai‘i with immigrant parents, they identify with having been an “FOB” (“fresh off the boat”) at one time and not understanding English or the local culture, they relate to growing up in a bicultural society, and they exchange their family upbringing without explanation. With other 1.5ers, they experience a collective consciousness and understanding of what it means to be 1.5.

How Are 1.5ers Different from Other Korean Americans?

First-generation Korean Americans are those who came to the United States as adults, having lived their childhood and adolescent years in Korea. Their first language is Korean, and although many of them are bilingual, they feel most comfortable speaking Korean, participating in