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KOREA'S BLACK RACISM EPIDEMIC

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It's in the classroom, it's in the media, it's painful and it's widespread.
How did it get here, and can it be stopped?

Story by **Dave Hazzan** / Illustrations by **Michael Roy**
Additional reporting by **Park Hye-jin** and **Elaine Ramirez**



On a subway in Seoul, Beauty Epps is approached by a middle-aged Korean woman. “Africa!” the Korean says. “No,” Epps, a young African-American woman, calmly replies. “American. Migukin.”

“No,” the Korean woman replies. “Africa.” Then, after a pause, the Korean woman says, “We domesticated you.”

In Gunpo, Gyeonggi Province, Ashanti Lee, a young African-American man, is hired to substitute at a kindergarten. He speaks to the manager on the phone, and everything seems fine. But when he shows up, the owner opens the door, stutters and then says, “Oh, no, no.” “Why not?” asks Lee. “Black ugly,” the manager replies. “White okay.”

Many foreigners would agree that, even if their experiences here are generally positive, Korean racism and xenophobia are impossible to ignore. There is still a clear disconnect between the 98 percent ethnic Koreans and the 2 percent “foreigners” of all sorts — mixed-race children, foreign brides, native English teachers, migrant factory workers and the tiny number of permanent immigrants and refugees who are now Korean citizens.

In a survey last year, the Washington Post found South Korea to be one of the least racially tolerant countries in the world. It found that “more than 1 in 3 South Koreans said they do not want a neighbor of a different race.” In 2009, The New York Times reported that “42 percent of (Korean) respondents in a 2008 survey said they had never once spoken with a foreigner.”

In one way or another, racism affects almost every foreigner in Korea. But being black here is different. Whether African-American, African or not even black but mistaken for it, experiences in Korea are tainted by the perception that blacks are lower than other races: Blacks are violent, unintelligent and poor. Black Americans are not really American, and are inappropriate teachers for Korean children. Africans live in a backward, single African country, consisting of little more than jungle. These views are not universal, but they are commonly heard in Korea.

Everyone has a different experience. While some black residents say they have never felt a touch of racism here, others say they must deal with it every day. Some, like Epps, just walk away. Lee convinced the academy owner that he was a perfectly good teacher, and was asked to stay. The infamous “see these rocks” guy of YouTube fame (explained in detail later in this article) snapped and unloaded on an old man on a bus.

Korea’s anti-black sentiment stems from a range of influences, from the traditional Korean preference for the color white, to the burning of LA’s Koreatown in 1992, to the Confucian philosophy of hierarchy, to the idea that blood type defines personality. Much of it is directly imported from the U.S. Racism happens in the workplace, on the street and at the first meeting with a girlfriend’s family. The local media continues to be flooded with racist sentiments, advertisements and perceptions. It’s painful and it’s widespread.

American Maria Hernandez, 30, says she experiences racism every day.

“I’ve never had to come to terms with (racism) like I have here.”

Racism in the classroom

For many black teachers in Korea, the problem begins before they even arrive — finding a job. The Korean practice of including a picture with the resume leaves nothing up to assumption, including skin color.

De'ja Motley, 34, has a master's degree, TOEFL certification and years of teaching experience, including time in Japan and university work in Haiti. "I would send my resume out without a picture and would get ambushed with replies from recruiters. Every recruiter, every school," says Motley, from Chicago. "And then I would send my picture, and it was crickets. I would be lucky if I got one reply back. And usually it was a reply back from China, or some school far out in the country."

Stories from other teachers include hagwon bosses asking, "How dark are you, exactly?" or bluntly asking mixed-race candidates if they identified as black. "Whites only" ads, while not as commonly found as they were in the late 2000s, can still be spotted on job posting sites. Some recruiters will tell black teachers flat out, "Your options are limited because you're black."

Although academies that Groove Korea interviewed for this story did not acknowledge discrimination against black teachers, recruiters said hagwon owners explicitly discriminate when searching for teachers.

One Korean recruiter, who asked not to be named, says "over 80 percent" of academies that he works with — especially in Gangnam and central Seoul and at well-known franchises — prefer white applicants over black.

"I am still getting many resumes from African-American teachers, but it's hard to find positions for them. I feel sorry for them. I found only two positions for them (in 2013)," he says, adding that the teachers — two of the more than 30 black applicants he worked with last year — were placed in rural Gyeonggi Province, not Seoul.

"Last year (2012) was six, I think. It's getting worse."

While some academies shy away from black teachers because of hearsay and personal prejudices, he says, others also face pressure from the parents. And with the hagwon industry tightening and more and more academies fighting uphill against closure, they are even more reluctant to take any potential risks, the recruiter says.

"They (the directors) say that if they hire them (black candidates), they would be worried about losing kids. It does not look good

to parents and may (give the academy) a bad reputation and lose in competition against other hagwons with white teachers," he says.

"Some hagwons have gotten a lot of complaints from parents and actually lost kids. Gossip grows quickly and sometimes it's unstoppable, like (with criticism from employing) black teachers."

An American recruiter, who also asked to remain anonymous, says schools will "usually" request white teachers only. "Nine out of 10 schools who don't request this up front will not choose to interview any teachers other than Caucasians," he says. "We've worked with about 100 schools in Korea, and only five to 10 of them have even considered our non-Caucasian teachers, even though they had equal qualifications."

"Parents seem to prefer their kids to be taught by Caucasian teachers than black teachers," says a manager at WILS Language Institution in Mok-dong, Seoul, who declined to be named. He says the school does not consider race, but rather career, nationality (for visa eligibility), passion and English-related studies. However, he says the school has not reviewed any black candidates for employment, claiming it has only seen the resume of one half-black, half-Hispanic teacher so far.

Tony Choi, who owns a small hagwon in Gangnam, says it's the parents' prejudices that cause hagwon owners to favor hiring white teachers. Parents are influenced by images from the media — such as those showing that white people are naturally good at speaking English while nonwhites aren't, or that black people are criminals, less trustworthy and uneducated — which he says leads even overseas-born Koreans like himself to have a hard time finding a job. "So, it's not fair to put the blame on hagwon owners for not hiring blacks or kyopos (overseas Koreans), because hagwons are a business, and a lot of parents want their kids learning from someone that they perceive as an 'English teacher,'" he says.

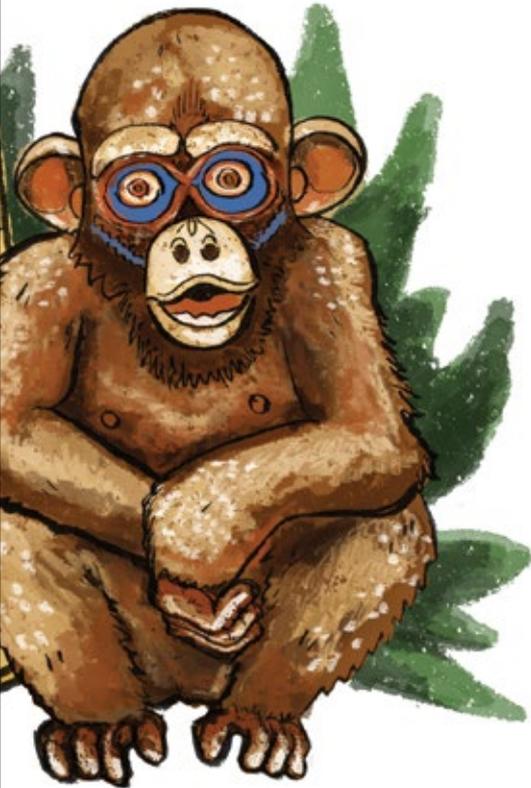
While general openness to foreigners seems to be improving, Choi says he thinks that hiring discrimination will get worse from a business standpoint. "As a hagwon owner of a small hagwon, it would be in my best interest to hire someone who will generate more business, as opposed to someone who will serve as an obstacle to get students. This isn't specific for black people, but I would have to hire someone who parents would feel

'Nine out of 10 schools who don't request (teaching candidates by race) up front will not choose to interview any teachers other than Caucasians. ... We've worked with about 100 schools in Korea, and only five to 10 of them have even considered our non-Caucasian teachers, even though they had equal qualifications.' — Recruiter



'A lot of (Koreans) are really ignorant about what we have in Africa. ... They find it weird that we actually speak English, and they wonder how we even got here. When they get to know that I'm on a scholarship, they're like, "Wow!"'

— John, student, from Ghana



comfortable sending their children to."

Even once a job is found, problems can continue. Black teachers often face harassment, negative comments from parents and coteachers and even campaigns to have them replaced.

Hernandez, from New Jersey, says she constantly has trouble with the management at her hagwon in Gangnam. She says she's faced a constant barrage of criticism from her bosses over "my hair, about my skin, my weight. It's constant here."

Parents are a driving force. Hernandez says parents ganged up on her and were forever trying to get her to leave her job, or get the bosses to fire her, even though she insists the kids "loved" her classes. These problems didn't seem to affect the white teachers at the school.

"The teacher that I replaced, all he did was play games," Hernandez says, adding that the teacher had been there for two years. "Me, just getting there, (the parents) wanted me fired after three months."

Brendan Spencer, 28 and from St. Louis, feels he gets a "lack of regard or respect" from his coteachers — "like I'm lesser," he says. When he was asked to make morning broadcasts at his school — outside of his contract obligations — he did it at first, but then said he was too busy planning his classes to continue.

"They were pretty upset about it," Spencer says. "Whereas when the previous (white) teacher was asked, he just flat (out) said no. And that got a pass."

Spencer adds that when he disagrees with the other teachers or asserts his rights, Koreans often get much more emotional with him than with others. "I just feel that if I were a Korean person or a non-black person, that kind of vitriol or emotion wouldn't be there," he says.

Scott Meech, a white, Korean-speaking Canadian who worked in 2009 as a head teacher and human resources manager for a company that sent foreign teachers to different hagwon every week, has witnessed discrimination against black teachers on the ground level. In one instance, he started receiving complaints about a black teacher, and went to observe that teacher's classes. He says he saw nothing at all wrong with his teaching.

"He was a good teacher with nice classroom manners and a connection with the students," Meech says. "I had a meeting with

the various directors, asking exactly what was wrong, and was told that many of the students were afraid of black people. They were afraid of losing students."

Meech tried to defend the teacher as "great," but was told to fire him anyway. He refused and stepped down from his position. He warned the teacher, and a month later, the black teacher was fired.

Many Korean parents have complained that their kids are afraid of black teachers. Elliott Ashby thinks the truth is different: Korean kids are not afraid of black teachers — their parents are.

"When I did parent-teacher conferences, some of the parents would ask, 'Are my children afraid of you?'" says Ashby, 30, from Phoenix. "I'd say, 'No, but you might be.'"

Ashby says kids don't know racism on their own. Some of his students would notice his dark skin, or the difference in skin tones on the palm and back of his hand. Sometimes kids would ask, "Why are you black?" and he'd answer, "Just ate a lot of chocolate!" But this is not hate — it's curiosity, and black teachers should understand that, he says.

"They say every bigot was once a child without prejudice," Ashby said. "Kids, they don't know the difference."

But sometimes miseducation comes before a black teacher does. Some teachers report students who couldn't believe a black person could be from America and not Africa.

Epps describes how at her school, the students were used to black American teachers. But then came a new first grader who looked at her strangely and wouldn't speak to her. One day, the girl told her, "You're Africa."

"I didn't even have to say anything," Epps says. "The other students responded and said, 'Babo (dummy), no, she's American.'" Epps set out to educate her, showing her pictures of her white South African friends on Facebook, and showing her Chicago on a map of the United States.

Hernandez says she does her best to educate the children, but she feels it's a Sisyphean battle. She believes that educating children about race is important, and says, "I've tried that with my own students. ... I tell them, 'Curly hair is okay'; 'You're not dirty just because your hair is like this'; 'People are different.' Then they go home and their parents talk to them, and then their parents say, 'No, they're different. That's not normal.' They re-educate them." It's a cycle Hernandez feels she can never escape.

Outside of the workplace

Outside of work, black people report difficulty getting taxis, even when Koreans and whites get them on the same street. Some say cab drivers go so far as to make illegal U-turns into traffic to avoid picking up black passengers. Some Koreans will refuse to get into elevators with black people, and will often change subway cars to avoid being near black passengers.

Ashby tells of one night out with a group of foreign and Korean friends. "There was this one Korean girl, she was in her early twenties," he says. "We'd only been talking for maybe two minutes ... and she says, 'The way you speak is very intelligent. And you're very nice.'" Then she said, "Not like most black guys." I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "You know. Not like black-black guys."

One black woman told Ashby that a Korean had said she was "so beautiful" that she couldn't possibly be fully African-American — "because most (black) girls only have a monkey face," she said."

John (not his real name), 26, from Ghana, feels that people from Africa get it even harder than black Americans, and is upset that Africans are often viewed as stupid and primitive.

"A lot of (Koreans) are really ignorant about what we have in Africa," says John, a graduate student in the Advanced Information Sciences and Information Technology Program at Pukyong National University. "They find it weird that we actually speak English, and they wonder how we even got here. When they get to know that I'm on a scholarship, they're like, 'Wow!'" He says he often comes across Koreans who don't realize there are even computers in Africa, much less centers to train computer specialists like himself.

John says he and his friends are sometimes barred from public places like bars and clubs. He says he has learned that "no foreigners allowed" can often mean no black foreigners are allowed, while white people can enter just fine. Lining up at one nightclub, two of his white friends walked into the club, paid their 10,000 won and got wristbands. He was outside taking a phone call, but when he showed up, the bouncer said foreigners were not allowed. "So

I'm thinking, 'How can you sell (tickets) to the first two people, the guy from Finland and the guy from Spain, but the moment I show up, say 'No foreigners allowed'? So, is this because of me being black, or because there are no foreigners allowed?" And it was not an isolated incident for him.

"Being an African here sometimes, it's tiring," John says.

For many blacks, getting questions like "Do you have a gun?" or "How many guns do you own?" are common.

Blogger Michael Hurt, 41, says there is a sentiment that "black people are low, stupid, crass, dangerous" and even scary.

"I would go around the corner and people would literally jump," Hurt says. He says people who are now his friends would say to him, "When I first met you, I was so scared of you!"

Hurt, who is half-black and half-Korean, admits he has a wider build, but that's not the only reason people are afraid. He says he has white friends who are also big guys, but people don't freak out when they see them in the community.

One smartphone-recorded video that went viral on Korean and English media in 2011 showed a black teacher assaulting an elderly Korean couple on a bus, yelling, "You see these rocks?" and shaking his fist at the old man. He had reportedly mistaken "ni-ga" — "you" in Korean — for racial profanity.

While many condemned the teacher for further damaging black expats' reputation, Hurt said the incident highlighted the absence of dialogue on anti-black racism here.

"Well, there we saw it — an angry black man, yelling and scaring ... everybody. Surely he just got up and started attacking people for no apparent reason, because that's what scary black men do, right?" Hurt had written on his blog, which was quoted by the Los Angeles Times. "Never has there been a discussion, in general, of the fact that black folks like myself get harassed daily on subways and buses and trains, but that never becomes an issue; no Korean thinks to flip on their cell phone to start making YouTube videos (of racism against blacks). I don't condone this young man's type of behavior. But I understand it."

Monkeys, blackface and watermelon

Media critics have not yet pinpointed the first appearance of black people in the Korean media, but prior to the 1980s, the images of black culture that became familiar to Koreans were of slaves, poor people or tribal Africans, according to Loyola-Marymount sociology professor Nadia Kim. From the 1980s, the media image became more sinister, with a greater focus on black criminality, violence and drug use. This was derived from a mix of both Korean and American media.

Media portrayals of blacks can range from professional and benign to ignorant and "shockingly racially offensive," as pointed out by celebrity blog Oh No They Didn't. It dubs K-pop as "KKK-pop," given the slew of acts that have been caught in blackface or making racist remarks. Big Bang's Taeyang, for instance, called his friend "Ma NiggA" on an online forum. After getting into the wrong van on a U.S. tour, his fellow boy band member Seungri said he was relieved the van's owners were white, because if they had been black, he might have been shot. Meanwhile, Girls' Generation member Taeyeon put her foot in it when she said Alicia Keys was pretty — "for a black girl." Her fellow girl group member Yuri was asked to "act black" on KBS' "Invincible Youth." She complied by rolling her neck, running her finger across her throat and yelling, "Yo! You die!" In November 2013, Miss A's Min was lambasted when she Photoshopped a picture of American rapper Rick Ross' head onto a female rapper's body, crawling toward an image of fried chicken, The Korea Times reported.

Koreans also began copying American blackface theater. Matt VanVolkenburg, who runs the public opinion blog Gusts of Popular Feeling, has traced references to blackface back to a 1978 play. Blackface gained popularity in the U.S. through vaudeville in the 19th century, though it wasn't until 1986 when it became associated with comedy in Korea, with TV's popular "sikeomeonseu" routine. It was stopped before the Olympics for fear of upsetting African athletes, but blackface re-emerged in force in 2003 with the Bubble Sis-

ters. The K-pop girl group began with an image that was based entirely on blackface, including their album cover and all their videos, until a relaunch in 2006.

On Jan. 23, American rapper Snoop Dogg tweeted an Instagram photo of himself posing with a Korean in blackface. The cutline read: "Stunt double. Hahahahahah. This nigha here!!" (There is writing in Korean behind the duo, suggesting the picture was shot either in Korea, or in a Korean office somewhere.) As of press time, the identity of the Korean in blackface was unclear, but the assumption around the internet is that it has to do with an upcoming video Psy was shooting with Snoop. Whether the blackface character was meant to be a joke, a media stunt, or a commentary on previous Korean blackface incidents is unclear.

Beast, Big Bang, Girls' Generation and Super Junior have all used blackface in their videos, on photo shoots or in comedy routines. In one comedy show in 2010, Beast member Lee Gi-kwang devoured a piece of watermelon while in blackface.

Professor Kim Eun-mee, dean of Ewha University's Graduate School of International Studies, says that while many K-pop artists like Park Jin-young and Psy respect and collaborate with black Americans, the ones who make racist remarks are acting out of ignorance. "I don't think it comes out of deep malice or deep-seated prejudice," Kim says. "I think it's the young trying to show off they're cool and they're hip, and I think that comes from that. I hope."

Motley, the teacher from Chicago, acknowledges that K-pop borrows a lot from black culture, which is why she finds the genre's racism particularly irritating. Motley says there are always videos of K-pop women mimicking black women, "doing the neck roll, wearing big earrings, popping their lips. You always see something."

In the music video "The Baddest Female" (2013), 2NE1 star CL sports a stiff leather baseball cap, track pants, gold chains and even a gold grill on her teeth, all the while dancing up a hip-hop storm. Such instances would be more tolerable if respect were given where it was due, says Motley, but "a lot of K-pop stars are mimicking us, without having us in their vid-

eos, without giving any acknowledgment.

"It's difficult because when you see the stars performing, you recognize that this comes from (black) American art forms, and our music and our dance, and yet we're insulted at the same time when they put on a commercial or TV show where they're making fun of us."

Korean advertisements have mocked Africans as well. Last year, Korean Air had to apologize after running ads promoting direct flights to Nairobi, Kenya, which urged Koreans to "fly Korean Air and enjoy the grand African Savannah, the safari tour, and the indigenous people full of primitive energy."

KyoChon Chicken ran a commercial in 2010 advertising that if you are ever washed up on a desert island full of angry black people who want to boil you in a pot, you should deter them by giving them some fried chicken.

And last year, cigarettes branded "This Africa" featured monkeys roasting tobacco on the box, and on billboard ads, the monkeys pretended to interview each other. The BBC quoted the parent company KT&G as saying, "We absolutely had no intention to offend anyone and only chose monkeys because they are delightful animals that remind people of Africa." Though the billboards were removed, the cigarette packs with the tobacco-roasting monkeys remain on the shelves because the company said it did not find them offensive.

In 2013, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea monitored 35 Korean television shows and found that many programs "showed racial or cultural stereotypes or used discriminatory remarks against immigrants."

The NHRCK pointed out one show that featured a character arguing about a black person — "(their) skin is dark, so I thought that the people are also 'dark,'" the character said, referring to personality — and another show on which a cast member likens "a traditional African dance to King Kong's dance."

The local drama "The Golden Bride" (2007-2008) featured a subplot about a Korean who goes to jail in the U.S., is terrorized by black inmates and returns to Korea with post-traumatic stress disorder.

And in September, a cartoon by Bounce Kim on nate.com featured Dominican LG Twins

pitcher Radhames Liz being lynched by the Ku Klux Klan for accidentally beaming a Korean player and then pitching three strikeouts in a row — known in Korea as a "KKK."

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There are many more examples: billboard ads for whitening cosmetics that say "white is beautiful, black is not," and ads of Africans throwing spears during soccer matches with African countries. A study in the scholarly journal *Language & Literacy* found that Korean ESL textbooks overwhelmingly profiled white and Western artists, including only white writers. In addition, a television station popular in some private academies, Africa TV, has been lambasted as portraying Africa as a continent of dancing, shoeless natives.

Blood types and hierarchies

Racism against black people in Korea comes from many sources: Korean ethnic nationalism and xenophobia, which touch all foreigners here; centuries of isolation that kept Koreans apart from other races; a traditional valorization of the color white; Confucianism; and most of all, racism imported from the United States of America.

It is still a widely held belief here that the Korean people are defined by their shared blood, according to Stanford sociology professor Shin Gi-wook. This belief is then applied to other countries — and for the U.S., that means Americans should be white.

Many Koreans also believe that blood is a definer of personality — it used to be very common for Koreans to ask, “What’s your blood type?” even in job interviews. It still happens occasionally.

Once blood is used as a personality indicator, it’s not a big leap to viewing races as inherently different, just as people with different blood types are, says Nadia Kim. Kim, who wrote the book “Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA” (2008) on how Koreans perceive race, says using blood as a definer of personality “biologizes race.”

“It creates a category system based on a biological division and hierarchy of humans that has been totally disproven,” she says. But Korea still invests ideas in blood type — “that it determines intelligence, character, athletic ability, morality and so on.”

Kim points out that the idea of “race” itself is merely a social construction. People look different because of social evolution and where their ancestors are from, not because of blood or blood type. Despite proof that there are no biological differences between races — beyond skin color, eye shape and other superficial differences — race is still used as a means to justify racism and affects how people interact with each other.

Koreans have also historically elevated white as a “pure” color, which benefits the light-skinned nobility over dark-skinned peasants, Kim says. The pure white hanbok was also associated with the Korean ethnicity.

“There were meanings associated with the color white — peace, being a peaceful people, purity,” says Kim, who notes this judgment has been carried out in many societies worldwide. “I don’t think this is unimportant, particularly when it intersects with an American and global order that puts white people on top.”

Confucianism, which has been Korea’s national ideology since the 14th century, orders everyone into five unequal relationships. It does not have a category for race. But race can be applied to the equation, and certain races can be seen as higher or lower in the Confucian hierarchy based on their perceived job status, income or similar factors. “Even if ‘immigrant status’ or ‘racial status’ is not explicit as one of the five relationships (the hierarchy system) informs it,” Kim says.

Blackface became associated with comedy in Korea with TV’s popular ‘sikeomeonseu’ routine. It was stopped before the Olympics for fear of upsetting African athletes, but reemerged in force in 2003 with the Bubble Sisters.





Imported from the U.S.

But the largest influence on Korean anti-black prejudice has been the United States, and its own savage, racist history.

Before the Korean War, the United States was seen here as a strictly white country, and one that brought universities, hospitals and the Christian religion — with its white Jesus — to the Korean masses. So when the war began in 1950, there was a lot of surprise at how many black soldiers were in the military. Although the U.S. government did not compile racial statistics at the time, it is estimated that 600,000 black soldiers served during the Korean War, with 5,000 dying in it.

And though the American military had officially desegregated in 1948, it was still viciously racist. Almost all the officers were white; a disproportionate number of the enlisted men were black. Koreans saw that blacks were subservient to whites, and this set up the context for future contact, Kim says.

The war ended in 1953, but the U.S. Army stayed to keep stability. Racial dynamics took a while to change in the U.S. Army. In 1973, the first year for which the U.S. government gathered statistics on race, blacks made up 18 percent of enlisted soldiers, but only 4 percent of officers. In 2009, blacks were 21 percent of the enlisted force, but still only 13 percent of officers.

"I think the anti-black stuff specifically comes from contact with Americans and, frankly, Koreans are quick learners," Michael Hurt says. "When the camptowns (operated), they saw that blacks were lower on the totem pole. The whites were officers, the blacks were enlisted men, to the point where ... there were hookers who went with the white officers, and there were hookers who dealt with the black enlisted men. Those were the

'lower-end' hookers."

A perception developed in Korea that black soldiers were "more troublesome" than white ones, especially after the Civil Rights Movement spread to the Korean military. Kim writes in "Imperial Citizens" that in a riot in Itaewon in the early '70s, black soldiers trashed a series of clubs that had banned them from entering. "Fifty black soldiers simultaneously entered five camptown clubs, ordered people to leave and demolished the establishments as an act of protest against Korean clubs' bias (which Korean clubs said they were pressured to follow). The black soldiers were met by a mob of over 1,000 Koreans who chased them with sickles, threw rocks in retaliation, and physically attacked them." According to her interviews with several Koreans, Kim found that, for many Koreans, the "low-class black soldier" came to symbolize all blacks in the decades following the riot.

The American media has also massively influenced attitudes in Korea, and most black expats whom Groove Korea interviewed saw it as guilty to some degree. Kim writes that the U.S. media has done more to influence Korean attitudes than anything else.

"U.S. mass media representations have likely stitched the black slave, gang banger, drug addict and one-dimensional entertainer into the South Korean collective consciousness more than any other source," Kim writes.

Korean and U.S. media coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots was particularly shocking for Koreans. The violence erupted after the four police officers who were filmed beating Rodney King — a black man — were acquitted by an all-white jury. While the police and National Guard protected rich white neighborhoods like Bel Air and Beverly Hills, they let Koreatown burn. More than 2,300 Korean-owned businesses were destroyed.

There were already tensions in America, particularly in LA, over Korean storeowners allegedly overcharging and disrespecting black customers in their shops. Rapper Ice Cube made these sentiments loud and clear in his 1991 song "Black Korea," where he raps, "Learn to speak English first, all right," calls Koreans "Oriental one-penny countin' motherfuckers," and then threatens to "burn your store right down to a crisp."

That same year, 15-year-old Latasha Harlins died from a gunshot wound in the back of her head delivered by Korean shop owner Du Sun-ja, who thought the black girl was shoplifting a carton of orange juice. Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter, but was spared jail time and sentenced to probation, community service and a fine. The sentence was met with widespread outrage in the black community.

Kim says the LA riots were a "watershed" moment in black-Korean distrust in America, which spilled over to Korea via the media and conversations with overseas friends and relatives. She says there was some mention of Rodney King in the Korean media coverage, but not much. The focus shifted to black criminality rather than suffering, as "many new (Korean) immigrants and South Koreans named the 'riots' as crystallizing their anger toward and fear of blacks," Kim writes.

Nonetheless, sympathy emerged in both communities. Ice Cube may have threatened to burn Korean shops down, but once those shops had indeed burned, Ice-T rapped in 1993's "Race War" that Koreans and blacks were not enemies: "Korean people live down in the hood / a little mis-fucking-understood / Orientals were slaves, too." Little reported in the U.S. or Korea were the post-riot demonstrations by Korean-Americans in solidarity with marginalized American blacks.

'Raised' racist

Many Koreans themselves say they were raised to believe that black people were not the kinds of people they wanted in Korea. Those interviewed by Groove Korea asked that their full name not be used.

Ahn, 39, a businessman in Seoul, says he was raised with very little exposure to foreigners. He admits that when he and his family did see non-Koreans, they had very different reactions toward them based on their skin color.

"When we saw black people, my parents and everybody said 'dirty,'" he says. "Maybe they look like monkeys in the zoo, because they're rare to see. We were very scared of them, like a phobia."

But when it came to white people, Ahn says it was the opposite. "My parents (and people their age) said white people are good. They're clean, they're reliable, because they're white — they're American. They helped us."

Ahn says American movies and music influenced Koreans to see blacks as dirty, poor, violent slum-dwellers. "The U.S. way of looking at black people came to Korea," Ahn says. "So Korean people looked at black people just like Americans did."

Lee, a business owner in Paju, Gyeonggi Province, says she was also raised to see black people as inferior to whites. "I thought black people weren't as smart or wealthy as non-black people," she says. "It was the common thinking among me and my peers. They were always presented this way on TV. TV and movies often showed bad neighborhoods with black people. So it was just the way we thought."

For many, attitudes changed over time with the media and contact. Today, Ahn feels there is little racism toward black people, though the animosity has shifted to Chinese and Southeast Asian workers. Young people in Korea, he says, think "black is good, black is cool, because they look at movies and YouTube, and they see black is not poor or dirty anymore, but they're cool, with hip-hop, movies, music, sports, Michael Jordan."

Kim, a small business owner in Ilsan, Gyeonggi Province, once believed blacks were poor, dumb, lazy and violent. But when she went on a three-week trip to Tanzania, everything changed. She said she was particularly struck with Tanzanians' zeal for education and how hard they worked, two qualities also highly valued in Korean society.

Perceptions changed for Ahn and his family when his father brought a black business colleague home for dinner. "My mother had never seen a black person before. And at that time,

my mother thought black people were dirty, dangerous, lived in slums," Ahn says. But after the man came home and ate with them, Ahn's mother changed her mind.

Ahn feels that Koreans fear what they don't know. "But once they meet a friend, they don't care anymore."

But how bad is it?

Despite any discrimination they face, almost every black source Groove Korea interviewed said they either liked or loved Korea. Many were quick to point out that not everyone in Korea was racist — indeed, most Koreans they knew weren't and were perfectly accommodating to them. Several sources indicated never having experienced any discrimination in Korea at all.

"Korea — there's racism here?" answered three Liberians in Itaewon when asked about racism. They all insisted that they had never experienced any racism in Korea, and that if there was any, it paled in comparison to other countries such as Thailand and Russia.

Shams el-Din Rogers, 44 and from Detroit, visited Korea on vacation for two weeks and liked it so much she came back to live. "I have not at all felt discriminated against in Korea. If people are discrimination against me, they're hiding it really well," Rogers says.

Rogers, who teaches on Geoje Island, says that within her first three days here, she was going with a bride to choose her bridal hanbok. When she toured around Korea, she had invitations from strangers to stay in their homes (which she declined), and everything was "very comfortable."

Samantha Coerbell, 42, from Queens, New York, says she has never felt discriminated against here. Before she left, white people had told her she would never be hired for a job. "That turned out to be insanely untrue," she says.

At Coerbell's first hagwon job, her boss stuck up for her when some parents expressed concern at having a black teacher. "He said he wanted to expose his students to America — all of America, not just one kind of America," Coerbell says. "When he had concerns from parents about there being a black teacher, he stood up for me and told them about my qualifications and how I was with the kids."

Since then, things have only been positive, and the only racism she has encountered is actually from white Americans, she says.

Jessica Womack, 25 and from Florida, notes a number of similarities between Korean and black American culture, from the food

to the music. She has also never felt discriminated against.

"I feel that a lot of people are more comfortable with me," Womack says. She finds strangers are always happy to talk to her. "One girl who came up to me, she said, 'Whenever I say hi to a white person, they don't say hi back to me. But when I say hi to a black person, they always say hi back to me.'"

Womack says that issues of discrimination don't necessarily have to do with color, but simply non-Koreanness. "If you're not Korean, you're just not Korean, period."

Many point out that Korea's tensions with the Chinese and other Asians have run longer and deeper than its discrimination against black people, whom they have only been exposed to in the past six decades.

Professor Kim of Ewha believes Korea is moving in a positive direction, away from blackface and bad jokes. She points to Park Jin-young's past collaborations with a host of black American artists including Will Smith, R. Kelly and Mase. And the students she sees now are not the same as they were even a few years ago.

"You can see over a very short period of time that things are changing very rapidly," Kim says. "I do hope we're in a trajectory towards a more open, diverse, multicultural society. We're not there yet. But the U.S. is not there yet either."

Many blacks find white foreigners just as racist as Koreans, if not more so. Teacher Jamian Bailey, 29, says a white South African in his town is forever "coming up to me and other black people, and saying, 'Hey homeboys, y'all done any drive-by shootings lately?' It's ignorant."

Motley caught a white American teacher telling a Korean guy she was dating to "never date black people" because of how "uneducated" they are. "I hate this girl. She is always behaving like a nigger," the white woman texted about her.

Corey Scott, 44, of Virginia, did experience discrimination from Koreans and admitted it was difficult raising two black children in Korea. But he also points out, "I would say this very clearly: The Koreans are a very tolerant and peaceful people. They have their quirks, like all cultures do, but the level of racism there can be handled."

This, he says, is a contrast to Saudi Arabia, where he now lives and where he says racism is completely blatant. "The racism (in Saudi Arabia) is on a completely different level," he says. In the Middle East, "it's just right out in the open."



Moving forward

But even if some don't experience it, the racism does exist. Ewha Womans University professor Bang Hee-jung, who surveyed 121 Korean students in Seoul, found that most of them preferred to have Korean friends over non-Korean friends. But when asked about which non-Koreans they would prefer to have as friends, blacks scored significantly lower than whites, while Southeast Asians scored the lowest.

Ashby thinks the problem is solvable through increased contact. "The kids in Korea (today) are going to be in a much better position because they can't discriminate against us," Ashby says. "Because they've met us, they've seen us face to face and they know what we're about. It's harder to have a one-dimensional version of this person from this country, or someone who is black or Jewish or whatever, because you've actually met someone."

Hurt, however, believes the best way to push Koreans to change their discriminatory ways

is by forcing their racist image to the global spotlight. For example, Hurt argues that the media could be used as a "shame-generator." "What if Time magazine made an issue called 'The New Racism' and identified Korea as the most racist country in Asia?" Hurt says. "Shit would change like that."

Ashanti Lee argues that, first, it's necessary to get Koreans to notice what's going on. Ultimately, he says, they're the ones who will have to change things.

"The way to get over this hump is to get other Koreans to care," Lee says. "If they (Koreans who don't hold racist beliefs) can get other Koreans to care and talk about it, then other Koreans will listen. But they won't listen to foreigners, especially the minority of foreigners."

Nadia Kim believes the best way — and often the only way — to change anything is through organizing. "I believe everything starts with social movements," Kim says, "just like it took the Civil Rights Movement in America."

These kinds of approaches naturally take time. For now, many say they feel it's up to them to provide a good example for the rest of society — no matter how unfair that is.

"I feel that if a white person does something, folks may say, 'foreigners are bad.' That's going to make all of us look bad," says Spencer, the teacher from St. Louis. "But if a black person does something, I feel like that's not going to be reflected on any other race but us."

Meanwhile, Bailey hopes attitudes change soon and respect is delivered where respect is due. "I don't want to say that all Korean people are bad," he says. "But it bothers me that I can't get a certain job here and I'm discriminated against, and it's almost like it's been ingrained in their thinking that white is better than black."

"We're all humans at the end of the day, and it shouldn't come down to skin color. It should come down to what kind of person you are."

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