



1991

Image vs. Reality in Korean-American's Responses to Mass-Mediated Depictions of the United States

Paul Messaris

University of Pennsylvania, pmessaris@asc.upenn.edu

Jisuk Woo

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Messaris, P., & Woo, J. (1991). Image vs. Reality in Korean-American's Responses to Mass-Mediated Depictions of the United States. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8 74-90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039109366781>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/466
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Image vs. Reality in Korean-American's Responses to Mass-Mediated Depictions of the United States

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a series interviews with Korean-American residents of Philadelphia. These interviews dealt with the informants pre-immigration experiences with images of the United States in movies, television programs, and magazines. The interviewees were asked to evaluate the role of these images in their decisions to immigrate and about their post-immigration responses to the relationship between these images and the reality of life in the United States. The analysis presented here focuses on ways in which reactions to the images might have been shaped by economic constraints and by values developed through formal education.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Image vs. Reality in Korean-Americans' Responses to Mass-Mediated Depictions of the United States

PAUL MESSARIS AND JISUK WOO

This paper presents findings from a series interviews with Korean-American residents of Philadelphia. These interviews dealt with the informants pre-immigration experiences with images of the United States in movies, television programs, and magazines. The interviewees were asked to evaluate the role of these images in their decisions to immigrate and about their post-immigration responses to the relationship between these images and the reality of life in the United States. The analysis presented here focuses on ways in which reactions to the images might have been shaped by economic constraints and by values developed through formal education.

It is a commonplace observation that many immigrants are conscious of having been attracted to the United States by portrayals of this country in movies or other mass media.¹ The study described in this paper was an attempt to explore certain aspects of this phenomenon with a particular group of immigrants. We wanted to know what, if any, specific features of American life as portrayed in the mass media had encouraged or strengthened these people's decisions to immigrate to the United States. We also wanted to know how these immigrants saw the relationship between the images they had derived from the mass media and the actual conditions that confronted them in their new lives: Did they feel that the reality of life in the United States had matched their expectations? Did they feel that the mass media had misled them in any way? Conversely, were there any ways in which the mass media had helped prepare them for what lay ahead? In analyzing these issues, we have paid particular attention to differences related to informants' gender and educational levels. It was one of our premises that how people respond to information is likely to be shaped by their sense of control over the circumstances of their lives and that, in the specific circumstances experienced by our informants, this sense of control may have varied considerably with gender and education.

INFORMANT CHARACTERISTICS

Our informants were 41 Korean-Americans (24 men and 17 women) who, at the time of our interviews (spring of 1990), were living and working in Philadelphia and its suburbs.² Half of this total (12 men and 9 women) had not progressed beyond high school in their formal education, while the other half (12 men and 8 women) had gone at least as far as a four-year college degree. We shall

refer to the former as "less educated" and the latter as "more educated." In all but two cases, these educational levels had been attained in Korea, before immigration to the United States, and only one of our informants, a female graduate student, was currently continuing her formal education. The median ages of the four groups of informants were as follows: for the less educated women, 42.0 years (range: 29-61); for the less educated men, 41.5 years (range: 29-55); for the more educated women, 40.5 years (range: 27-54); for the more educated men, 46.0 years (range: 30-55).

Perhaps even more than in the United States, educational attainment in Korea is related to economic status. However, it has typically been the case that Korean immigrants with high levels of education and occupational status in their native country (professionals, teachers, administrators) typically have had to move into lower-status occupations after immigration to the United States (Choy, 1979, pp. 241-243; Hurh & Kim, 1984, p. 56). Consequently, while it may indeed be legitimate to view the disparities in our informants' educational levels as indices of broader socioeconomic differences in their pre-immigration backgrounds, their current occupational statuses do not differ by education as much as one might expect. Among Korean-Americans as a whole, the most frequent occupations are the ownership and management of small businesses (Young, 1983; p. 53). This was the modal pattern for our informants as well, 8 out of 12 more educated men, 3 out of 8 more educated women, 8 out of 12 less educated men, 1 and 6 out of 9 less educated women. The kinds of businesses in which these people were engaged included (in descending order of frequency) grocery stores, dry-cleaning establishments, and fast-food shops, as well as miscellaneous others. Among the remaining informants, 3 women (2 less educated and 1 more educated) described their current occupation as "housewife," while 1 more educated woman was a graduate student. The rest were employed in a variety of occupations: secretary, insurance agent, nurse, laundry worker, and tailor, among others. As this list suggests, none of our more educated informants was working in an area in which his or her college degree was a formal requirement of employment.

All of our informants were part of what has been described as the fourth wave of Korean immigration to the United States (H.-C. Kim, 1989), which began after the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 and the consequent revision in the number of Asians permitted to enter the country as immigrants.³ However, there was a notable difference between our less educated informants and their more educated counterparts in terms of actual date of arrival in the United States. The median length of U.S. residence was 6 years for the less educated women (range: 7 months-18 years); 5 years for the less educated men (range: 1.5 years-15 years); 11 years for the more educated women (range: 3 years-22 years); and 11 years for the more educated men (range: 3 years-21 years). This

difference means that our less educated informants were somewhat more likely to have come to the United States during the eighties, while our more educated informants were somewhat more likely to have emigrated during the previous decade. There may therefore have been systematic differences in the images of the United States to which these two groups of people were exposed while they were making their decisions to emigrate.

Our informants were recruited for our study by the head or an informal association of Philadelphia-area Korean-Americans. Interviews with these informants were conducted in Korean by two Korean graduate students in the social sciences, who translated tape recordings of the interviews into English. Our study had been conceived as an exploratory, interpretive investigation, in the sense that its aim was to generate hypotheses rather than to test them (cf. Marshall & Rossman, 1989, pp. 45-46). Consequently, while the interviews were structured around a common set of basic questions, much of the ultimate course of any particular interview was deliberately left up to the individual interviewee. For this reason and also because we did not have a probability sample of informants, the reported frequencies of various types of responses should be taken as nothing more than heuristic aids. The hypotheses that this paper derives from our data are very much our own interpretive constructions, only minimally constrained by quantitative relationships observed in those data.

ATTRACTORS IN MASS MEDIA IMAGES

Which aspects—if any—of the mass-mediated images of the United States that they had seen in Korea had attracted our informants? We asked: "I'd like to know if there was anything that you saw in movies, TV, or magazines in Korea that particularly encouraged you to come to the United States". Every one of our interviewees answered yes to this question and discussed specific things that she or he had found attractive. It is worth mentioning that this was the only question we asked to which the response was uniformly positive; that a related question on the *utility* of these pre-immigration images received an overwhelmingly negative response; and that 16 of our 41 informants explicitly said that the mass media had been their *only* pre-immigration source of information about conditions in the United States.⁴ We see these observations as one indication that our informants' responses at this point in the interviews reflected something that had really happened in their lives and were not merely attempts to be accommodating in their role as interviewees.

In this connection, it should also be noted that movies and television programs produced in the United States were widely distributed in Korea throughout the period in which our informants were in the process of emigrating.

According to the *Korea Film Yearbook* (1987), between 26 and 40 U.S.-made movies were imported to Korea in each year between 1971 and 1985, and the United States is by far the most frequent source of movies imported to Korea, accounting for over 65% of imports in recent years. Furthermore, U.S.-produced TV programming has been extensively available to Koreans not only on Korean-owned stations but also through the American Forces Korean Network, which began TV broadcasting in Korea in 1957 and is currently on the air for more hours per day than its Korean counterparts (*Korea Electronics Yearbook*, 1989).

In discussing the specific features of the images that had attracted them to the United States, our informants mentioned a considerable variety of things. Not surprisingly, the most frequent references were to images of wealth, which were mentioned explicitly in 19 of the 41 interviews. However, the general category of wealth itself encompasses further variety, as the following examples may suggest:

[A less educated woman:] There were so many [encouraging media images?]. I thought I would live a very luxurious life, like the one I saw in movies in Korea. My husband kept telling me that I would have to work very hard and it would be really tiresome work. But I thought that, even if I did have to work hard, my life in America would be better than that in Korea. The gay and beautiful pictures of America I saw in movies and TV had been in my mind until I stepped down to the airport in the U.S.

[A less educated man:] I thought America was a paradise. TV programs and films I saw made me think it was a fancy and dream land: People here eat good food in fancy restaurants, live in a beautiful house-a huge house with wonderful decorations. But that was an illusion. Even average white Americans cannot do that.

[A more educated woman:] As I recall, American movies shown in Korea in the 1960s were about romantic movies, war movies, and Western movies. Every scene was pictured as luxurious and magnificent, and American women were just great. I thought the life in the United States would be a totally different one as compared to my experiences in Korea. I was very excited at the thought of coming to the new world.

[A more educated man:] Pictures of cars really encouraged me to come to the U.S. At the time in Korea [he had emigrated 12 years earlier], having one's own car was a dream that could not come true easily. In addition, I saw really beautiful scenery with green grass in some magazine. Although there were no color television sets in Korea [at that time], I was impressed by many flowers, grass, and picturesque houses in an open field when I saw *Little House on the Prairie*, starring Melissa Gilbert. I was also encouraged [to come to the United States] by exciting pictures of New York City. It made me want to experience the excitement of city life in America.

One kind of difference among these visions of the United States has to do with what may be termed their degree of idealization. This is the difference, in other words, between America as a paradise and America as a place where one can

own a car. These two ways of imagining an alternative reality are not incompatible, of course. For example, in the more educated man's statement that owning one's own car in Korea was a "dream" there may-perhaps-be an echo of the kind of conception expressed by the less educated man: America as "dream land." However, the "dream land" aspects of these visions of America point to a problem that the more quotidian aspects do not entail. The frequent occurrence of idealizing terms in our informants' descriptions of how they imagined the United States (e.g., "a paradise for laborers", "an ideal country", "a mixture of dream and fantasy", "Mickey Mouse and Disneyland ... a land of dream and fantasy") suggests that these expressions are not simply accidents of phrasing. Since any adequately socialized adult knows that paradise-as opposed to car ownership-cannot be attained through any form of earthly migration, can we say that an immigrant who has been motivated by an idealized image has, at some level, consciously embraced falsehood? This question is worth asking not because it may be answerable in its own terms, not because of whatever psychological intricacies it may entail, but rather as a point to keep in mind in any assessment of culpability for the impact of the images of American life contained in the mass media.

Aside from these differences in how our informants envisioned wealth, the examples quoted above also illustrate that these images were typically associated with other envisioned attractions of life in the United States, most notably beauty. This association between wealth and aesthetics pervaded the interviews, and in nine cases, the two concepts were joined in the same phrase (e.g., a less educated woman: "I thought America looked very beautiful, wonderful, rich and wealthy in movies"; a less educated man: "I saw many pictures of beautiful surroundings and rich families in movies in Korea"). Certain aspects of beauty are, of course, inseparable from wealth (e.g., see Veblen, 1899/1953, pp. 97-102), and this kind of connection is perhaps most evident in a statement such as this, by a more educated man: "My impression got from it [the mass media] was that American society has an abundance of material goods, and Americans enjoy a very luxurious and extravagant life. I was prepared for the clothes should wear, mostly line suits, etc."

One may not always be able to tell, however, where the beauty that one can buy leaves off and a different order of beauty begins. For example, one of the less educated women mentioned having been impressed by the "many fantastic pictures of beautiful lawns in movies". On the face of it, the image evoked here may seem of a clearly different order from the flowers and grass "in an open field" referred to in the quotation about *Little House on the Prairie*. In one case, we are dealing with cultivated beauty; in the other, with untrammelled nature. But, although cultivation is indeed the most obvious pathway from wealth to beauty, it is not the only one, as the following statement by a less educated man made only too clear:

I think I saw all the good aspects of American lives in the mass media. I was really encouraged to come to the U.S. after I saw pictures of a large, wide, and green landscape, which would be impossible for me to see in Korea. [In response to a follow-up question:] The beautiful scenery actually exists here, but I cannot afford to go see it.

The variety of possible connections between wealth and associated concepts or imagery is illustrated further by the following two quotations, the first of which was another variation on the theme of open land:

[A less educated man:] I saw pictures of the wide land of the U.S., and I thought there would be more opportunities for success in America than in Korea.

[A less educated man:] Another important reason for coming here was education. For common people like me, I expected that education for my children here would be better and easier. From pictures of the material affluence of America, I thought I might have my kids enter college.

Were any aspects of the informants' visions of America *not* somehow connected to wealth? In official proclamations about immigration, it is virtually axiomatic that the primary motive (and, perhaps, the only legitimate motive) for wishing to come to the United States is the desire for political freedom. This motive was not absent from the accounts our informants gave us. However, it was referred to explicitly in only 5 of the 41 interviews. Furthermore, as the second of these examples shows, freedom in a political sense is not always easy to distinguish from economic freedom (cf. Schuck, 1990, p. 101):

[A less educated man:] I saw that the U.S. is really large and therefore not as crowded as Korea. I saw pictures of Americans in the mass media and they looked happy and free. The Americans I saw in movies did not care whether other people could observe their behavior. I thought they could do anything if they wanted to.

[A more educated man:] There are a lot of images that encouraged me to come here. There seemed to be a lot of freedom and opportunities in America. The U.S. looked very rich and beautiful, too. The Americans in the mass media looked very rational as compared with Koreans.

[A more educated woman:] The movies I saw in Korea provided a lot of pictures that encouraged me to come to America. I thought that Americans could behave very freely while Koreans are urged to follow very restricted and established ways of doing things. They did not seem to care so much about other people's opinions or viewpoints as Koreans do. I also found that the students in America do not have to wear uniforms and cut their hair short. I thought they were allowed to do what they like with their own. It truly fascinated me.

While explicit references to freedom were relatively rare, at least 16 interviews can be seen as addressing one or another among a broader category of

concepts, encompassing various aspects of social relationships. In the last two quotations, above, this general category took the specific form of freedom from traditional social constraints. Along similar lines, other informants who mentioned social relationships dealt with such issues as openness in the display of sexual affection (a more educated woman: "I was also impressed by the fact that American couples are so sweet and warm to each other"); parental concern for children (a less educated man: "The most impressive thing was that Americans really take care of their children. They listen to what the kids are talking about. Korean kids have to obey every word their parents say"); and close family ties (a more educated woman: "From the American movies, I felt Americans were more humane than Koreans. Especially among family members, they seemed to contact each other more frequently and intimately").

At a time of considerable public concern about the state of the American family, it may seem ironic to encounter such conceptions about life in the United States, even granting the fact that they were formed in response to a somewhat earlier generation of media images. (The first of the three informants who supplied these quotations immigrated to the United States 15 years ago, while both of the other two immigrated 3 years ago.) However, from another perspective, these statements serve as useful reminders of the fact that, for many immigrants, the cessation of certain traditions (e.g., undemonstrative sexuality, strict obedience to parents) is actually a welcome feature of immigration (see, e.g., Wong, 1971).

EDUCATION-RELATED DIFFERENCES

The various issues we have discussed so far give a fair representation of the range of images of America mentioned by our informants, although we have not attempted to be exhaustive. In classifying informants' statements in terms of their relevance to wealth and/or social relationships, we found that aspects of *wealth* were mentioned by seven less educated women, six less educated men, three more educated women, and three more educated men. Aspects of *social relationships* were mentioned by three less educated women, two less educated men, six more educated women, and five more educated men. While there is no appreciable difference between men and women, there is a suggestion of an education-related difference for both of these categories of images: Less educated people were relatively more likely to mention wealth, while more educated people were relatively more likely to mention social relationships.

The fact that images of wealth appear to have been more salient to the less educated informants could mean that economic pressures played a larger role in their decisions to emigrate, since they are likely to have come from poorer backgrounds than their more educated counterparts. On the other hand, it is also

conceivable that the differences we observed in our interviews do not accurately reflect the salience that images of a wealthy America may actually have had for some of the informants when they were still in Korea. As noted, at the time of our interviews none of our more educated informants was working in a position formally related to his or her educational qualifications. If this discrepancy has been experienced as downward mobility, it may have led some of them to downplay, retrospectively, the importance of (unfulfilled) economic expectations. In view of the frequency with which all of our interviewees, both more and less educated, were willing to acknowledge dashed expectations, we do not consider this possibility to be a particularly likely one, but it certainly cannot be dismissed entirely. In any case, either interpretation of the connection between social background and our informants' responses to these images seems fairly straightforward.

What seems somewhat less straightforward is an explanation for the second education-related difference, namely, the greater frequency of references to social-relationship imagery in our interviews with the more educated informants. Might some noteworthy underlying process account for this difference, or could it be simply a result of the vagaries of convenience sampling? In our view, there are at least two theoretically interesting possibilities. The first deals, once again, with the likely difference in economic background between the less educated and the more educated informants. The active pursuit of individualistic social arrangements—especially at the level of explicit political relationships—is commonly assumed to be more feasible for people who are less constrained by pressing economic needs. To the extent that there is any truth to it, this assumption can be seen as suggesting one possible link between our informants' socioeconomic characteristics and the extent to which they found themselves consciously attracted by the images of social relationships portrayed in American movies and TV programs. This link is relatively indirect—since it is predicated on an economic difference between informants preceding the difference in educational levels—and it emphasizes the material circumstances associated with educational attainment rather than any ideas that the educational process might explicitly cultivate.

An alternative assumption, entailing a more direct link between educational background and attention to images of social relationships, would emphasize the characteristics of education itself. Although the system of higher education in Korea bears the unmistakable imprint of a distinctly Korean cultural history, to a certain extent it is probably also characterized by a major formative assumption of the "Western" or "Western"-influenced model of liberal education—namely, the idea that, in intellectual life at least, a person's identity is significantly self-created, the product of individual activity much more than of prior demographic classification. (This assumption about intellectual life—and, indeed, the very

premise that there is a meaningfully distinct intellectual sphere in life—is of course no longer accepted by many scholars in the "West"). If our more educated informants were in fact exposed to such a view of personal identity in the course of their years of college education, the influence of this view may account for their apparently greater receptiveness to images of social relationships free from traditional constraints.

This explanation of this pattern in our data is not incompatible with the more economically oriented one; and, of course, given the methodological issues that we have already discussed, we cannot pretend to be able to decide between them on the basis of our own data. Indeed, we must also note that there is yet another, perhaps more parsimonious explanation for both of the education-related trends that we have discussed. Since there is a difference of about five years between the median emigration date of our more educated informants and the corresponding date for their less educated counterparts, the differences in these two groups' patterns of responses to American media may simply reflect historical trends in the content of the images conveyed by these media. This, too, is an alternative whose relative merit we cannot test with the data available to us.

DISCREPANCIES: IMAGE AND REALITY

To initiate discussion of our informants' sense of the relationship between media images and the actual circumstances they had experienced in the United States, we asked: "Now that you are in the United States, do you feel that any of these pictures gave you a misleading impression of what you would find here? If so, which ones?" Not surprisingly, perhaps, all but five of the interviewees answered that they did indeed perceive a discrepancy. However, not all of those who answered yes actually gave specific details in response to this question. For example, one of the more educated women said: "Some of the information I received in Korea was not true or realistic at all. When I began to live here, I found that the images I obtained from the movies and TV were totally wrong." Asked to elaborate on this point, she essentially repeated a generalization: "Almost every image that I gained from Korea was a misleading one." Likewise, one of the more educated men simply said, "The image I had in Korea was more like a dream. It was not realistic."

As one might expect in view of the kinds of images of wealth in America that many of our informants had described earlier in the interview, when specific discrepancies *were* mentioned, the standard of living in the United States was a prevalent theme. Aspects of this theme were mentioned by a total of 24 informants (7 less educated women, 7 less educated men, 5 more educated women, and 5 more educated men). Their comments can all be seen as variations on the basic point that

the United States is not the land of boundless luxury and ease that some media images had led some of them to expect. For example:

[A less educated woman:] Before three days had passed since I came here, I realized I had dreamed a totally different life from reality. There was too much work for me to do. I had to do everything for myself. I never wore the beautiful dresses I had imagined in Korea. Maybe there exist happy and convenient lives somewhere, but I still don't know where they are. I have never experienced them. I think that the beautiful pictures I saw in movies in Korea are not about ordinary lives in the United States.

[A more educated woman:] I expected to eat steaks every day here, but I always have spaghetti and noodles instead.

[A more educated man (who had earlier said that the mass media had left him with the impression that life in America was "very luxurious and extravagant"):] But since I have been here, there are big differences. Americans are very frugal. For example, look at the cemeteries. Compared to their Korean counterparts, where social status and money counts for size and luxuriousness, they are the same in size and Americans do not seem to use much land for dead men.... Look at the shoppers. I have seen many housewives holding books of discount coupons and saving money even though it is minimal in amount.

[A less educated man:] I feel deceived by the pictures I saw. I first arrived in San Juan, Texas. Huge land and endless road, that was what I saw from movies. But once I started to work, I realized the image I got was a misleading one.... I worked 10 hours a day, but I didn't earn enough money At the end of each daily AFKN [American Forces Korean Network] program, they played the American national anthem with fancy pictures. I saw the Statue of Liberty, the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. As they say, I expected America to be a land of liberty. But it's only the rich man's liberty.

Whereas in the case of images of wealth there was a clear sense in the interviews that the reality of life in the United States had not measured up to our informants' expectations, in the case of images of social relationships there was not much evidence of their having experienced a contradiction (in, for example, the specific pictures of social relationships free from traditional expectations or restrictions). However, in discussing the issue of false expectations about the United States, a substantial number of informants referred to aspects of American social relationships that they said they had not seen at all or had not been sufficiently alert to in the mass-mediated images to which they had been exposed in Korea.

In particular, these comments dealt with the issue of interethnic friction and with the broader problems of social conflict and violence in contemporary urban America. The sheer difficulty of making sense of an unfamiliar system of interpersonal ritual was expressed very nicely by a less educated woman:

"[Americans] hide behind their faces. You can tell by the face if a Korean man is upset or not. But you cannot do that when it is applied to Americans. They pretend not to be angry". The (apparently unintended) irony of this image will surely not be lost on anyone who is familiar with the hoary Anglo-American stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental. The broader context for this woman's comment was an observation that the media images she had seen in Korea had not prepared her for what it would be like to be a member of an ethnic minority in the United States. The same point, with specific reference to discrimination, was made by another less educated woman: "After I came here, I realized that the problem of discrimination is even more serious than I had learned in Korea. The discrimination on Asians and Hispanics is not only from white Americans but from black Americans as well."

Since the American media to which these people are likely to have been exposed in Korea would more than likely have contained no depictions whatsoever of Asian-American life in the United States, statements of this sort are perhaps not very surprising. What may appear more surprising, in light of the magnitude of domestic public concern about the level of violence in American movies and TV programs, is that our informants made similar comments about-i.e., expressed surprise at encountering-American crime and social dislocation. For instance:

[A less educated man:] The impression I got at that time [before coming to Philadelphia] and now is completely different. Philadelphia is a community of drugs and criminals. We Koreans are always living in anxiety.

[A less educated woman:] I have been constantly disappointed since I first got off the airplane. There were many desolate scenes in the United States which I had never imagined. , .. There are so many poor people and criminals here, too.... I was surprised that there are so many criminals in the United States.

[A less educated man:] We have no problems at home. We are much better off than in Korea. However, to cope with Americans, I found living as a minority was very hard to bear. What I now experience is different from what I thought it would be. The streets are dirty, and doing business here is very dangerous. I sometimes wonder how a country like this became so rich and powerful. .. I once heard that early American settlers first built churches, then schools, and then their own houses. Now look at America today. Once a country of discipline, now it suffers from drugs and violence.

Comments of this sort about these aspects of social relationships in the United States were made by a total of 15 interviewees (3 less educated women, 5 less educated men, 2 more educated women, and 5 more educated men). As the examples we have quoted here may suggest, while comments dealing with

discrimination typically reflected the specific experience of Korean-Americans, comments about violence or other social problems usually voiced concerns that are indistinguishable from those occupying the broader public consciousness (e.g., urban decay, moral decline, drugs). The fact that a good number of our informants evidently felt that the media images of America they had seen had not prepared them for such social problems raises an obvious question: Did those movies or TV shows contain less of the violence, crime, etc., about which media critics in the United States have long been complaining? Or did this aspect of the portrayal of the United States in the mass media for some reason make less of an impression on our informants than some of the images mentioned earlier? Possible answers to this question emerged from the next section of our interviews.

DISCOURAGING MASS MEDIA IMAGES

Just as we had asked about images that had attracted them to the United States, we now asked our informants about discouraging images: "I would like to ask you if there was anything that you saw in movies, TV, or magazines in Korea that particularly discouraged you from coming to the United States". Whereas the responses to our earlier questions about misleading impressions did not exhibit any noteworthy gender- or education-related differences, in this section of the interview the difference between groups was striking. All but one of the more educated men mentioned having been discouraged by some aspect of the images of the United States that they had seen in Korea. Only two of the less educated men, one of the less educated women, and none of the more educated women gave such a response to our question. Barring the unlikely possibility that Korean men with a college education are simply more frequent viewers of gangster movies and other American genres containing crime and violence, this pattern suggests a relationship between our informants' social backgrounds and their sensitivity to negative images of life in the United States. To put it differently, this pattern may indicate that our informants' awareness of negative aspects of American social relationships is more than merely a function of prior exposure.

What could account for the more educated men's responses to this section of our interview? The fact that they tended to have immigrated to the United States earlier than the two less educated groups seems irrelevant here, since the more educated women, who had immigrated at approximately the same time as their male counterparts, did not exhibit the same response. In seeking to make sense of this aspect of our findings, we were impressed by a remark from one of the more educated men, who had earlier expressed disillusionment with the United States: "I had thought that America was a country of gentlemen, not of beggars. But walk

along the streets in Philadelphia. It is dirtier than Korea." In response to our subsequent question about images that might have discouraged him from coming to the United States, he mentioned problems of crime and violence, but he added: "As long as I decided to live here, I try to find ways to contribute to this society. It is not an easy country to live in, but it was I who decided to live here. I should bear it".

What struck us about this statement was the sense of personal responsibility it expressed. Responsibility is related to power--since one cannot logically be responsible for something over which one has no control--and the sense of power or control over one's destiny is not given equally to all. In particular, we would expect both maleness and socioeconomic status to have contributed to our more educated male informants' sense of personal efficacy in the period before their emigration. Presumably, had they chosen to stay in Korea instead, their economic options in their homeland would have been more favorable than those of their female and/or less educated counterparts. If we make the further assumption that a person with more options--or, more accurately, with a greater *sense* of options or control over his or her destiny--is more likely to weigh pros and cons before acting, we have one possible explanation for why more educated men should have been more sensitive to negative aspects of life in the land to which they were about to immigrate.

Supporting this explanation is the fact that, among the three groups of informants who tended to report that they had not been discouraged by any images of the United States that they had seen in Korea, several made it clear that they had seen negative images but had discounted them (e.g., a more educated woman: "Even when I saw some movies which dealt with criminals or gangs, I considered them as very peculiar cases and 'fictions'. I did not imagine they could be part of the real United States"; a less educated woman: "I saw many violent movies in Korea, but they did not appeal to my sense of reality. Therefore, I did not take them seriously so they could not act to discourage me, either"; a more educated woman: "I saw some movies that had a lot of violence in their content, but I was not discouraged at all").

The almost complete lack of such discounting in the case of positive images may be nothing--more than an instance of wishful thinking, but there is also a more complicated possibility: There is some evidence that even relatively sophisticated movie viewers are more likely to accept the authenticity of a movie's background features (clothing, sets, etc.) than of its plot developments (cf. Messaris, 1981). To the extent that violence is a part of the plot and luxurious, aesthetically pleasing surroundings part of the background, this distinction may account for the

difference in our interviewees' responses to these two types of images. In any event, the presence of the kinds of statements quoted above supports our assumption that the sharp difference in reports of discouragement between the more educated men and the other three groups may have been due to heightened sensitivity or receptivity to the same or similar images, rather than simply greater exposure.

In this connection, it should also be noted that, with one exception, all the more educated men who spoke of having seen discouraging images of the United States specifically mentioned movies as the source of these images. This is an important point, because it eliminates the possibility that these men's greater responsiveness to images of crime and violence might have been due to higher exposure to factual images (e.g., TV news reports or photographs in news magazines), which would have been inherently less easy to discount than fictional movies. The following examples illustrate the more educated men's statements on this issue:

I saw *Godfather* in Korea. I learned about organized crime in the United States in that movie. I knew there could be organized crime anywhere in the world, but I obtained a more concrete idea of what the Mafia is. I was very scared because they we're fighting with guns or other weapons when Korean gangs were fighting with fists.

I saw a lot of violent movies ... I remember some movies about the Mafia and gangs. I saw many pictures of cruel and heartless slaughters. I thought it would be very dangerous to live in the United States. Moreover, I saw some movies about slaves in the United States. When I saw that even some Americans became slaves because of their color, I was worried if Asians like myself could be oppressed in America.

The discussion of discouraging images was followed by a request for a retrospective assessment of their validity: "Now that you are in the United States, do you feel that any of these pictures gave you a misleading impression of what you would find here? If so, which ones?" Of the 14 interviewees who had mentioned discouraging images, 5 (1 less educated man and 4 more educated men) answered yes to this follow-up question. All five made the point that the negative images that they had seen in Korea had been selective, showing only the worst aspects of a particular problem or omitting contradictory, positive trends. For example, one more educated man who had initially said, "I thought that there would be severe racial discrimination in the United States when I saw some black people and Hispanics in movies", went on to point out the following:

I found that there is actually discrimination on people other than white races here. However, I also found that there are constant efforts to reduce the conflicts between different races in the

United States. I was very impressed, and I don't think I saw any movies or TV programs that dealt with those efforts when I was in Korea.

Another more educated man, who had said that he had seen crime and violence in the mass media "many times" and had been very apprehensive when he first came to America, answered our follow-up question with these remarks:

America is a mixture of different ethnic groups. However, it is quite well controlled. Some Korean friends of mine say America is dangerous to live in. But America is 50 times larger than South Korea in size. Thus it can be said that 50 crimes in America equal 1 crime in Korea. Americans, both black and white, are very kind and generous. My drop shop [a type of laundry] is located in a black community, but I haven't had any big troubles in dealing with them. People talk about racial tension between Koreans and blacks. But it's natural. Suppose some black people moved to my hometown in Incheon. Koreans might tease them and quarrel with them. Blacks are good people. They are, in certain respects, similar to Koreans. Yes, there are drug addicts and criminals here, indeed. But, when we say "America" we should think of ordinary people, not abnormal people and deviants. Americans are very kind. They are better than Koreans. Although the United States has had a very short history compared to 4,000 years of Korean history, there are lots of things to be learned from the American people.

Especially interesting here is this statement's deliberate accommodation to the point of view of people who are demographically unlike the speaker (although this difference is itself part of what he was challenging). As his statement as a whole suggests, the ability to span mentally what for others is often an unbridgeable divide appears to have played a significant role in this interviewee's assessment of the validity of the images he had discussed earlier. It also seems arguable that in some cases-although not in that of this specific interviewee-the ability to bridge the ethnic divide may have played an important role in informants' initial discouragement in the face of certain negative images of the United States. In particular, one could speculate that images of interethnic discrimination in the United States must have been especially discouraging to informants who could identify with the victims of the discrimination, either in the sense of fearing the same for themselves or simply in the sense of deploring someone else's suffering. This line of thought was brought up explicitly in the course of a preliminary interview (not included in our final sample) with a Korean graduate student who said, "I also found [in movies] discrimination of Caucasians on African-Americans, but it did not discourage me personally, because [at that time] I could not relate it to discrimination on other minorities, which include myself".

A heightened ability to encompass other people's perspectives in one's own is often assumed to be a major outcome of certain forms of higher education, and, if this assumption has any validity in the case of our more educated informants, it may

provide an alternative explanation for some of the differences between the more educated men's and the other informants' reactions of discouragement to negative images. However, since the more educated women exhibited no such discouragement, it seems unlikely that the kind of mental process envisioned in this explanation could have played more than a secondary role in our informants' responses.'

LEARNING TO "FIT IN"

We would like to discuss briefly one final aspect of our findings. Previous research on immigrants' exposure to American mass media has tended to focus on the relationship between exposure and acculturation to "American" patterns of thought and behavior. Research on immigrants from Korea, in particular, has found positive relationships between these two variables, not only in the case of domestic media exposure (Chaffee, Nass, & Yang, 1990; J.K. Kim, 1980; Y.Y. Kim, 1977) but also in the case of pre-immigration exposure to American mass media in Korea (WonDoornink, 1988). For the most part, our study was not concerned with the issue of acculturation as such. However, we did ask about conscious uses of the mass media as sources of information for our informants' adjustment to American society: "I'd like to ask you if any of the pictures of American life which you saw in movies, TV, or magazines in Korea contained helpful information on how to fit in in American society".

All but seven of our informants (one less educated woman, three less educated men, and three more educated men) answered no. The few exceptions all dealt with various aspects of American manners (e.g., a more educated man: "When I saw American movies, I found out about gentlemanship in Americans' behavior. For example, men are supposed to open doors for women here, which is totally different from Korean manners. I learned it from movies"; a less educated man: "I learned some etiquette through films. For example, people here say hello to others even if they are strangers. Also, when you go shopping, both clerks and customers say 'thank you' to each other. You know, Koreans seldom do that"). The paucity of cases of this sort in our data may appear to contradict the findings of earlier research in this area (e.g., Ewen & Ewen, 1982; Luk, 1988), which had revealed a more extensive pattern of immigrants' reliance on movies and other mass-produced images for information on dress, grooming, etiquette, courtship behavior, and other aspects of American manners. There are at least two plausible explanations for this contrast between our findings and the earlier research. First, the immigrants to whom the earlier findings apply have tended to be relatively young-i.e., adolescents, who are still actively acquiring patterns of social interaction-whereas

virtually all of our informants were middle-aged. Alternatively, because Korea has a developed market economy, certain "American" consumer goods and, especially, clothing (dealt with frequently in earlier accounts) may have been more familiar to our informants than was the case with the immigrants in previous research in this area (e.g., turn-of-the-century Europeans or ethnic Chinese from Vietnam).

CONCLUSION

In undertaking this study, our hope was that our informants' remarks would help us better understand the relationship between their backgrounds and their responses to portrayals of the United States in the mass media.⁶ As we have seen, our analysis has led us to a number of hypotheses about aspects of this relationship. A central concern in our analysis has been the individual immigrant's power over the economic circumstances of his or her own life. We have assumed that such power varies with both education and gender, the two variables by which we divided our sample for analysis, and, reasoning further on the basis of our findings, we have been led to three hypotheses with a primarily economic rationale: Receptivity to images of the non-economic attractions of American life (e.g., certain aspects of social relationships) should be greater for immigrants with a greater sense of control and alternatives in their own lives; sensitivity to negative images of the United States should also be greater for such people. Conversely, of course, we would also expect people with fewer economic alternatives to be more receptive to images of wealth as such. All of these hypotheses are relatively straightforward, in the sense that economic motives do not require further explanation. To put it differently: We may be moved emotionally, but we are unlikely to feel we are uncovering an unexpected motive, when we encounter a statement such as this, from one of our less-educated informants: "America appeared to me to be a place where I could escape my hardships in Korea: a large country where I could live in a big house and eat nice meals".

However, as we have seen, not every response to positive or negative images can be reduced to purely economic terms. In particular, for some of the responses described by our informants, the cognitive consequences of education might be a productive area in which to search for explanations, and accordingly we have offered the following two hypotheses: Exposure to a "Western" style of higher education should be positively related to receptivity toward images of social relationships unconstrained by traditional social obligations; and sensitivity to images of ethnic discrimination should be greater for people whose education has cultivated in them a tendency to empathize with the perspectives of people unlike themselves. These hypotheses are partial alternatives to the ones mentioned above,

but it bears repeating, and should in any event be obvious, that in many cases it would be inappropriate to try to assign a single distinct reason to our informants' responses or a single distinct meaning to the images they were responding to. Consider, for example, one final illustration of the protean multiplicity of meanings that can be assumed by the image of the American landscape (cf. Jussim & Lindquist-Cock, 1985): "I saw the wide and open land of the United States in movies. These pictures of wide land ignited my aspiration to come to America. The brave pioneer spirit of early Americans I saw in movies also encouraged me to come here." Not only is it probable that, in this association with the American past, the landscape is seen both in terms of economic opportunity (as in some of the comments quoted earlier) and in terms of freedom from social restrictions (as in others of these comments), but it also seems indisputable that, even in combination, these meanings do not exhaust the range of associations encompassed by this (more educated, male) speaker's use of such an abstraction as "brave pioneer spirit". Taken together, the hypotheses we have derived from our findings are a first attempt to untangle some of these complexities.

NOTES

¹The media portrayals discussed in this paper were not intentionally designed to attract immigration to the United States. However, visual media have been used deliberately for this purpose in the past (e.g., see Ewen & Ewen, 1982), and there is also a history of the use of visuals to promote internal migration within U.S. boundaries (e.g., see Taggett & Schwartz, 1990).

²The Philadelphia area has one of the largest concentrations of Korean-Americans in the United States. According to the Philadelphia Korean Association, approximately 50,000 people of Korean descent live in the city and its suburbs. At the time of writing, the most recent available estimate for the nation as a whole, 357,000, is based on the 1980 census (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1990).

³It is estimated that, nationwide, over 80% of the Korean-American population are post-1965 immigrants (Yu, 1983, p. 28). The previous three waves of Korean immigration to the United States, according to H.-C. Kim's (1989) chronology, are: (a) 1902-1905 (involving Koreans who went to Hawaii as sugar-plantation workers); (b) 1906-1945 (a period of limited Korean-American immigration involving students, political refugees, and picture brides of the male laborers in Hawaii); and (c) 1946-1964 (in which the immigrant population included students, Korean wives of American service-men, and Korean War orphans).

⁴One of the questions in our interview asked: "Aside from the mass media that we talked about, what other kinds of information did you have about the United States before you came here?" Sixteen interviewees indicated that they had not had any other kind of information. In the course of elaborating on their answers, a less educated woman said, "I did not know anything

about America. I came here blindly", while a less educated man said, "I think the only way to get information about American society was film. My impression and desire to come to the United States were largely due to scenes from movies and television". The use of other sources of information (relatives or acquaintances in the United States, Americans in Korea, print media, etc.) appears to have been related to level of education. Lack of other sources was reported by 6 of the 9 less educated women, 6 of the 12 less educated men, 1 of the 8 more educated women, and 3 of the 12 more educated men. (However, educational level was not a predictor of the actual presence of relatives in the United States. Only 1 woman and 3 men in each of the education-related subgroups did not have any family relatives in the United States at the time of our interviews.)

⁵As Ravitch (1990) has pointed out, in educational circles today it is widely assumed that identification is unlikely to cross ethnic boundaries. However, discussions of this issue typically focus on members of ethnic groups that have suffered discrimination responding to members of the ethnic groups that have perpetrated the discrimination. In other words, in such cases the circumstances themselves can be seen as erecting an active barrier to identification. For example, in a discussion of how people who live in the West might react to Western movies, Stegner (1987) points out that, if you are not of Northern European origin, "instead of being suitable for casting in the cowboy and pioneer roles familiar from the mythic and movie West, you may be one of those Chinks or Spics or Greasers for whom the legendary West had a violent contempt. You'd like to be a hero, and you may adopt the costume and attitudes you admire, but your color or language or the slant of your eyes tells you that you are one of the kind scheduled to be a villain or a victim" (pp. 64-65). Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising to be told that "waiting for Tonto to walk away from the Lone Ranger, or wondering when Rochester will quit Jack Benny's employ ... is how a lot of us who aren't white managed to enjoy these programs in the 1950s and 1960s" (Wallace, 1988, p. 164). However, the kind of identification we are dealing with in this paper does not involve such a history of unequal social relationships, and it is unlikely that we can straightforwardly extrapolate between the two.

⁶The issues we have examined in this study can be seen as part of a broader topic, which might be termed the problem of "images of aspiration"—images derived from the mass media that, at some level, people accept as portrayals of the way they would like their own lives to be. In past scholarship, this problem has been examined primarily with regard to such matters as adolescents' views about their own physical appearance (e.g., Tan, 1979) or young adults' conceptions of romantic relationships (e.g., Goldfarb, 1987), but interesting parallels could be drawn between the results of that body of research and findings we have described here. For example, two media-derived images described by our immigrant informants, that of the United States as a place where great wealth and luxury are the norm, and that of reciprocal respect for the individual as a characteristic of American family life, both have been identified by native-born Americans as sources of social friction and a sense of personal deficiency in their own lives (see Messaris, 1987, pp. 99-101). However, it was beyond the scope of this study to attempt any systematic extrapolation of this sort.

REFERENCES

- Chaffee, S. H., Nass, C. I., & Yang, S.-M. (1990). The bridging role of television in immigrant political socialization. *Human Communication Research, 17*, 266-288.
- Choy, B.-Y. (1979). *Koreans in America*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Ewen, S., & Ewen, E. (1982). *Channels of desire: Mass images and the shaping of American consciousness*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Goldfarb, E. (1987). *Romance and media: The role of romantic portrayals in perceptions of real life romantic experiences*. Unpublished master's thesis, The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Hurh, W. M., & Kim, K. C. (1984). *Korean immigrants in America: A structural analysis of ethnic confinement and adhesive adaptation*. London: Associated University Presses.
- Jussim, E., & Lindquist-Cock, E. (1985). *Landscape as photograph*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kim, H.-C. (1989). Koreans in the United States. In H.-C. Kim (Ed.), *Asian American studies: An annotated bibliography and research guide* (pp. 13-22). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Kim, J. K. (1980). Explaining acculturation in a communication framework: An empirical test. *Communication Monographs, 47*, 155-169.
- Kim, Y. Y. (1977). Communication patterns of foreign immigrants in the process of acculturation. *Human Communication Research, 4*, 66-77.
- Korea electronics yearbook*. (1989). Seoul: Electronics Review Company.
- Korea film yearbook*. (1987). Seoul: Film Promotion Corporation.
- Luk, L. Y. A. (1988). *Communication and community: Television and the socialization of recent Chinese immigrants in America*. Unpublished master's thesis, The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1989). *Designing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Messaris, P. (1981). The film audience's awareness of the production process. *Journal of the University Film Association, 33*(4), 53-56.
- Messaris, P. (1987). Mothers' comments to their children about the relationship between television and reality. In T. R. Lindlof (Ed.), *Natural audiences: Qualitative research of media uses and effects* (pp. 95-108). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Ravitch, D. (1990). Multiculturalism: E pluribus plures. *The American Scholar*, 59(3), 337-354.

Schuck, P. H. (1990). The great immigration debate. *The American Prospect*, 1(3), 100-118.

Statistical Abstract of the United States (110th ed). (1990). Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census.

Stegner, W. 1987. *The American West as living space*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Taggett, S.C., & Schwartz, T. (1990). *Paintbrushes and pistols: How Taos artists sold the West*. Santa Fe, NM: John Muir Publications.

Tan, A (1979). TV beauty ads and role expectations of adolescent female viewers. *Journalism Quarterly*, 56, 283-288.

Veblen, T. (1953). *The theory of the leisure class: An economic study of institutions*. New York: Mentor.

Wallace, M. (1988). Invisibility blues. In R. Simonson & S. Walker (Eds.), *The Graywolf annual .five: Multi-cultural literacy* (pp. 161-172). St Paul, MN: Graywolf Press.

Won-Doornink, M. J. (1988). Television viewing and acculturation of Korean immigrants. *Amerasia*, 14(1), 79-92.

Wong, J. S. (1971). Puritans from the Orient: A Chinese evolution. In T. C. Wheeler (Ed.), *The immigrant experience* (pp. 107-131). New York: Penguin.

Young, P. K. Y. (1983). Family labor, sacrifice and competition: Korean greengrocers in New York City. *Amerasia*, 10(2), 53-71.

Yu, E.-Y. (1983). Korean communities in America: Past, present, and future. *Amerasia*, 10(2), 23-52.

Paul Messaris is Associate Professor and Jisuk Woo is a graduate student at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. The authors would like to express their gratitude to Jae-Hyup Lee for his contribution to this study.