

## Relations have improved between blacks and Koreans

By **ANNE ARTLEY**  
Contributing Writer

**LOS ANGELES** — On the day that four white police officers were acquitted for beating Rodney King in April 1992, a group of young black men walked into a Korean-owned liquor store three blocks west of Florence and Normandie avenues, the site where six days of rioting, looting and arson began.

They grabbed several bottles of liquor off the shelves, hit the storeowner's son and broke the storefront window. One yelled, "This is for Rodney King!"

Even though the Korean-American community was not involved in the Rodney King incident, tensions between the black population and Korean immigrants came to a head during the 1992 Riots, during which more than 2,000 Korean-owned businesses were destroyed.

"The tensions and conflicts between blacks and Korean merchants and the reality and perception by blacks of merchant exploitation and disrespect were one of the two biggest reasons for the L.A. riots," said Earl Ofari Hutchinson, author of more than 10 books on politics and racial issues in America.

Another court decision, handed down a week before the Rodney King verdict, set the stage for discontent: a state appeals court upheld the mild sentence for Soon Ja Du, a South Korean born convenience store owner, in the shooting death of Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old African-American girl Du accused of attempting to steal a bottle of orange juice from her store.

Video footage captured Du shooting the girl in the back of the head as she was leaving the store, even though Harlins had put the orange juice back on the counter. A jury found Du guilty



Many Korean-owned businesses burned during the 1992 Riots, but relations between the Korean and black communities have improved in the ensuing 25 years, people from both communities say.

Courtesy photo

of manslaughter, with a maximum sentence of 16 years in prison. But the judge gave her probation, 400 hours of community service and a \$500 fine.

Witnesses said Harlins had never attempted to steal the juice in the first place, and that she told Du she was going to pay for it.

"The majority of Koreans stood in support of Harlins' murder, but they paid the price during the L.A. Riots," community activist Najee Ali said at a memorial service for Harlins on the 25th anniversary of her death in 2016.

He also said relations have improved between the two communities since the 1990s.

"The next generation of Korean business owners took the time to learn customers' names and began to hire local people to work in their businesses," Ali said. "It's also the small things, like putting change in patrons hands instead of throwing it on the counter."

But Hyepin Im, the founder of the nonprofit Korean Churches for Community Development, said the Korean community also suffered losses that are

not part of the narrative of the time.

"What happened to Latasha Harlins is a terrible tragedy, but many more Korean business owners lost their lives from black customers gunning them down," she said.

"I remember a one- to two-year period leading up to the riots where it seemed like a Korean store owner was shot every day," she said. "Nobody outside the Korean media covered the deaths."

Im said because of the "model minority" myth, in which certain ethnic

groups are perceived to have a higher degree of socioeconomic success than the rest of the population, Asian storeowners still suffer from a misconception that they "make money off the back of the black communities they serve."

She described an incident this year when she was sitting on a panel about the L.A. Riots and one audience member accused storeowners of not providing enough economic opportunities for the black population.

"That's pretty much like yelling at someone in a wheelchair to jump," she said.

Im said Asian immigrants are in an "economic wheelchair," where they are forced to set up businesses in low-income communities because they can't afford anywhere else.

"These storeowners work 16-hour days and the holidays," she said. "If it was lucrative, the big chain outlets would be there."

Edward Park, director of the Asian Pacific American Studies program at Loyola Marymount University, said that due to a lack of English-speaking skills, recent immigrants gravitate toward setting up liquor or convenience stores since it does not require forming a connection with customers, unlike a dry cleaner, for example.

They also can recruit family members as unpaid labor, as they often don't have the money for new hires, he said.

Im said the myth of Asian storeowners as "predators and outsiders" in the black community not only persists today, but also throughout the U.S.

She said the protests of police violence against Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 and Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015 included damages to Asian businesses.

"It was the criminal justice system that failed in all of these cases," she said. "It's not the fault of the Asian community."