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Jane Yeonjae Lee
Stanford University

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Jane Yeonjae Lee

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Institute for Asian American Studies
University of Massachusetts Boston
100 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125-3393
(617) 287-5650
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Lee is a Visiting Scholar at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University. Prior to joining Shorenstein APARC, she was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Northeastern University working in a global comparative project on future of mobility policies. Dr. Lee is an interdisciplinary qualitative researcher and her research revolves around transnationalism, skilled mobilities, and social policies. She holds a Ph.D. and B.A. in Geography from the University of Auckland. Dr. Lee may be contacted at jane.leechoi@gmail.com.

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Being Non-Christian in a Christian Community: Experiences of Belonging and Identity among Korean Americans

Jane Yeonjae Lee

Introduction

Christianity is a critical element in the study of Korean Americans. It is estimated that over 70 percent of all Korean Americans is affiliated with Korean Christian churches (Hurh and Kim, 1990). There are over 3,000 ethnic Korean Christian churches in the United States, and 54 Protestant Korean churches in the Massachusetts area alone (Kupel, 2010). Much of the existing literature illustrates that these churches provide essential resources for both newly arrived and long-term Korean immigrants, and they serve as important social mechanisms, consolidating Korean Americans' sense of identity and belonging.

While these statistics illustrate that Korean Americans are highly religious,

some observers have noted that these statistics may “tend to perpetuate the myth and stereotype that all Korean Americans are Christian” (Suh, 2004:3). Indeed, 40 percent of Christian Korean Americans surveyed converted to Christianity upon immigration to the United States (Hurh and Kim, 1990). Studies of those who do not belong to ethnic religious communities or who are non-Christian that comprise the “religiously marginalized” have been largely ignored within the study of religion in certain ethnic communities including Korean Americans.

The tendency to focus on religious institutions is understandable given evidence of the link between these institutions and a sense of belonging, community, and identity. Thus, it is not hard to find studies that

illustrate the importance of churches in providing networks of ethnic minority groups with a sense of community (Chai, 2001; Kwon, 2004). For example, a study about Portuguese immigrants in Canada explains that Portuguese churches in Toronto are open day and night to help immigrants find employment, file paperwork and get married (Brettell, 2003). The church is more than a religious institution; it is what the study's author calls "a rallying point for the formation of ethnic interests" (Brettell, 2003:121). Another study about Korean immigrants in New Zealand illustrates that Korean ethnic churches provide numerous cultural and social events throughout the year and group activities for all ages (Lee, 2015). A study about Korean-Canadian churches also illustrates that ethnic churches provide counseling services for immigrants who are stressed about changing family roles and job searching while settling in their new homeland (Ley, 2008). These social/religious activities enable a sense of belonging and create stronger bonds within the immigrant community (De Leeuw, 2007).

The study of religion and ethnic minorities also suggests a strong relationship between ethnic churches and immigrant identity formation. In an ethnographic account of Korean American Christians in Chicago, Chong (1998) argues that "when an ethnic group is faced with a strong sense of social marginalization believed to arise from its racial status, the ethnic church can play a dominant role in the group's quest for identity and sense of belonging" (259). This view is shared by numerous other scholars who

illustrate that Christian churches provide a sense of community, and, therefore, a higher social status within the host community, and stronger sense of belonging through ethnic identity (Min, 1992; Kwon et al., 2001; Ecklund, 2005; Suh: 2004). For second generation Korean Americans, the role of the Korean church may be stronger because it is the only access to Korean culture for the group (Lee, 2007).

The strong and much studied link between religion and belonging raises questions about identity formation among those ethnic minorities who do not belong to ethnic religious communities. What happens to immigrants and ethnic minorities if they do not belong to certain religious groups? Do they end up converting to the ethnically dominant religion (Hurh and Kim, 1990; Yang, 1998)? Or do they find other mechanisms to deal with integration and their ethnic minority identities?

This study responds to the need to investigate the lives of secular migrants where religious marginalization may play a significant role in their everyday lives. Through a qualitative approach, this exploratory study examines the experiences of secular and religiously marginalized Korean Americans in relation to their predominantly Christian communities. In particular, the study focuses on the unique experiences of those aged between 25 and 35 living in the greater Boston area. The study compiles vivid narratives of non-Christian Korean American experiences within a dominant Christian ethnic community focusing on their religious and non-religious performances.

The overall objectives of this study, then, are:

1. To contribute to the literature on ethnic religious communities by achieving a more nuanced understanding of those who belong to marginalized religious groups and those who do not belong to any religious organizations. To understand how dominant ethnic religious communities affect and shape immigrants' everyday lives;
2. To understand how the religious marginalization of secular and non-Christian Korean Americans affects their identification with the wider Korean community and shapes their everyday lives;
3. To examine how the identities of secular and non-Christian Korean Americans change and mature over time and in different social contexts due to religious marginalization.

Korean Americans in the U.S. & Massachusetts

In 2010, Koreans were the fifth largest Asian American ethnic group after Chinese, Asian Indians, Filipinos and Vietnamese. Much like other Asian groups, Korean immigrants are one of the many ethnic groups who entered the United States in large numbers after the 1965 Immigration Act. However, Korean immigrants did not make a smooth transition into U.S. mainstream society because of cultural and language barriers and experienced various conflicts in order to culturally and economically adjust to their new life in the United States. The first generation Korean immigrants relied heavily on self-employment and operated small businesses such as convenience stores, hair salons,

restaurants, and dry cleaners (Min and Kim, 2013). The 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans have adjusted better and many have entered the private and public sectors of the mainstream economy. Perhaps more than other Asian immigrants, religion is an important component in sustaining the sense of belonging for Korean Americans. Importantly, Christianity exists as a strong anchor of Korean American identity.

According to the 1970 U.S. Census, there were 70,598 Koreans in the United States. By 1980, that number had increased to 357,393 with Korean Americans accounting for 10.3 percent of all Asian Americans. The 1990 census counted 798,849 Korean Americans, and the 2000 census counted 1,072,682 or 10.7 percent of Asian Americans. The most recent data of the 2010 census indicates that there are 1,423,784 Korean Americans in the United States. Korean American is the fifth largest Asian American group and accounts for 0.6 percent of the entire U.S. population.

Korean Americans are spatially distributed across the country in an uneven manner—they are concentrated in certain cities and counties and sparse in other places. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 43.7 percent of Korean Americans reside on the West Coast, 32.3 percent in the South, 9.7 percent in the Northeast, and 9.1 percent in the Midwest. At the state level, there are 451,892 Korean Americans in California, 140,994 in New York, and 93,679 in New Jersey, which account for 48 percent of Korean Americans in the United States. The states with the lowest Korean populations are Wyoming (508) and North Dakota (609).

There are 28,904 Koreans living in Massachusetts. This population includes numerous students living in Boston and Cambridge, and residents concentrated in Brookline, Newton and Lexington. The existing Korean communities in the state are relatively small and are dominated by religious groups. In 2009, there were an estimated 54 Protestant Korean churches in Massachusetts alone, three Catholic churches, and three Buddhist temples.¹ Korean churches provide a strong network and sense of belonging for Koreans living in the Boston area (Kupel, 2010; Chai, 2001).

Research methods & participant information

Between December 2013 and March 2014, I conducted interviews with 19 Korean Americans who are either non-religious or have a non-Christian religious affiliation. Two additional individuals who identify as Catholic were included in the study since they experienced a sense of marginalization from the dominant Protestant mainstream as well. The aim of the interviews was to understand the complexities of individuals' experiences. As Bennett (2002:151) affirms, the key to interviewing is more or less to "expose differences, contradictions and, in short, the complexity of unique experiences". Along with such a methodological aim, I also took a life history approach (Wallace, 1994) in order to collect information from childhood to the present day in order to gain a holistic understanding.

¹ Data derived from: www.bostonkorea.com.

More specifically, this study examines the life histories of 1.5 generation Korean Americans who are not churchgoers. There is not a universal definition of who is considered to be a member of the 1.5 generation. The term is mostly used in order to differentiate those who immigrated as children of their first generation parents, but who were still born overseas. The 1.5 generation's migration and settlement experiences are different from their parents as well as from 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants who are born in the destination country. It is also argued that 1.5 generation's adaptation strategies are distinct from those of earlier migrants (Bartley and Spoonley, 2008).

This research focuses on a group of younger adults aged 25 to 35 as this demographic is likely to have graduated from tertiary education, and be looking for employment and perhaps a future spouse. Therefore, in this stage of entering adulthood, this group is more likely to be seeking out social networks and forming stronger (or less strong) ethnic identities (Erikson, 1997). The recruitment of interview participants was done through a snowball sampling method. There were eight male and 13 female participants. Out of 21 participants, 13 were born in the U.S. and eight were born in Korea. All of the study participants spent their early childhood to teenage years in the U.S. and have lived in Boston for more than eight years in the recent past. Seventeen participants identified themselves as being either atheist or agnostic; two are Catholic and two are Buddhists. Their occupations included graduate student, lawyer,

medical practitioner, accountant, and educator. All of them were highly educated and had completed their tertiary education in Boston. Fictional names have been used for all study participants in this paper in order to keep the study participants' identities anonymous.

Reasons for not going to a Korean church

The study participants are non-churchgoers generally because they have been brought up in a non-Christian family and/or simply because they do not hold Christian beliefs. However, in many cases their beliefs evolved over the years and they often experienced complex emotions about attending church. Some of the study participants used to attend a Korean church, have agnostic views, or have Christian faith to a certain degree. Yet, they all shared some form of negative experiences with their local Korean churches (either their own or gleaned from witnessing others) which created certain barriers to joining the community. Indeed, growing up in a Korean community in America, they had many opportunities and aspirations to join a Korean church in order to be part of a Korean community and to find a sense of belonging. For many of the study participants, Korean church was the only access they had to a Korean community within their neighborhoods or, indeed, the entire city:

In my childhood, we went to a Korean church for many years. I think it was important, more for my parents than

me and my brothers, to go to a Korean church—having cultural and language affinity. I didn't have friends, really, but I think it was one of few spaces where I saw lots of Koreans in one space, since our suburb and school was mostly white.

(Laura Lim, F, 29)

For Laura, who grew up in a rural area where there was a small Korean population, attending a Korean church was the only way to access a Korean community. As she affirms, it was considered more important from her parents' perspective because they wanted to teach their children Korean language and culture, and church was the most accessible way of attaining both. Laura further stated that she did not enjoy going to the church because she had many personal conflicts with the preaching and it was hard for her to make friends with other Korean kids. However, it was her parents who made the decision to stop going to the church:

When I was maybe in middle or high school, we stopped and started going to an American church closer to home, the Korean church was about an hour away in Baltimore—we lived in the suburbs. I think my dad had a bad experience with politics and leadership drama at the church. I was too young to totally understand.

Although Laura still does not fully understand what kind of 'leadership drama' her father went through in their local Korean church, she knew that it was not a pleasant experience for her and her parents. Laura stopped going to a church after attending

college as she formed a stronger sense of her own religious beliefs and knew that Christianity was not suitable for her.

Similar to Laura, many of the study participants had childhood or teenage experiences of going to a Korean church. Stephen Paek (M, 35) also grew up in a small town in the Midwest. His family used to drive two hours each Sunday in order to attend a Korean church. The first time that Stephen went to a Korean church, at the age of ten, he saw Korean people for the first time other than his family. He used to enjoy going to the church as he made Korean friends and was able to enjoy good Korean food and cultural activities. Church was something that he looked forward to every Sunday, until the following incident occurred:

Yeah, it was all good and fun in the beginning. I was very drawn into the Korean community and back then, I think I was almost 100 percent Christian. I totally believed in the Bible and enjoyed listening to the priest. Then, there was the scandal. It was so huge, that the church was eventually closed. Well, basically, the priest had a number of affairs with the Korean ladies who attended the church and had some money issues. Back then, I was so shocked when I first heard the news and did not want to go back to the church ever again. After all that teaching, the priest was a total joke!

The incident put Stephen off the Korean community and he never returned to a Korean church. Although he had opportunities to join other churches throughout

his life, he decided that he did not have to attend a church and follow the rituals in order to have faith in God.

Other study participants were reluctant to attend Korean churches for other social and personal reasons. Many thought that Korean churches were 'too tight' and they were put off by the closeness, gossiping, and being closed in a 'Korean bubble':

I did belong to the Korean church that my parents attended. I did not agree with what the church preached as I got older and was able to make my own decisions about my religious beliefs. After I started college I was very turned off by Korean churches and did not want to join any. I felt that a lot of people who attended Korean churches only went to socialize and gossip about other Korean people. There was so much jealousy and competition between people. I did not want to be part of the community.

(Stella Kim, F, 28)

I did have many friends at school who went to Korean church, so I used to follow them. It was very much of a peer pressure for me. Now I don't go to church at all because I have a stronger sense of what I want. Over the past experiences, I think I did gain some kind of prejudice against Korean churches. They seem like a huge industry to me, you don't really get a sense of community, you know. There are so many Korean churches, and people attend the church just to meet other people, to make connections... I keep hearing from my friends who go to church that this or that church is not their 'type', so

they switch their church to go to the ones where they can find people that they like. I find it all very arbitrary. It's more of a social group than anything religious. I don't really like that. I don't like being in that circle of people and live in a Korean bubble.

(Michelle Lim, F, 30)

Despite all the positive elements of having a close ethnic church within a host society, such as social support and retention of original identity (Min, 1992), the 'closeness' of these ethnic communities may also have important downsides. By being too close to one another, one's social network can become limited and may create the feeling of being in a 'Korean bubble'. Both Stella and Michelle emphasized that the gossip, dislike, jealousy and competition within the Korean community were some of the main features they did not like about Korean ethnic churches. Michelle further noted that she wanted to make friends from all ethnic backgrounds, blend into the wider society and not limit herself to a solely Korean community. Although one can be part of a Korean American community and, at the same time, be part of the wider society, Michelle especially felt that she was limiting herself from other opportunities if she went to a Korean church.

The contrasting costs and benefits of having a closed ethnic community was also a theme in other study participants' narratives. Anne Kwon (F, 30), a second generation Korean American, was encouraged by her parents to attend a Korean church when she was at high school:

My mom sent me to a Korean church when I was at school to learn Korean language and make Korean friends. First I didn't really fit in at the church because the Korean girls didn't like me. After a few months, I started making some church friends and started hanging out with them more. We went to Korea-town and went to No-rae-bang² and hung out all the time. And then my mum didn't like that because she thought I was hanging out with the 'bad kids' as I didn't study much, but spent too much time with my Korean friends. So she ended up stopping me from going to the church.

Anne's story illustrates typical Korean parental behavior that prioritizes children's educational discipline over interaction with their peers. This particular account echoes the notion that there can be pros and cons of attending an ethnic church. Anne's mother felt that while the church provided her daughter with access to her own culture, she did not want her daughter to fall into 'bad' behaviors. Anne still does not go to a church because she was never a Christian and she did not enjoy her teenage experience of being in and out of the Korean church community.

So far, I have illustrated various reasons why the study participants have kept their distance from ethnic Korean Protestant communities. Their narratives illustrate that they hold some hostility toward the Korean church either coming from their personal experiences or through the influences of

² Korean Karaoke.

those around them. For others, it was a simple matter of not wanting to attend because they do not believe in Christianity. No matter what their reasons for not being a Korean church member, the consequences of their decisions were significant, particularly as adolescents and young adults. In the next section, I move to the narratives of the study participants' relationships (or lack of relationship) with the Korean community and how they have experienced such 'distance' between themselves and the wider Korean community.

Dominance of Korean Protestant communities

Sometimes when I meet a new Korean person, I worry what they are going to think of me.

(Michelle Lim, F, 31)

As mentioned in the introduction, over 70 percent of Korean Americans are affiliated with Korean Christian churches (Huh and Kim, 1990). Aside from Christians, six percent are Buddhists, and 23 percent are unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2012). Such disparity between the number of individuals connected to Christian churches and the non-Christian identified is common in other regions where there is a significant Korean American population. In this section, I examine whether secular and non-Christian Korean Americans identify themselves as being part of a wider Korean community despite their non-affiliation to dominant Protestant churches. In doing so, I

attempt to understand their sense of belonging and experiences of being religiously (and socially) marginalized.

The narratives indicated that the study participants recalled their teenage and college lives as being somewhat difficult due to their religious minority status. Most expressed a feeling of 'not fitting in' and not being able to blend in with their peers due to their non-affiliation to the mainstream Korean American religious community. The teenage period is considered to be the most formative and sensitive phase of one's life course in terms of identity construction (Kroger, 2007), which was reflected in the narratives of the study participants' memories of their school life. The participants were never explicitly left out, but they felt isolated because they could not take part in the 'fun' church activities that their peers enjoyed:

There were times when I went to school, I really wanted to be part of the Korean church, mainly because of the fun camps that they go to. My friends would go to a ski camp, and summer camps with their church people, and they looked really fun. That's where my friends made new friends or made girlfriends. For me, I always had to search for my own...

(Raymond Kim, M, 29)

On many weekends when all my (Korean) friends went to a camp or a church picnic or something, I used to just sit alone in my room, wishing that I could join. I didn't want to go along with them just for the sake of it, I didn't want to go and pray and all that, but I did feel little anxious and felt

left out that I didn't get to hang out with all my friends.

(James Lee, M, 30)

Both Raymond and James recalled their teenage years and stated that they felt isolated at times when their friends all went to church gatherings. They didn't want to go to church because they were not Christian, but they still felt they were 'missing out' on many things such as making new friends, forming romantic attachments, going to camps and picnics, and being connected to the Korean American community. It is important to note that most of the Korean American study participants hold strong ethnic ties and identities and are discouraged from interethnic marriage. Hence, finding a potential Korean spouse is important, and this was often seen as an advantage of going to a Korean church. As Raymond and James' narratives illustrate, the non-churchgoers had to find their own Korean social connections through different means.

For some participants, being disconnected from the Korean church community and holding onto their non-Christian identity made their teenage and early college years somewhat more difficult. Anne Kwon (F, 28) became non-religious when she entered college. She decided that Christianity was no longer her belief and stopped attending her local Korean church. While this was not an easy decision for her to make, its difficulty was compounded by the changed way that her friends behaved around her:

When I stopped attending the Korean church at my first year in college, that's when my friendship with my girl group ended. We just stopped hanging out for no reason. It just ended. They gradually stopped inviting me to hang out and I didn't want to ask them to invite me.

(Anne Kwon, F, 28)

Anne further explained that she was initially very happy with her group of Korean friends at college. They all went to the same church every Sunday and spent all their time together during the first few months of college. However, as soon as Anne stopped attending their local church, she was isolated from her Korean peers. Anne has since started making non-Korean friends. Feeling isolated does not necessarily come from being explicitly bullied and excluded. Many of the participants stated that they felt like outsiders on some occasions due to their 'religiously marginalized' position. Often, a subtle feeling of inferiority was inflicted by the people that they were close to, as exemplified through Anne's story. As a result, the feeling of exclusion was more severe and distracting.

The sense of being inferior can be a product of mainstream's ignorance of one's culture and/or subtle gestures that constantly remind the minorities that they are 'different'. Helen Park (F, 29) shares a similar, yet different story from Anne's. Helen is a Buddhist Korean American and there were many occasions during her teenage and college years when she had to defend or hide her non-Christian identity:

I started becoming more and more insecure with being a Buddhist as I entered my teenage years. Some Korean kids at school would kind of tease me that I would go to hell if I don't go to church. They would say it in a kind of joking manner, but it was not that funny for me. So I learnt to hide my religious identity as I grew older. At college, I never really talked about my religion with my friends, I would just tell them that I don't really practice any religion. Even on Facebook, I don't post anything that's to do with my Buddhist temple because I am scared about what they are going to think of me. You just always have to be quiet.

Helen further noted that it was difficult for her to share her everyday life with her Korean friends because they could not understand the Buddhist rituals. There are certain rituals that Buddhist Koreans traditionally practice, such as 'Jae-Sa'. 'Jae-Sa' is a Korean ceremony for ancestors. Koreans prepare certain food and drink for their deceased family members and ancestors and bow to them in front of the prepared foods arranged along with pictures or written names of their ancestors. Helen was afraid that if she shared this ritual, her friends would think of her as someone who was too 'traditional' and part of an older generation. Helen also stated that this feeling of insecurity was more severe during her teenage years, and she is still learning to be comfortable with her religious identity:

I think being a Buddhist, I am a minority in America, but as I grew older, I am

becoming comfortable with it. I think I am still learning, to be comfortable with who I am, but I am getting better. In Korea, I don't think I ever thought that being Buddhist is bad or different. And I am sure I would have met more people of my age at temples if I was in Korea.

As can be seen in this narrative, Helen makes an important point about her religious status being a 'placed' experience (Cresswell, 1998). As a Buddhist, Helen has always felt 'out of place' in America because Buddhism is not the mainstream in Korean American society. However, in Korea, Buddhism is the largest religious group with 22.8 percent of the population practicing. Only 18.3 percent are Protestants in Korea.³ Koreans in Korea generally understand the teachings and rituals of Buddhism, and Helen would have felt much more comfortable in this sense had she been living in Korea. Helen realized this when visiting Korea on holiday trips and staying in various temples in Korea. She was able to freely express her religious identity with the people she met in Korea. She also found that there were more people of her own age in Buddhist temples in Korea, which was something that she missed in her local Buddhist temple in America.

Having trouble expressing their non-Christian identity in front of other Korean Americans was a shared experience among study participants:

One time, I went on a blind date with this guy. We both felt that we really connected

³ Data derived from: <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/english/index.action>.

and we had a great time chatting. Then towards the end of the date, he suddenly asked me if I went to church. When I said no, that's when the silence came and we both knew that we weren't going to meet again. Well, I mean, I wouldn't mind dating him, but I had a sense that he wouldn't want to meet me because I am not that good church girl you know.

(Janet Park, F, 26)

As the narrative illustrates, Janet was aware of the general perception held by Protestant Korean Americans that non-religious people are not 'good people'; hence, she used to feel that she needed to be extra careful in displaying her identity. Janet did not want to be judged based on her non-religious identity. Having to negotiate such stereotypes was mentioned by a few other study participants: as children, they were told by their peers at school that they could not be friends anymore because the parents of their peers had told them not to hang out with kids who do not go to church because 'they will influence you in bad ways'. Having had such childhood experiences, as well as understanding general taboos against atheism, Janet was hesitant to tell others that she was non-Christian, especially on a first blind date with a Korean American. As soon as the silence came, Janet knew that she would not be seeing the man again.

Similar to the case above, many of the study participants' everyday experiences were filled with either being forced to admit that they do not go to a Korean church or consciously hiding the fact. Almost all of the study participants agreed that when

they meet a new Korean American person, they are always asked the question of church affiliation. For Korean Americans, church affiliation becomes a point of connection (or disconnection):

I do kind of 'feel a person out' when I meet a new Korean American. Inevitably the religion question comes up, mostly like 'Do you go to church?'—I don't ask that question, but I often find that other Korean Americans, especially churchgoers, ask that question. And if it doesn't come up at first, it'll come up later. So it's a point of connection or disconnection sometimes.

(Alicia Choi, F, 33)

People definitely treat me differently after finding out I'm not Christian. Hmm... well, it's like they assume I am like them, like I go to church, then when they find out I don't go to church, they don't really know how to follow up. Like suddenly they can't relate. There have been a few instances where some people seem to lose interest in me. Almost all Koreans go to church, so if you don't go you are almost automatically excluded from the community.

(Laura Lim, F, 30)

The above quotations strongly represent the everyday negotiations and challenges that non-Christian Korean Americans have to go through. Throughout this research, I constantly questioned to myself: 'Are the terms marginalization, prejudice, religious discrimination too strong?' The study participants have never been explicitly/publicly excluded or marginalized from their own ethnic group based on their religious status.

However, the secular Korean Americans did feel limited and excluded at times due to the fact that the Korean American population is overwhelmingly Christian and in many occasions, non-Christian Korean Americans were instantly seen as the 'Other'. Such exclusions (although not made explicitly) through everyday conversations, behaviors and structural constraints, are hard to pin down as instances of discrimination. Yet, these are small acts of discrimination which exist clearly in the feelings and memories of those who experienced them.

Finding 'alternative' groups and stronger selves

So far, I have illustrated various narratives of those Korean Americans who experienced difficulties and a sense of marginalization due to their religious status. In this section, I explore how much their sense of 'religious marginality' affects their Korean American identities and how these identities change and mature. My analysis of the study participants' narratives showed that the most difficult period of being religiously marginalized was during their high school and college years. As the study participants entered adulthood and found stable positions through their jobs and other institutions, they were able to form their own groups and communities and gain stronger religious (and ethnic) identities.

I use the term 'alternative' group because some of the study participants wished to belong to the ethnic Korean community, yet it was hard for them to find a Korean community that was not religious:

I do sometimes wish there were more Korean Americans that I could hang out with—I feel like there's a common understanding of culture and ethnicity with other Korean Americans. Some of my closest friends are Korean Americans and from things like being able to say some key Korean words that are not translatable to just understanding family dynamics that are unique to being Korean, I feel a connection to other Korean Americans that isn't quite there with other Asian Americans or non-Asian Americans.

(Tara Hong, F, 27)

Some of the study participants stated that they were able to find an alternative Korean community by actively engaging in cultural activities and gathering people with similar interests. For instance, Michelle Lim (F, 30) stated that she currently runs a small 'food club' for Korean Americans, which she started while she was at college:

During college, I was so lonely at first because I was never part of a community. Back then, I just came back from my one year stay in Korea. I was an exchange student at a Korean university, and I loved spending time with Korean people and sharing the Korean culture. I knew that I felt mostly true to myself when I am surrounded by Korean people. But I didn't want to go to a Korean church just to meet people because I was never religious. So one day, I started this Korean group called 'food club'. It was started with a group of three to four friends. We would meet once every month and go and try new

restaurants and just eat good food. The group became bigger and at one point, we had more than ten people who were active members. When I had a larger group of Korean friends, that's when I felt like I was part of something.

Michelle stated that it was easy to gather Korean people and run this group because there were always new students in college, and she always invited the newcomers. She still runs the club and is satisfied with her own group of Korean friends and how she can express her Korean identity through the group. She believes that she can always find her own community and sense of belonging, and will not be untrue to herself and attend a Korean church 'just to meet people'. Like Michelle, Helen Park (F, 28) also finds that being part of a Korean American community is integral to sustaining her Korean identity. Helen, who is a Buddhist, found it difficult when she was younger, yet she went on to find a community of tolerance to practice her religion and identity:

It is very important for me to be a part of the Korean community, I'm like the perfect medium between Korean and American. I can be very American sometimes, and at the same time, I am very Korean. So I think its really important for me to be part of the Korean American community. It did take me a very long time to get to this point. At college, I didn't really know, but it really took a long time to make that balance because I couldn't show my religious identity in front of my Korean American friends. I think I finally felt comfortable with myself during college.

Now that Helen feels much more comfortable with her religious identity, she practices Buddhism more freely in front of her peers and is actively involved in the Korean American Buddhist community, which was not as accessible to her during her teenage years.

While it was important for most of the study participants to be part of a Korean American group, some others felt more comfortable being part of the Asian American community:

In college, I was on the board of Asian American Student Union (AASU) for three years. It was a very big part of my college experience and I met a lot of wonderful friends through it. As a part of the student organization, we collaborated with the Korean Student Association a few times for social events and cultural shows. My last year of AASU, we hosted a large conference for all of the Midwest schools to attend. We had many keynote speakers, workshops and a large banquet dinner. These conferences touched on many topics including Asian identity, professions that Asian families frown upon, Asians in the media, pop culture, Asian LGBT awareness, etc. I really felt like it made a difference in many lives. I really enjoyed being a part of AASU in college and wish I had more time to be involved with something like that again. However, I do not want to exclude myself to just a Korean organization itself.

(Stella Kim, F, 29)

Stella noted that she felt more comfortable around her Asian American friends than her Korean American friends. Although

this does not necessarily affect her Korean American identity, she finds a stronger sense of belonging in the wider Asian American community. The narratives below run parallel to Stella's feelings about her identity and her sense of belonging:

I was involved with the Korean club at my college. Haven't been involved in Korean organizations at any other time. I kind of wish there were a Korean American association that I could be part of, but the ones that exist don't really speak to me. I've felt more comfortable in pan-Asian American organizations.

(Alicia Choi, F, 35)

I relate to Chinese Americans the most and other Korean Americans who are atypical.

(Laura Lim, F, 30)

Both Alicia and Laura noted that they would have been involved in Korean American communities if they were not all Christian identified. As Alicia states, the already existing Korean American organizations did not seem fitting for her. Both participants felt more stable being part of the wider Asian American community and practicing their Asian American identity rather than trying to fit into the Korean American community.

There are three major forms of interacting elements that formulate one's sense of identity: these are biological, physiological, and social/cultural (Erikson, 1968). The social element of one's identity is mostly formulated from adolescence to adulthood (Erikson, 1968) and also changes throughout one's life course as social circumstances

change over time. Kroger (2007:8) explains further that "optimal identity development involves finding social roles and niches within the larger community that provide a good 'fit' for one's biological and psychological capacities and interests". Indeed, many of the study participants stated that they find their current community as adults to be fulfilling. As they grew older, they found identification and association through interests and work:

I don't feel an urgency to socialize with Korean people only. I enjoy hanging out with people who have the same interests that I do. Because I am not in college anymore, I don't have the time to go to many social events and gatherings outside of work to meet other Korean people. If I happen to meet some cool Koreans, then I would definitely continue to hang out with them, but I would not actively search for Korean friends. I currently have a few Korean American friends and see them every so often, but I am mostly hanging out with the people that I meet at work. We know each other the best because we spend the entire day together, and they are pretty awesome. I love being part of this community.

(Amy Woo, F, 32)

Amy used to feel excluded by her Korean American friends at times during high school due to her religious marginality. Now that she has entered the workforce and is working as a medical practitioner, she feels that she has found her 'good fit' in both a psychological and social sense. She still feels strongly Korean American when she

is around her family and close friends, but she does not desire to be part of a Korean American community. She is fully satisfied with her work community where she feels well-placed and that she is being true to her identity. Jerrod Han (M, 30), a second generation Korean American, illustrated a similar narrative:

I feel very comfortable as a Korean-American. But I am also equally American, since I have lived in the United States my whole life. I am not involved in any Korean organizations at the moment. I socialize with my medical school classmates and co-workers/patients at the hospital where I work. I am very comfortable in my working and academic environments.

Jerrod stated that he never really felt a sense of marginalization from the Korean American community as a teenager. He tried going to a Korean American church as well, but he eventually attended an American church because that is where he felt more comfortable. He feels that one should not limit one's identity to being just Korean American and be closed in that circle:

Not being part of your ethnic community can be isolating at times—but we have to realize that we are in the United States and that while it is perfectly fine to attend a Korean church, it is also important that if someone is a U.S. citizen, and votes in the United States, that they integrate themselves in America. This does not mean cultural compromise but rather sharing one's culture in the melting pot that is America.

Conclusion

While previous studies have examined the important role of ethnic Christian churches in creating a sense of belonging and community for Korean Americans, in this study, I wanted to understand the experiences of those who are not affiliated with the dominant Protestant Korean American community. In the results section, I illustrated that not all of the study participants were non-churchgoers simply because they were non-Christians. Some participants had experiences or involvements in Korean churches in the past as children or teenagers. Most of those experiences involved negative feelings and incidents that caused them to stop attending the Korean church.

While religious communities can create spaces of peace and belonging for immigrants, they also create hierarchies and exclusions based on different religious views. The study participants had mixed feelings about not being part of the Korean church community. At certain points in their lives, especially during their teenage and college years, they felt marginalized because they were not part of the dominant Korean American group. They could not 'fit in' and take part in certain cultural activities that were organized by churches, hence they felt isolated from their own peers. The study participants were definitely aware of the dominance of Korean churches, and it often shaped their everyday lives. The secular Korean Americans felt limited and excluded at times due to the fact that Korean Americans are predominantly Christians and, on many occasions, the study participants were

instantly seen as the 'Other'. I have argued in this study that these are small acts of discrimination.

Yet, the study participants also indicated that they now prefer to be part of wider American society and not limit themselves to a closed 'Korean bubble'. Also, there were strong narratives suggesting that they would not convert to Christianity in order to be socially included in the Korean American community. In other words, they were still satisfied with their current religious status and social positions.

The study participants' experiences with the Korean church changed over their life phases and, as they entered their adulthood, they gained a stronger and more stable sense of self. Although there was a 'price to be paid' for not taking part in the Korean American community, they felt much more confident and true to themselves by finding 'alternative' communities and groups with similar interests. I have illustrated that not taking part in the Korean church did not have a strong impact on sustaining the participants' Korean American identities. They still held onto their Korean culture through family and close friends (and also by having connections to Korean food and media, the latter of which has not been dealt with in this paper). Having a connection to a Korean church was not necessary to sustaining their "Koreanness".

There were a number of limitations to this research. The study examined a specific group of young professionals living in the Boston area, and those who grew up in the U.S. If the study participants were 1st

generation immigrants (who would presumably be culturally and linguistically less adapted to U.S. society), or from a lower income and less educated background, the findings could have been rather different. Due to the limited time available and the snowball sampling method that was used, the study was unable to find a wider range of participants, but had to limit its focus on a group of young professionals. The study has not been able to delve into other themes such as intergenerational differences, regional differences, gender, class, family, and power. These themes and interlinking ideas would be excellent domains for future research.

This research was not intended to discourage participation in or criticize ethnic religious communities. Rather, it emphasized the fact that while it is good to have those communities, they can also be limiting. The fact that the Korean American community is predominantly Protestant Christian makes it difficult for those who are not religious or who practice other denominations and faiths to be part of the wider Korean American community. The research calls attention to these issues and argues that there is a need for civic organizations that are inclusive of people from the same ethnic group regardless of their religion (or gender, class and body).

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