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A HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIP:
THE SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN KOREAN-AMERICAN
PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND NEW IMMIGRANTS

An Undergraduate Thesis Presented to
Department of Religion,
Trinity College,
Hartford, CT

In Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts in Religion

by

Heewon Yang
May 2016

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Introduction

Prior to leaving South Korea in 2003, I never participated in any religious organization. My parents were never particularly religious, although they both came from a religious family background. My paternal grandmother was a devout Buddhist, and my maternal grandmother was a Roman Catholic. My mother's sisters were all religious too, as they all believed in Christianity. However, it was natural for me to not believe in any religion because my parents never did. This changed when my family moved to New Zealand on January 21, 2003.

Although my family did a lot of research before actually moving to the land of long white cloud, it was nevertheless difficult to settle down. None of us spoke English fluently, which made it extremely hard to find housing, open a bank account, and move around the town. There were still a few weeks left until the school I got into started, but time was pressing and we needed to solve the problems we were facing. We could not afford to spend any more money on staying at a hotel and using taxis as our primary means of transportation. After ten days had passed, my parents finally took action and contacted a nearby Korean immigrant church via the internet. Things moved swiftly then.

The next day, I opened the door when I heard knocking and saw a strange Korean man with a smile on his face. My parents welcomed him, and told me to wait here while they went out with him and did some business. I was unaware of what that business was, but when they came back with a new car after a few hours I realized that that strange man was our savior. For dinner we went to a Korean restaurant recommended by the man that was so good that in future our family became frequent visitors. While we were waiting, the man asked me whether we went to church and believed in Jesus before coming to New Zealand. We said no, and so he courteously suggested that we should attend his church. I paid no further attention because food came out, but they continued to discuss about it. The man came back the next day, and with his assistance my family was able to open a bank account and eventually find housing after three

days of searching for an adequate house. It was not the most pleasing house, as it was cold even during the summertime, but the location was ideal as it was close to many stores and my school. Also the fact that we finally had our own place made me happy.

After my father went back to Korea because his school was about to start, my mother began to attend the church she asked for help. I later found out that the man who helped our family settle down was an elder in that particular church, Auckland Onnuri Korean Presbyterian Church, and he had successfully convinced my mother to attend church. By then I had made a few Korean friends at school because I was put in a class specifically designed as an ESL class, but because I was inexperienced with the public transportation system in my area and was not yet fluent in English I had not much to do during the weekends except playing console games. Internet speed in New Zealand was way too slow compared to that of Korea, and my friends all lived far away from my home. Then my mother suggested that I should go to church with her because it was celebrating Chinese New Year. She said that there would be lots of Korean food and I would get to play some traditional Korean games as well. As I had nothing else to do, I followed her and had much fun with people around my age. Then I also became a regular attendee to the church, as it offered an ideal setting for me to spend Sundays with fun activities and even English classes for me to learn grammars and vocabulary. Furthermore, as it celebrated major Korean holidays, I could remember all the holidays I celebrated back in my home country which I otherwise would have forgotten. Auckland has a huge Korean population and I had many Korean friends I made at school, but the Korean immigrant church had a huge influence on me in terms of preserving my Korean identity.

After spending three and half years in New Zealand, my family chose to move to the United States of America because my father was to become a visiting professor at State University of New York at Buffalo for his sabbatical year. This time my parents contacted Buffalo Korean Presbyterian Church two months before we actually moved there so they could

settle down as soon as possible. It turned out that a new pastor was also moving to Buffalo as well, and because the same person helped the both families my family became neighbor with the new pastor's family. The Korean church in Buffalo served the similar function as the church I attended in New Zealand, but it had a bigger influence on me because there were not as many Koreans in Buffalo as in Auckland. There were only a handful of Koreans in my high school in the U. S. compared to about 300 Koreans in New Zealand, and it was even harder to socialize with them because they were a lot older than me and thus had different schedule than me. Therefore, the Buffalo Korean Presbyterian Church played a role of providing an ethnic community which I did not require in New Zealand.

The church played a crucial role in helping me after my father's sabbatical year ended, as I was no longer able to live with my family and could not go to the same high school due to a visa restriction, so I was supposed to transfer to a private school. When my mother expressed her concern to the church community, people were more than willing to assist me. They found a new private high school which I graduated from and one person actually offered my parents to act as my guardian and host family. Furthermore, people helped me sell my family's possessions which were still left in the U.S. because we all thought that we could come back and stay until I finish my high school education. I ended up staying at that house for three whole years, and built a good relationship with the whole family. Now when I look back it seems I felt I needed to repay the favor the church community had done to me, as I participated in many church activities including Youth Group leader and acting as a teacher at Korean school offered by the church. I also paid tithes very well. My parents always sent me sumptuous money and encouraged me to pay tithes, and so I did. Overall, I would say that my high school life was dictated by the church I attended because I spent so much time, energy and even money in return for the help, social life and food it provided.

I never dedicated my time and energy to another Korean immigrant church after I started attending Trinity College. Also after I got discharged from my mandatory military service and started studying religion, I lost faith in Christianity. As I was studying Christianity, I began to question the relationship between Korean immigrant church and new immigrants. Although I am not an immigrant, my family nonetheless got assistance from Korean immigrant churches in the same spectrum as new immigrants when we moved to foreign countries. Seeing that the largest Korean immigrant population is in U.S.A. and Korean-American Protestant churches such as Methodists and Presbyterians dominate Korean-affiliated religious organizations in U.S, I decided to investigate the reason why Korean-American Protestant churches offer so much help to new immigrants. After exploring the relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants, I found out that the symbiotic relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and recent Korean immigrants is ideal for helping new immigrants and their children in becoming a part of American society in healthier and more sustainable way, while it also sustains a cultural and linguistic link to Korean identity for second-generation Korean immigrants.

Chapter 1: The Impacts of Churches on Immigrants

Many immigrants from non-English speaking countries who move to the United States of America find themselves helpless once they arrive. No matter how hard and long they have researched the country beforehand, the difference between researching and actually experiencing the foreign land is huge, especially if they do not possess the adequate command of English. Also, the immigrants suffer a huge environmental change as they move from being members of the majority in their country to strangers in a foreign land. Although they may enjoy the new environment by touring around, staying at a hotel and eating out for a few days, the immigrants soon realize they have pressing social and economic problems at their hands. However, since they are newcomers to the country, there is a high possibility that they are without any acquaintances. Thus it is common for immigrants to search for an established community, preferably made up of people who speak the same language as them, in their region in order to seek aid. The same story applies to Korean¹ immigrants in the U.S., and for Koreans the community they ask for help is likely to be Korean-American Protestant churches which, I argue, is the mainstream form of Korean community in the United States. In this chapter, I will discuss how Korean-American churches help immigrants and why immigrants rely on Korean-American Protestant churches rather than other Korean-affiliated organizations such as Korean-American Catholic churches, Korean-American Buddhist temples, and Korean associations.

First, Korean-American churches help new² immigrants to alleviate stress caused by the new environment they are forced to adjust into. International migration can indeed be a traumatizing experience. Immigrants are removed from the setting they are used to, and placed

¹ In this thesis, “Korea” and “Koreans” refer to South Korea and its citizens, as North Korea does not allow its common citizens to migrate to other countries, including the United States of America.

² In this thesis, “new” refers to immigrants who have lived in the United States of America for less than one year.

in a new environment where they have to struggle to reassert themselves. Charles Hirschman gives an excellent description of the difficulties of the new immigrants:

Immigrants become strangers in a new land with the loss of familiar sounds, sights, and smells. The expectations of customary behavior, hearing one's native language, and support from family and friends can no longer be taken for granted. Even the most routine activities of everyday life – shopping for food, working, and leisure time pursuits – can be alienating experience for many new immigrants who find themselves in strange settings that require constant mental strain to navigate and to be understood.³

These aspects described by Hirschman generate a considerable amount of stress to the immigrants as they feel isolated from the society. Thus they naturally seek to mitigate loneliness through participating in a community consisting of people who are familiar to them.

The same rule applies for Korean international students attending American universities. However, it is more difficult for immigrants than international students to join a group that is purely based on ethnicity, as students are in a closed setting which enables them to gather as a group without sharing particular interests. The possibility for a newcomer to become a part of a group increases when there are more similarities he or she shares with the members of the group. While ethnicity is certainly one aspect which binds Korean immigrants, it does not possess overarching power to draw all Korean immigrants toward a community. Since Korean international students who attend the same American universities already have two fundamental similarities - their school and their ethnicity - in common, it is much easier for international students to either create or join Korean associations compared to the immigrants, who may not share anything common with other immigrants except for their ethnicity.

Also, even though there are Korean ethnic enclaves already established in some metropolitan cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, Dallas and Georgia, not many immigrants enjoy the privilege of moving to these cities. For Korean immigrants who are not

³ Hirschman, Charles. "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States." *International Migration Review* 38.3 (2004): 1210.

located in those metropolitan cities, religion tends to be the most prevalent form of shared interest because “[t]he normal feeling of loss experienced by immigrants means that familiar religious rituals learned in childhood, such as hearing prayers in one’s native tongue, provide an emotional connection, especially shared with others.”⁴ Korean-American churches tend to hold services twice, one in Korean and one in English. The fact that the churches hold Korean service helps new immigrants to become less homesick through hearing their native language spoken by everyone attending, as they are no longer hearing a foreign language that requires extensive concentration to understand. Furthermore, Korean-American churches tend to serve Korean food for lunch after service, which in turn gives immigrants an opportunity to communicate with others in a familiar setting. The setting helps to lessen stress for new Korean immigrants as well.

Korean-American churches do not simply help new immigrants with social problems; they also actively seek to help immigrants with their economic problems. New immigrants find themselves under pressing economic issues such as finding and contracting housing, buying cars, building credit, and getting employed. Because these problems require extensive English skills, first-generation immigrants from Korea are not likely to possess such the necessary command of the language. Although English is one of four core subjects⁵ in Korean education system, it is extremely focused on grammar and translation as found in reading. Hence Korean students do not spend time on learning how to speak and listen to English. Furthermore, Korean as a language also differs extensively from English in terms of the grammatical structure, which makes it more difficult for Koreans to become fluent in speaking English.⁶ Therefore, Koreans who finished their education in their home country are usually better at reading English than

⁴ Hirschman, 1211.

⁵ Other three subjects are math, science, and Korean language and literature.

⁶ For example, the simplest sentence structure in English is subject-verb-object, i.e. he ate an apple. But in Korean, the sentence structure is subject-object-verb, i.e. he an apple ate.

either listening or speaking it, which results in their inability to communicate properly with Americans. This lack of communication skills, along with other practical problems such as lack of financial credit in the U.S.A. and means for transportation, hinders new immigrants from tending to pressing economic problems. Hirschman reports that new immigrants turn to churches for solving these problems:

Although the value of religion is usually considered in spiritual terms, there are many social and economic benefits derived from participation in religious organizations. These aspects of religious participation are particularly salient to immigrants because they have many needs and few resources. Many evangelical efforts to win religious converts among immigrants begin with the provision of needed services.⁷

Since the preexisting members of Korean-American churches are also immigrants who have gone through similar problems faced by new immigrants, they have “information about housing, social, and economic opportunities that facilitate their adaptation to American society.”⁸ Furthermore, some attendees of Korean-American churches who live closer to new immigrants provide physical help free of charge, such as providing transportation to various places until new immigrants can buy a car, finding and contracting housing on behalf of new immigrants, and acting as an interpreter for new immigrants.

While individuals who attend Korean-American churches are the main workhorses in supporting new immigrants, Korean-American churches as an organization also lend a helping hand to new immigrants. For example, the Korean Catholic Apostolate Church of Queens, with more than 2,500 members, runs a credit union that serves members of five other Korean Catholic churches in the New York City region⁹ and helps new immigrants, who are likely to be without account issued from American banks, with credit. Credit is hard to build for new

⁷ Hirschman, 1224. The aid provided by Korean-American Protestant Churches will be further discussed in later section on selective acculturation of Korean immigrants through Korean-American Protestant churches.

⁸ Ibid, 1224.

⁹ Ibid, 1225.

immigrants in the United States of America, thus Korean-American churches' solution for credit is appreciated by new immigrants.

Other Korean Organizations

While Korean-American Protestant churches are the main topic of this thesis, there are certainly other religious organizations from which new Korean immigrants can seek assistance, as Korea is a country with some religious diversity. According to the 2005 statistics, about 53 percent of Korean population is religious. Of the 53 percent, 43 percent of the religious population believes in Buddhism; 34.5 percent believes in Protestant Christianity; 20.4 percent is Roman Catholic; and 1.9 percent belongs to other¹⁰ religions.¹¹ Since there are more Buddhists among Koreans than Protestants, it seems natural that Korean-American Buddhist temples would also be where many Korean immigrants should go to seek help. Indeed, there are Korean-American Buddhist temples located in the United States of America and they do offer help to those who ask.

As 47 percent of Korean population is not religious, it is even more plausible to expect to see non-religious Korean immigrants contacting Korean Associations in America located in their cities for assistance. Like the Buddhist temples, members of Korean Associations are willing helpers to new immigrants who are moving into cities under their influence, because they were in the same shoes before and are ready to welcome new people into their community. Yet, neither of these organizations have nearly the reach, nor the influence, over recent immigrants as do the Protestant churches.

There is even an option for Catholic immigrants, as there are a few Korean Catholic churches in the United States as well. Although I have used the term 'church' without disclosing

¹⁰ These religions include Confucianism, Won Buddhism, Islam, and other Korean cults such as *Jeungsangyo*, *Cheondogyo*, *Daejonggyo*, and Unification Church.

¹¹ "Religion." on Korea.net : The Official Website of the Republic of Korea. Accessed February 15, 2016. <http://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/Korean-Life/Religion>.

whether it is Catholic or Protestant church, from now on I am distinguishing between Protestant churches and Catholic churches in the thesis for two reasons: first, Korean Christians are strict about defining themselves as either Catholic and Protestant, and there is no middle ground; second, there are visible differences between Korean Catholic and Protestant churches regarding theology, as “Korean Catholic immigrant churches are more liberal in theology than Korean Presbyterian churches.”¹²

If they are students, they can rely on Korean Student Associations in their school. It is not hard to find information about Korean Students Associations in many of liberal arts colleges and universities online. When there is no organizations designated for Koreans in a college they attend, Korean students start their own group as in the case of Trinity College in Hartford, CT.¹³

Nonetheless, out of all these choices, Korean-American Protestant churches continue to be the dominant force in assisting new immigrants coming into the United States of America. It is important to discern why this is the case.

Factors of Korean American Protestant Churches’ Dominance

There are many factors that can be attributed to the domination of Korean-American Protestant churches compared to other organizations, religious or not. These factors include the number of Korean Christian immigrants to the United States of America, the accessibility of Korean-American Protestant churches compared to other Korean-affiliated organizations in America, and the resources and cultural comfort Korean-American Protestant churches provide to new immigrants.

¹² Min, Pyong Gap, and Dae Young Kim. "Intergenerational Transmission of Religion and Culture: Korean Protestants in the U.S." *Sociology of Religion* 66.3 (2005): 270

¹³ Korean Students Association in Trinity College was created in Fall 2014 under the name of Korean Association, Trinity College. It was founded by Jeffrey Oh of Class of 2015, Harry Lee of Class of 2016, and myself. It is not officially recognized by the college because the college expects a club to be inclusive for every ethnicity in order to be recognized.

First, the gap between Korean-American Protestant churches and other organizations comes from the fact that the majority of Korean immigrants to the United States are Christians. The recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life report that 71% of Korean Americans identified themselves as Christians, and among Christian Korean Americans 61% considered themselves as Protestants.¹⁴ It can be conjectured thus that since the majority of Korean Americans are Protestant, the similar can be said about Korean immigrants.

Secondly, this predominance of Korean-American Protestant churches compared to other Korean affiliated associations becomes more evident when the numbers are compared. David Yoo and Ruth Chung report that there “are a reported 154 Korean American Catholic parishes, and 89 Buddhist temples serve Koreans in the United States.”¹⁵ On the other hand, *Christian Today*, a Korean Protestant newspaper located in Los Angeles, California, conducted an annual survey every year to find out the distribution of Korean churches are in the United States of America as well as in other countries:

The total number of Korean Protestant churches in North America are 4,730, as there are 4,251 churches in the United States of America and 479 churches in Canada. . . The state with most Korean Protestant churches is California, which occupies 31.82% of total Korean churches in America with 1,353 churches; New York has 452 churches (10.63% of total Korean churches in America; New Jersey has 262 churches (6.16%); Texas has 228 churches (5.36%); Virginia has 209 churches (4.91%), and so on. . . [The number of Protestant churches in America continue to decrease for two consecutive years]¹⁶

Although the author of the article is discouraged by the decrease of Korean Protestant churches for two consecutive years of 2014 and 2015, Korean-American Protestant churches remain as

¹⁴ "Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. 2012. Accessed March 12, 2016. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/>.

¹⁵ Yoo, David, and Ruth H. Chung. *Religion and Spirituality in Korean America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008: 2.

¹⁶ Seo, In-sil. "'너 어디 아프니?...'미주한인교회 2년째 감소." 크리스찬투데이. December 25, 2015. Accessed February 17, 2016. http://christiantoday.us/sub_read.html?uid=23500. Translated by Heewon Yang.

the overwhelming majority of any Korean affiliated associations. 154 Catholic churches and 89 Buddhist temples indicate a significantly less number of places recent immigrants can seek help than at one of the 4,251 Korean Protestant churches in America.

Furthermore, while Korean-American Protestant churches are scattered throughout the country, Korean-American Catholic churches are mostly located in New York City and Los Angeles, the two metropolitan cities with the highest Korean populations in the United States.¹⁷ The same applies to the Korean Buddhist temples.¹⁸ The concentration of Korean-American Catholic churches and Korean-American Buddhist temples in the two cities greatly limits the accessibility of new immigrants who follow Roman Catholicism and Buddhism compared to Korean-American Protestant churches. Unless they settle down in either New York City or Los Angeles, it is impossible for new immigrants to attend Korean-American Catholic church or Korean-American Buddhist temple. This leaves the immigrants with two options: go to the nearby Protestant church, or seek aid from nearby Korean association, which also is available for new immigrants in all fifty states. According to Federation of Korean Association in the United States of America, there are currently 163 Korean associations in fifty states.¹⁹ While this number is similar to the number of Korean-American Catholic churches, the associations are scattered throughout the country and there is at least two Korean association centers in each

¹⁷ This information is based on the google map that displays most of Korean Catholic churches located in the United States, presented by FIAT. FIAT Foundation is a non-profit organization that serves the Korean American Catholic Community by developing leaders, providing resources, promoting advocacy, and connecting communities.
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?ll=41.244772%2C-114.433594&spn=64.825349%2C131.835938&hl=en&msa=0&z=3&source=embed&ie=UTF8&mid=zigDyOgG6-aU.kOTTsbK1RjBg>.

¹⁸ "미주한국불교 Korean Buddhism in The Americas." 미주한국불교 Korean Buddhism in The Americas. Accessed February 28, 2016.
<http://www.koreanbuddhism.us/centers.html?PHPSESSID=6fec254c0998d92ca164a2559c520a43>. This website contains 47 Korean Buddhist temples in United States and lists them in alphabetical order.

¹⁹ "미주한인회총연합회." 미주한인회총연합회. Accessed February 15, 2016.
http://www.koreanfedus.org/main/sub_03/sub_10.php.

state. Again however, compared to 4,251 Korean-American Protestant churches, the accessibility to the Korean association is still narrower than Protestant churches. Last but not least, help from Korean Students Associations is not likely to happen unless immigrants are attending the school, and since the members are also students, they may not be able to assist new immigrants with economic issues. Thus, many new immigrants naturally seek aid from Korean-American Protestant churches near them. So far, we have seen how broader accessibility is a second major factor in explaining the dominant role of Korean-American Protestant churches in assimilating new immigrants to the U.S. However, there is a third factor which is especially significant for understanding why there is a large number of immigrants who convert to Protestantism after their arrival in the United States of America.

Because members of Korean-American churches provide assistance for practical needs to immigrants through accompanying them, the benefactors and the beneficiaries become more and more acquainted with each other. Since the benefactors are likely to be the first acquaintances to the beneficiaries after migration, the new immigrants meet more frequently with their Christian assistants, which leads to high possibility for them to naturally convert into Christianity due to their gratitude toward the church and their benefactors who helped them to settle down in the strange environment. The high percentage of conversion among non-religious Koreans after immigration and the sheer number of Korean Christian immigrants to the United States of America contribute hugely to the expansion of Korean-American Protestant churches throughout the United States of America, thus further increasing the accessibility of new immigrants to Protestant churches compared to other organizations. This can be demonstrated by an observation in a trend among immigrants who attend Korean-American churches that there is “a very high degree of conversion to Christianity among Koreans after immigration. About 70 percent of first-generation Koreans in Los Angeles

reported affiliation with Korean ethnic churches in the United States.”²⁰ This fact of producing high rates of conversion is a particular feature of how Korean-American Protestant churches function very effectively as a place for cultural syncretism.

Syncretism of Korean-American Protestant Churches

The high percentage of conversion into Christianity among immigrants is tied with the cultural comfort and the resources provided by Korean-American Protestant churches to immigrants, which lead them to spend much time in the congregation they received help from. The sociologists Pyong Gap Min and Dae Young Kim report in their study of Korean Protestants in the U.S. that Korean Protestants are fervent participants of the church they attend:

Survey studies show that more than 80% of Korean Protestant immigrant respondents participate in a congress once a week or more (Huh and Kim 1990; Min 2000). Results of the 1997-1998 Presbyterian Racial and Ethnic Panel Studies also reveal that 78% of Korean Presbyterians participate in their congregation’s Sunday worship service every week, compared to 49% of Latino, 34% of African American, and 28% of Caucasian Presbyterians (Kim and Kim 2001:82). The vast majority of Korean immigrant churches have two or more meetings per week (the prayer and/or Bible study meeting) in addition to the Sunday worship service, with more than 20% of members participating in these extra meetings (Min 1992, 2000)²¹

Such zealous devotion to the Protestant church, combined with high percentage of conversion among new immigrants to Christianity, implies that there is an aspect in Korean-American Protestant churches which appeals to people who want to partake religious life.

Min and Kim argue that there is a crucial aspect in the prevalence of Korean-American Protestant churches, as the aspect that attracts immigrants is the observance of Korean folk traditions within Korean-American Protestant churches. This appeal is created by the syncretism within Korean-American Protestant churches. Syncretism, according to *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “refers to connections of a special kind between languages, cultures,

²⁰ Hirschman, 1217.

²¹ Min and Kim, 269.

or religions.”²² The typology of syncretism is twofold: relations between complex wholes and relations between particular components. Korean-American Protestant churches are great examples of the former type of syncretism, which the *Encyclopedia* describes as follows:

A complex unity or whole can be any coherence of mental elements and of actions, representations, or objects related to these elements, which has the function of giving human beings an irreducible explanation of their world, as well as norms that are likewise not further reducible. The coherence can take sociological form in an organization or institution, though it need not; in its intellectual expression it can be presented as a system but may also take some other doctrinal form.²³

Korean-American Protestant churches successfully create a comfortable environment that charm immigrants to convert to Christianity and devote much time in the congregations by combining Protestant Christianity and Korean folk traditions. Unlike the Korean Protestant churches in South Korea, which because of its short history has not incorporated elements of Korean folk culture because of its short history,²⁴ Korean-American Protestant churches follow a unique practice in which Christianity and Korean folk traditions are combined. The traditions include language, holidays and food associated with holidays.

Almost all Korean-American Protestant churches offer a church service conducted in the Korean language, even though they are in the United States of America, an English-speaking country. This is done so that the participants can remember their language, an important factor in solidifying their identity as Korean. Korean immigrants have great pride in their language for its long history and the respect for its creator²⁵, and thus consider speaking Korean to be one of the essential characteristics to become a Korean. Usually immigrants are prone to forget their mother-tongue when they live in another country for a long period of time because they

²² Colpe, Carsten. "Syncretism [First Edition]." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 13. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005: 8926.

²³ Ibid. 8927.

²⁴ Min and Kim, 265.

²⁵ Korean characters were invented by King Sejong of Joseon dynasty in 1446. Koreans have great reverence for King Sejong and thus display same respect for the characters he created.

are less exposed to the language, which ultimately can lead them to lose their unique tradition. For young children who are not as fluent in Korean as new immigrants, Korean-American Protestant churches offer language classes in both Korean and English to further preserve the language skill of young children who are better at absorbing new language than maintaining a language they previously learned.²⁶ Thus, it is important for Korean immigrants to remember and practice the language by listening to and speaking Korean among themselves in the congregation in order to maintain their identity as Koreans. Korean-American Protestant churches therefore syncretize the congregational service, a Christian tradition that worships Jesus and God, with Korean language in order to attain both Korean and Christian identity even in foreign country.

It is also shown in studies that all Korean immigrant congregations observe two major Korean cultural holidays.²⁷ The two major cultural holidays are *Seollal* and *Chuseok*. *Seollal* is the Korean word for the Lunar New Year celebration, a family-oriented three-day-long holiday that involves ancestor worship, paying a visit to their ancestors' tombs, and playing traditional board games. While Korea celebrates both Western New Year and *Seollal*, Koreans view *Seollal* more important because it is a traditional holiday observed by their ancestors. It is customary for Koreans to eat *tteokguk*²⁸ and play *yutnori* to commemorate the holiday.²⁹ *Chuseok* is the Korean version of Thanksgiving, as people celebrate harvest for three days by cooking rice with freshly harvested crops and making *songpyeon*³⁰. *Chuseok* also involves ancestor worshipping and paying visit to their tombs similar to *Seollal*. These two holidays are the most important and anticipated holidays in Korea, and thus Korean-American Protestant

²⁶ Hirschman, 1225.

²⁷ Min and Kim, 274.

²⁸ A traditional Korean dish that consists of broth with thinly sliced white rice cakes. Eating a bowl of *tteokguk* symbolizes getting one year older.

²⁹ A traditional Korean board game played between two groups in turns with the goal of bringing four tokens home first by casting the sticks and moving tokens according to the score.

³⁰ A traditional Korean rice cake that is shaped like a crescent.

churches also observe them. Apart from the ceremony of ancestor worshipping, which Korean Christians do not observe because they see the ceremony as superstitious, Korean-American Protestant churches acknowledge the holidays through mentioning them at service held on the week of the holidays, serving food related to each holiday for lunch after congregation, and playing traditional board games after lunch.

All these Korean traditions are familiar to new immigrants, who are severed from their familiar culture after moving into a strange new setting. New immigrants who are stressed by foreign environment enjoy a feeling of respite when they come to Korean-American Protestant church, as they are in a place filled with their ethnic group and are surrounded with familiar sound and sight. Through syncretizing Protestant Christianity and Korean folk traditions such as language, holidays and food, Korean-American Protestant churches give new immigrants the cultural comfort that they long for.

While secular Korean associations in the United States can also offer similar experience to Korean-American Protestant churches, they cannot truly be an alternative for Korean-American Protestant churches. Korean associations play a role of event maker, as they prepare festivals for annual Korean holidays, but since they do not hold regular meeting like churches, it is harder for Korean associations to act as a comfort zone for new immigrants compared to Korean-American Protestant churches. In other words, the Korean-American Protestant churches combine the function of celebrating Korean holidays with the more weekly regular services and community of a church.

In conclusion, while there are many Korean affiliated organizations in the United States that are able to assist immigrants with the problems they face, it is evident that Korean-American Protestant churches are more capable at fulfilling the needs of new immigrants over other organizations on based on numerous factors. Even though only one-fifth of Korean population believes in Christianity, the majority of Korean immigrants report themselves as

Christians. Also, compared to other Korean religious organizations, such as Korean-American Catholic churches and Korean-American Buddhist temples that are centered around mostly Los Angeles and New York City, Korean-American Protestant churches are a lot more accessible because there are 4,251 Protestant churches scattered around the country. These two factors contribute hugely to the expansion of Korean-American Protestant churches. Furthermore, the fact that Korean-American Protestant churches follow a unique combination of Protestantism and Korean folk traditions has enough charm to attract even those immigrants who were not Protestants nor religious to Korean-American Protestant churches. Thus, immigrants receive great help, both emotionally and practically, from Korean-American Protestant churches, and in return join the congregation and spend much time there.

With the number, accessibility, and the cultural support provided by Korean-American Protestant churches, it seems obvious for new Korean immigrants to seek help in Korean-American Protestant churches even if they are not themselves Protestants. However, why are Korean-American Protestant churches so willing and eager to help new immigrants? Is it purely based on religious ideology? Or is there something else behind it?

Chapter 2: The Impact of Immigrants on Korean-American Protestant Churches

Korean-American Protestant churches serve as the dominant institution for assisting new immigrants coming to the United States of America. The individual members of Korean-American Protestant churches help new immigrants in social and economic problems, and the churches as an organization provide a comfort zone by syncretizing Protestant Christianity and Korean folk tradition. All these supports are part of evangelical efforts to convert new immigrants, and Korean-American Protestant churches have proven themselves very effective through high percentage of new immigrants converting to Protestant Christianity after arriving at the United States of America. However, the question of why Korean-American Protestant churches are so eager to help out new immigrants still remains intact. Evangelism is a natural aspect of Korean-American Protestantism's mission, but this is not a comprehensive explanation of why it is necessary to help new immigrants. In this chapter I will examine how new converts can be beneficial to Korean-American Protestant churches by discussing typical daily and weekly schedules of Korean-American Protestant churches and how new members can provide help for the organization in various ways, as well as the cultural influence recent immigrants can bring to the churches.

A typical Korean Protestant church in the United States of America holds numerous weekly events planned by the church. Okyun Kwon gives a detailed description of the weekly services of Grace Church, a Protestant church located in Queens, New York, in detail to portray what typical Korean-American Protestant churches go through each week:

Eight regular religious activities are held in Grace Church every week. They are the daily dawn prayer meetings, Wednesday evening services, Friday night prayer meetings, Saturday evening Bible study class, high school students' meeting on Saturday, youth group meeting for the members in their twenties on Friday evening, Sunday service, and praise music service on Sunday afternoon. Sunday service is also divided into three different sessions in different time zones, including one English service for the second-generation members at 11:00 AM.³¹

³¹ Kwon, Okyun. *Buddhist and Protestant Korean Immigrants: Religious Beliefs and Socioeconomic Aspects of Life*. New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003.: 149.

While it is not mentioned by Kwon, most Korean-American Protestant churches serve full Korean lunch after Sunday service, have Korean school available for those who wish to learn Korean, and provide transportation service for those who cannot come to the church on their own.³² Most of the events hosted by the church are handled by pastors and other church officials, since pastors are in charge of leading dawn prayer meetings, Wednesday evening services, Friday night prayer meetings, Saturday Bible study classes, and Sunday services. However, the church also requires individual members to participate in supporting other activities because church officials alone cannot fill all the necessary duties. Thus an average Korean-American Protestant church requires active participation from their members.

The unusually active participation of regular members in Korea-American churches is evident in Kwon's portrayal of a daily schedule at Grace Church. He uses Grace Church as an example for Korean-American Protestant churches' daily schedule:

Between 6:00 A.M. and 7:00 A.M. everyday, 15 to 20 members participate in the dawn prayer service. The service is over within 30 minutes, and after the service, the participants perform individual prayers for another 30 minutes. Some participants leave the church immediately afterwards, but some pray longer. The dawn prayer service is over at 7:00 A.M. The church is closed until 9:00 A.M., when a male assistant pastor and a female evangelist come to the church for routine daily work. They take care of telephone inquiries, prepare teaching materials for Sunday school and Korean school on Saturday, consult church members about various matters by appointment, prepare the weekly bulletin, mail last week's bulletin to absent members, and arrange appointments of head pastor's visits for members who have special occasions, such as birthdays, business openings, new home purchases, moves, weddings, funeral ceremonies, and so on.³³

The passage shows that while church officials, in this case a male assistant pastor, are certainly actively engaged in maintenance of the church, it is important to notice that a female evangelist, who is only a regular member of the church, is helping out the assistant pastor. The same applies to many other members of the church because officials alone cannot fulfill all the required duties. In order to serve lunch, there needs to be people to cook Korean food; leaders for both

³² Hirschman, 1224.

³³ Kwon, 150.

high school students' meeting and youth group meeting for the members in their twenties are required; teachers for Korean school must be attendees who are fluent in their mother-tongue. Furthermore, because there are people whose family members do not attend the church, the church needs to provide transportation for them,³⁴ since the public transportation system in the United States is not as well-supported as in Korea.

Finding people to fill in those positions is not too hard in a populous church, since many Korean Protestant Christians are willing participants in church activities, bring with them a positive attitude. The sociologists Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim state that Korean immigrant church members participate in church activities very intensely, as “[m]ore than half of Koreans (54%) spend six hours or more at church activities [per week].”³⁵ The positions Korean-American Protestant churches seek to fill with new immigrants are cooking lunch and teaching Korean in Korean school, both of which require being fully immersed in Korean culture. Korea has a unique culture, as both language and food are distinct from any other culture in the world. Korean language is linguistically considered an isolated language, which means that it has no demonstrable genetic relationship with any other language and has not been shown to be the descendent of any ancestral language which has other descendants.³⁶ Thus it is not common for people other than Korean to speak the language fluently. Korean food as well has distinct cuisine using garlic, ginger, and pepper to create spiciness of the food. It is dictated by personal experience predominantly without fixed recipe, which makes it hard to be cooked unless the person cooking has been exposed to Korean lifestyle. Since Korean-

³⁴ Kwon, 147-8.

³⁵ Kim, Kwang Chung and Shin Kim. "Ethnic Roles of Korean Immigrant Churches." *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*. Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen. Warner. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001.: 82.

³⁶ Campbell, Lyle. "Language Isolates and Their History, or, What's Weird, Anyway?." *Proceedings of the 36th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 36. UC Berkeley: Department of Linguistics, 2016: 16.

American Protestant churches serve Korean food after the service, people who participate in cooking must know how to cook Korean food. New immigrant women have been cooking Korean food for a long time, and thus are ideal helpers for cooking Korean lunch at the church. Also, since recent immigrants are more fluent in Korean than those who stayed in the United States for a long period of time, Korean-American Protestant churches see new immigrants as perfect candidates for teachers in Korean school.³⁷ Korean-American Protestant churches are eager to bring new immigrants into their community because of their usefulness in serving the congregation.

The attitude of church members participating in serving the church also plays huge part. As in the case of Grace Church, the church van drivers are all church members and are paid by the church for their services, but the drivers are eager to take care of van riders not because they are paid, but because they consider the job as part of their service to the church.³⁸ In Buffalo's Korean Presbyterian Church they hired high school students, university students, and graduate school students who are fluent in Korean for full teachers and assistant teachers in the Korean school. The church paid small amount of money for regular teachers who were usually university students and graduate students, and gave community hour service to assistant teachers who were usually high school students.³⁹ Teachers gained certain benefits from teaching, but nevertheless they were dedicated in their jobs primarily because they considered it as a service to the church they were attending similar to the van drivers at Grace Church. This shows that material benefit through serving Korean-American Protestant churches does

³⁷ I started teaching at Korean school at Buffalo Korean Presbyterian Church, a Korean-American Protestant church located in Buffalo, New York, within the first year I started attending the church, because the church officials saw my fluency in Korean and requested me to teach Korean.

³⁸ Kwon, 147.

³⁹ I served as both assistant teacher and full teacher as a high school student, and was given an option between getting paid and getting community service hours when I became full teacher. I chose community service hours because my high school required completion of at least 25 hours of community service per year.

not mean as much to participants, since often times the idea that they are serving the church is enough for regular members to put their effort into serving the congregation.

Engaging in church activities to help the congregation is not the only impact immigrants bring to Korean-American Protestant churches. Korean immigrants contribute more to the church financially. Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim provide analysis on how much Korean immigrants pay to the church in the form of tithe in respect to three other ethnicities:

The majority of Koreans (62%) contributed \$2,000 or more in regular giving to their current congregations . . . Only 35 percent of African Americans, 26 percent of Hispanics, and 40 percent of Caucasians report giving that much. Moreover, more than a quarter (27%) of Koreans gave more than \$5,000. The corresponding rates are 8 percent for African Americans, 6 percent for Hispanics, and 11 percent for Caucasians. Once again, the amount of regular giving is markedly different depending on whether one has been ordained as an elder or not. Thus Koreans – fewer of whom are elders – certainly contribute a lot more financially than other ethnic groups to their current congregation.⁴⁰

It can be seen that many Korean immigrants pay exceptionally large sums of money to the congregation they are currently attending. The huge amount of tithes offered by Korean immigrants per year compared to other ethnic groups is another reason why it is beneficial for Korean-American Protestant churches to put significant effort in converting new immigrants. To run a church requires much money, which makes it necessary for Korean-American Protestant churches to convert new immigrants because once they start attending the church, they become a reliable source of finance for the congregation. Although money is considered a sensitive matter by many religious organizations including Protestant churches, it is nevertheless an important factor that cannot be neglected in maintaining religious organizations. Thus Korean-American Protestant churches are so eager to convert new immigrants through helping immigrants to solve various social and economic problems they face because Korean immigrants put all their energy and resources into their current congregation.

⁴⁰ Kim and Kim, 82-3.

Another benefit Korean-American Protestant churches get from bringing new immigrants to the congregation apart from active participation in church service and financial aid is consolidating Korean identity within the congregation. While the most important function of all churches is to worship God through service, Korean-American Protestant churches also strive to maintain Korean identity. Many of activities by the congregation such as hosting Korean school, serving Korean lunch, celebrating Korean holidays, and holding Korean service are intended to preserve Korean identity among immigrants, as immigrants are culturally alienated from Korea in the United States of America. However, even though the congregation is fully composed of Korean immigrants, it is difficult for them to maintain their Korean identity fully because they are no longer living in Korea. Because they hear and speak English more often than Korean, the immigrants gradually forget Korean and start to mix them together, adding English nouns or verbs when they are speaking Korean. This process is more drastic in younger immigrants, as they are more susceptible to learning one language and forgetting another. Cooking Korean meal becomes harder, for it is more difficult to get the necessary ingredient in the United States to create the taste unique to Korean food. As a community surrounded by foreign culture, Korean-American Protestant churches gradually merge into American society despite the struggle to maintain Korean identity.

The most successful way to hinder the process of merging into American culture by Korean-American Protestant churches is to bring new immigrants, who are closer to authentic Korean identity, into the congregation. Because new immigrants are not fluent in English, the pre-existing members of Korean-American Protestant churches become more careful not to speak English to them, hence speaking a purer form of Korean. Also, as new immigrants are prone to bringing ingredients from their homeland prior to the departure, members of Korean-American Protestant churches are able to once again go through the taste of Korea and recreate that taste in Korean lunch served at the church using that very ingredient. Thus Korean-

American Protestant churches try to win new immigrants because they are well-versed in Korean traditions such as food and language, which are important factors in maintaining Korean identity in the United States of America. This approach is especially useful for second generation Koreans who do not yet have a solid Korean identity.

Identity Formation of Second Generation Koreans Through Korean-American Protestant Churches

Unlike adult immigrants, who have lived in Korea long enough to form ethnic identity and pride, second generation Koreans do not possess concrete identities as Koreans because they either were born in the U.S.A. or migrated at a very young age. In solidifying their Korean identity, Korean-American Protestant churches play a huge role through giving them a place where second generation Koreans can socialize with each other and maintain Korean identity in their adolescence, an important period for establishing individual identity.

The sociologist of religion Peter T. Cha conducted a study on ethnic identity formation of second generation Koreans in their childhood and adolescence, and it shows that there is a positive influence of Korean-American Protestant churches in the process. Most of the twelve participants in Cha's research described their childhood as a period of yearning to be like their Caucasian friends and distancing themselves from their Korean identity. Many of them admitted that they distanced themselves from "their Korean name, food, friends, or even parents, that might have reminded them and their friends that they were different."⁴¹ As a result, even attending churches is not the most pleasing experience for them in their childhood. As previously mentioned, Korean-American Protestant churches act as a haven for immigrants to preserve their Korean identity in the United States of America. Thus, for second generation Koreans who want to distance themselves from their Korean-ness, going to church is not an

⁴¹ Cha, Peter T. "Ethnic Identity Formation and Participation in Immigrant Churches: Second-Generation Korean American Experiences." *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*. Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen. Warner. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001.: 144.

enjoyable event.

However, once second generation Koreans reach adolescence, they recognize there are undeniable differences between their American friends and them both physically and socially. People start to notice physical differences and differentiate second generation Koreans as Asian Americans from Caucasian Americans, and one respondent pointed out that he was no longer a stellar athlete because he stopped growing taller. Also, the fact that first generation Koreans have great command over their children's freedom of hanging out with friends further deepens the gap between second generation Koreans and their American friends.⁴² This situation results in second generation Koreans retaking their Korean identity which they were desperate to distance themselves from when they were in childhood. Going to Korean-American Protestant churches thus turns into a positive experience for second generation Koreans, as it offers an ideal setting to socialize with other Korean-Americans with supports from the community. Furthermore, Korean-American Protestant churches play a central role in development of their ethnic identity and ethnic pride. In order to preserve Korean identity, Korean-American Protestant churches offer Korean language classes and celebrate major Korean national holidays. As adolescent second generation Koreans experience such events and develop their identity as Korean, Korean-American Protestant churches act as a source of growth, comfort, and support.⁴³

Therefore, it can be seen that there is a symbiotic relationship between new immigrants and Korean-American Protestant churches, since the two groups both benefit greatly from each other while assisting another group. New immigrants get social and economic assist from Korean-American Protestant churches, while the churches receive resources and energy from immigrants as well as preserving Korean identity that can be easily lost. This relationship is

⁴² Cha, 145-6.

⁴³ Ibid. 149.

also beneficial to second generation Koreans, for they are prone to be ashamed of their Korean-ness which is very dangerous for successful immigration.⁴⁴ However, the problem arises when the people assigned in the position leave the congregation and thus no longer serve the congregation and pay tithe because Korean immigrants display high fluidity of the membership. Because Korean immigrants are prone to move to different congregation after a short period of time, Korean-American Protestant churches are always in search for new members.

Fluidity of the Membership in Korean-American Protestant Churches

It is not unusual for most Korean-American Protestant churches to be in continuous search for suitable attendees because the stability of membership in Korean-American Protestant churches is very fluid. Kim and Kim compare how fluid the membership of Korean immigrants in Korean-American Protestant churches with other ethnicities:

The length of tenure with their current congregation is longer among elders than non-elders. Nevertheless, even among elders, close to 15 percent have been with the current congregation for less than three years . . . Furthermore, close to 40 percent indicate that they are “not sure” or that it is “not likely” that they will stay with their current congregation five years from now. These data hint at extreme fluidity of congregational membership. The other racial and ethnic groups display less uncertainty – 24 percent of African Americans, 19 percent of Hispanics, and 20 percent of Caucasians indicate such possibility of changing congregations.⁴⁵

Such fluidity indicates that although Korean-American Protestant churches are successful in converting new immigrants, they are not efficient in maintaining people they converted to continue attending the congregation. The major reasons why Korean immigrants switch to other congregations according to Kim and Kim include: moving away from the area in order to change occupation; services do not satisfy spiritual needs, hence looking for another congregation that suits their needs; too much conflict in the congregation, as it is not unusual for humans to engage in conflict due to power struggle or opinion differences;⁴⁶ issues with

⁴⁴ I will discuss this issue section Theoretical Approach to the Relationship Between Korean-American Protestant church and New Immigrants in the third chapter.

⁴⁵ Kim and Kim, 81.

⁴⁶ This happened to the church I attended in Buffalo, NY, as the power struggle between

the pastor, and/or with the programs the church currently offers.⁴⁷

The short tenure with a particular ethnic congregation among Korean immigrants is evident when it is compared to other ethnic groups, as “69 percent of African Americans, 60 percent of Hispanics, and 65 percent of Caucasians have been members of their current congregations for more than ten years.”⁴⁸ The fluidity of the membership of Korean immigrant congregation suggest that once immigrants become used to living in the United States, they seek to break away from the congregation with which they initially were affiliated. The major reason for the breakaway could be because the immigrants no longer need any assistance from the church and feel like they have done their due service to the church. Korean-American Protestant churches also do not suffer hugely from losing attendees, because it is much easier to bring in new immigrants who can replace the attendees they lost. Hence, it is more beneficial for to Korean-American Protestant churches to bring new immigrants to the congregation rather than retaining existing members. This point can be backed up by the data because the conversion rate and fluidity level in Korean-American Protestant churches are both high. Thus, this research gives another answer for the question of why Korean-American Protestant churches are so eager to convert new immigrants through providing them great deal of help.

There are two answers for the question of why Korean-American Protestant churches have helped new immigrants successfully settle down in America. The first answer is that new immigrants help the church through various means such as active participations in church affairs and financial support. The participations include cooking Korean food, providing transportation for those who require it, teaching Korean in Korean school, and helping church officials in the maintenance of the church. Korean immigrants are also reliable source of money for the congregation, as they offer more money than other major ethnic groups in the U.S.A.

elders and pastor eventually led to the downfall of the church.

⁴⁷ Kim and Kim, 81.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The second answer is because it is more beneficial for Korean-American Protestant churches to convert new immigrants than to maintain existing attendees. Korean immigrants are both easy to convert into Christianity and fluid in terms of their membership to a particular congregation, and thus it is easier for the churches to bring new immigrants rather than try to satisfy the pre-existing members. Furthermore, it is the recent immigrants who can provide the particular benefits sought by Korean-American Protestant churches discussed above; closer and more “pure” connection to Korean homeland and language, Korean knowledge and ingredients for cooking. Thus, recent immigrants best serve the purpose of helping to maintain Korean identity amongst those Korean-Americans who have been longer in the U.S.

Since the symbiotic relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants are investigated. I will now turn to discuss whether such relationship can be applied to other two groups through theoretical approach of segmented assimilation of immigrants.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Approach

In the previous two chapters I have demonstrated that there is a symbiotic relationship between new immigrants and Korean-American Protestant churches. New immigrants benefit from the churches through the provision of a solution to social and economic problems they face as well as creating a place of cultural comfort to maintain their Korean identity in the midst of the alien culture they must accommodate. In return, Korean-American Protestant churches receive aid to organize church events from immigrants while likewise retaining and strengthening their own Korean identity. As a result, Korean-American Protestant churches play a role in helping new immigrants go through the processes of assimilating and adapting to American society and culture, while new immigrants benefit the church with material, cultural and labor support. In this chapter, I will discuss how the symbiosis of Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants actually can be understood through the lens of the sociological theory of “selective acculturation.” Through this analysis we can see how the symbiotic relationship found between Korean-American Protestant churches and recent Korean immigrants is ideal for helping new immigrants in becoming a part of American society in a healthier and more sustainable way, for there are many dangers lie between new immigrants and successful settlement in the U.S.A. as they attempt to assimilate into American culture and society.

Before moving onto the discussion of selective acculturation and how it is applied to the relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new Korean immigrants, I first want to describe what it means to assimilate more generally. This is necessary to understand where the process of selective acculturation—that is found within the theory of segmented assimilation—fits into the history of assimilation, for segmented assimilation is a theory that is developed much later.

According to sociologists, *acculturation* generally happens when immigrants and their children become native speakers of English and when they adopt American folkways, values, lifestyles and ideology. *Assimilation* refers to the process of immigrants forming personal relationships with people outside their ethnic groups by moving out of immigrant neighborhoods and occupations into mainstream ones.⁴⁹ Acculturation is a process of assimilation, which explains why selective acculturation is a subdivision of segmented assimilation theory. Historically, at first sociologists assumed that immigrants gradually become American in a linear way as they spend their lives in the United States of America. Because the earliest immigrants who migrated to America were mostly Europeans who shared similar appearances with Americans, there was no particular obstacle to hinder their assimilation into American society except for their fluency in English. While there was certain barrier between Americans and white immigrants that was caused by American ethnocentrism, it eradicated shortly because they were nonetheless similar in appearance with mainstream Americans. The American-born descendants of European easily assimilated into American society as well because they grew up speaking English.⁵⁰ However, the theory became invalid when other ethnicities began to migrate to America and there were clear indications that not all immigrants successfully assimilate like European immigrants, arguably because of racism.⁵¹ Recognizing the requirement of different approaches to assimilation, a team of sociologists constructed a theory known as “segmented assimilation” that is also inclusive to non-Caucasian immigrants, such as Korean immigrants.

The theory of segmented assimilation, of which selective acculturation is one strategy, demonstrates how the children of contemporary immigrants become incorporated into the

⁴⁹ Light, Ivan. 2004. “Coming to America”. Review of *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. *Contexts* 3 (2). [Sage Publications, Inc., American Sociological Association]: 65.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

system of stratification in the host society and the different outcomes of the process.⁵² It is developed by a group of sociologists led by Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, including Margaret Gibson, Min Zhou, and Carl Bankston. Segmented assimilation theory acknowledges the fact that children of post-1965 immigrants to the United States typically become American through diverse paths rather than linear fashion.⁵³

There are three strategies of segmented assimilation according to the sociologists. The first trajectory is “dissonant acculturation,” the least favorable trajectory for the immigrants and their children. This happens when the second generation successfully and rapidly adapts to the language and the culture of the United States of America and in the same time forgets their native language and culture. This leads to the separation of the first and second generation, as the former is less susceptible to the alien culture and maintains unity with their native culture. As a result, the family structure becomes disfigured through the role reversal as children have more linguistic and cultural competence than their parents, becoming their parents’ parents.⁵⁴ Since the second generation is better at English than the first generation Koreans, the second generation Koreans become representatives for their parents in daily business. The business includes making a reservation at a local restaurant, answering an important phone call regarding a contract, and asking for a refund. Warner describes the stories told to Portes and Rumbaut by immigrants and their children in Miami and San Diego in the 1980s and 1990s in which most of the second generation that followed dissonant acculturation and therefore were not able to absorb life wisdoms of their parents drifted into “gangs or drugs or premature pregnancies and leave school before getting the education they need for occupational

⁵² Zhou, Min. 1997. “Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation”. *The International Migration Review* 31 (4). [Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc., Wiley]: 975–1008.

⁵³ Warner, R. S. "The Role of Religion in the Process of Segmented Assimilation." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612, no. 1 (2007): 100.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 107.

success.”⁵⁵ The result of dissonant acculturation is downward assimilation, in which the immigrants wallow into persistent poverty.

“Consonant acculturation,” the second strategy of segmented assimilation, is a process undergone by individual families according to Portes and Rumbaut’s model. This happens when a family either chooses to abandon their native culture and language in order to become completely assimilated to American society, or holds solely to their old country culture despite being in the United States of America. The former happens when families have fluency in English and thus there is no concrete reason for the first and second generation of immigrants to learn English after arriving in the United States of America. According to Warner, consonant acculturation is a prevalent form of segmented assimilation that happens to Filipinos, “whose typically fluent English, deep-seated Roman Catholic faith, and high occupational standing facilitates their and their children’s participation in American society.”⁵⁶ The latter happens when there is already an established ethnic community large enough for self-sustenance. Koreatown in Los Angeles is a great example, as Koreans who live there do not need to speak English for daily business because everyone speaks Korean there. Consonant acculturation causes mixed outcomes of both downward assimilation, in which immigrants live in persisting poverty because they refuse to learn American culture and language, and upward assimilation, where immigrants successfully integrate into American society and achieve high social status because they successfully integrate into the mainstream American society.

Finally, there is “selective acculturation,” which is also known as “additive acculturation.” It is the recommended form of acculturation in segmented assimilation theory in which new immigrants and their children alike can achieve successful assimilation in American society:

[Portes and Rumbaut] particularly recommend a strategy of selective acculturation (or additive acculturation) through which groups with nontrivial but vulnerable stocks of economic, human, and social capital, and without the burden of the

⁵⁵ Warner, 107.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 108.

hostile reception accorded the least advantaged immigrants, can support their young people as they Americanize and thereby influence these trajectories. Under selective acculturation, maturing youth maintain fluency with the oldcountry language and culture and are thereby able to communicate with their immigrant parents, even as they (inevitably) absorb American culture. In this way, they are seen to stand a better chance of acquiring the education that is so crucial to occupational attainment in America's increasingly high-technology workplace.⁵⁷

This process, according to Portes and Rumbaut, is how immigrants gain the status of upward assimilation where they escape the worst form of treatment by the host society and thus become prosperous members of America. Portes and Rumbaut conclude that "the key to successful selective acculturation is that both the first and the second generation are inserted into the ethnic community and maintain old country language and customs while they together learn the English language and American customs."⁵⁸

For Korean immigrants, Korean-American Protestant churches are the perfect environment to assist them in attaining assimilation in the United States of America because the churches provide all of the necessary characteristics for successful selective acculturation such as ethnic community, educational support, and homogeneous family structure in religion. Comparing the relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants with the theory of selective acculturation is vital because if the symbiosis between the two groups is proven to be theoretically applicable to other groups, then it is possible for other general groups to model after the symbiotic relationship and successfully assimilate into American culture and society.

Now I will look into how the key constructions of selective acculturation actually fit with the relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants as Korean-American Protestant churches prevent new immigrants from following the other two less favorable forms of segmented assimilation.

⁵⁷ Warner, 103-4.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 104.

The Prevention of Less Favorable Forms of Segmented Assimilation

The first role of the Korean-American Protestant churches is to act as a safehouse for new immigrants by preventing them from falling into other two strategies, dissonant and consonant acculturation. Dissonant acculturation, the least favorable trajectory for new immigrants and their children, shows the process of how new immigrants follow downward assimilation and eventually persist in poverty in two parts:

In the first [part], children rapidly acculturate to American customs and the English language while their parents separately take refuge from American society in ethnic institutions. Parents and children come to live in culturally different worlds and as time goes on lose the capacity to communicate with one another, parents not gaining fluency in English, and children quickly losing the ability to speak the parents' language. In the second, more drastic form of dissonant acculturation, parents lack coethnic support and become ever more bewildered as their children Americanize and defy the authority parents feel is theirs but do not know how to exercise. The hallmark of dissonant acculturation is role reversal, where children become their parents' guides to the society they have made their new home. Children have more linguistic and cultural competence (which is not to say wisdom) than their parents, becoming their parents' parents.⁵⁹

The most distinct source of dissonant acculturation is the distance between new immigrants and their children created by the lack of common ground in both language and culture. Because the younger generation learn new language and customs more quickly and are more susceptible of forgetting old language and customs, the cultural and linguistic barrier between new immigrants and their children increases exponentially as they live longer in the United States of America. The presence of an ethnic community in this case does not help closing the gap much, for children think attending ethnic community is bothersome.⁶⁰ Thus the lack of shared aspects of life plagues the lifestyle of new immigrants and leads to eventual downward assimilation. Through attending Korean-American Protestant churches, such drastic assimilation can be prevented as churches break the language barrier by enabling both

⁵⁹ Warner, 107.

⁶⁰ See under the section Identity Formation of Second Generation Koreans Through Korean-American Protestant Churches for more detail.

generations to learn and practice English while retaining Korean as well. Furthermore, the celebration of major Korean holidays, inclusion of Korean folk traditions, and serving Korean food enable both recent immigrants and second generation Koreans to not forget their Korean identities.

Korean-American Protestant churches take the similar role for consonant acculturation as well, as consonant assimilation is less favorable for upward assimilation. According to Portes and Rumbaut divide consonant acculturation into two parts as well, in which “one in which parents and children learn English and American customs together and largely abandon ethnic ways, and a second where the generations unite in resisting any sort of acculturation and hew to the ethnic community.”⁶¹ In both cases immigrants and their children become isolated from some concepts of their identity as Korean and American. For the first case, they are never fully accepted into mainstream American society because they are not of the same ethnicity – in this case, Caucasians or Afro-Americans – as Americans, and they refuse to associate themselves with Koreans in the United States because they chose to separate themselves from Korean language and culture altogether. In the second case, because the immigrants under consonant acculturation maintain a strong tie with their Korean identity, they lose the meaning of migrating to the foreign country and do not associate with the mainstream American society, thus living in their own world.

Korean-American Protestant churches help new immigrants from falling into consonant acculturation with similar actions as a haven for dissonant acculturation – offering English and Korean language classes, preserving Korean identities while holding English services, and sharing common grounds with other Korean immigrants by attending the same congregation. All the aforementioned efforts by Korean-American Protestant churches lead to the process of selective acculturation, the most favorable form of segmented assimilation. While Warner

⁶¹ Warner. 108.

certainly does mention that it is worthwhile to investigate the influence of religious organizations, he fails to actually address the influence. Thus I have decided to take the job and investigate the role of Korean-American Protestant churches in assisting Korean immigrants to assimilate successfully into American society.

Case Study of Selective Acculturation in Korean-American Protestant Churches and New Immigrants

Korean-American Protestant churches assist new immigrants and their children greatly in both helping them avoid wallowing in dissonant and consonant acculturations and preparing them for selective acculturation. As explored above, linguistic fluencies are an important factor for all immigrants, because the mastery of English is essential for new immigrants in order to become a part of American society. Hence it is not surprising to see Korean-American Protestant churches provide English lesson to help immigrants learn the language faster.⁶² While English classes are primarily for new adult immigrants who are unable to learn the language as fast as their offspring, classes offered by Korean-American Protestant churches give younger immigrants an organized approach to the language, an approach that American schools do not take because they assume their students to be fluent in English. English lessons are especially helpful for both new immigrants and their offspring, because the key to successful selective acculturation is that they both are inserted into the ethnic community, which is Korean-American Protestant churches, and together learn the English language and American customs, which can be done by taking English classes together in the congregation. Therefore, Korean-American Protestant churches give new immigrants another help in successful selective acculturation via English lessons.

Another important contribution of Korean-American Protestant churches to new immigrants for selective acculturation is the religious homogeneity attained through attending

⁶² See under the section Syncretism of Korean-American Protestant Churches for more detail.

the same congregation. Religious homogeneity occurs within family when all the family members believing in the same religion. It is not uncommon for family members of a person who attends Korean-American Protestant churches to start going to the church, as in my case.⁶³ America's public transportation system is inferior to that of Korea, where public transportation is well-organized, more than frequent, and covers almost all the areas of the country because it is a smaller country. Here it is difficult to go away from home without a car, especially on Sunday. Since "half of Koreans, even among those living in large metropolitan areas with many Korean churches in their neighborhood, indicate that their church is located ten miles or more away from their residence," according to Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim, it is evident that churchgoers require the use of car to get to their congregation.⁶⁴ With no car, no close friends, lack of knowledge of nearby places and not-so-friendly public transportation, there is not many options for new immigrants to spend the weekends. Furthermore, Korean-American Protestant churches offer many benefits to new immigrants such as Korean food, language lessons, and community composed of the same ethnicity which allows them to hear and speak Korean. The lack of other options to spend free time and the favorable community lead to the whole family members eventually attending church. Although it is not entirely sought, a form of religious homogeneity nevertheless is created because the whole family starts to go to the same church in order to entertain themselves over the weekends.

As Warner mentions, the positive contribution of religious homogeneity is a key background factor in selective acculturation. Following the same religion and attending the same congregation give new immigrants and their children a sense of shared background, which contributes to successful selective acculturation that is desirable for new immigrants.

⁶³ My parents and I never went to any religious organizations prior to going to New Zealand. Then when my mother started attending church after receiving much help from one particular church, my father and I eventually followed her and attended the same church. I stopped going to the church after a while, but the pattern reoccurred when we came to America.

⁶⁴ Kim and Kim, 79.

Furthermore, attending Korean-American Protestant churches gives new immigrants an opportunity to continue exercising in their old country language and customs. Although it bears the title Korean-American, the dominant language in Korean-American Protestant church is Korean. The main service is held in Korean, and attendees speak Korean to each other as well. Furthermore, Korean-American Protestant churches celebrate major Korean national holidays such as *Seollal* and *Chuseok* with traditional Korean food and also mention minor Korean national holidays prior to the sermon.⁶⁵ Thus through attending Korean-American Protestant churches, new immigrants maintain their native language and customs, thus taking one step further in achieving successful selective acculturation.

Lastly, the importance of ethnic community in achieving successful selective acculturation is emphasized by Warner, for participating in ethnic community alleviates the hostility of the new society by which new immigrants are beginning to assimilate. While there are many Korean organizations in which new Korean immigrants can be affiliated with, such as Korean-American Catholic churches, Korean-American Buddhist temple, and even non-religious Korean Associations, it has been examined that Korean-American Protestant churches is the predominant form of ethnic community for immigrants due to the sheer difference in numbers for each organization.⁶⁶ Since it is difficult to live in a region that does not have any Korean-American Protestant church established within driving distance, Korean-American Protestant churches already offer significant help to new immigrants by offering an easily accessible ethnic community, a necessary component for selective acculturation of new immigrants.

⁶⁵ See under the section Syncretism of Korean-American Protestant Churches for more detail.

⁶⁶ See under the section Factors of Korean American Protestant Churches' Dominance for detailed numbers for each organization.

It can be seen that the symbiotic relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants fall in the general theory of segmented assimilation, specifically in selective acculturation. Through offering an ethnic community and opportunities for educational attainment, language fluencies, and religious homogeneity, Korean-American Protestant churches act as a gateway for successful selective acculturation among new immigrants by providing ground for maintaining old country language and customs learning the English language together. In return, new immigrants give Korean-American Protestant churches funds, participation in church affairs, and preservation of Korean identity by preventing second generation Koreans from losing Korean culture and language. Thus the new immigrants aid in the process of selective acculturation for second-generation immigrants, providing a link to their Korean identity.

I have investigated how Korean-American Protestant churches help new immigrants to have a successful migration in the form of selective acculturation while simultaneously preventing them from following less favorable trajectories of segmented assimilation. Through the investigation, it is evident that the symbiotic relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants is illuminated by the sociological theory of segmented assimilation to American society. This particular median for of assimilation works so well because it both integrates the new immigrants to American society, while at the same time providing cultural and linguistic continuity for recent immigrants and second-generation immigrants alike linking them back to Korean identity.

Conclusion

The goal of the study is to examine the relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new Korean immigrants and find out why Korean-American Protestant churches are willing to help new immigrants at great length. Immigrants go through critical social and economic problems once they arrive at the United States of America. New immigrants are overwhelmed by the alien culture they must adjust to, as they are not proficient in English. This alienation causes new immigrants a sense of loneliness and nostalgia, which makes them search for ethnic community to ameliorate their homesickness. Immigrants also are in need of assistance in economic matters such as contracting housing, buying cars, opening bank account, and getting jobs. All these problems need fluency in English, but as stated above new immigrants are yet to possess such command in language. Because Korean-American Protestant churches dominate Korean-affiliated organizations in America in terms of number, and most of the attendees have lived in America long enough to be fluent in English, churches are in a better position to help the new immigrants solving social and economic problems than other ethnic communities. Furthermore, Korean-American Protestant churches offer an ideal cultural setting for new immigrants by syncretizing Korean folk traditions such as food, language and holidays with Protestant Christianity.

All these efforts by Korean-American Protestant churches are compensated by new immigrants in the form of time, energy, and money. Korean immigrant Christians have the highest participation rate among ethnic groups in various forms, as they help to organize church events, cook Korean lunch, and teach Korean at Korean schools. Through such participations, new immigrants help Korean-American Protestant churches in maintaining Korean identity in America as they are yet to become completely assimilate within American culture. Korean immigrants are also a reliable source of income for Korean-American Protestant churches, as they pay exceptionally large sum of money to the congregation they attend. Lastly, Korean-

American Protestant churches protect second generation Koreans from losing their ethnic identity and pride through offering an ideal setting for social life and cultural preservation. Therefore, it can be said that Korean-American Protestant churches and new Korean immigrants form a symbiotic relationship, in which both groups benefit from the relationship.

It turns out that the symbiosis of the two groups is a favorable relationship, as the relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new Korean immigrants pertains to the sociological theory of segmented acculturation. Through the aid of Korean-American Protestant churches both the first and second generation Koreans maintain their homeland's culture and language while learn American folkways, values and lifestyle, which results in successful assimilation into American society. Thus it can be concluded that the symbiotic relationship found between Korean-American Protestant churches and recent Korean immigrants is ideal for helping new immigrants and their children to assimilate within American society in healthier and more sustainable way.

When I look back, I think I am the beneficiary of the healthier and more sustainable assimilation formed by my relationship with Korean-American Protestant church during my adolescence. Adolescence is considered a shaky period in life that often results in identity crisis and other psychological troubles, and because I spent that time of life without my parents I was under the threat of identity crisis. However, attending Korean-American Protestant churches helped me go through adolescence without much problems. Although the study began from my personal experience, investigating the question actually proved that the symbiotic relationship between Korean-American Protestant churches and new immigrants can be applied to other groups as it attests to a sociological theory.

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