

Korean Ethnic Churches' Benefits to  
Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Their Families

By

Sungeun Bae-Hansard

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Approved:

Daniel B. Cornfield, Ph.D.

Laura M. Carpenter, Ph.D.

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## INTRODUCTION

Because large numbers of Koreans in the United States are both business owners and practicing Protestants, it is vital to consider whether Korean churches serve as more than religious centers. Based on twenty-four in-depth interviews from two Southern cities, this paper explores different tools Korean ethnic churches provide to their members. These tools help Koreans in developing businesses, adapting to America, and rearing children. The Protestant work ethic, possibly combined with a Confucian work ethic, encourages Korean business owners to devote extra time and energy to their businesses. Additionally, the church provides Korean business owners in service work a means to transform emotional labor into Christian service. Koreans often coordinate with trustworthy church members to form rotating credit clubs. Parents with businesses may rely on churches for free SAT classes, English classes, and childcare services. By providing English services but also reinforcing Korean cultural values, these churches theoretically help the second generation become balanced Korean Americans who can embrace both cultures. Still, churches may seem “wastes of time” to those whose businesses do not depend on Korean customers or who already have support systems from family and friends in the United States.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Immigrants and Religion in America*

According to the Pew Research Center’s Global Religion and Migration Database 2012, there are 243,100,000 Christians in the United States. Of these, 32,000,000, or about 13%, are immigrants (Connor 2014: 36). In the United States, Christianity is the most

popular religion among immigrants. The same is true in Canada and Western Europe, but immigrants in the United States constitute a much larger percentage of the total Christian population than in Canada or Western Europe. In the United States, there are about 2.1million Muslim immigrants, 4.4 million immigrants unaffiliated with a religion, 1.7 million Buddhist immigrants, and 1.3 million Hindu immigrants. Of the immigrant population, 370,000 are Jewish, and 940,000 are of another religion (Connor 2014: 36).

Not only is the retention rate for Protestants high, but many Asian Americans who were raised with no religion now claim to be Protestants. See Table 1 for information on the religions in which Asian Americans were raised versus their current religions (Connor 2014: 99). This paper will focus on Koreans, the Asian American group most likely to be Protestants (Chai 1998).

Table 1: Asian American Adult Children of Immigrants’ Religious Affiliation in the United States

	<b>Religion Raised</b>				
<b>Religion Today</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Buddhist</b>	<b>Other religion</b>	<b>No religion</b>
<b>Protestant</b>	<b>66%</b>	16%	2%	3%	<b>24%</b>
<b>Catholic</b>	1%	<b>59%</b>	0%	3%	6%
<b>Buddhist</b>	2%	0%	<b>52%</b>	0%	7%
<b>Other religion</b>	3%	3%	0%	<b>71%</b>	5%
<b>No religion</b>	<b>28%</b>	22%	<b>39%</b>	5%	<b>56%</b>
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Korean Immigrants and Religion in America*

Churches have always been vital to Korean communities in America. Forty percent of the very first Korean plantation workers who arrived in Hawaii in 1903 were Christians

or considering Christianity (Joselit 2001). Thus, they built a church shortly after reaching the United States. Two of the earliest Korean ethnic churches are the Korean Methodist Church in San Francisco, built in 1905, and a Korean Presbyterian Church built in Los Angeles in 1906 (Joselit 2001). Today, about 25% of Koreans living in Korea are Christians, but in 1903, this number was under 10%. Christians comprised such a high percentage of Korean immigrants because American missionaries encouraged many newly-converted Christians to move to the United States, trying to distance them from Korean cultural ancestral worship (Kim 2014).

After the Korean War, the number of Christians in Korea grew rapidly. Many urban middle class Koreans converted to Christianity as conversion symbolized upward mobility by Westernization (Chai1998). Because the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 attracted professional and technical workers, middle class converts were more likely to emigrate than people of other socioeconomic statuses (Hurh and Kim 1990). In 2005, about 30% of Koreans identified as Protestants or Roman Catholics (the majority being Protestants) (Bankston 2014).

There is a high rate of church attendance among Korean immigrants (K. Park 1997). “For instance, 69.9% of the Los Angeles Koreans and 76.8% of the Chicago Koreans were affiliated with Korean ethnic churches, and the vast majority of the church affiliates attended church at least once a week” (Hurh & Kim 1990: 20). In addition, approximately 25% of non-Christian Korean immigrants convert to Christianity after moving to the United States. Min (1992) argues that “many probably began attending the ethnic church primarily because it met their practical needs associated with immigrant adjustment” (1371). Some

of these practical needs are (1) “fellowship, (2) maintenance of cultural tradition, (3) social services, and (4) social status and positions” (297-299). Chai (1998) argue Koreans are drawn to Christianity because even though “racial and ethnic separation is not encouraged in the United States, religious distinctiveness is promoted” (Chai 1998: 299). Chai states: “ethnic churches are therefore convenient vehicles for preserving ethnic culture and identity with the support of most Americans (299). She states that in fact, white Americans have supported many of the Korean churches in the United States with financing and personnel, among other commitments.

### *Denomination Switching*

Although there are many studies on immigrants’ religious conversions, studies on immigrants’ denomination switching within Christianity are limited. Among Americans, Presbyterians and Episcopalians tend to be higher-status and more liberal Christians, whereas Baptist, Church of Christ and Pentecostal groups tend to be lower-status and more conservative (Sherkat 2001). The status theories predict Presbyterians and Episcopalians will gain members due to the status associated with their denominations, whereas Baptists, Church of Christ and Pentecostal groups will lose members. Rational choice theory, on the other hand, predicts people will continue their denominational affiliations because of familiarity, and when they choose to switch, they will choose denominations similar to their original denominations. Many scholars agree denominational identities are not as relevant as they once were. Since the 1960s, “status ordering of religious groups has become far less clear... and... denominational differences in status, regional distribution, and ethnic identity have decreased (Hunter 1990; Wuthnow 1988, 1993)” (Sherkat 2001: 1462).

A high percentage of Koreans attend Protestant churches and consider themselves Protestants (Bankston 2014). This is because many American missionaries to Korea were Protestants. Thus, the first Korean churches were Protestant churches. Applying rational choice theory, it follows that those who were Protestants in Korea would continue to build and attend Protestant churches. However, some do decide to switch their denominations. What are their reasons for switching? Are there patterns to this denomination switching?

### *Korean Family Businesses*

According to Bankston (2014), there are three common immigrant occupational types. The first type is low-skilled or semi-skilled labor. Most immigrants involved in these occupations work in agricultural, construction, and meat-packaging jobs. The second occupational type is skilled or highly-educated labor. These are highly-educated immigrants who usually arrive with medical degrees transferrable to American medical degrees or who educate themselves in America to become engineers or technicians. Lastly, some immigrants start their own businesses.

In the United States, whites are most likely to own businesses, and Asians are second most likely to do so (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014). Among Asian immigrants, Koreans own businesses at the highest rate (Bankston 2014; Espiritu 1999). In 1975, *Newsweek* wrote, “What used to be Mexican-American, Japanese, and Jewish stores and businesses are now mostly Korean, with giant Oriental letters spread across their low-slung store fronts” (Joselit 2001: 112). Koreans’ small businesses tend to be located in minority neighborhoods. “[Korean] ethnic networks provided the means for these relative outsiders to take these marginal positions, while developments in the country of destination opened

up places for them” (Bankston 2014: 53). Language barriers, discrimination, and difficulty transferring Korean educational credentials to the United States result in labor disadvantages to Koreans. These difficulties make it more attractive for Korean immigrants to engage in small family businesses.

Scholars interested in immigrant businesses have focused on immigrants’ motivations for starting businesses and difficulties immigrants face when running businesses in the United States (Clark and Drinkwater 2000; Kang 2010; Lerner 1999; Masurel et al. 2002; Shinnar and Young 2008). Much research has shown that immigrants often start their own businesses to avoid discrimination and to have more flexible work hours (Kang 2010; Park 2005). Many immigrants turn to entrepreneurship as a remedy for underemployment, Korean immigrants being the most likely to do so (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014; L. Park 2005).

While many immigrants come to America with professional credentials from their home countries, these credentials often do not transfer well. As such, immigrants often start businesses because they cannot practice their former trades (Kang 2010; K. Park 1997). In short, limited job prospects lead many immigrants, including Korean immigrants to start their own businesses (Kwon 1997). “Personal and group resources” of immigrants also aid their opening small businesses (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014: 75). The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 further encourages skilled and financially privileged immigrants, as opposed to other socioeconomic classes, to move to the United States. Because many such immigrants’ statuses in their home countries allow them to save money, opening businesses in the United States is a real option (Dhingra and Rodriguez



2014).

### *Contribution to the Field*

The current study contributes to these fields of immigration research: immigrant entrepreneurs, second generation immigrants, immigrant religion, and gender norms and expectations. Immigrants' motivations for starting businesses have been studied extensively (Clark and Drinkwater 2000; Masurel et al. 2002). The current study, however, will build on previous studies by focusing not only on immigrants' reasons for starting businesses, but also on different impacts churches have on immigrant businesses. Originally planning to study business succession among Korean immigrant entrepreneurs, I only interviewed Korean immigrants with children. When discussing their religious lives and church involvement, many talked about their children. Thus, I will briefly discuss benefits and disadvantages churches have for second generation immigrants as well. Most current research on Korean second generation immigrants has focused on their being model minorities, their identities as both Korean and American, and their language retention. I will discuss these topics in the context of religion.

Religion scholars have studied extensively the benefits of Christianity, but very few have focused on Korean immigrant entrepreneurs. Kwon's (1997) study on Korean entrepreneurs and their religion only focused on Koreans in Houston. My study, which focuses on two cities, contributes to Kwon's (1997) findings. As I demonstrate below, our findings are similar and different in many ways.

I focus on this population because owning a family business is a common occupation among Korean immigrants. In other words, one cannot study Korean immigrants without

studying Korean small business entrepreneurs. Korean entrepreneurs, more so than other Korean immigrants, gain specific benefits from Korean ethnic churches. The aim of this paper is to discuss benefits Korean ethnic churches provide to Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and the limits of those benefits.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### *Emotional Labor*

According to Hochschild (2003), emotional labor “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (7). Emotional labor requires three key factors: (1) “personal contact with the public” (e.g., face-to-face, voice-to-voice), (2) “the production of a state of mind in others,” and (3) emotions monitored by supervisors (Hochschild 2003). In her study of Delta flight attendants, Hochschild finds the airline encouraging flight attendants to smile and suppress negative feelings toward passengers, all to make passengers’ experiences more pleasurable. Attendants learned to use deep acting by changing their mindsets about customers (e.g., explaining passengers’ rudeness by telling themselves passengers were merely scared of flying). Attendants were to change their facial expressions, gestures, and intonations, among many others aspects of themselves to provide better service. In short, service workers’ emotions became commercialized.

The current paper will extend Hochschild’s emotional labor framework by discussing how Korean immigrant entrepreneurs incorporate God’s commands into service work transforming otherwise degrading emotional labor into important Christian service work. In

other words, Christianity aids their deep acting, which eases the demanding task of emotional labor, resulting in better customer care, and often economic profit.

### *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

The economic impact of Christianity is not limited to aiding employees' emotional labor. Some Koreans may prosper because of their "Protestant work ethic." This term originated with Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Intrigued by the fact that capitalism first occurred in the West, but nowhere else, Weber conducted a study from 1904 to 1905 focusing on Germany. He found business owners and those highly educated tended to be Protestants. He argued that because Calvinism encouraged hard work and pursuit of profit, it fostered capitalism as a Western economic system.

Weber describes two main groundings for the Protestant work ethic. First, according to Weber, Protestantism values wealth as an indicator of divine election. Second, Weber (1930) describes a belief among Protestants that each individual was called to a certain occupation in which God had commanded him or her to work hard; this is the person's "calling." Additionally, the Calvinist doctrine of predestination—that humans are incapable of earning eternal salvation, but God has chosen who will be saved from eternity—created a "psychological sanction" for the development of the Protestant ethic. Protestants believed it was important to work hard in the occupations to which God had called them, and that wasting time and enjoying luxuries were sinful. In other words, Protestants were to work hard because God called them to do so. Because they did not believe in accumulating wealth for the sake of status or purchasing goods, they worked constantly, regardless of how much money they had already earned. Protestants believed they were "called" to specific work, and

hard work glorified God. This idea comes easily to many of the Korean immigrants raised with Confucian cultural values, which emphasize work and business ethics (Domurat & Zajenkowska 2002; Lam 2003). This paper will demonstrate that Korean immigrant entrepreneurs use the Protestant ethic framework along with Confucian business ethics to aid their businesses and to encourage their children to work hard in school.

### *Assimilation Theory & Segmented Assimilation*

Assimilation theory originated in the Chicago school during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, purporting to explain how immigrants assimilate into America's dominant culture. Some scholars believe, not only is assimilation unpreventable, but it is also "prescriptive" (Dhingra & Rodriguez 2014). Warner and Srole (1945) extend the theory by noting the importance of skin color when determining one's likelihood of assimilating to the dominant culture. They concluded that African-Americans would not be able to assimilate without "revolutionary changes in U.S. Society" (Parrillo 2008).

Milton Gordon developed assimilation theory further and argues that assimilation is a multidimensional process wherein cultural and structural assimilation are the two most important dimensions. Cultural assimilation occurs when immigrants reject their ethnic cultures and accept the dominant culture. Structural assimilation, on the other hand, occurs when immigrants integrate with the members of the dominant group through befriending, living near, and forming romantic relationships with its members (Gordon 1964).

Alba and Nee have adapted assimilation theory for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They define assimilation as "the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences" (2003:11). In other words, assimilation does not mean the disappearance of all

“ethnic markers” (Parrillo 2008: 58). Alba and Nee (2003) also propose that, along with assimilation, “boundary blurring” will occur between the dominant group and the immigrant group. Parrillo defines a social boundary as “an institutionalized social distinction by which individuals perceive their social world and divide others into categories that have the character of ‘us’ or ‘them’” (59). Alba (2009) states that Latinos and Asians, compared to African-Americans, often gain social proximity through working and living near whites and engaging in romantic relationships with whites, which will eventually result in the assimilation of these racial groups.

Segmented assimilation, however, suggests that immigrants may assimilate to other ethnic groups instead of simply assimilating to the dominant culture. In other words, newly-arrived Asian immigrants may assimilate to Asian American groups instead of assimilating to white American culture. Immigrants can “assimilate into different segments of society beyond simply into the white middle class assumed within assimilation theory” (Dhingra & Rodriguez 2014). Segmented assimilation often occurs for immigrants living and working in ethnic enclaves with little interaction with white Americans. Even if one’s business is not in an ethnic enclave, attending a mostly-immigrant church can result in segmented assimilation. Children of immigrants, though, may assimilate to the dominant society if the schools they attend have low immigrant populations, or if the children purposefully avoid interacting with other immigrant children. This research shows that church plays a prominent role in first and second generation Korean immigrants’ assimilation processes. With the second generation in mind, most Korean churches provide English-language services. Churches also offer Korean classes for second generation

immigrants. These classes not only teach the language, but also Korean cultural values. For the first generation, Korean churches often provide English classes since learning English is vital to their assimilation. By channeling both cultures, Korean ethnic churches provide opportunities for first and second generation Koreans to assimilate to different segments of American society as they see fit.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The data for this research consists of twenty-four in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Korean immigrant family business owners in two Southern metropolitan areas. All respondents were born in South Korea and owned or co-owned small businesses in the United States. In addition, they all had at least one biological child. Some children were born in America, (82% of children; or 41 children) and the others were born in Korea (18% of children; or 9 children). See Table 1 below to find the demographics of these owners. I conducted the interviews during June, July and August, 2014. I transcribed these interviews in September and October, 2014. Only sixteen of twenty-four respondents agreed to be recorded. For those who declined, I took extensive notes during and after the interviews. I also took notes when interviewing participants who agreed to be recorded. I took notes on their facial expressions and hand gestures, as well as their their restaurants or other interview settings to help guide me through the questions.

I used snowball sampling to recruit most of my respondents. Early in the study, I recruited some participants from Korean churches I started attending for purposes of the study. Then, these interviewees referred me to other future respondents. As shown in Table

1, most of my respondents were Christians. I also asked participants to refer me to people who did not attend church or identify as Christians to ensure some religious diversity in my sample.

I transcribed each interview less than two months from the date of the interview. I used word-for word transcribing and noted the laughs, pauses and intonations of each interviewee. Some interviewees spoke in mixed Korean and English. As a native Korean speaker, I translated any Korean phrases to English during transcription. I assigned a pseudonym for each interviewee, as well as for his/her spouse, children, relatives and friends. I used MAXQDA to code my interview transcriptions. I began by using line-by-line coding to ensure that my biases did not alter my coding. I also used in-vivo coding—a type of coding used to capture specific words participants used during the interview. After coding with MAXQDA, I also coded thematically to help me grasp big-picture issues. This approach helped me connect various large themes between different field notes. The thematic code list consisted of code categories with numerous sub-codes. I analyzed my data by studying the relationships between different codes. I used “issue-focused analysis” and found similar issues among the interviewees (Weiss 1994). I also took initial memos, writing down similarities and differences between the respondents I had interviewed and compared my data to other scholars’ data (Emerson et al. 1995). I combined these initial memos with codes and searched for common themes.

Table 2. Sample Demographics

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religion in Korea</b>	<b>Current Religion</b>
Ashley	F	42	None	Christianity
Beth	F	46	None	Christianity
Chris	M	66	Buddhism	Christianity
David	M	35	None	Christianity
Eric	M	50	Christianity	Christianity
Felicia	F	41	Christianity	Christianity
George	M	48	Christianity	Christianity
Hanna	F	55	None	Christianity
Izzy	F	33	Christianity	Christianity
James	M	39	Christianity	Christianity
Kate	F	56	Buddhism	Buddhism
Lauren	F	44	Buddhism	None
Melissa	F	43	Buddhism	None
Nate	M	36	Christianity	Christianity
Oliver	M	49	Christianity	Christianity



Patrick	M	50	Atheism	Christianity
Qamar	M	35	None	Christianity
Robert	M	34	Christianity	Christianity
Samantha	F	55	Atheism	Christianity
Tim	M	57	Atheism	Christianity
Ursula	F	41	None	None
Veronica	F	50	Christianity	Christianity
William	M	52	None	None
Xavier	M	35	Christianity	Christianity

**FINDINGS**

*Converting to Christianity*

As shown in Table 2, five respondents who once identified as having no religion now identify as Christians. Three former atheists are now Christians, and one former Buddhist is now a Christian. This is a good representation of the Korean immigrant population in general, as it is common for Korean immigrants to convert to Christianity once they have arrived in the United States (Joselit 2001). This is how one of my respondents explained her conversion experience:

I had no religion in Korea. I was raised like that. And my husband was raised like that too. Then, I came to America and saw everyone going to churches. I had friends back home in Korea who went. They urged me to go, but I never did. But here, I came [to the United States] and didn't want to go to church either. But I had no friends. No one to talk to. No one to help us buy a car or rent an apartment. I talked to one of the other Korean business owner down the street, and she helped me greatly. She invited me to come to church events, and I couldn't decline, because I got so much help from her. Then I started attending the church. And I got saved one day hearing the good news. I told my husband. He didn't want to go [laughs]. I had to drag him to church. [laughs]. I had to shove him to the car and pull him to the church building. But now, he thanks me. I tell him he owes me greatly. [laughs]

This quote demonstrates a very typical experience among my respondents. Many started attending churches for these reasons: (1) to find friends or acquaintances, (2) to find help with housing and employment, (3) to deal with “emptiness” and (4) “to see why everyone goes to church.” A grocery store owner, David, came to America with the help of his brother who owned a business in the same town. He told me he wanted “to see why everyone goes to church:”

I made lots of friends through my business. [laugh] Having one of the biggest businesses in town and lots of the restaurants buying ingredients from me, they want to get to know me better. Nobody pushed me to go to church. But they always talked about going to church on Sundays. Nobody was there to play golf with me on Sundays because they were going to church. [laughs] [pause] I wanted to know what the deal was. Why is everyone going to church? Is it that great? Do they give free cows to those who come? [laughs] So I went one day to get my free cow. [laughs]

In Korean parlance, the expression “are they giving out free cows” usually implies there is no apparent reason for a particular crowd or gathering. The grocer employs it comically to express his astonishment that so many Korean immigrants were attending churches. This excerpt demonstrates well how regular church attendance by Christians appeared to

newcomers and those not attending churches. However, “Not having someone to play golf with” may have been less likely to have happened if David were located in other parts of the United States where attending church is less common. Moreover, as demonstrated more fully below, not all immigrants viewed church attendance positively. An owner of a laundromat, Kate, who has been Buddhist all her life, talked negatively about festive Sunday churchgoing activities:

They think it's a party or something. It shouldn't be so loud. Where's peace? Do their god like noisiness and party-like scene? I don't get it. It's almost degrading to see all the Koreans being rowdy together on Sundays. [sighs] They are in America and need to be Americanized. [long pause] What happens if you go to a Korean church? If you like Korea so much, why did you come to America?

It is obvious from her interview that she did not view Korean Christians attending Korean churches positively. Her reasons for this view were because of the “noisiness” and her sense that attendees degraded Korean immigrants’ image as a whole. As a religious minority (very few Korean immigrants remain Buddhist), she may have felt left out and may have been concerned that others overlook non-Christian Koreans such as herself. She also expressed resentment toward Korean ethnic churches because there was no temple for her to attend near where she lived. She had to travel more than an hour to attend a temple. Thus, she did not attend the temple frequently but attended once a month or once every other month. As the grocery store owner queried, do churches “give out cows?” If not, why do Koreans flock to Korean churches? Why are there Korean churches on every corner, but not as many temples?

### Switching Denominations

As religious scholars argue, denominations are not as important as they were prior to the 1960s. When I asked current Christian respondents (n=19) about their religions, no one volunteered their denominations. When I asked their denominations, nine of the nineteen Christians stated that they were not affiliated with any denomination, but that their church was affiliated with a specific denomination. Their common response was, “Denomination? Well, I don’t really have one. But my church is \_\_\_\_\_ Presbyterian Korean Church.” Interestingly, the participants who did not identify with specific denominations were the younger participants. They were mostly in their 30s and early 40s (one was 49 years-old).

For the other ten Christians, the most popular reason for choosing a specific denomination was continuing in the denominations of churches they attended previously. As Bankston (2014) states, church or temple membership is a prime source of identity and a “real element of continuity between their country of origin and their new homeland” (122). Thus, most participants wanted to attend churches in the same denominations as their churches in Korea. One respondent, Felicia, stated:

Church is the only same thing I have. Everything else changed. My job. My children’s attitude. Their language. My home. Food. Holidays. People around me. [Sigh] Church did too. [Sigh] But it is the closest thing I have to what I had in Korea. I wanted the church to be as similar as possible to the one we attended in Korea. We visited different churches. The one we go to was not only the same denomination, but the pastor and his wife was also very similar to the ones we had in Korea. They even look the same! They have the same number of kids, same sense of humor. The pastor wears this glasses that look just the same as the ones my pastor wore in Korea. [Laughs]

Anyway, my husband and I said, “This is it!” We’ve been to \_\_\_\_\_ church ever since.

The second most popular reason for choosing a particular church was the proximity of the church or limited availability of Korean ethnic churches (e.g. “This was the closest Korean church to my house,” “This is the only one in this city,” “This one is the only Korean church with English service for my son/daughter/children”). Lastly, some chose to attend specific churches because they were introduced to the specific church by neighbors or acquaintances from work.

Among those who changed denominations, most chose to switch for practical reasons. These reasons include: availability of nurseries, availability of an English service, better environment for children, better service times to accommodate work schedules, and to join a church with congregants more similar to the respondent or his/her family members. For example, one of the respondents (a 39 year old restaurant owner, James), decided to move from a Presbyterian church to a Methodist church because the latter had more elderly church attendees. His mother, who was in her early 70s, came to the United States about three years ago to live with James after James’ father passed away. She was not a Christian, but James and his wife wanted her to attend church in hopes of her converting to Christianity. They thought it best to move to a church where there were more elderly attendees to help her make friends, adapt to the United States, and learn about Christianity in a more friendly and familiar environment.

Two respondents from two different cities changed from Presbyterians to Baptists churches for similar reasons. Both of them were introduced to Christianity through an

acquaintance and a relative. The two evangelists happened to be Presbyterian, and these respondents decided to attend the churches of the evangelists. After they converted and learned more about Presbyterianism, they learned about pre-destination. They did not agree with the doctrine of pre-destination and decided to become Baptists. This resulted in one of the respondents switching to a Baptist church. The other respondent was in the process of finding a Baptist church.

### *Benefits of Christianity and Regular Church Attendance*

#### Financial Benefits

Church attendance can also ease immigrants' overall experience in America as they meet other Korean immigrants and entrepreneurs who can mentor them. Also, attending church can have direct economic advantages for some Korean immigrants if they choose to join rotating credit clubs (Korean: *kye*). Compared to salaried employees, entrepreneurs benefit far more from rotating credit clubs. They need large sums of money at one time to expand their businesses, purchase new machines, or even start new businesses.

Unlike many other churches in America, Korean immigrant churches engage in *kye* (K. Park 1997). Rotating credit clubs are very popular among adults in Korea; friends, coworkers, and colleagues meet every month or so and rotate money. Everyone in the club pays a specific amount each month, and one person in the club takes home all the money collected. The next month, another person in the club has turn to take the collected money. Because everyone in the club will have a month when he/she keeps all the collected money, many members make grand plans for what to do with the money they collect. Rotating

credit clubs provide an opportunity for each member to have a large sum of money on a regular basis.

Because trust is essential to these rotating credit clubs, the groups only emerge among people who trust one another and have known each other for long periods of time. When immigrants move to new countries, they often lose their memberships in these rotating credit clubs (K. Park 1997). For immigrants in a new country with few friends and acquaintances, it is easiest for the newly-arrived immigrants to find church members with whom to form rotating credit clubs (K. Park 1997). Many Christian immigrants are more likely to trust church members in hopes fellow Christians will have Christian morals and be less likely to suddenly quit clubs or abscond with collected money.

Many of my respondents stated that they were not extremely close friends with all the people involved in their rotating credit clubs, but they still trusted the club members because they were “brothers and sisters in Christ.” One woman stated, “Worst case scenario, if they choose to run away with the money, we have all their contact information through church.” This view suggests that accountability as well as trust emerges from common church membership. Attending churches gave access to these rotating credit clubs with large numbers of people, which allowed them to gain large sums of money. Otherwise, they would only be able to form such clubs with close circles of friends, resulting in small sums of money changing hands—not enough to expand or start a business.

#### *“Help My Kids Stay Under Control”*

When I asked one of my respondents, who owns a nail salon, why she and her family attend church regularly, she stated without a pause, “It helps my kids stay under

control!” As a shop owner and a mother of twin teenage boys and a six-year-old girl, she had little or no time to take care of her children. Her husband co-owned the nail salon but usually stayed home or did little to help with the business. She explained that her husband was an accountant in Korea, and she used to be a housewife. Her boys—who were ten when they moved to America—were used to their mom watching over them at home. She explained that when they first moved to America, and she was very busy with her business, the teens were acting up, and her husband did not know how to take care of them. Following a friend’s advice, she decided to send them to a youth group at a church, hoping they would be supervised, and that decision had made all the difference. She said her husband was still not helpful, but he at least carools them to church events. “There are lots of stay home ladies at churches taking care of my boys and other teenagers. They keep an eye on each other’s kids. It’s wonderful.”

She was not the only one who said this. Most of the women who owned nail salons, spas or massage parlors—because they were very busy as the main owners of their businesses, and because their husband could not do much to help with such gendered businesses—talked about how other women in the church watched over their children. One woman even called her children, a teenage girl and a ten year old boy, “motherless children.” As Milian Kang (2010) describes, many of the women with nail salons were suddenly busy in America, and their children were left with little supervision since businesses such as nail salons, restaurants and grocery stores are busier after school hours and on weekends. Thus, it was common for the women to spend all day in their nail salons and barely have time to see their children. They often had to leave their houses before the



children left for school, coming home around 11PM. Teenage children were often not asleep, but if these women had younger children, they were asleep by the time the women were able to come home from a full day of work. These women had difficulties balancing work and family. This balance was especially hard for those who were housewives in Korea but became the breadwinner of the family in America:

I was a housewife in Korea. My children were raised by me. They got used to my supervising them. My husband got used to my cleaning the house and cooking. I had the food ready when he came home. Now, I'm suddenly the one making all the money. I'm never home, but my husband expects the house to be miraculously cleaned and food to be miraculously cooked. The first month I started working, I cried every day. I felt stuck. I didn't know what to do. How do I do everything? My children don't know how to do homework without me. It was worse because it was in English. My husband doesn't know how to clean or cook. We started attending church our second month, and things started to change. There were so many other women like me. They were good emotional support, and they introduced me to women who were happy to look after my children. My husband learned from church people that this is America, and gender roles are different. Men are expected to be the moms if the women are working like me.

As my respondents stated, churches provided much needed help supervising working moms' children. Additionally, churches served as places to adapt newly arrived Koreans to aspects of American culture like new gender norms. Learning new gender norms is especially vital for Korean entrepreneurial couples who were once female homemaker/male breadwinner. Although these men did fewer house chores than women once did in Korea, they helped with housework more than in the past. As Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) Kibria (1990) found, women transitioned more than men, adapting to different ways of being both mothers and workers. Although many women in my sample found transition difficult at first, most found it liberating. Consistent with the literature

(Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kang 2010), women achieved economic independence as they started working in America, helping them to also gain personal autonomy.

Church also served as a middleman - teaching newly-arrived Koreans about American culture and teaching Korean culture to Americanized second generation immigrants. One of the male respondents, Robert, who owned a business in a majority white neighborhood attended a Korean ethnic church for his two children:

Like I said... because I did not live in Korea for all my life... because I came to America earlier than most people and my wife was adopted by white parents, we have trouble with the language. Other Koreans, they can just speak Korean at home and their children learn. Us, we mix Korean and English. Children usually only speak English. [sigh] [long pause] The new church we go to provides Korean lessons for children. That's why we stopped going to the American church. My kids are already American enough. They need to learn Korean. They are Korean! [sigh]

Unlike his assumption that other Korean parents who are fluent in Korean and speak Korean have little trouble teaching their children Korean at home, these children had trouble learning Korean just by listening to their parents talk. One of the respondents said, "We talk Korean at home all the time. I mean all the time! But they still don't get it. They like going to the Korean school because there are friends and they make it fun. At home, I just spank them if they don't do it right [laughs]. So it's no fun."

Additionally, the churches served as places for Korean children to learn about Korean holidays such as the Korean equivalent to Thanksgiving and Korean New Year. To their parents' disappointment, however, many knew these holidays based on the food they were given on these holidays. In broken English, a Korean restaurant owner said, "They know now. Thanksgiving... Songphyun. New Years... Tuk-Kuk. I wish they know more but

okay. Thanksgiving Songphyun. New Year, Tuk-Kuk. That's good. That's good." He smiled and put his thumbs up excited that his young children were somewhat attuned to the Korean holidays. He said Korean churches always serve iconic holiday foods near holiday times. He stated that sometimes, working so hard, he would forget about Korean holidays until he saw songphyun (Korean rice cake) one day at church during lunch time. Then he would know Korean Thanksgiving was approaching in Korea. "It helps me remember call my parents." He smiled. From his story, we learn that Korean churches can serve as bridges between Korea and America. This function is especially important for Korean immigrants who feel they no longer have a country. As one Korean pastor explains, "A people without a country must have something to believe in and to hold on to" (Joselit 2001: 111). In the midst of being busy and immersed in the American culture, Korean churches help immigrants remember Korea. It brings them back to their old friends, relatives, mother tongue and holidays. As Felicia stated (see "Switching Denominations," above), church is one of the only aspects of life Korean immigrants feel has not changed during their migration experience. Churches serve somewhat as small replicas of Korea to these Korean Christians living in America.

### *"Turn the Other Cheek"*

"Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matthew 5:39). Izzy—a current Christian believer who was also a Christian before immigrating—cited this verse quickly both in Korean and English when I asked, "You said the church benefits you in many ways. What about your religion? Does it help you with your family, your work, anything?" After she cited the verse, I asked her to explain why she chose that

verse:

I do really embarrassing work. You know..... [long pause]. You've been to a nail salon, right? Who washes your feet? [she opens her palms and looks at her hands] Jesus helps me though. Americans look down on us because of the work we do. They come to my business and start speaking nonsense and make faces. Sometimes, they start speaking Chinese or Japanese. I have to hold back tears. They make fun of us... at least I'm the owner. They make fun of young women... the staffs. They will touch their hair saying how pretty it is as if we are dolls. You don't just start touching people! That's very rude! [she sniffles and her face starts getting red. She looks down] Jesus helps me. I turn the other cheek.

Her narrative shows an example of Christianity helping workers with emotional labor. They incorporate God's command and words into their service transforming otherwise degrading emotional labor to important Christian service work. One of the women, who owns the laundromat, stated that she even had a chance to evangelize one of her customers because of her faithful service to her clients. She said, "[My customer] wanted to know how I could be so genuine and nice. They wanted to know what was different about me."

Christianity also helps Christian workers with deep acting. "Acting" becomes more than a means to economic benefit. One of the male respondents stated that he is living in the mission field:

You don't have to go to Africa. You can stay here. This is your mission field. I guess for me, this is another foreign country. You know what I mean [he laughs]. No one goes to America for mission work. You go to places like Africa or somewhere poor... people who never heard of Jesus and have nothing. But this is mission field for me. I believe God sent me to America so I can serve others.

As a restaurant owner, he ensured that others knew about his faith. On his front door, he explains why he takes Sundays off. His restaurant has scenes from the Bible as well as a

cross. He said, "I can't do this if not for Jesus. I was a successful businessmen in Korea. I'm not used to bowing down to others. I bowed down to my boss, but I was one of the high-ups. Here, I hold back any ugly words and smile thanks to Jesus." From these excerpts, it is clear that Christianity not only aids emotional labor, but that immigrants also use their emotional labor as a way to evangelize others. Many gained work satisfaction through their religion.

If these immigrants were employees of other companies, they may not have the freedom to demonstrate their faith as boldly. By having the authority to decorate and set hours for their businesses, it is easier for Korean Christian entrepreneurs to demonstrate their faith to others. Additionally, because they are business owners, they have the luxury to talk to their customers about their faith if they want to and even convert them. Employees, on the other hand, unless they are employed by Christian businesses, would most likely be discouraged from proselytizing during business hours at another person's business. In short, this is almost only possible because these Koreans are business owners themselves, free to discuss and decorate their business as they choose. Korean entrepreneurs in other regions of the country, however, may not feel as encouraged to demonstrate their faith as their customers are less likely to be Christians and more likely to find overt expressions of religious affiliation distasteful. In the South where a higher percentage of the population is Christian, Christian-themed decorations may even help the business, as Christian customers may feel a bond with the owner(s).

#### *Choosing Not to Attend Church*

As shown in Table 2, not all of my respondents converted to Christianity. Out of

twenty-four respondents, one respondent who was Buddhist in Korea remained Buddhist at the time of the interview. Two who were Buddhist in Korea were claiming no religion and two who had no religion in Korea still claimed no religion at the time of the interview. The two who were Buddhist in Korea were not very devout Buddhists. They said “things fell through,” because of the rarity of Buddhist temples in America. They said most Buddhist temples in America are not Korean-only but ethnically mixed. Because of this ethnic mixing, the two decided to stop attending the temple. They found Korean Buddhism unique from other incarnations of Buddhism, and they were looking for other Koreans to bond with. Therefore, they said they might be Buddhists once they go back to Korea, but that as long as they lived in America, they would maintain Buddhist beliefs without considering themselves Buddhists.

### *“Waste of Time!”*

One respondent and his wife owned a donut shop in a “nice white town.” They said most of their clients were whites. When I asked the respondent if he ever considered attending the Korean church, he shook his head. He said, “No... no no... waste of time!” I asked him to explain:

The children there hang out all the time. I don’t want my children doing that. They have to study. Do well in high school and go to college! [He had two girls. One was in eighth grade and the other girl was a junior in high school.] The ones that go to church don’t go to good schools. They go to state schools. My girls need to go to Harvard, Stanford, Yale. My older girl is valedictorian [He had trouble remembering the word, and I had to help him] because she does well in the school. All the kids that go to church is average in school. They see me and ask how [my girls] do so well. I want to tell them “Don’t go to church!” But I can’t do that. That’s rude. [laughs]

He explained to me that the children who attend churches spend almost every evening and all weekend at church playing sports together and hanging out. He was aware that Korean churches had Korean language and SAT classes (J. Park 2012). He, however, said they were not good: “They just play! They don’t really study. My girls really study.” This view was somewhat contradictory to what some female respondents said. Many stated that they wanted their children to be part of the church because they stayed out of trouble. Perhaps they are able to stay out of trouble and learn, with mediocre performance in school, but not excel in school the way the donut shop owner’s daughters did.

### *No Need for Korean Networks*

Another factor to consider is that the donut shop owner’s wife was able to stay home and instruct and monitor their daughters. In addition, because the donut shop owner has three brothers (also donut shop owners) who live in the same state, they helped the donut shop owner start his business. The donut shop owner’s clients were also mostly white. He did not need to attend church for networking purposes like many others did. Kwon (1997) conducted a case study of a Korean church in Houston and “found that the church brought entrepreneurs together with potential customers and employees, and was a place where new immigrants could find work” (Bankston 2014: 123). For instance, a respondent who owns a hair salon said most of her clients were from church. She did not like the pastor’s way of preaching but was hesitant to change churches because her clients were all from the church. Because hers was one of the only nearby Korean hair salons (the other Korean hair salon owner did not attend church), churchgoers felt the need to support their fellow congregant’s hair salon.

Because the donut shop owner did not need help establishing his business like most Korean immigrants did when they arrived, he did not feel the need to seek help by attending Korean ethnic churches. Additionally, because most of his customers are white, due to the location of his shop, he does not need to attend Korean churches for networking purposes in hopes of finding customers the way the Korean hair salon owner had to. All of my Christian respondents who had non-Korean customers (six out of nineteen) agreed except for Robert (*see "Help My Kids Stay Under Control"* above) who attended Korean churches in hopes of his two American-born children learning the Korean language and culture. Although Korean ethnic churches provide social networks for business owners, this is usually only the case for those who need Korean customers.

In other words, Korean churches provide bonding ties, not bridging ties. Bonding ties are those that link individuals within bounded networks to each other, and bridging ties are those that link individuals in bounded networks to individuals outside the network boundaries (Bankston 2014: 19). Bonding ties can be problematic in that, because they consist of people in close-knit relationships, they can limit the flow of information. As Kate, who has remained Buddhist throughout her life, stated (*see "Converting to Christianity,"* above) attending Korean churches can limit one's network to only Korean immigrants, thereby hindering new knowledge. However, for Korean entrepreneurs interested in serving co-ethnics, or who need financial or emotional support as well as a group of women to look after their children, Korean ethnic churches provide a bountiful supply of benefits.



## DISCUSSION

In this paper, I have demonstrated how Korean ethnic churches benefit Korean entrepreneurs and their family members. First, church members help take care of female entrepreneurs' children. Because many women were stay-at-home mothers in Korea, help with their children during the process of adapting to their new lifestyle is much appreciated. Second, churches provide direct financial benefits as many attendees engage in rotating credit clubs through church. The rotating credit club model is essential to entrepreneurs; it often makes starting and expanding businesses possible. Third, incorporating God's command to love others aids entrepreneurs with emotional labor as all of my respondents engaged in some aspect of service work. I also have explored how and why some chose to convert to Christianity and switch denominations within the Christian religion.

Lastly, I have shown that some immigrants choose not to attend church because they perceive it as a waste of time and/or do not need Korean networks for their businesses to succeed. Immigrants who attend church for other than religious reasons may encounter certain emotional costs. For instance, non-Christians could easily feel constrained to feign acceptance of religious teachings they have no desire to embrace. Additionally, fellow churchgoers may expect commitments of time, energy and money (e.g. paying tithes, bringing baked goods to events, greeting newcomers and handing out service programs).

Bankston (2014) has found other ethnic churches benefiting their own ethnic groups as well. Some of these include Vietnamese, Mexicans and Filipinos. Although ethnic churches are famous for helping immigrants, other institutions such as community centers

and ethnic specific sports clubs have also supported immigrants in times of need and during their adaptation processes. While such institutions are not the focus of this research, it seems unlikely they would affect members' attitudes toward labor in the ways Korean churches appear to do. As exemplified above, some interviewees identified their work with that of Christ – “washing feet” or emotionally “turning the other cheek.” Respondents also noted a heightened level of trust among churchgoers, facilitating the *kye* rotating credit clubs. Finally, respondents often perceived white Christian customers treating them with more camaraderie because of their shared faith.

## CONCLUSION

As one of very few studies focusing on religion, immigration, and entrepreneurship, this research contributes to and has many implications for numerous fields and disciplines. First, the current research demonstrates that we should not group all immigrants together. Many immigration books combine Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants together to call them “Asian Americans” and discuss their statistics together as shown in the introduction (Connor 2014; L. Park 2005). This view is problematic because it assumes a common religious experience among Asian Americans.

Second, this research contributes to the literature on second generation immigrants. Many believe that second generation Asian Americans do well in school due to their parents' intensive supervision. As shown in this research, however, not all parents have the time and resources to intensively supervise their children. Churches and elders at churches can serve as institutions where second generation immigrants go to grow not only religiously, but also academically and culturally. For those interested in studying second

generation Korean immigrants' school performance, studying churches is a must. Lastly, this research has shown that entrepreneurs have very different experiences based on the races and nationalities of their clients and customers. Thus, those studying entrepreneurs should differentiate their respondents based on who the respondents' clients are.

The current paper, however, is not without limitations. My sample is not representative of all Korean entrepreneurs since I only interviewed those with children. Because so many of the benefits described above related to parenting, entrepreneurs without children might be less incentivized to engage with churches. Additionally, many respondents were recruited through churches, and they were all living in two Southern states. I strongly suggest scholars conducting future research interview or sample those living in other parts of the United States to test for any regional differences. Religious affiliation may be less appealing in areas outside the Southeast. Americans in certain parts of the U.S. may even prefer businesses they feel are "authentic" representation of Korean culture, making any appearance of Westernization a liability. Additionally, as one of the first studies on Korean entrepreneurs and their religious practices, I was not able to take account of numerous demographic factors that may influence the results. Some of these include respondent sex or gender, or the specific region of Korea a respondent immigrated from. For respondents who were in romantic relationships, all of the interviews were with only one member of a couple, but I highly suggest future research include interviews of both members.

Through this study, we learn the significance of religious institutions for immigrant entrepreneurs. Although ethnic churches have been found to help immigrants emotionally,

financially, culturally and also help immigrants support each other; Koreans are famous for the cultural centrality of their ethnic churches (Bankston 2014). Ethnic institutions can help these immigrants adapt to America. We learn that not all ethnic enclaves and institutions are creating divisions in America. Instead, we should encourage these ethnic institutions since, as we know from assimilation theory, not all immigrants adapt to mainstream America. Becoming part of mainstream America is not the only way to become an American. Instead, these ethnic churches preserve Korean culture while accounting for their American environment. Korean Americans. Similarly, we should not perceive ethnic community centers, ethnic enclaves and ethnic festivals as their way of refusing to adapt to America. Policies should instead support the creation of these ethnic institutions and communities as well as encourage immigrants to retain their cultures as they adapt to America.

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