

The Korean Church Effect

Politicization Paper

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Asian American Youth Culture

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When I was a freshman in high school, I went along with some of my Korean friends to a Christian revival held at a high school auditorium in northern New Jersey. It was sponsored by several Korean churches, all of them of evangelical Protestant denominations, and the attendees were mostly second-generation English-speaking Korean American teenagers. As I sat in the packed auditorium, I listened as several speakers took turns giving sermons on various topics. All emphasized “faith” and the “love of Jesus”, but some made references to topics such as abortion, homosexuality, and even Communism. The speakers derided the notion of “pro-choice” and spoke of abortion as “murder”; homosexuality was termed a “disease” that had to be cured; North Koreans suffered from a failed economy because Communism was anti-Christian and God was punishing the entire nation. For me, what I initially took to be a social event came off as a political forum for aspiring conservatives. From then on, I noticed that many of my Korean friends, especially those who were actively involved in their respective churches, derived their political beliefs from church teachings. I believe that Korean churches, with their multiple roles as cultural, ethnic, and religious centers, play a critical role in the politicization of the Korean American community. In this paper, I will focus particularly on the political relationship between second generation Korean Americans and the Korean church of evangelical Protestant denominations.

Living in the Northern central part of New Jersey, where there is a fairly high concentration of Koreans, I was able to see the function of various Korean churches firsthand. The congregations were homogeneously all-Korean and the adult services were in Korean, while youth group services were in English. Ever since the Korean population began to grow in America, Korean churches have been important to immigrant families trying to settle in a new

environment. Providing a social atmosphere for networking and support, the Korean church often serves as a starting point for the settlement of Korean families in America. I also noticed that almost every church I knew offered Korean classes for second generation kids on Saturdays, and celebrated traditional holidays such as *Chusuk* (autumn festival) and Lunar New Year's Day with special food arrangements and performances. As Chong (1996) writes in her article, *What It Means to Be Christian*, the Korean church not only serves as an "ethnic community and fellowship" but also plays a role in an effort to "preserve [the Koreans'] ethnicity and culture, not only for themselves, but for their future children" (p. 267). The ability of the Korean church to provide an environment that is not only religious, but very social and cultural, allows both immigrant parents and their second generation children to become dependent on the church as the cohesive force in the Korean American community. The Korean church, as Hong and Min (1999) write, "facilitate second-generation Korean children's ethnic attachment by helping them learn the Korean language and Korean customs and maintain social networks with co-ethnic friends." Playing the vital role of community center for Korean Americans, the Korean church is able to exert its influence on its vast membership.

It is important to note that the Korean church is not an "ideologically monolithic institution," but one that experiences differences and tensions between the first generation and second generation. Younger generations often urge for "cultural and social openness," but such remarks come in a context of evangelizing people other than just Koreans (Chong, 1996, p. 280). The second generation may also raise questions on gender roles, as both Korean and Christian cultures are conducive to the subordination of females. However, despite these concerns, the prevailing authority of the first generation in a Korean church setting allows for the fusion of Korean moral standards with "conservative/fundamentalist Christian values [that] become

central to the articulation of the second generation's highly exclusive sense of group identity" (Chong, 1996, p. 282) Having deeply ingrained Korean-influenced Christian values, second generation church members are more likely to embrace the messages delivered in the sermons without question. It is from this behavior that a political ideology emerges. I will focus on three specific topics that, through the influence of both the Korean and Christian elements present in the message of the Korean church, have shaped the political make-up of the second generation Korean Americans.

Homophobia

I can remember several instances during my churchgoing years when the pastor made homophobic statements in his sermons. Labeling it a "disease" and citing several Bible passages, the pastor drove his point to the youth group audience. Even during my U.S. Government class in high school, several of my Korean friends expressed to the rest of the class their desires to see the revocation of equal rights for gays. It comes as little surprise, then, to see the anti-homosexual sentiments of an organized movement by Southern California Korean churches, which supported the California Defense of Sexual Responsibility Act (CDSRA). What was surprising was the political coordination of the movement itself; the political nature of the movement, which called out Korean American voters and ran newspaper announcements, eventually led to the founding of the first Korean American Christian Coalition chapter (Lee, 2000). The combination of Korean "virtues," which prevent the mention of anything related to sex or sexual orientation, with the Biblical criticism of sodomy, foster an attitude that "actively work to prevent honest and nonjudgmental information concerning homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism - sexuality and gender in general – from reaching young people" (Blumenfeld). It is from this type of education, or a lack thereof, that allows Korean American

adolescents to take political stances which support the removal of gays from the military, the denial of gay marriages, and a lack of sympathy for homophobic hate crimes.

Abortion

The topic of a woman's "right to choose" is a sensitive one that still provokes intense debate among Americans. Many second generation Korean Americans, in accordance with the fundamentalist teachings of their Korean churches, support the pro-life side of the abortion debate. What may also contribute to the pro-life view are the "traditional Korean views regarding sexual morality and gender relations," which are better enforced in a conservative, church setting (Chong, 1996, p.270). The notion that unwanted pregnancies can be avoided in the first place by abstaining from premarital sex makes abortion seem like an exacerbation to an already immoral decision. However, it is of interest to note that in Korea, where fundamentalist Christian values are not as dominant as in the Korean American community, abortion is a non-issue and only protested against by a small minority, notably the Korean Catholic churches. Living in a society that harbors strong opinions both for and against abortion rights, the Korean church is able to exercise a greater influence in the political stance of second generation Korean Americans.

Communism

The sermons I have heard regarding North Korea over the years have criticized the lack of religious piety in the Communist state. The lack of Christianity in North Korea is seen as the main cause for the suffering of the people there. From a pro-capitalist viewpoint, Korean churches refer to communism as "backward" and "evil," echoing the Regan cries against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The North Korean situation is a sensitive topic for many immigrant first generation Korean Americans. Family ties to those in North Korea, or memories of the

Korean War itself make the older generation very wary of words hurled against the Communist nation. My grandmother, a devout Christian, at first applauded President Bush's victory in the 2000 elections, citing that he was a "good Christian," but a year later, upon hearing his "axis of evil" reference to North Korea, she quickly changed her opinion of him, worried that the possibility of reunification might be jeopardized. Korean churches have been known to fundraise for famine relief in North Korea and have organized visits there for volunteer work, due mostly to the sympathy of the older generations. While the older generation reminisces and hopes for a unified Korea, second generation Korean Americans, who have accepted the existence of two separate Koreas all their lives, are less likely to feel any attachment to North Korea and may even support militant action against the "rogue nation." In terms of Communism as an ideology, the Korean church often simplifies it and portrays it as a Godless state destined for ruin. For them, the many North Koreans "deprived" of Christianity present more of a missionary dream, and only the destruction of the Communist regime would allow for such an opportunity. With a mixture of Korean church propaganda against Communism and the indifference towards North Korea from second generation Korean Americans, plans for a general "war on terror" may be welcomed by conservative Korean American youth.

These three examples of conservative outlook on the part of second generation Korean Americans bring my argument to a linkage between the influence of the Korean church and Omatsu's neo-conservative model. Omatsu notes that Asian American neo-conservatives often tend to "emphasize individual advancement as the way to overcome racism," presenting a barrier to unified activist movements. Asian American political groups criticize the church for their focus on "individual salvation as opposed to unity, collective action, and working for material change [in] conditions" (Lee, 2000). Second generation Korean Americans, often geared by

their parents and even the church to embrace the “model minority” stereotype and base their priorities on academic merit and qualifications, “lose sight of power and oppression in America.” (Omatsu) Along with anti-abortion, anti-communism, and homophobic tendencies, the passive approach to civil rights all fit into criteria that make many second generation Korean Americans prime candidates for Republican Party membership.

In seeing how the Korean church may indirectly affect the lack of panethnic initiatives within the Korean American community, it is important to observe the degree of ethnic attachment bred by active membership in the church. Many Korean Americans take part in programs such as Campus Crusade for Christ or InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Along with evangelical Chinese youth, these college students find themselves to be a large majority of active Christians on campus, often leading to the creation of Asian American Christian groups (Ch’ien, 2000). Although Asian American Christian groups may promote panethnicity, unity among Korean Americans and other Asian Americans may not necessarily be guaranteed. At Columbia University, the Campus Crusade for Christ, predominantly Korean and Chinese American in membership, saw a split last year as the Korean American members formed the Korean Campus Crusade for Christ. I interviewed a member of the KCCC and learned that non-Koreans in CCC accused the Korean Americans of being too “cliquish” while the Korean American students themselves believed a Korean-only club might create a more comfortable, united atmosphere. The interviewee agreed that many of these students, having attended Korean-only churches most of their lives, expected a similar environment in college. Although campuses around America may not experience a schism, such a possibility exists, most often due to the exclusive nature of Korean churches in fostering a “Korean-only” mentality.

One should not imagine the Korean churches as a singular establishment imposing conservative values on Korean American youth. Instead, it is important to see them as numerous, competitive, and often-times, very business-oriented in the sense of membership building. Although they may not take as much an active role in bilingual education, immigration protections, welfare rights, and other issues, it is impossible to say that they are apolitical. What allows these churches to be similar to each other is the coexistence of ethnic and religious values. The fusion of traditional Korean values with Christian values, enforced by a strong first generation authority allows the church to play a critical part in the molding of second generation Korean American identities. The result of such a phenomenon is a conservative ideology unique to many second generation Korean Americans.

I believe that for Korean Americans to actively participate in political movements that address issues such as immigration, welfare, and workplace discrimination, strong community centers with secular agendas need to emerge. Some organizations, such as the National Korean American Social and Educational Consortium (NAKASEC) in Flushing, NY and the Philip Jaisohn Memorial Foundation in Philadelphia have undertaken initiatives such as advocacy of immigration and hate-crime legislation as well as low-cost medical assistance to Korean elderly. But active participation in these organizations pale in comparison to participation in Korean churches. Bridging the gap between the two different Korean American community establishments may hold a promise for the effective political empowerment of Korean Americans.

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