

Religious Participation in the Lives of Korean Immigrants in Canada

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I investigate Korean immigrants' religious participation in their lives in Montreal, Canada. The present article, in particular, focuses on Korean immigrant adults' perceptions of the role of Korean ethnic churches for their younger members' Korean language and ethnic identity maintenance. I collected data from a questionnaire and interviews with 18 Korean adults who live in Montreal and who attend a Korean ethnic church in the city. Participants were ten Korean immigrant parents, two Korean language and two Bible study teachers of the Korean ethnic church, and four pastors. Information on their perceptions of the relationship between Korean language maintenance and ethnic identity, and of the linguistic and cultural obligations of the Korean ethnic church for their younger members' Korean language and ethnic identity maintenance is gathered. The findings reveal that all the adult members agree on the role and underlying significance of Korean ethnic churches for their younger generations. The results also suggest that all the adult members should understand and support the linguistic and cultural role and the community function of Korean ethnic churches within the Korean community in Montreal for their younger generations' Korean language and ethnic identity maintenance.

Keywords: Korean language maintenance, Ethnic identity maintenance, Korean immigrants' religious participation, Role of Christian religion in Canada, Korean immigrants in Montreal

INTRODUCTION

The role of Christian religion and the importance of religious participation in the lives of immigrants have been confirmed and recognized by many scholars (e.g., Warner 1998; Ganga, 2005; Ley, 2008). For example, Warner (1998) claims that religion in the lives of immigrants should be understood "in the form not of texts but of living communities" (p. 9) as a means of reproducing their cultural heritage. In a similar vein, Ganga (2005) mentions that the Italian Catholic mission serves as a means of transmitting cultural values, ethnic identity, and language through cultural activities and the use of the heritage language in worship services based on his study with ten Italian origin immigrant families in the Nottingham area, UK. He also claims that religion plays a role in ethnic identity formation.

With regard to the growth of Korean ethnic churches, Hurh and Kim (1990) show that the number of Korean ethnic churches in the United States increased dramatically from 75 churches in 1970 to approximately 2,000 churches in 1988 (Hurh & Kim, 1990). They also claim that Korean ethnic churches serve religious as well as social, educational, and psychological functions for Korean immigrants and Korean immigrants' religious faith within Korean ethnic churches helps them overcome the unstable adjustment periods and intensifies the ties of ethnic identity in the new host country.

Concerning the role of immigrant churches in Canada, Lay conducted 46 semi-structured interviews with pastors and church members from 20 Chinese-Canadian churches, 16 Korean-Canadian churches, and 10 German-Canadian churches located in the Vancouver metropolitan area. Drawing from the 2001 Census of Canada, Ley (2008) mentions that 72% of Koreans are affiliated with more than 60 Korean ethnic churches in Vancouver. However, he also states that the functions of Korean ethnic churches are limited to Korean immigrants, for Korean ethnic churches “saw their community in co-ethnic terms” (p. 2067), which focused only on Koreans. On the other hand, German-Canadian churches saw their community in multi-ethnic terms including other ethnic groups in the neighbourhood.

Chong (1998) also conducted an ethnographic study and gathered data from participant observation and in-depth interviews with 62 second generation church members and pastors in two Korean Protestant churches in the United States. In this study, Chong claims that younger generations’ religious faith and their Korean ethnic church participation are strongly related to their ethnic identity maintenance.

Overall, this review supports the idea that Korean immigrants’ religious faith and their participation within religious institutions may influence their integration process to the host society as well as their Korean language maintenance and construction process of achieving a healthy sense of ethnic group membership.

BACKGROUND

Korean immigration to Canada

Korean migration to Canada started in the mid-1910s when a small number of Korean students were sponsored by Christian missionaries to study in Canada. However, Korean migration was limited until 1966, when Canada changed its immigration policy in response to its economic demands (Yoo, 1999). At this time, Canada lifted the exclusion of Asian immigrants and Koreans were allowed to immigrate to Canada on a small scale until the 1980s, when “investment immigration” was put in place (Yoo, 1999, p. 884). Since then, considerable immigration from Korea to Canada has taken place till now.

As a result of the steadily increasing influx of Korean immigrants to Canada, the total population of Koreans in Canada has drastically increased from 29,705 in 1986 to 146,545 in 2006 (Yoo, 1999; Statistics Canada, 2008). The 2006 Canadian census shows that most Koreans (i.e., 84%) live in Ontario and in British Columbia and a small number of Koreans (i.e., 4%) live in Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2008). In 2006, there were 72,060 (i.e., 49%) Koreans in Ontario and 51,860 (i.e., 35%) Koreans in British Columbia, while there were 5,555 Koreans in Quebec (i.e., 4%). Of those who came to Ontario, 57,235 (i.e., 79%) chose Toronto and of those who went to British Columbia, 46,035 (i.e., 89%) chose Vancouver, while 4,850 (i.e., 87%) chose Montreal among those who came to the province of Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2008). Yoo (1999) explains that the majority of Koreans are concentrated in these metropolitan cities, because there are more chances for Koreans to find jobs through the large already-established Korean communities in these areas. In addition, the multilingual and multicultural environment of these cities attracts Koreans (Yoo, 1999).

Religion in Korea

Korean religious culture is quite complicated. The religions of Korea have been formed by the combination and interaction of Koreans’ traditional beliefs including: Shamanism, which is based on ancient Korean beliefs and native practices; Buddhism, which was introduced to Korea in 372 A.D. from China; Confucianism, which was introduced along with Buddhism from China; and western religions such

as Catholicism and Protestantism, which were introduced in the 17th and 19th centuries respectively (Korean Overseas Information Service, 2007).

The constitution in Korea guarantees freedom of religion (Korean Overseas Information Service, 2007). According to the Korea National Statistical Office (2005, as cited in Korean Overseas Information Service, 2007), over half (53.1%) of the total 47 million Korean population identify themselves as having a religion. Korea's religious population consists of 43% Buddhist, 34.5% Protestant, and 20.6% Catholic. The remaining 1.9% includes followers of Confucianism, Islam, Shamanism, Won-Buddhism, and Cheondogyo.

After Protestant Christianity was introduced in the 1880s, Korea had experienced political and social instability during the end of the Choson Dynasty in 1910, the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), and the Korean War (1950-1953) (Grayson, 2002). Furthermore Korea rapidly modernized and industrialized. These significant cultural changes encouraged many Korean people to find new solutions to their precarious life of instability through Christianity (Grayson, 2002; Korean Overseas Information Service, 2007). Now, the rapid growth of the Christian faith in Korean society is very noticeable in its social, cultural, educational, and political aspects (Korean Overseas Information Service, 2007).

Koreans' religion in Canada

The majority of Koreans in Canada (i.e., 80%) claimed to have religion (i.e., Protestant 51%; Catholics 25%; Buddhists 4%; and No religion 20%) (Statistics Canada, 2007). Unfortunately, there are no data concerning these Korean immigrants' religious beliefs when they were in Korea. With regard to the reason why many Koreans become church members in Canada, Yoo (1999) explains that Korean immigrants choose Korean churches as places in the new country where they can find peace of mind from the anxiety and stress that often comes with living in a new environment, even though they were not Christians in Korea.

In 2007, there were 382 Korean ethnic churches (i.e., Protestant) in Canada including 12 Korean ethnic churches in Montreal (Seo, 2008), while there were 17 Korean Catholic churches in Canada including 1 Korean Catholic church in Montreal (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea, 2008). As of 2011, there are 14 Korean ethnic churches including one Catholic church in Montreal and the rate of Koreans' ethnic church participation in Montreal is about 50 percent. This rate is based on personal estimate provided by several Korean ethnic church pastors, since no formal statistics are available. Other than Korean ethnic churches, there are three Korean religious institutions (i.e., 2 Buddhist congregations and 1 Won-Buddhism congregation) in Montreal.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This qualitative study examines how Korean immigrants' Korean ethnic church participation influences their lives in Montreal, Canada. In particular, the focus of the study is on the Korean adult immigrant church members' attitudes toward the role of the church in their lives and their perceptions of the relationship between Korean language maintenance and ethnic identity and of the linguistic and cultural obligations of the Korean ethnic church for their younger generations' Korean language and ethnic identity maintenance.

METHOD

Participants were 18 Korean immigrant adults who live in Montreal and attend a Korean ethnic church. They were recruited from churches in the Montreal area. They provided demographic information through a questionnaire and participated in individual one-on-one interviews (see Appendix A for participants' profiles). The participants were ten Korean immigrant parents who had a child (or children) between the ages of 13-19, two Korean language and two Bible study teachers, and four pastors. Among the participants, eight parents, two Korean language teachers, two Bible study teachers, and two pastors were recruited from the church where I serve as a member. The other four participants (i.e., 2 pastors and 2 parents) were recruited from other two Korean ethnic churches located in Montreal. Information on their attitudes toward the role of the church in their lives, on their perceptions of the relationship between Korean language maintenance and ethnic identity, and on their perceptions of the linguistic and cultural obligations of the Korean ethnic church is gathered. Parents and teachers had the same interview questions, while pastors had slightly different interview questions. Interviews were conducted where and when the participants felt comfortable and were conducted in Korean for less than one hour on the average.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of the relationship between Korean language maintenance and ethnic identity maintenance

The results of this study reveal that the Korean adult church members perceived Korean language maintenance to be the most important factor for ethnic identity maintenance.

It is a complicated issue when tagging someone as being a Korean. One can be considered Korean so long as she or he is of Korean origin and looks the part; however, if their mentality is entirely void of the Korean nature, we cannot realistically call that individual a Korean. Despite physical appearance, a given individual in my opinion is not Korean if she or he does not think or act like one. (Parent 2, February 29, 2008)

Those Korean Canadians that are unable to speak Korean, in my opinion, cannot recognize their true cultural identity. Having Korean parents and having Korean physical appearances do not mean they are truly Korean: they may not have Korean mentality. (Parent 4, February 28, 2008)

In fact, one parent strongly emphasized the need to teach Korean to her children for their Korean ethnic identity maintenance.

Our children will never know their Korean ethnic identity if they are not given a chance to be taught Korean. They would go on considering themselves as Canadians even though nobody approves of it. It's sad, but true that they will be categorized as Asian, or Oriental instead of Canadian. (Parent 9, February 12, 2008)

In addition, there was one parent who stressed the importance of multiple identities as Korean Canadian. He emphasized his children's multiple identities as Korean and Canadian at the same time. He mentioned that his children would find their Korean identity easily if they maintained Korean language.

My children ask me who they are as they grow up, and I tell them they are Canadian as well as Korean. I emphasize the importance of being able to speak English and French as a Quebec resident, as well as Korean as children of Korean immigrants. It is essential for the Korean children to maintain their Korean so that they can find their cultural identity later on in life. So long as the language is there, they can easily find their way back into their ethnic background. (Parent 8, March 9, 2008)

The teachers also viewed the Korean language as the most important factor for their students' Korean ethnic identity identification. One teacher who rated 5 emphasized the importance of the Korean language for children's self identification with their Korean identity. She explained this by taking her niece's example.

My niece has been raised in the U.S. since elementary school and attended boarding schools most of her school life. She may be Korean on the outside, but the way she acts or talks resembles an American and so there is no closeness between us. I think the language barrier obscures our relationship. (Korean language teacher 4, February 10, 2008)

The pastors' responses also showed that young members' Korean language maintenance was not separable from their Korean ethnic identity maintenance. One pastor pointed out that people who could not speak Korean were less likely to claim that they were Korean.

In fact, through my ministry for young adults, I have met many individuals who lost Korean. When you go to a Canadian university, you will find many second generation Koreans. Most of the second-generation Koreans I've met cannot speak Korean. Well, if you look only on the exterior, they look totally Korean but they act like they are Americans or Canadians. For the most part, if they don't know their language, they don't think they are Korean. Their Korean identity seems to be in proportion to their knowledge of the Korean language. (Pastor 4, February 13, 2008)

Overall, most of the adult members viewed their children's (students') Korean ethnic identity maintenance as the first reason for their Korean language maintenance.

Perceptions of the role of Korean community institutions other than Korean ethnic churches for the Korean tradition and culture maintenance

The adult church members, in general, expressed a positive view on the role of such institutions as Haninhoe (The Korean Community of Greater Montreal). Although they expressed a positive view of the cultural role of Korean community institutions, they also responded that Korean community institutions should put a great deal of effort into the maintenance of the Korean tradition and culture. One parent responded that the capability of these institutions to preserve the Korean tradition and culture depended on their own constant efforts.

In my opinion, Korean community institutions in Montreal are capable of maintaining the Korean traditions as well as culture; otherwise, it would be difficult for the Korean immigrants to continue using their language or meet other Koreans. However, I believe that they need to make more efforts to preserve the Korean tradition and culture. (Parent 6, February 24, 2008)

In addition, this parent mentioned that all the cultural activities of Haninhoe were focused only on Korean adults instead of the younger generations.

Unfortunately, Haninhoe serves mainly the older generation of the community. It is rare that the institution deals with the younger Koreans; therefore, the younger Koreans are most likely to have no idea what the institution does. Moreover, there are no programs organized by the institution aimed at Korean teenagers. (Parent 6, February 24, 2008)

One pastor also responded that the capability of the Korean community for Koreans abroad depended on the support and cooperation from the Korean ethnic church.

Members of Haninhoe acknowledged, "If it was only the Korean association gathering together, no planned events would follow through. However, when they were organized with church leaders through churches, many gathered without difficulty at any time. Therefore, the Korean association here cannot be achieved without the support of church leaders." I often hear that Koreans have strong respect, reliability, and trust for their church leaders. So it is often said that it is more effective when church leaders make the announcement for Korean community-related events. (Pastor 3, February 12, 2008)

Perceptions of the linguistic and cultural obligations of the Korean ethnic church

With regard to the adult members' perceptions of the linguistic and cultural obligations of the Korean ethnic church for the next generations, all the participants emphasized that Korean ethnic churches should play an important role in helping younger generations maintain the Korean language and culture. One interesting finding in this study is that most of the adult members put more emphasis on the linguistic obligation of the Korean ethnic church than on the cultural role of the Korean ethnic church.

This result can be explained by the following response:

We primarily focus on teaching the Korean language. If language is considered to be part of culture, then we can say we take care of culture too in the church; however, if not, we cannot say we take care of culture. We take care of only language for the present. (Pastor 4, February 13, 2008)

In addition, one parent also emphasized the social role of Korean ethnic churches in immigrant societies. He claimed that Korean ethnic churches in Montreal should be more responsible for Koreans abroad than churches in Korea.

Korean churches abroad should have different and more social roles compared to the ones in Korea. I think they have social roles as well as religious roles. In immigrant societies, Korean ethnic churches should function as a social institution where Koreans can gather and interact with one another. (Parent 5, March 8, 2008)

Furthermore, I also asked the pastors about the main goal of their churches in Montreal. All the pastors responded that Korean ethnic churches exist first and foremost in order to worship God, to spread the gospel, and to satisfy people's spiritual needs. In addition to the religious role of the Korean ethnic church, the pastors also named a variety of other goals of the Korean ethnic church in Montreal such as: (1) to help Korean people maintain their Korean identity; (2) to provide places where Korean people socially interact with other Koreans; (3) to help and guide new Korean immigrants to adapt themselves

to Quebec society; (4) to provide practical help (e.g., counselling and translation services, etc.); and (5) to transmit Korean traditional values and culture to the next generation.

I think the church's major responsibility to them is to provide spiritual service. I also think the Korean church's broad purpose is to help a Korean maintain a Korean identity, and to play a social role in providing help in interacting with one another. (Pastor 1, February 14, 2008)

First of all, the Korean church's aim is to have service in worshipping God and to spread the gospel. However, since we are in a foreign country, the focus tends to be geared more towards consoling and comforting. Within the immigrant society, the Korean church is a place where new immigrants can easily approach other Koreans and request help. (Pastor 2, February 5, 2008)

Firstly, the Korean church is a place of worship service; secondly it is a place to educate the children in Korean culture and tradition, and thirdly it is a place where people can socialize. Furthermore, I believe the Korean church is needed to help new immigrants. Finally, I think that the Korean ethnic church might be the stepping stone for our ethnic group to fit into the majority society. (Pastor 3, February 12, 2008)

Amongst the first generations, there are some people who have a hard time going to places where English or French is required because of their poor ability in both languages. When they have to go to the hospital, someone from our church goes with them. For example, if they need to sign a contract for something, then we provide many translating services. Basically we provide all kinds of services that are related to helping people in their daily activities that require English or French. (Pastor 4, February 13, 2008)

The adult church members, in general, expected that the Korean ethnic church should support the preservation of Korean language and culture for their younger generations.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings presented above suggest that parents, teachers, and pastors agree on the role and underlying significance of Korean ethnic churches for the younger generations of Korean families in a multilingual and multiethnic society. They believe that Korean ethnic churches affect the younger generations' Korean language and ethnic identity maintenance. In addition to the linguistic and cultural role of Korean ethnic churches, the participants also emphasized the community function of Korean ethnic churches within the Korean community in Montreal. Thus, one implication in this study is that Korean ethnic churches should work in closer partnership with other non-religious Korean community institutions in order to make sure that the Korean language and culture would be alive in Montreal.

This study also confirms the positive relationship between Korean language maintenance and ethnic identity maintenance. Therefore, adult members need to put more efforts on encouraging their younger generations to maintain the Korean language for their ethnic identity development as Koreans. In addition, the results of this study also suggest that adult members should encourage their children to maintain the heritage language and culture as well as the majority language and culture, instead of forcing them to choose just the Korean identity, so that they can develop a positive cultural identity. Thus, this result implies that Korean younger generations' cultural identity as Koreans should not be forced one-sidedly by the parents, since they do not have to choose to be either a Korean or a Canadian

in Montreal. According to Lambert (1975) and Lee (2002), younger generations' heritage language development may help them define their cultural identity more positively in multicultural and multilingual societies, since being bi- or multi-lingual may promote their acceptance of both the majority culture and their heritage culture.

Furthermore, insights from this research can help in improving the role of heritage language and culture maintenance in the integration process of immigrant populations throughout Canada.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that all the adult members should understand and support the linguistic and cultural role and the community function of Korean ethnic churches within the Korean community in Montreal for their younger generations' Korean language and ethnic identity maintenance.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES

| No | Role | Age | Gender | Length of Korean church participation in Montreal | Involved in the church before immigration |
|----|---------------------------------------|-----|--------|---|---|
| 1 | Pastor 1 | 47 | Male | 13 years | Yes |
| 2 | Pastor 2 | 32 | Female | 7 months | Yes |
| 3 | Pastor 3 | 52 | Male | 10 years | Yes |
| 4 | Pastor 4 | 47 | Male | 20 years | Yes |
| 5 | Korean language teacher 1 | 44 | Male | 4 years and 6 months | No |
| 6 | Korean language&Bible study teacher 2 | 20 | Female | 13 years | Yes |
| 7 | Bible study teacher 3 | 26 | Female | 3 years | Yes |
| 8 | Korean language teacher 4 | 36 | Female | 10 years | Yes |
| 9 | Parent 1 | 53 | Female | 9 years | No |
| 10 | Parent 2 | 44 | Female | 3 years | No |
| 11 | Parent 3 | 47 | Female | 13 years | Yes |
| 12 | Parent 4 | 46 | Female | 13 years | Yes |
| 13 | Parent 5 | 36 | Male | 16 years | Yes |

| | | | | | |
|----|-----------|----|--------|----------|-----|
| 14 | Parent 6 | 37 | Female | 15 years | Yes |
| 15 | Parent 7 | 41 | Female | 5 years | No |
| 16 | Parent 8 | 44 | Male | 19 years | Yes |
| 17 | Parent 9 | 48 | Female | 10 years | Yes |
| 18 | Parent 10 | 44 | Male | 10 years | No |

NOTES

ⁱ The use of statistical data (e.g., the means and standard deviations of the participants' opinions on some questions) in this qualitative study is for supplementary purposes only in order to complement interview data.

ⁱⁱ In order to understand the adult members' perceptions of the relationship between Korean language maintenance and ethnic identity maintenance, I posed the following question: "If someone does not speak Korean, can he (she) still claim to be Korean?". They were asked to rate their opinions on a scale of 1 to 7 with 7 as he or she has every right. Both the parents (Mean=3.40, Standard Deviation=1.71) and the teachers (M=2.50, SD=1.91) felt that language was strongly tied to identity. The parents who chose very low scores (i.e., 1 and 2) related children's loss of the Korean language to their loss of Korean mentality. The pastors' low scores (i.e., M=2.00, SD=1.15) also seemed to suggest that they agreed with the adult members' (i.e., parents and teachers) opinions on the relationship between Korean language maintenance and ethnic identity maintenance.

ⁱⁱⁱ With regard to the adult members' perceptions of the linguistic and cultural obligations of the Korean ethnic church for the next generations, they were asked to rate their opinions on a scale of 1 to 7 with 7 as very strong. The results show that both the parents and the teachers rated higher scores on the linguistic obligation of the Korean ethnic church (6.19 and 5.00, respectively) than on the cultural obligation of the Korean ethnic church (4.06 and 3.00, respectively); however, the parents rated the church's obligation higher for both linguistic and cultural obligation than did teachers. The relatively low standard deviations (0.92 and 0.82) for linguistic obligation of the Korean ethnic church indicate that there was little variation in the adult members' opinions. The relatively high standard deviation (1.90) on the cultural obligation of the Korean ethnic church means that there was considerable variation in the parents' opinions. However, the teachers showed a smaller variation (SD=0.82) on the cultural obligation of the Korean ethnic church. The pastors also rated higher scores on the linguistic obligation of the Korean ethnic church (M=5.63) than on the cultural obligation of the Korean ethnic church (M=4.13).