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## Organisational legitimacy beyond ethnicity? Shifting organisational logics in the struggle for immigrant rights in Los Angeles

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### ABSTRACT

Immigrant political organisations in the United States have traditionally built political power by claiming to legitimately represent an ethnically defined group. However, the emergence of a number of multi-ethnic, class-based organisations over the last two decades has challenged this assumption, while raising questions about the ability of the institutional context to accommodate organisational change. Building on a neo-institutional theory of legitimacy, I examine the diverging legitimating strategies employed by two long-standing immigrant organisations based in Los Angeles (LA): the Korean Resource Center (KRC) and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA). Through grant applications, organisational archival data and qualitative interviews, I show how KRC and KIWA, two groups embedded in the same sociopolitical context, have built unique yet equally successful legitimating accounts by adopting different organisational logics, one broadly based on ethnicity and one on class and multi-ethnicity. I suggest that KIWA and KRC's ideological differences, and their reliance on a different core of supporters – ethnic-oriented for KRC, labour-oriented for KIWA – drove the organisations towards distinct, yet partially overlapping subfields. By discursively mobilising those connections, and by actively shaping the surrounding organisational environment, both KRC and KIWA were able to incorporate in the broader non-profit advocacy sector in LA.

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## Introduction

Ethnicity and race have long defined the perimeters of urban politics in the USA (Katznelson 1981; Wimmer 2008; Mollenkopf 2013). Immigrant organisations have followed in this pattern, traditionally building political power in their American host societies by claiming to *legitimately* represent an ethnically defined group (Portes, Escobar, and Arana 2008). This strategy has been even more salient in the local politics of cities, such as Los Angeles (LA), and notably in the context of the city's 1992 civil unrest and the narrative of ethnic reconciliation that ensued (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999;

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Chung 2007). Recent organisational developments, however, have challenged this assumption. The change has come, in part, as a result of the stronger alliance between immigrant organisations, labour unions, and a new generation of African-American associations (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010; Nicholls and Uitermark 2013). Over the last two decades, a number of immigrant organisations – recently grouped as *worker centres* (Fine 2006) – have forwarded the political interests of multi-ethnic immigrant constituencies through the discourses of socio-economic inequalities and class. In doing so, they have built hybrid organisational forms that cannot be easily reconciled with established models of immigrant ethnic organisations (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010).

Examining this change in narratives and structures among immigrant organisations is crucial for understanding how they establish themselves and survive. That is, how they become legitimate collective actors, recognised not only by the constituency they represent, but also by the broader field in which they operate. However, not all immigrant-based organisations gain legitimacy in the same way, use the same rhetoric or draw support from the same audiences. Analysing how new organisational models emerge and survive can help us better understand how broader institutional change takes place, as well as better appreciate the degree of flexibility of the local context in accommodating different types of immigrant organisations.

The Korean Resource Center (KRC) and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), two long-standing LA-based immigrant organisations, were selected for comparison with this purpose in mind. KRC was first established as an international solidarity group and later became an organisation along the lines of ethnic representation. KIWA emerged from the same political milieu but embraced an intersectional, class-based framework of action, claiming to represent ‘immigrant workers’ across ethnic lines. Both groups have broadly combined identity-based service provision with political advocacy, supporting an agenda that calls for protecting and enhancing the rights of their immigrant constituency in the USA. However, despite being located in the same geographical area and initially working with a similar population, the two organisations have employed different strategies to gain and assert legitimacy to their surrounding environment, building distinct organisational models.

This article aims to understand these two diverging paths and, in so doing, answer the following questions: why have these two organisations pursued different strategies to assert their legitimacy in almost identical contexts? How have they succeeded? Building on a neo-institutional theory of legitimacy that emphasises the desirability and appropriateness of organisational actions within a normative context, I compare the historical trajectories of KRC and KIWA. I then turn to how the organisations discursively constructed their legitimating accounts over time.

## Literature review

Organisational legitimacy is inherently linked to organisational survival (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Suchman 1995). Immigrant political organisations are no exception in this respect. Their struggle to be seen by other social actors as *legitimate* is largely driven by their need to access material and symbolic resources (Suchman 1995; Vermeulen and Brünger 2014). Beyond the commitment of their constituency, such organisations also need backing from a wide range of external audiences – other organisations, churches,

unions, media, funding agencies, and select institutions – who are not directly concerned by the issue at stake. External supporters become crucial in situations where the targeted constituencies come from underprivileged groups and lack economic resources, and organisations require technical expertise or critical mass to achieve a particular political goal (Walker and McCarthy 2010).

The pursuit of legitimacy poses significant constraints to the scope of collective action. Neo-institutional scholars have argued that newly formed organisations, if they seek higher chances of surviving, are generally expected to conform to the social values and norms of institutionalised organisational fields (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Walker and McCarthy 2010). Suchman's (1995, 574) influential definition, incorporated in my study, stresses this precisely, stating that legitimacy is the 'generalized belief that an organization's actions are desirable, suitable and appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs'. Organisational fields generally form from increasing interdependencies and mutual awareness processes among collective actors, with organisations gradually resembling each other's structures, discourses, and practices (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Once this process completes, social actors come to recognise certain organisational forms (or templates) along with their practices and discourses, as being natural within a given order of arrangements (Suchman 1995). New organisations therefore have to deal with existing 'models, schemas, or scripts' (Clemens and Cook 1999, 446) that dictate the accepted range of possibilities within a given field. Each field will be guided by its own *institutional logics*: 'organising principles that shape ways of viewing and interpreting the world ... [which] encode the criteria of legitimacy by which role identities, strategic behaviours, organisational forms, and relationships between organisations are constructed and sustained' (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005, 38).

Emerging organisations are not only constrained by the limitation of organisational possibilities. They also have to cope with an existing discursive context where there are already 'established notions of who and what are considered reasonable, sensible, and legitimate' (Koopmans 2004, 451) concerning a certain field or issue. Within this context, only specific strategies of *categorisation* and *classification* of the social world (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Brubaker 2004) are considered acceptable by most, if not all, the actors. They may revolve around notions of class, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, religion, or some combination thereof. Such strategies are socially context-dependent, historically contingent, and inherently contested, being the product of an ongoing political struggle where the most powerful social group imposes its own categories and meanings on the others (Wimmer 2008).

Organisations that challenge established organisational models and discourses may, therefore, face dire prospects of survival. As a matter of fact, it is still unclear how those new organisations empirically construct their legitimating accounts and successfully recombine elements from different organisational logics. Moreover, why similar organisations operating in similar environments may pursue unique strategies remains largely unexplained. Skilled institutional entrepreneurs can, to varying degrees, exploit external shocks or tensions between different institutions to create new logics, mainly by transposing or extending schemas from one context to another (Clemens and Cook 1999). For instance, they may align an innovative organisational narrative with the 'broadly accepted norms, values, and belief systems that constitute the master principles of society, such as truth, equality, and justice' (Haveman and Rao 1997, 1613–1614). In other words, they

may create organisations that, at the surface level, adopt established structural features (organisational denominations, mechanisms of accountability, and predetermined financial requirements) but, at the deeper level, challenge normative expectations within the very same field (Clemens and Cook 1999; Vermeulen and Brünger 2014).

Some scholars have suggested that the analysis of organisational linkages is useful for studying legitimacy, as it places a single organisation within the wider field in which it is embedded (Baum and Oliver 1991; Vermeulen, Minkoff, and van der Meer 2016). Others have stressed that networks are crucial for understanding why organisations adopt specific organisational logics (Clemens and Cook 1999), or why certain groups are more powerful than others in public discursive struggles (Wimmer 2008). These different streams of literature, however, have not paid enough attention to how different networks can impact legitimating strategies of similar organisations, particularly within the same context. Often, the assumption is that organisations with similar characteristics and embedded in the same context will attempt to gain legitimacy from the same institution in the same way, but this is not always the case.

In order to explain for this process, I propose to combine different conceptualisations of networks in my study. In one way, I consider networks as a *structural vehicle* on which models, practices, interpretative frameworks, and discourses travel between organisational settings, thus setting the conditions for bridging different institutional logics or creating new narratives (Clemens and Cook 1999; Wimmer 2008). When incorporated into organisational narratives, networks also become a *discursive device* (Mische and White 1998), ‘cultural constructions, [that] do not pre-exist, or exist apart from their enactment in conversation and discursive communication processes’ (Knox, Savage, and Harvey 2006, 129). Therefore, organisational entrepreneurs may be driven towards a given legitimating strategy and organisational logics because of previous or ongoing interaction with specific actors. Organisations and individuals become part of a foundational ‘organisational infrastructure’ (Nicholls 2003, 882), conceived as a system of relations which comes to characterise a specific organisational sector. This infrastructure, to its turn, not only allows the organisation to develop, but also influences and limits the horizon of organisational possibilities over time. At the same time, organisational entrepreneurs may also discursively employ different types of linkages to gain legitimacy among third-party actors. Advertising those connections may suggest reliability and adherence to certain organisational values and principles (Baum and Oliver 1991), or rather convey support from the *community* it wishes to represent (Walker and McCarthy 2010; Vermeulen, Minkoff, and van der Meer 2016).

## Methodology

My research focuses on the long-term legitimating strategies of KRC and KIWA, two immigrant organisations active in LA over the last three decades. Given the larger amount of material available and the peculiarity of its trajectory, KIWA is my main case study. The reason for comparing KIWA with KRC lies in the similarities that the two organisations share with respect to a number of characteristics: their ideological orientation, which can be broadly traced to the same wider political milieu within the Korean and Korean American Left; their intrinsic ‘political’ mission, supported by a variable combination of service provision, membership organising, and advocacy activities; the ethnic

characteristics of the founders and of the early staff, largely composed of 1.5- and second-generation Korean immigrants; and their co-existence within the same territorial, social, and cultural boundaries of the multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Koreatown in LA. I therefore selected the two organisations for comparison in order to understand how they adopt diverging, yet equally successful legitimating strategies despite those striking similarities.

To conduct this study, I relied on a number of data sources, which are cited throughout the paper to demonstrate the evolution of organisational trajectories at specific moments in time. Those included archive (grant applications to funding organisation and related material); interviews with KRC and KIWA former and current staff; and public organisational material available online (internal reports, press releases, newsletters, and other digital information). Most of the archive material was assembled by Liberty Hill, a private philanthropy foundation, which has funded a number of LA-based immigrant advocacy organisations over the last 40 years, including KRC and KIWA, and kept detailed record of the whole funding process. Each application folder, ranged per year and per organisation, generally included a grant application (9–10 to 23–25 pages), prepared by the organisation to apply for a specific grant; evaluations conducted by the Liberty Hill foundation during the selection process; correspondence between the application and the foundation, such as grant agreements (few pages); an interim report (6–8 pages), describing the progress of the use of funds by the organisation awarded the grant; a final report (7–10 pages), describing organisational achievements at the end of a funding cycle; and miscellaneous material provided by organisations to back their application, including newsletters, newspaper articles, fundraising dinner booklets, and organisational reports. The significance of the miscellaneous material varied greatly, both by organisation and by year, being overall significantly richer for KIWA during the period 1992–2006. For KRC, information was available only for the periods 1983–1984 (on behalf of Young Koreans United (YKU)), 1998–2000, and 2005–2015 (total of 11 application folders). As for KIWA, the data spanned the period 1992–2015 with some minor gaps – records were available so long as the organisation submitted an application and was awarded funding (total of 20 application folders). KIWA folders also included selected folders of affiliated organisations Multi-ethnic Immigrant Workers Organizing Network (MIWON) and Restaurant Workers Association of Koreatown (RWAK) in 2000 and 2002, respectively. For the scope of this article, I mostly focused on the early years and up until the mid-2000s for both organisations, when each public legitimating strategy solidified.

I treated archival material and interviews as discursive products, assuming that grant applications and related material reflected KRC's and KIWA's official narratives as intended for an external US audience, that is, a LA-based philanthropic organisation. This assumption carries two caveats with it: first, that organisations are aware that funding applications are expected to comply with certain context-dependent technical and normative expectations in order to be considered by donors; and second, that the official narratives necessarily obfuscate the internal debates and disagreements within organisations, to the advantage of a seemingly homogeneous and coherent organisational story that is essentially the product of the organisational leadership. I adopted a methodological strategy that analysed archive material to formulate legitimating accounts by focusing on the following dimensions: organisational historical accounts; objectives; structure, decision-making, and collaborations; projects, campaigns, and activities; financial metrics and sources of funding; and identified memberships, audiences, and opponents.

The literature reviewed and the research questions informed my coding strategy. I coded the material mostly through structural and descriptive coding, in my attempt to extrapolate underlying organisational logics as embedded in those descriptions – that is, the organisational worldview, its view on social change, the criteria defining its membership, etc., I interpreted organisational linkages mentioned in the narrative in two different ways: as representing a flow of information, ideas, practices, and discourses between the main organisation and the connected groups; and as part of the discursive legitimating strategy of the organisation vis-à-vis the third-party donor agency.

I also conducted 10 interviews with current and former staff: 4 from KRC and 6 from KIWA. The interviews broadly focused on the same organisational dimensions explored in the archives, with a specific look on selected periods of the organisational life between the early 1990s and the early 2010s. Respondents provided their own perspective on the development of certain webs of relationships that proved crucial, in their understanding, for the development of campaigns and the organisation. They also clarified interpretation of some of the archive material.

### The politics of the Korean immigrant community in LA

The KRC and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) are considered part of a small group of highly politicised organisations that emerged in LA's Korean immigrant community between the 1980s and the early 1990s (Chung 2007). Ideologically, each organisation was inspired by a different thread of South Korea's pro-labour and pro-democracy movement during the 1980s, though both were firmly anchored on the left of the political spectrum (Louie 2004). Researchers have explained their emergence by singling out three intertwined factors that affected the immigrant community: the pro-labour and pro-democracy movement in South Korea; the 1992 civil unrest in LA; and the generational change within the immigrant community (Louie 2004; Chung 2007; Kwon 2010; Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Pena 2013).

Since 1965, LA has been one of the major cities across the United States in which waves of Korean migrants settle (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). As Korean immigration boomed in the following three decades, a significant percentage of Korean-owned businesses concentrated west of Downtown LA, which gradually became known across the city as 'Koreatown'. As the immigrant population grew and their activities and socio-economic status diversified, immigrant-led organisations of all types and political inclination established premises in the area, providing different financial, social, and cultural services that, due to cultural and linguistic barriers, local institutions could not (Chung 2007). This combination of residential, economic, and service concentrations, all catering to a specific immigrant group, soon earned Koreatown the definition of *ethnic enclave*. This happened despite the fact that the area was (and still is) inhabited by an extremely heterogeneous and ethnically diverse population, including a majority of Latinos (mostly composed of Mexican and Central American immigrants), as well as South Asian immigrants (mostly from Bangladesh) (Kwon 2010).

As LA's Korean community became the largest outside South Korea, the South Korean government also took strong interest in maintaining tight control over the political activities of its nationals in the USA, specifically when those were directed at influencing affairs in the Korean peninsula (Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Pena 2013). Immigrant

organisations sponsored by Korean institutions had little to no legitimacy outside the immigrant community, mainly because they did not need external backing to perform their functions (Chung 2007). At the time, the Korean community in LA was particularly sensitive to political developments in the homeland. The growth of South Korea's labour and democracy movements inspired a new generation of Korean Americans to formulate alternative political projects to those of the government-sponsored traditional elites (Louie 2004; Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Pena 2013). As news of the South Korean government's brutal repression of the movement travelled to the USA, an emerging group of young Korean Americans, often born in the USA from Korean parents or socialised in the American context at a very early age, connected with the home country of their parents in unexpected ways. The connections they forged with pro-democracy and pro-labour activists during this period considerably shaped their political consciousness (Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Pena 2013).

Taking place from 29 April to 1 May 1992, a second major event was short-lived but hard-hitting. Following the acquittal of four white LA Police Department officers who had been charged with the beating of an African-American motorist, LA's inner city experienced one of the most violent rioting outbreaks in its entire history (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). What began as an expression of anger over the acquittal, soon devolved into widespread disturbances that included killings, arson, and looting. Korean storeowners, most of whom had shops located in South Central and Koreatown, were hit the hardest. By all sides, including social commentators and researchers, the event was seen through the lenses of ethnicity and race, with identities such as Black, Latino, and Korean heavily defining cleavages that were much more complex and woven in the broader social, political, and economic disempowerment of inner-city residents. For the Korean immigrant community, the event was not only financially devastating, but also dramatically exposed the community's powerlessness in local politics (Chung 2007). At the same time, the unrest put Koreatown and its surrounds in the spotlight, attracting the attention of mainstream non-profit groups, media, and private foundations, which began channelling their resources to the inner city to promote interethnic collaboration.

For 1.5- and second-generation Korean American political activists, often highly educated and perfectly comfortable in dealing with mainstream US institutions, this combination of events opened up an unprecedented political space to make their concerns heard outside of the immigrant community (Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Pena 2013). It also allowed organisations such as KRC and KIWA, which were part of this milieu, to envision other sources of legitimisation beyond the immigrant leadership.

## **KRC: building immigrant ethnic politics**

### ***From ethnic international solidarity to ethnic engagement in the USA***

KRC was established in 1983 by Yoon Han Bong, a South Korean activist who played a major role in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Seoul and Kwangju in 1980 (Louie 2004). Throughout the 1980s and up until the early 1990s, KRC mostly functioned as a progressive community space for the local immigrant population, providing a safe haven where Koreans could share their common experience as immigrants, speak their native language, and engage in cultural and political activities. YKU, the centre's more



politicised arm, was heavily engaged in raising awareness about the oppressive nature of the South Korean state and exposing US complicities with the regime. Although firmly planted on the left of the political spectrum, members of both KRC and YKU had diverging opinions on the future of South Korea (Louie 2004). Some promoted versions of liberal democracy, underscoring the fight against US imperialism in South-East Asia and emphasising the quest for national independence and reunification. Others supported degrees of socialism, arguing that democratisation in South Korea should come as the product of class struggle within the country. The centre's political mission, as well as its popular charismatic founder, was key for attracting a small niche of committed volunteers, most of them 1.5- and second-generation immigrants. More or less at the same time that KRC was funded, South Korean activists encouraged the establishment of similar centres elsewhere in the USA: respectively, the Young Korean American Service and Education Center (YKASEC) in New York in 1984, and the Korean American Resource & Cultural Center (KRCC) in Chicago in 1986 (Louie 2004).

In this phase, the organisation received little to no active support from audiences beyond a small core of committed activists with an immigrant background (Louie 2004). KRC, however, was not a foreign object in the LA organisational landscape. First, the organisation officially registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, complying with local regulations governing voluntary political organisations. Second, KRC's ethno-national political dimension was quite common in LA among different international solidarity organisations comprising immigrants and political refugees from diverse countries (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). LA-based organisations such as the Guatemalan Information Center, or the Committee in Solidarity with the People of Salvador (CISPES) pursued a similar combination of public awareness-raising, ethnic identity-building, and service provision to the onsite immigrant community. While there is no direct evidence linking KRC's organisational trajectory to that of those organisations,<sup>1</sup> I suggest that KRC established itself within a growing organisational field where certain practices and discourses were already considered legitimate, this *de facto* recognition likely smoothing up the organisation's transition to US advocacy and its later professionalisation.

KRC's political mission started to change in the early 1990s, when the organisation shifted focus from international solidarity to the concerns of the Korean immigrant population living in the USA.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the political situation in South Korea had become less pressing, as the country was well on its way to democratisation. On the other hand, in making a connection between the 1992 Civil Unrest and anti-immigrant legislation (such as California Proposition 187 and the federal welfare reform of 1996), KRC stressed the vulnerability of Korean immigrants as both an ethnic minority and an immigrant group:

The April 29, 1992 L.A. Unrest (Sa-I-Gu) and the anti-immigrant wave with Proposition 187 and welfare reform were two recent events which led many Korean Americans to reassess their understanding of the American dream. Korean Americans directly experienced the harsh effects of social and economic inequality, unfair immigration laws and immigrant scapegoating. As well, these events signified the need to educate young second generation Korean Americans to become socially conscious about their community and to defend their civil rights. (KRC newsletter no. 3, 1999, 5)

In KRC's narrative, those events were seen as inherently related, and presented as an attack directed at Korean Americans as a *whole*. KRC emphasised the ethnic and racial

component of both the disturbances and the legislative action, not only noting the unfair 'scapegoating' of *Korean immigrant community* by the rest of society, but also using this argument to urge Korean Americans to get politically involved.<sup>3</sup> This particular reading of the events provides a rationale for the organisation's shift to legislative advocacy, as well as for its decision to treat legislative and socio-economic discrimination as a matter of *civil rights*.

KRC's transition was facilitated not only by the organisation's pre-existing informal structure of members and supporters, but also by its decision to continue to address the same type of public institutions. Another element that guided and facilitated KRC transition was the organisation's embeddedness in a national network of 'Korean' organisations, which included YKASEC in New York and KRCC in Chicago (Louie 2004). Not only did the two organisations share similar principles and undergo a similar transformation to that of KRC, but they also joined the LA-based group to establish the National Korean American Service Education Consortium (NAKASEC) in 1994. The network developed as a national infrastructure where participating organisations would regularly meet to share ideas, information, as well as human and financial resources.<sup>4</sup> It also tied the interests and logics of KRC to those of the other centres and of their national counterpart, as it formalised their common political struggle as Korean ethnic-based advocacy organisations.<sup>5</sup>

Those logics were retained and further developed in the late 1990s, when the organisation decisively moved towards professionalisation and budget expansion. KRC's then director, Dae Joo Hoon, began seeking external finances to cover major expenses such as headquarters maintenance and mortgage fees, expansion of organisational activities, and building a core of paid salary staff.<sup>6</sup> This last move signalled the beginning of the organisation's dependence on a new type of supporter, philanthropic foundations, and considerably changed the organisation's size and scope. Within the broader context of post-1992 LA, KRC recognised the lack of a 'Korean voice' in the local politics, and went on to structure its political claim along these lines.

### ***Placing Korean Americans at the centre of the mainstream immigrant rights debate***

Throughout the late 1990s and the early 2000s, KRC elaborated an organisational platform that placed at its core the *political empowerment* of *Korean Americans*, stressing both the ethnic and immigrant dimension of this community. KRC planned to achieve this through a combination of 'education, advocacy and grassroots organising ... [in order to] promote political and civic participation of Korean Americans ... preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Korean Americans as part of multicultural America'.<sup>7</sup> The identification of such organisational objectives implies an underlying logic where ethnicity is discursively used as a primary source of identification for members and staff as well as a principle for guiding the organisation's political action within American society. Korean identity – loosely presented as self-awareness of Korean and immigrant history, culture, and language – thus becomes a way to unite different immigrant generations, children of immigrants raised and born in the USA included, around a common political cause blending immigrant and ethnic rights.<sup>8</sup>

KRC structured its legitimating strategy in LA around two axes. One was the assertion of its role as a progressive political advocate of the specific interests of Korean Americans, an ethnic constituency which lacked a voice in 1990s' local politics. The second was the recognition of its constituency's struggle as being similar to that of other underprivileged groups, mostly defined across ethnic and racial lines, coupled with an implicit acceptance of the broader US institutional system and its logics.

As for the first axis, the organisation emphasised its ethnic commitment in the description of its cultural and educational activities, which were open to the *Korean immigrant community* at large and, unlike KIWA, were not explicitly antagonising or excluding particular segments. KRC stressed that its staff mostly comprised 1.5- and second-generation Korean youth, and that its 'core leadership represents different components of the Korean American community (women, seniors, recent immigrants, students, low-income families, etc.)'.<sup>9</sup> The description of board members also conveyed connections with an ethnic community at large, the immigrant experience, and progressive politics. It highlighted the member's 'sincere involvement in and commitment to social justice issues',<sup>10</sup> their civic engagement in a variety of local and transnational Korean associations, and their varied socio-economic status.<sup>11</sup> Through its association with NAKASEC, KRC built a double-layered narrative meant to challenge established advocacy groups and reinforce the legitimacy of both groups. KRC would represent the most immediate connection to the Korean immigrant constituency, mobilising an 'ethnic immigrant grassroots' base to support advocacy activities. Those included, for instance, the Californian campaigns to restore welfare for elderly immigrants or to gain access to higher education for undocumented youth,<sup>12</sup> or the creation of grass-roots groups such as the elderly-led Community Health Promoters, and the undocumented student-led Alliance for Korean American Students in Action (AKASIA).<sup>13</sup> For its part, NAKASEC would – through its aggressive advocacy stunts – translate those concerns at the national level, establishing 'Korean Americans as a player in the welfare reform and immigration debate'.<sup>14</sup>

As for the second axis, KRC connected the struggle of Korean immigrants to larger issues within mainstream American society. Building on a tradition that emphasised institutional political engagement within a democratic system, rather than polarisation around class inequalities, KRC and NAKASEC elaborated a framework that envisioned the political empowerment of the immigrant community as part of a process to make US society more just and equitable, all the more while fostering *multi-ethnic coexistence*. In suggesting the development of 'a truly multi-racial and multi-ethnic civil rights agenda', and in urging 'more immigrant communities and ethnic communities [ ... ] to become active players in the civil rights arena'<sup>15</sup> together with more traditional groups, the organisation implicitly connected the struggle of Korean immigrants to that of other racial minorities present in the USA, moreover inscribing its actions in the footsteps of the widely legitimated civil rights movement of the 1960s. KRC went about political organising as a way not only to educate the immigrant community of its rights as American citizens, but also to encourage immigrants to embrace mainstream political engagement. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, KRC's main activities – legislative advocacy, voter education, and civic engagement – precisely supported the organisation's acceptance of the institutionalised US political system. KRC's network of collaborations also illustrates this pattern. The organisation has since the mid-1990s associated itself with a variety of established civil society organisations and institutions, mainly by formally engaging in joint projects, by

joining a number of coalitions and alliances, and by endorsing campaigns organised by other organisations. Partners include renowned national and local advocacy organisations, such as the National Immigration Law Center (NILC); established immigrant rights groups, such as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA); ‘Asian’ advocacy organisations, such as the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC); and institutional actors, such as the Archdiocese of LA. Those linkages, as described in the proposals, provided funding agencies a framework to interpret the organisational coherence of KRC and its reputation in the non-profit scene. They also showed that KRC had actively embraced the logics of ‘alliance-building’ and ‘networking’ – that is, the idea that organisations should devote part of their time and budget to engage in collaborative work – which were particularly praised by progressive philanthropies.<sup>16</sup>

## KIWA: building immigrant class politics

### *Developing an immigrant working-class organisation in a hostile environment*

KIWA,<sup>17</sup> formerly known as Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates – the ‘k’ in ‘Korean’ now standing for ‘Koreatown’ and the ‘a’ in ‘advocates’ for ‘alliance’ – is an LA-based non-profit organisation founded in 1992 by South Korean-born activists Roy Hong and Danny Park. Throughout its over two decades of existence, the organisation has mostly focused on workplace-based advocacy, addressing labour conditions and labour law violations in the Korean-dominated service economy of Koreatown and beyond. It has done so by highlighting socio-economic inequalities *within* and *across* immigrant communities, representing a *multi-ethnic* constituency of *low-wage immigrant workers*.

Members of the same political milieu that established KRC, Hong and Park grew up in the Bay Area, where the movement leaned more in the direction of Marxist, class-based international solidarity. During college, both volunteered for local labour unions, with Hong soon taking up a job with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). He worked there from 1983 until 1992, learning the ins and outs of the US labour union system and gaining insights into the work of one of the most progressive unions of the time, famous for groundbreaking campaigns such as the Justice for Janitors Campaign (JJJ). Such experience acquainted him with the idea of *industry-wide* and *cross-ethnic organising*. It also exposed him to the inefficiencies and flaws of the union machine, plagued by internal racism, lack of cultural sensitivity for the immigrant population, and sometimes blatant incompetence.<sup>18</sup> Partly disenchanted with SEIU and US unions, but also deeply moved by the most radical and ‘workerist’ wing of the pro-democracy movement as it was developing in industrial zones in South Korea, Hong and Park moved to LA in the mid-1980s. It was then that they established their organisation in Koreatown.

LA’s Korean immigrant community was predominantly conservative and anti-labour (Chung 2007). Even if KIWA did not necessarily emphasise a class-struggle rhetoric in Koreatown, merely mentioning the word ‘worker’ in Korean (*nadoja*) was enough for most immigrants to associate KIWA with the militant labour movement in South Korea (Kwon 2010). Despite an early attempt to reach out to large segments of the Korean community – by assisting business owners affected by the civil unrest – the organisation could never really get beyond *de facto* recognition, let alone receive active support (Chung 2007; Kwon 2010). In fact, once KIWA began to target local businesses with gradual force – by

filing wage claims on behalf of workers, organising ‘workers’ rights seminars’, staging pickets and protests, and later on launching public campaigns – the attitude of the immigrant elites and most of the middle class turned to widespread hostility (Kwon 2010; Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Pena 2013). At the same time, KIWA’s main constituency was extremely low income, thus constantly thwarting the organisation’s effort to collect dues.<sup>19</sup> The long-term survival, if not success, of the organisation therefore greatly depended on its ability to secure a basis of support beyond the immigrant population.

In its first years, publicly presenting itself as an organisation committed to ‘Korean immigrant workers’, KIWA stressed both its class and ethnic dimensions. The organisation did not immediately draw sharp class boundaries within the immigrant community, rather maintaining quite a loosely defined *worker constituency*. KIWA’s narrative initially tried to ‘proletarianise’ most of the immigrant population – including small business owners, service subcontractors, and their employees – as *all* part of a vulnerable, under-protected immigrant working class trapped in racially segregated, low-income work sectors. However, in so doing KIWA also flipped the mainstream reading of the civil unrest as a culturally motivated ethnic conflict:

While the successful employers and business owners in the Korean community are highly visible, vocal, well organized, and well-funded, the struggling workers who make up the majority of the community have had to suffer silently because of lack of representation and basic legal/administrative resources for them. KIWA’s rapid development since the inception testifies to the overdueness of such services. The so-called ‘Black-Korean conflict’ must also be seen in the context of this disproportionate attention given to the business sector. (KIWA grant application, 1993, 3)

Describing situations such as Korean storeowners dealing with inner-city African-American customers or a Korean factory owner employing ‘Latino’ and ‘Korean’ blue-collar workers, the organisation stressed that ethnic and racial tensions were mostly due to economic disparities. Moreover, those tensions were fuelled by the lack of general understanding that economic disparities existed not only *between* ethnic and racial groups, but also *within* a given group.<sup>20</sup> This perspective diverged from KRC’s reading of the civil unrest, which mentioned no socio-economic inequalities and instead emphasised shared victimhood among Korean co-ethnics.

KIWA did not radically challenge ethnic categorisations as a broader interpretative framework of social relations in LA. For once, the organisation believed that categorisations such as Korean, Latino, or White were still salient in light of the institutionalised racism of American society. However, KIWA did question the suitability of an ethnic analytical framework alone for promoting serious social change, not only because it masked asymmetries of power within the immigrant community, but also because it downplayed commonalities among the low-income strata of different immigrant groups, to the advantage of supposed cultural commonalities.<sup>21</sup> KIWA also believed that its analysis should not exclude gender, as immigrant women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning people faced the additional burden of sexism and sexual discrimination.

### **Articulating legitimating strategies outside of the Korean immigrant community**

KIWA’s political vision, if completely subversive to the eyes of the immigrant elites, provided the basis for grounding the organisation’s legitimacy in other milieus. Two circles of

supporters were key for this first period, and strongly influenced its organisational logics: young Korean American activists who supplied the manpower to run organisational operations and, as the organisation developed, the intellectual tools to build and sustain its vision; and progressive labour unions, which consolidated KIWA's status as a hybrid quasi-union organisation. To its turn, KIWA strongly relied on these groups to legitimise itself vis-à-vis the larger LA progressive community of non-profit organisations and philanthropic foundations.

KIWA's analysis of the civil unrest, magnified by mainstream media and a creative outreach strategy that included summer trainings, internships, and exposure programmes, found a receptive audience in young, highly educated, second-generation Korean Americans (Chung 2007). Mostly educated in progressive academic venues, many students began to volunteer for KIWA over the years. Taking on daily tasks like administration, media relations, copyediting, and researching, some were gradually incorporated as paid staff. Thanks to the ties that KIWA developed over time with different research centres, faculty members, and student collectives across LA campuses, the organisation strongly benefitted from these resources in two other major ways. First, it enabled KIWA to quickly mobilise rank-and-file support for most of its public activities, such as pickets, and demonstrations. Second, it allowed KIWA to back organisational objectives and strategies with solid *activist research*<sup>22</sup> – scientific research being an important tool to legitimise organisations and their vision vis-à-vis institutions (Suchman 1995).

Despite Hong's and Park's reservations, labour unions were the first major institutions KIWA reached out to for external recognition. Between 1991 and 1993, KIWA staff assisted unions in a number of campaigns involving abuses and labour law violations by Korean businesses in LA. Critical was the Koreana Hotel campaign coordinated by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), during which Hong helped facilitate dealings between the union and the Korean consulate with the Korea-based corporate owners (Kwon 2010). KIWA's association with progressive unions in its early years proved crucial. That solidified its public reputation as an organisation that, despite lacking the formal properties of an official labour group, was integral to the labour movement rather than to the advocacy non-profit scene (Narro 2005–2006; Kwon 2010).

Unlike KRC, KIWA went through a meticulous work of endorsement- and alliance-building since its earliest phase. Its founders presented KIWA as a unique organisation, 'arguably the first and only organisation of its kind, not only in LA. but in the country, working to build a grassroots community base among Korean immigrant workers and to build bridges with other ethnic community'.<sup>23</sup> Hong and Park tempered KIWA's radical political message by *formally* adopting the organisational features that characterised more conventional non-profits, and established a 501(c)(3) organisation. Fundraising dinners and galas were conceived as formal acts of public legitimation before LA's progressive community, not so much aimed at directly securing material resources – funds collected during these events were relatively modest – but rather at displaying the organisation's ability to bring certain people and organisations to its side. Throughout the 1990s, KIWA also joined a number of coalitions with established progressive organisations, promoting its image as a *hyperconnected organisation*. In a similar fashion to KRC, cross-referencing, mutual endorsements, and joint press statements with recognised civil society organisations became increasingly common practice for KIWA, as the same time revealing its ideological pragmatism for the sake of recognition. While this strategy

did not really impact KIWA's organisational logics, it was crucial in highlighting the organisation's visibility for funders, especially before it had any substantial track record.

### *From Korean immigrant workers to a multi-ethnic immigrant workers constituency*

Between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, KIWA began presenting itself as a predominantly working-class organisation, loosening its ethnic connotation. KIWA's Koreatown Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign (1997–2000) and the Assi Market campaign (2001–2003)<sup>24</sup> were innovative efforts to together organise Korean and other immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America. The organisation always stressed multi-ethnic collaboration, but this was the first time it worked *directly* with a multi-ethnic immigrant constituency in major projects. Within the LA context, a non-union dealing with workplace complaints across ethnic lines was groundbreaking. For this reason, KIWA introduced its decision in pragmatic terms. For one, workers in Koreatown businesses were ethnically heterogeneous, including many non-Korean employees in backdoor and delivery jobs in Korean restaurants and supermarkets. Also, Korean workers, unlike other groups, seemed more vulnerable to social pressure from co-ethnics to not challenge the status quo.<sup>25</sup>

KIWA's narrative emphasised the uniqueness of its multi-ethnic work, testified by an ability to overcome linguistic barriers – using interpretation during meetings and workshops and publishing material in English, Korean, and Spanish – and by hiring multi-ethnic staff, specifically with *Asian* and *Latino* background. It legitimated its aggressive tactics vis-à-vis Korean restaurants and markets by associating with the union principle of *industry-wide organising*. The narrative highlighted the direness of its work and its efficacy, describing horror stories of workers' exploitation and harassment and KIWA's role in winning compensation and pressuring employers to improve conditions. It underscored KIWA's strong grass-roots nature, epitomised by the ubiquity of 'the workers' in all public documents. KIWA's political commitment was also reflected in its organisational structure and decision-making process. It encouraged the formation of self-defined *multi-ethnic constituent-led groups*, which depended on KIWA for organisational support but were formally independent. The RWAK<sup>26</sup> and the Immigrant Workers Union (IWU)<sup>27</sup> are two such examples. The strategy aimed to incorporate immigrant workers within the life of the organisation and serve as a final step in their political empowerment as self-helping autonomous subjects.

The more KIWA's narrative became radical and innovative, the more KIWA took an active role in changing the surrounding organisational environment. Projects such as the Summer Activist Training (SAT),<sup>28</sup> which exposed participants of immigrant Asian background to the principles of class-based, multi-ethnic organising, or the Asian Pacific Garment Workers Collaborative,<sup>29</sup> which paved the way for the creation of the multi-ethnic Garment Workers Center (GWC) in the late 1990s (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010), were instrumental in extending the intersectional, class framework to the experience of other Asian immigrant groups.<sup>30</sup> KIWA also reinforced this process by encouraging the development of new organisations that shared a similar political vision, such as the Thai Community Development Center (TCDC) or the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC), which were both first sponsored and hosted on its premises.

KIWA also skilfully established itself within the larger *immigrant rights movement* in LA. The product of a political convergence built over years of close collaboration, KIWA, CHIRLA, PWC, GWC, and the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA) formally joined, becoming a network that would amplify the multi-ethnic worker centre narrative for the larger public. The result was the MIWON, established in 2000, with the goal of addressing ‘unjust immigration laws and other major issues affecting immigrant communities and particularly undocumented workers’.<sup>31</sup> In recognition of KIWA’s important role, one of its staff was later assigned to coordinate the network, which was officially hosted on KIWA premises under the fiscal sponsorship of CHIRLA. On the one hand, MIWON further consolidated the relationship among this core of organisations, whose closeness had made one’s reputation reliant on that of the others. On the other, MIWON linked workers’ rights to the bigger battle on state and federal immigration legislation, particularly through the highly visible May Day Marches which the founding organisations first launched in 2000.<sup>32</sup> In proposing a class-based, multi-ethnic counter-narrative to the mainstream ethnic and civil rights frame, the MIWON organisations not only challenged the legitimacy of Washington, DC-based advocacy and policy groups that were accused of being disconnected from the daily reality of most immigrants,<sup>33</sup> but also distanced themselves from the more traditional narrative of organisations such as KRC. Despite MIWON’s fading role after the historical 2006 immigrant rallies in LA, in the early 2000s the network was able to successfully present itself as a collective of immigrant-led, membership-based political organisations, and consolidated its organisations’ legitimacy in the local progressive scene (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010).

These developments are important to keep in mind when looking at KIWA in more recent history. After a bitter struggle, the failure of the Assi Market unionisation campaign between 2002 and 2003 tarnished the organisation’s track record and drained its human and financial resources (Kwon 2010). Throughout the late 2000s, the organisation responded by abandoning more confrontational tactics such as direct action and unionisation, reframing its commitment to the immigrant working class by explicitly incorporating a socio-economic spatial dimension in its narrative (Kwon 2010). By identifying low-wage immigrant workers in their capacity as both *workers* and *residents* of Koreatown, the organisation could not only justify greater involvement in issues such as housing, healthcare, and gentrification,<sup>34</sup> but was also able to retain (if not expand) its sources of financial support. By the end of 2005, KIWA officialised its cross-ethnic commitment to workers and Koreatown residents by changing its name to KIWA.

## Conclusion

Organisational legitimacy is essential for immigrant organisations, but may be achieved in different ways. This study highlighted how two immigrant organisations embedded in the same sociopolitical context employed different strategies to gain legitimacy among mainstream institutions. KRC mostly reproduced the typical pattern of politically incorporating immigrants as ‘ethnics’, largely responding to normative expectations of the surrounding institutional environment, to get recognition. KIWA challenged this pattern, producing a counter-narrative that, beyond ethnicity, mobilised notions of class and economic justice to advance the political inclusion of immigrants as ‘workers’.



In highlighting the similarities of the organisations and their diverging legitimating strategies, I point out the ability of KRC and KIWA to actively shape their organisational logics, as well as the broad organisational field through their action. My chronological perspective underscored the importance of decision-making in the early phases of an organisation, as informed by its founders' backgrounds and early connections. The trajectories of KRC and KIWA also suggest that organisational logics, once consolidated and legitimated, do not easily change and become strongly path-dependent.

This analysis builds on previous literature on organisational legitimacy, further suggesting that, within a broadly limited perimeter, alternate (but equally successful) public legitimating strategies are possible within the same context. KIWA and KRC's ideological differences, and their reliance on a different *core* of supporters – ethnic-oriented for KRC, labour-oriented for KIWA – drove the organisations towards distinct, yet partially overlapping subfields. However, in discursively mobilising those connections vis-à-vis the same public institutions, the two organisations also provided local funders with a legitimate framework to interpret their distinct organisational logics. As a result, both KRC and KIWA managed to become part of the broader non-profit sector of immigrant advocacy organisations in LA.

This article analysed organisational legitimating strategies as a cohesive collective product, assuming that public archives represent the official views of their organisations. To fully appreciate all the levels of the legitimating process, it may be fruitful to investigate other interrelated dimensions through other sources. A stream of research incorporating ecological perspectives could further investigate how organisational templates, frames, and discourses diffuse across organisational fields and populations, and how popular they become as measures of legitimacy. A second stream, more concerned with micro-dynamics, could address the construction of legitimating accounts by organisational staff, examining the internal discursive struggles that occur when producing a cohesive narrative of self-presentation. Such analyses may provide a more nuanced understanding of how legitimating strategies are shaped and how ideas and schemas are concretely mobilised to form a coherent account for outsiders.

## Notes

1. Former ED Joo Hoon compared the formation of KRC with the establishment of CISPES or the activity of Filipino exiles in LA (Interview with Dae Joo Hoon, former KRC executive director and current NAKASEC director, 21 January 2015) (herein cited as 'interview with Joo Hoon'). Moreover, a KRC grant application of 2007 referred to the early 1980s as a 'vibrant and provocative time when young Korean Americans were politically awakened by the anti-imperialist and democracy movements from Nicaragua, El Salvador, South Africa, the Philippines and South Korea' (7).
2. KRC annual report, 1998.
3. KRC newsletter no. 3, 1999 and interview with Joo Hoon.
4. In his interview, Joo Hoon also stressed a similar point.
5. See "The Political Awakening of Korean Americans", KRC Website, withdrawn on 5 June 2015 [http://old.krcla.org/en/The\\_Political\\_Awakening\\_of\\_Korean\\_Americans](http://old.krcla.org/en/The_Political_Awakening_of_Korean_Americans)
6. Interview with Joo Hoon.
7. KRC grant application, 1999.
8. KRC newsletter no. 3, 1999.
9. KRC grant application, 1999.
10. KRC grant application, 2006.
11. KRC grant application, 1999.
12. KRC grant application, 2007.

13. KRC grant application, 2009.
14. The 1995 NAKESSEC “Justice for Immigrants” Washington Post Ad Campaign involved raising over \$50,000 for a pro-immigration reform ad to appear in *The Washington Post* (see KRC grant application, 2006).
15. See KRC grant application, 1999 (5).
16. Liberty Hill funding applications always included a section about the applicant organisation’s collaborations and coalitions, the organisational network being one of the metrics employed to assess the viability and credibility of a proposal.
17. See previous work on KIWA. For example: Chung (2005, 2007), Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Pena (2013), Narro (2005–2006), and Kwon (2010).
18. Interview with Roy Hong, 10 June 2014.
19. KIWA grant application, 1994.
20. KIWA grant report, 1994.
21. This point was made repeatedly throughout the grant applications and was also expressed to me by Hong in our interview.
22. See, among others: ‘Workers Empowered: A Survey of Working Conditions in the Koreatown Restaurant Industry’ (2000); or ‘Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads’ (2012).
23. KIWA grant application, 1992.
24. The Koreatown Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign focused on improving working conditions for restaurant workers. The Assi Market campaign demanded living wages and unionisation for the employees of a major Korean-owned supermarket. See Kwon (2010).
25. Interviews with former KIWA organiser Elizabeth Sunwoo, 3 June 2014 (herein cited as ‘interview with Sunwoo’).
26. RWAK grant application, 2001.
27. KIWA grant application, 2001.
28. KIWA grant application B, 1994.
29. KIWA grant application A, 1994.
30. KIWA grant application A, 1994.
31. KIWA/MIWON grant application, 2000.
32. KIWA/MIWON grant application, 2000/ KIWA grant application, 2001.
33. Interview with Sunwoo.
34. Interview with Alexandra Suh, KIWA executive director, 5 November 2014.

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