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Edward J.W. Park

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Global Religion and Local Faith: Korean Churches in Beijing and Tokyo

<https://doi.org/10.31720/JGA.2.2.4>
Journal of Global and Area Studies
2018, Vol. 2(2) 65–76
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Edward J.W. Park*

Loyola Marymount University, USA

Abstract

Korean Christian churches and missionaries have a prominent presence around the world. In cities such as Yanji and Los Angeles, Korean churches are an essential part of century-old Korean ethnic communities that trace their origins to Japanese colonization that began in the late-1800s. More recently, the economic success of South Korean corporations has resulted in Korean churches and missionaries in global metropolises such as Beijing, London, and Singapore that serve thriving Korean communities anchored by corporate transnationals, entrepreneurs, and international students. This same economic growth has financed Korean missionaries from Africa to Central Asia to undertake projects ranging from health care to education. While all Korean churches and missionaries have comfortably imbued the global religion of Christianity with their national and ethnic identity, the differences in national and local contexts shape their individual beliefs and practices. Given the dramatic changes in both Korean and its diasporic histories, each Korean church selects from rich and complex vocabularies of religion, nation, ethnicity, and community to negotiate and articulate its mission and identity. Within this context, this article focuses on two Korean churches—one from Beijing and another from Tokyo—as emblematic case studies of global religion and local faith.

Keywords

Korean churches, Korean diaspora, globalization, ethnic identity

* Email: Edward.Park@lmu.edu

INTRODUCTION

The history of Korean Christian churches and missionaries and their outsized prominence around the world can be told in two distinct chapters. First, during the colonial era (1910 to 1945), Korean churches and missionaries served as one of the most important institutions that preserved and developed Korean nationalism and ethnic identity (Choy 1979; Kim, 2011). As Korea itself fell under Japanese imperial domination and policies of political and cultural assimilation, Korean churches served as centers of political and cultural resistance and played the leading role in organizing the independence movement. This was especially true in the United States, where American Protestant missionaries played a key role in organizing Korean immigration itself. Korean American churches enthusiastically embraced their role as nationalist organizations and saw little separation between their religious life and political activism in the independence movement. Indeed, Korean American churches during this time were places of exile that simultaneously celebrated and memorialized the Korean nation that could only be brought back from the abyss by political and religious commitments of their members. Moreover, Korean Christian churches and missionaries connected Koreans throughout the diaspora and laid the foundation for secular political institutions, including the Korean Provisional Government whose finance and leadership drew heavily from Korean American Christian churches and missionaries (Yoo 2010).

The second chapter begins in the late-1980s with the rising economic fortunes of South Korea. With the growth of the economy and the rise of “mega-churches,” Korean churches and missionaries began to finance missionary work in far-off places in their “neoliberal turn” as global and entrepreneurial enterprises (Easley 2014). Liberalization of immigration policies in Japan in the 1980’s and the establishing of diplomatic ties between South Korea and the People’s Republic of China in 1992 resulted in large influx of South Korean “newcomers” into cities such as Osaka, Tokyo, Beijing, and Shanghai. Embedded in these migration flows have been mainline and evangelical churches and missionaries eager to establish congregation in these global cities to serve both the Korean community and to establish a foothold in these important cities (Yoon 2013). By the late-1990s, South Korean corporations established sizable and growing presence in both developed and developing countries as they sought growth opportunities from high finance to low-cost production resulting in sizable Korean population in cities diverse as London, Singapore, Bangkok, and Hanoi. Korean churches and missionaries became prominent parts of these ethnic enclaves, and they serve as important civic and social focal points for Koreans in these sprawling

metropolitan areas. By 2003, nearly 20,000 South Korean missionary workers were assigned abroad to work in 175 countries, making South Korea the second largest national sources of Christian missionaries, only surpassed by the United States (Moon 2003).

Given their size and visibility, contemporary Korean churches and missionaries have received significant scholarly attention. Recent studies have detailed their theological and missionary vision, administrative and financial control, the scope of their non-religious activities, and their political activities. Some of their controversial activities, including organized missions to aid North Korean refugees or to proselytize in Afghanistan, have garnered intense media attention and put a spotlight on Korean churches and missionaries (Lee and Son 1999; Kim 2007; Harden 2007; Jung 2013). Additionally, there have been numerous studies that have examined the role of Korean churches and missionaries as community institutions that build a sense of common fate and a new ethnic identity for Korean transnationals in these newly-established or revitalized enclaves. Examining the role of Korean churches in Beijing, Sharon J. Yoon (2013) argues that Korean churches have become the focal point for South Koreans and ethnic Korean Chinese to build ethnic solidarity and trust that are then deployed for wide-ranging activities that include providing social services to facilitating entrepreneurial activities.

In light of this complexity and diversity, the purpose of this article is to examine how two specific churches—one in Beijing, China and another in Tokyo, Japan—implement the global Korean Christian movement at the local level. The intent of the case studies is not to assert that these churches are representative of Korean churches and missionaries in these two cities, let alone these two countries. Rather, the case studies illustrate the diversity of Korean churches and missionaries around the world as individual church leaders and their congregation draw on the rich and complex history and present circumstances of Korean Christianity and apply them to their immediate religious and secular surroundings, priorities, and visions. The settings of these two churches, in capital cities of South Korea's powerful neighbors, provide a dramatic backdrop. The data collection for the article took place between 2004-2007 when I was a visiting scholar at the University of International Business and Economics (Beijing), and a visiting professor at University of Tokyo. Field research consisted of participant observation for a month at each church when I attended Sunday services, participated in church activities, and conducted extensive interviews with the two ministers. To preserve privacy, I use pseudonyms for the churches and the ministers.

BEIJING: A NEW MESSENGER FOR CHRIST

In the fashionable Nuren Jie neighborhood of the Chaoyang District of Beijing, the members of the Hanyang Korean Church prepare early for the primary 10:30 service offered in English. The church occupies two middle floors of a new and impressive glass-and-steel office building near the upscale Kampinski Hotel. A Ferrari dealership is nearby. In addition to the main sanctuary, which can accommodate nearly five hundred worshippers, the church has classrooms, offices, a large dining room, and an industrial-sized kitchen. The Koreans run the Hanyang Church in Beijing as a “megachurch,” with an outsized sense of their presence and mission: in addition to Sunday services, the church offers Korean, English, and Mandarin language classes during weekdays, a dozen Bible study classes on Saturdays, and various workshops on topics ranging from women’s leadership to youth ministry scheduled throughout the week. With all these overlapping and interconnected activities, the most active members spend nearly all of their free time at the church. The strong missionary identity of the church is clearly stated in all of its printed materials: the mission of Hanyang Korean Church is to serve as “A New Messenger for Christ for A New China.”

The idea of newness—and its corollaries of excitement and of possibility—permeate Hanyang Church. In addition to the brand new facility, one that looks more like a modern concert hall than a conventional church, the style of worship relies more heavily on popular music than traditional sermon, and the minister acts more like a life coach than a religious authority figure. The pervasive use of English in print and speech and the ubiquitous South Korean corporate logos add to the sense of modernity and affluence. The most obviously “new” aspects of Hanyang Church are the South Korean leaders and members themselves: they are both new kinds of Christian and Korean in a city and within a country where “Christian” has largely meant “white” and “Western,” and where “Korean” has meant “traditional” and, since China’s economic pivot from the Northeast to the South in the 1980’s, “poor.” There are two types of South Korean parishioners at the Hanyang Church: the first are professionals who work for South Korean corporate conglomerates; and the second are university students who study at elite Beijing universities. The professionals have international work and study experience—primarily in the U.S.—and most of the students are hoping to follow in their footsteps. The Chinese who attend the church are almost always colleagues and classmates of these South Koreans.

The main service itself is an elaborate performance. As mixed groups of South Koreans and Chinese file into the main sanctuary, musicians and performers fill the front of the great

big stage with an impressive array of musical instruments, including electric guitars, a Korg keyboard, and a full Pearl drum set. The service begins when attractive young men and women take their spot on the stage for a radically modified rendition of Bob Marley's "Stir It Up" with "little darling" replaced by "Holy Spirit." As the singers throw up their hands in praise, the congregation rises on its feet. Like much of East and Southeast Asia, China is in the grip of Hallyu—originally a Mandarin but now universal term for the popularity of Korean dramas, films, and pop bands—and it is clear that this is indeed a new way to spread the word of Christ in the capital of the Middle Kingdom.

TOKYO: FAITH OF AN OPPRESSED PEOPLE

Bethel Tokyo Korean Church is walking distance from Shin-Okubo Station, on Tokyo's Yamanote Line. In the past fifteen years or so, Shin-Okubo Station has become the center of all things Korean in Tokyo; there are countless restaurants, bars, supermarkets, and DVD stores. Posters of the Korean drama "Winter Sonata" cover glass windows and plaster walls, and songs by Korean pop bands flow onto the sidewalk. On any given night, long Yamanote trains unload hundreds of people every five minutes so they can get their fill of Korean barbeque and soju. On Friday and Saturday nights, a dozen or so young Korean students from a dozen or so Korean churches in and around the area pass out flyers at the only exit that serves the station. Bethel Church was initially established in 1998 as a missionary branch of a church in Seoul, but it quickly became independent in 2000 as the mother church disbanded over leadership issues.

As the Korean presence in Shin-Okubo grew by leaps and bounds, Bethel Church grew as well, with a congregation that approaches nearly a thousand members. Like the Hanyang Church in Beijing, the main service used to be held at 10:30 in the morning, so that a Korean lunch could be served afterwards at noon. But since the service tended to go too long, Bethel Church's main service had been rescheduled to 10:00. The main service is in Korean, but it is simultaneously translated into Japanese via headphones. Unlike the Hanyang Church, the neighborhood around Shin-Okubo Station is rather run down, with a high concentration of low-income apartment buildings and love hotels that overflow from the adjacent Kabukicho, the notorious red-light district that sits between Shin-Okubo and Shinjuku Stations.

The adult membership of Bethel Church consists of three groups. First, there are the South Korean "newcomers," immigrants who came when Japan liberalized its immigration

laws in the 1980s. A majority of them have lived continuously in Japan for over ten years. Second, there are Korean Japanese, the so-called *Zainichi* Koreans, who were born in Japan, but due to Japanese government policies, not all of them are Japanese citizens. Indeed, some of the newcomers have naturalized into Japanese citizenship while many of the Koreans who were born in Japan have not. For Korean Japanese who do not have Japanese citizenship, they have either South Korean or quasi-North Korean citizenship. Finally, the third group consists of Japanese nationals, a majority of whom are married to New Comers or Korean Japanese. Within the last few years, a small number of single Japanese nationals have joined the church, and nearly all of them have had some compelling connection or interest with Korea: some have lived in South Korea as exchange students, others have jobs in which they use their knowledge of Korean language and business, and some simply find the Bethel Church's brand of Korean Christianity to be compelling. As the service is about to begin, the sanctuary fills with families, and nearly a third of them are wearing headphones to hear the simultaneous translation. The program contains all the hymns for the services—they are to be sung in Korean but there are helpful katakana syllabaries to help those who cannot read Korean.

BETHEL TOKYO KOREAN CHURCH: A POST-COLONIAL “US VERSUS THEM”

Minister Kim Dong-kyu's personal history is tightly woven into the complexities of Korea's colonial past. His own parents came to Japan in the 1930s and settled in Osaka—the historical center of the Korean population in Japan—and his father became a successful merchant within the ethnic Korean community. After World War II, the family moved back to Busan where Minister Kim was born in 1954. Even though he himself never experienced Japanese colonialism, he feels that the colonial past was a presence in his life, as he recalled his parents talking about the hardship they endured, as well as episodes of nostalgia for life in Osaka. After completing his education and becoming an ordained minister, he decided to go to Japan, to undertake what he calls the toughest job in Christendom—“converting the Japanese.” As the head of the Bethel Tokyo Korean Church, Minister Kim's desire to convert the Japanese stems from political as well as religious reasons, all wrapped in a complicated history. He articulates a very common and popular sentiment among Korean missionaries in Japan:

Like many people in Asia, I feel that Japan, as a nation, has not faced up to its imperialist past. The basic reason for this is Japan's lack of compassion toward the weak, lack of commitment to justice, and lack of empathy for others—these are all exactly those qualities that come from Christ. The purpose of my work in Japan is surely to save the souls of individual Japanese, but I am convinced that I have a greater purpose, and that is to save Japan itself. Otherwise why would God put me, a Korean—of all places—here in Japan?

It seems that the Bethel Church, with its overwhelming Korean membership, is at best an imperfect place for Minister Kim to carry out his mission of converting Japanese. Yet, this does not diminish his conviction that Koreans in Japan can serve as a strategic beachhead for his mission. That Japanese society needs to redeem itself from its past, by embracing Christianity in the present, is the paramount responsibility of the *Koreans* is underscored in almost every sermon, and that same message appears in the Sunday school curriculum for the children. In one sermon, Minister Kim cautions against admiration for Japan, for all of her material wealth and worldly status, and he reminds the congregation that without God, these are vanities and conceits that can lead to eternal damnation. A Sunday lesson for elementary students points out how “guns and swords have the power to mete out death, but faith in God and Christ has the power to give life.” Within the walls of the Bethel Church, it's hard not to get swept up and relive Korea's colonial suffering at the hands of Japan, nor to find the conviction that the suffering brought Koreans closer to God, and then gave the Koreans a holy mission to save Japan. Through Christianity, the good Minister says, Koreans will triumph over the Japanese, and it's not a complete stretch to think of this possibility in light of the history of Christianity itself: Minister Kim loves to remind the congregation, “the same Christians who were fed to the lions in the Coliseum eventually become victorious, and made Rome the capital of Christianity.”

A less dramatic effect of this dichotomous approach to Korea and to Japan is that it encourages and justifies an insular ethnic identity for Koreans in Japan. This quintessential *us-and-them* approach hides the profound and deep diversity within the Korean members of the church, many of whom have radically different legal or cultural or personal claims to being Korean or, for that matter, Japanese. For children who have both Korean and Japanese parents, this mutually exclusive configuration of Korean and Japanese leave them in a particularly vexing position, as the church so stridently argues against more complicated and nuanced understandings of ethnic identity. For Japanese nationals, most are polite but evasive about their feelings toward the political dimensions of Bethel Church's mission, and yet a small minority expresses strong support, and repeats almost verbatim Minister Kim's

uncompromising convictions.

The Church reflects insularity in other ways. Every Sunday, at the end of a long service, Bethel Church announces a list of jobs that church members need filled. This scene and the types of jobs mentioned—cashier at a convenience market, waitress at a Korean restaurant, translator for an import business—is familiar, and this is a reminder of the economic and ethnic insularity that characterizes Korean communities from New Malden in London to Koreatown in Los Angeles. However, during one special day, on September 25, 2005, Minister Kim ended the service by reading the names of the students and the colleges they will be attending the following spring. Students were identified with a mix of Korean and Japanese names—some students have one of each, others with just one. The list of universities was truly impressive, including Waseda, Hitotsubashi, Ochanomizu, Kyoto, and two headed to Todai (University of Tokyo). The names of students admitted to Todai were saved toward the end of the service, and they received loud cheers that seemed to celebrate their entry into the highest echelon of mainstream Japanese society. However, the members got up and gave a standing ovation when the final name was announced: Kim Minja was going to Ewha Womans University in South Korea.

HANYANG KOREAN CHURCH IN BEIJING: “BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST”

Eugene Choi is the head minister of the Hanyang Church. A graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York, he has been educated around the world, graduating from an international high school in Singapore, college in Seattle, and then his divinity degree in New York in 1992. He is perfectly fluent in English and Korean, and he has worked as a youth minister in New York and Los Angeles. Prior to taking his current position at Hanyang Church, he was the assistant pastor responsible for the English service at a large church in the affluent Gangnam section of Seoul. When he was given the opportunity to lead Hanyang Church in 2002, he found the possibility of working in the dynamic, kinetic city irresistible. In addition, he noted that what made Beijing attractive was the sense that the city and the nation was “clearly on its way to becoming the center of the new Pacific Century.” He was excited that the renewed opening of China to the outside world—including to religious groups—provided Koreans “with a level playing field to do God’s work.”

In other words, in this newly emergent and open China, Hanyang Church could compete

with Western, primarily American, missionaries, and the church could bring to bear South Korea's new standing in the world. While Chinese government policies made it impossible to proselytize openly, Minister Choi feels confident that developing ties to even a small number of well-placed Chinese now will inevitably pay big dividends in the future, as China inevitably becomes more affluent and modern:

Our mission in China is to participate in building the country's future and to ensure the place of God and His grace in it. As a Korean church, we bring a unique and special message for China: economic growth without faith is meaningless and God's presence gives us strength and guidance in times of change. Just as importantly, we can also show that belief in Christ can exist side-by-side with Asian traditions and values. By honestly sharing our faith with future leaders of China today, I have faith that we are planting a seed that will eventually bear amazing fruit.

As the band finishes playing "Stir It Up," a Korean graduate student of classic Chinese literature at the Beijing Language and Culture University walks up to the stage, and she gives an impassioned prayer in Mandarin. Coupled with the song, the prayer seems like open—if subtle—defiance to official policy: foreign churches must not engage in politics (or "stir things up"), and they are off-limits to Chinese nationals. After a few more rounds of pop-infused songs and bible passages in English, Mandarin, and Korean, Minister Choi delivers a short but effective sermon about how faith in Christ dissolves human-created divisions of nations and ethnicities, to create "a new people empowered by God who can then have the courage to change not only China or Korea but the world." His sermon is delivered over a PowerPoint presentation and ends with the sentence "ONE WORLD IN CHRIST!" over the image of Earth rising out of darkness over the horizon.

After the service ends at noon, the entire congregation moves to the large dining hall for lunch and a special event. It is Mother's Day in South Korea, and the stage has been decorated with huge displays of carnation flowers that are traditionally associated with the purity of a mother's love. Minister Choi goes up to the stage and takes pains to explain that this is not a religious event, and that special guests have been invited. The special guests turn out to be the mothers of the Chinese members of church; these Chinese members are themselves "guests" of sorts, since Chinese nationals, under Chinese law, cannot be "official" members of a foreign church. Most of the dozen or so women are from the greater Beijing area, but others came from other regions for the special event. The congregation "oohs and aahs," as the mothers are introduced in the order of how far they have had to travel to get to the church. Minister Choi goes on to explain that these Chinese women are

“mothers to us all because”—forgetting the comments he made just a few minutes ago—“we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.” As the traditional Korean Mother’s Day song plays on the speakers, pairs of Chinese and Korean members go up the stage, they perform the traditional Korean-Confucian prostration, and one of them pins a single carnation on the blouses and dresses of each Chinese mother. The ceremony leaves everyone in tears, as the Hanyang Church serves its mission in a glittering office building in the capital of the most populous and powerful communist country in the world.

CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON FAITH AND PLACE

Located in the luxurious center of the Chaoyang District in Beijing, Hanyang Church embodies South Korea’s corporate ambitions and its cosmopolitan outlook that imagines a borderless world populated by global citizens. Despite its ethnic identification, the language and the culture of Hanyang Church easily vacillates from Korean to English to Mandarin and this works to elevate Korean as a global language and culture. Given the status and popularity of Korean brand names and popular culture in China, this happens with seamless ease. The end effect of all this is to strip Korea and Koreans at Hanyang Church of recognizable history and ethnicity and give credibility to the church’s central message that “we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.” In contrast, Bethel Tokyo Korean Church is enmeshed in history and ethnicity. Despite the diversity of its members, Bethel Church views its mission through the troubled history of Koreans in Japan as oppressed and persecuted people. For the church, Korean language and culture are spiritual resources to be protected, and Korean ethnicity stands at the bulwark against secular temptations of Japanese society. Within Bethel Church, Korean history and ethnicity have been essentialized and frozen and reinforces the tight boundary between Koreans and Japan.

While Hanyang and Bethel Churches have made individual choices regarding what and how to foreground histories and contemporary realities of South Korean relations with China and Japan, they reinforce the broader geopolitics of South Korea with respect to their two neighbors since the early-1990s. Two dates in the 20th century stand out as particularly significant in modern South Korean history. On August 22, 1910, through the Annexation Treaty, Korea became a colony of Japan, bringing to a culmination decades of Japanese imperial encroachment, and then unleashing another thirty-five years of brutal colonial rule. Forty years later, on October 25, 1950, the People’s Volunteer Army crossed into Korea to help the North Koreans fight back against the United Nations, the United States, and South

Korean forces, all of whom had come within miles of the Yalu River. These Chinese “volunteers” attempted to reunite the peninsula and to bring Korea into the communist world, and they were half successful. After three more years of war, Korea remained, and remains today, the last hot spot in the fading Cold War (Cumings 2005). Whatever their profound differences now, both halves of Korea can still claim a long list of grievances toward their more powerful neighbors, these countries who used the peninsula as a land bridge for imperial ambitions, as a buffer zone for their own claims of ideological and cultural superiority, and as a site for colonial exploitation. However, as with all national histories, how Koreans remember that history is, in part, a profound political act that says more about Korea’s present than the past.

Since South Korea normalized relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1992, South Korea has chosen to put its relationship between itself and China and Japan on radically different trajectories. On the one hand, South Korea has chosen to view China largely through the lens of economic development, and state policies have focused on China’s insatiable market, its abundant cheap labor, and vast opportunities for investment and profit. On the political front, South Koreans have seen rapprochement with China as the best long-term strategy for winning Chinese cooperation to check and discipline North Korea’s intransigence. This strategic vision has made it easier for South Koreans to view China as an important economic and political partner (Pollack 2014).

On the other hand, even though South Korea nearly copied the Japanese model of state-centered, conglomerate-led, and export-oriented economic development after the Korean War, this has ironically made Japan South Korea’s most direct regional competitor. By the 1990s, South Korea no longer needed Japanese capital nor technology, and joint ventures that were so crucial to South Korean industry up to that point declined precipitously. In politics, instead of bringing the two nations closer together, the rise of democracy in South Korea has led to greater calls for Japan’s accountability, and demands for contrition over that nation’s imperialist past. South Korean politicians have iterated a long list of grievances: Japan should apologize for, and provide reparations to, Korean women who had been reduced to “comfort women,” or sex slaves, for the Japanese Imperial Army; the Japanese government should concede that Liancourt Rocks is Dokdo not Takeshima; and Japanese representatives should stop honoring the war dead at the Yasukuni Shrine, including the war criminals buried there (Rozman and Lee 2006). If it appears that South Koreans are struck by an historical amnesia in their relationship with China, it’s hard not to see that South Koreans are consumed by an historical memory of all things Japanese. Hanyang Church in Beijing and Bethel Church in Tokyo have largely adopted these divergent and prevailing sentiments, amplifying them in their respective messages of solidarity and community and separation and resistance.

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Received on September 2, 2018

Revised on November 22, 2018

Accepted on November 22, 2018