Conscientization for Korean Canadian Christian women

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to suggest Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization as an active process of intervention within three cultures (i.e., Korean Confucian culture, multicultural Canadian culture, and the culture of the Korean Canadian immigrant churches) to empower Korean Canadian Christian women (hereafter KCC women).[1] More specifically, I would like to look into how KCC women claim their space in the cultures where Korean Canadian immigrant churches are situated, by analyzing the impact of the dynamics of these three cultures upon these women. To explore the interactions among cultures, I draw on H. Richard Niebuhr's five typologies from *Christ and Culture* together with insights from Boyung Lee's work.[2] I investigate how the three cultures have contributed to KCC women's *han*, the core product of marginalization (i.e., Christ and culture as mutually malforming) and the null curriculum of racism and sexism implicit in Korean Canadian immigrant churches. I also discuss how the three cultures contribute to the survival and faith in God of KCC women (i.e., Christ and culture as mutually sustaining). Lastly, I make an important suggestion about conscientization which could be a step toward a life-giving religious education for KCC women.

Christ and Culture as Mutually Malforming

Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng states that Asian North American Christians are enculturated in three settings: the culture of heritage, the dominant culture, and the culture of the Christian faith

[1] I define Korean Canadian women as first-generation immigrant women who were born and raised in Korea and immigrated to Canada as adults before 2006, and who were found to be of significantly lower socio-economic status than average Canadians in 2005. The boundary of my study is based on census data about Korean immigrants to Canada gathered until 2006. See Jungwee Park, "A Demographic Profile of Koreans in Canada," in *Korean Immigrants in Canada: Perspectives on Migration, Integration, and the Family*, ed. Samuel Noh, Ann H. Kim, and Marianne S. Noh (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 21-34. The largest age group of Korean immigrants in 2006 was those between the ages of 25 and 44. In 2022, they would be in their 40s to 60s. I base my study on the analysis of Korean immigrants in Canada in *Korean Immigrants in Canada: Perspectives on Migration, Integration, and the Family*, published in 2012. There has been little analysis on the patterns of Korean immigration to Canada since. I leave study of recent immigrants and the younger generation to future inquiry. Furthermore, Korean Canadian Christian women are defined as those within my conservative Protestant context, which is the majority of Korean Christian immigrants. I do recognize that there are other denominations and different understandings of Korean Canadian Christian immigrants. Nevertheless, this specific group of women, as defined here, is assumed to constitute the majority of Korean Canadian Christian women.

[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2001); Boyung Lee, "A Philosophical Anthropology of the Communal Person: A Postcolonial Feminist Critique of Confucian Communalism and Western Individualism in Korean Protestant Education" (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 2004), 86-91.

community.[3] Correspondingly, Korean Canadian Christians are inducted into Korean Confucian culture, multicultural Canadian culture, and the culture of Korean Canadian immigrant churches.

The Heritage Culture

The encounter between patriarchy—which has been handed down throughout Korean history—and Neo-Confucianism, has engendered a most tenacious patriarchy. This inflexible form of patriarchy in Korean culture has contributed to the marginalization of KCC women. When Korean immigrants came to Canada, they brought Korean Confucian culture with them, and this has strengthened patriarchy and the subordination of women.[4] The oppression of Korean women culminated with the introduction of Neo-Confucianism as both the social norm and the national religion of the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910). In Confucianism, the subordination of women falls under three principles: *namjonyobi*, *samjongjiui* and *chilgeojiach*. *Namjonyobi* means that men should be respected, and women should be lowered.[5] *Samjongjiui* is the requirement that a woman should obey her father when she is young, her husband when she is married, and her son when she is widowed. *Chilgeojiach* means that a husband can expel his wife based on one of seven conditions.[6] Simply put, women should selflessly sacrifice themselves and obey their husbands for the sake of harmony in the family.
With the westernization of Korean culture that began in the nineteenth century, women's status underwent changes. However, the above Confucian principles are still relevant, and *namjonyobi* still dictates the relationship between Korean women and men, even in Korean Canadian immigrant families and churches.

The Dominant Culture

Multiculturalism has contributed to the implicit racism in the Canadian dominant culture and to the privatization of Korean immigrant churches, which has led in turn to reinforcement of patriarchy. The government of Canada declared multiculturalism an official policy in October 1971, with a focus on "funding for programs aimed at cultural retention and cultural sharing by Canada's ethno-cultural communities, including support for the teaching of heritage languages."[7] Although this policy, uniquely known as the "mosaic myth," seems to show respect for minority cultures, scholars aver that it demonstrates implicit racism in three ways.

First, the focus on ethno-cultural diversity in the mosaic myth distracts attention from racism and justice issues.[8] Second, the mosaic myth draws a clear line between the public and private spheres. In the public sphere, immigrants are expected to acculturate into one of the

[3] Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, "Family and Education from an Asian North-American Perspective: Implications for the Church's Educational Ministry," *Religious Education* 87, no. 1 (1992): 57.
[4] Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women's Christology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2002), 62.
[5] Lee, "A Philosophical Anthropology of the Communal Person," 89-90.
[6] The seven conditions are disobedience to parents-in-laws, inability to give birth to a son, adultery, jealousy, theft, having a serious disease, and chattiness.
[7] Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, "Salmon and Carp, Bannock and Rice: Solidarity between Asian Canadian women and Aboriginal women," in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 200.
[8] Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, "Diversity and Difference in the Work of Gender Justice," *Making Waves* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 17.

official languages, and only in the private sphere are they free to sing their ethnic songs, speak their ethnic languages, and eat their ethnic food. In this way, immigrant communities are prone to becoming segregated into private enclaves with little influence on mainstream society. Third, what seems to be implied in multicultural policy is that Canadians are ranked into three classes: Canada's founding peoples as the first class, immigrant groups as the second class, and the Aboriginal people as the third class.[9] This implicit racism is called "racial microaggression," the new manifestation of racism, which is subtle and ambiguous, but just as problematic and damaging as overt racism.[10]

Partly because of the cunning privatization of ethnic communities through the policy of multiculturalism, and partly because of the silence and ignorance of Korean Canadian immigrant churches toward racism, social and civic capital in mainstream society cannot flow into Korean immigrant churches. For this reason, the churches remain as privatized ethno-religious institutions and as segregated islands or "little Koreas" within the dominant society. Consequently, the disconnection of social and civic capital from the mainstream society leaves patriarchy in Korean Canadian churches intact and more intransigent. Hence, this biased reality of the dominant culture further skews the Christian ideal and reinforces the distorted relationships of the heritage culture.

The Culture of Korean Immigrant Churches

The Korean Canadian immigrant churches maintain the subordination of women in structural and functional ways. Since the first two Korean Presbyterian churches were founded in Toronto in 1967, Korean Canadian immigrant churches have been crucial sites for meeting the psychological and spiritual needs of Korean immigrants and for offering sociocultural integration: i.e., church as the sustainer of culture.[11] However, the churches have also perpetuated the subordination of women by remaining deeply patriarchal institutions. Jung Ha Kim offers a good analysis of the marginalization of women within Korean North American immigrant churches under two categories: structural and functional. From a structural perspective, "there are no official and legitimate channels for women's leadership to become more visible and empowering".[12] Functionally, women's ministry is "relegated to all kitchen-related responsibilities," and women's work is considered less important than that of men in the churches.[13]

Triple Marginality of KCC Women

The preceding three cultures have functioned to malform KCC women, who then experience triple marginalization and displacement: at home, in Canadian culture, and at their

[9] Evelyn Kallen, "Multiculturalism: Ideology, Policy and Reality," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 56.
[10] Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 18. See Lee's book *From a Liminal Place*, pages 19-20 for more information on "racial microaggression."
[11] Kim, *The Grace of Sophia*, 70; Jung Ha Kim, *Bridge-Makers and Cross-Bearers: Korean-American Women and the Church* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1997), 1. I utilize Korean American scholars' works in this article on the assumption that Korean Canadian and Korean American women's experiences are similar and leave the differences between the two contexts to a future inquiry.
[12] Kim, *Bridge-Makers and Cross-Bearers*, 54.
[13] Ibid., 55.

churches. At home, they are often frustrated because of not being validated by men, even though they are pressured to take care of the house, raise the children and work as much as their husbands.[14] Many live lives of exile in Canada, since many came to Canada for someone else's sake (e.g., children).[15] They also experience displacement by leaving their "home" of Korea and living in a new land where they consider themselves "guests," no matter how long they live there or how accustomed they become to Canada's social and cultural fabric.[16] At church, they are marginalized both structurally and functionally.

KCC Women's *Han*

Influenced by this triple marginality from the three cultures, KCC women accumulate *han* in their minds, i.e., unresolved resentment stemming from social powerlessness.[17] Among the various manifestations of *han*, KCC women tend to manifest self-hatred, low self-esteem, a sense of emptiness, sorrow, powerlessness, and guilt, as well as acquiescence to the status quo due to a long history of subjugation, humiliation, and defeat.[18]

For example, KCC women generalize gender differences and portray their acquiescence to the patriarchy in their church by saying, "That's just the way it is," or "Whether the work is unfair or not, I don't think that people should complain about their jobs."[19] As a minority group, they maintain a collective silence toward racism and a spiritualization of everyday suffering as a "high price for the chosen people."[20] They also feel inferior, alienated, and lonely in the dominant culture of Canada.[21]

Racism and Sexism as the Null Curriculum

Despite everyday exposure to racism and sexism inside and outside Korean Canadian immigrant churches, these issues are not included in children and adults' curricula. I therefore categorize these topics as a null curriculum, following Elliott Eisner's threefold typology of an explicit curriculum, an implicit curriculum, and a null curriculum.[22] For Eisner, the null curriculum is what schools do not teach. He argues, "what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach … ignorance is not simply a neutral void."[23]

Most Korean Canadian immigrant churches use a church curriculum either from the United States or from Korea, with the major focus being an individualistic soteriology and the

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[14] Ibid., 107.
[15] Kim, *The Grace of Sophia*, 77. Many Korean Canadian married women immigrate to Canada for the purpose of their children's education. There are also Korean Canadian women who are called *Gi-Reo-Gi* (wild geese mothers) who come to English-speaking countries to educate and support their children while their husbands remain in Korea.
[16] Kim, *Bridge-Makers and Cross-Bearers*, 92.
[17] Andrew Sung Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing: An Asian-American Theological Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 9.
[18] See Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds-Han* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1994) for more information on meanings and different categories of *han*.
[19] Kim, *Bridge-Makers and Cross-Bearers*, 107.
[20] Ibid., 100.
[21] Ibid., 13.
[22] Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 87-107; Boyung Lee, 70-73.
[23] Eisner, 97; Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, "Inclusive Language in Asian North American Churches: Non-Issue or Null Curriculum?" *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 21.

importance of the Bible.[24] Moreover, the Confucian communalism of trying to live in harmony and peace with others leads Korean immigrant churches to neglect and/or avoid justice and gender issues. By not teaching about racism and sexism in Sunday school curricula and adult Bible studies (i.e., a null curriculum), Korean Canadian immigrant churches have taught congregations that racism and sexism are irrelevant to religious education and can be tolerated.[25]

Christ and Culture as Mutually Sustaining

I would like to point out that despite the marginalization of KCC women in Korean Canadian churches, these churches are sites that can solve the issues presented above, because they still hold immense socio-cultural-spiritual value for women. Even in the midst of triple marginality, the three cultures interact in a mutually sustaining way to help Korean women to survive and to retain their faith.

First, KCC women find strength and hope for survival as they participate in communal prayer meetings in times of suffering and *han*. When these women face pain and hardship, they go to ecclesial spaces, such as Korean immigrant churches and early morning prayer meetings, and plead with God. They untangle their *han* through prayer, and in this way their faith that one day God will liberate them from their pain is consolidated. Visiting public spaces diminished in the COVID-19 era, but KCC women still pray fervently to God in times of adversity.

Second, the combination of *han* and spiritual fervor sustains a unique worship style in Korean immigrant churches, and KCC women find the greatest spiritual connection within such a liturgical environment. Unlike many other socio-cultural Christian subgroups, the worship includes fervent prayer and singing hymns loudly with clapping. Sermons proclaim the hope that entangled problems will be solved by the power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, many special revival meetings, which are usually held twice a year, consistently include this Pentecostal style of fervent prayer and loud hymn singing, which expresses some unique spiritual attributes. Thus, both Korean culture and Christian worship help Korean Canadian Christian women relate deeply to God and continue their battle for survival based on their faith.

Third, Korean Canadian immigrant churches provide very important social functions as ideal sites of further engagement for KCC women. According to Grace Ji-Sun Kim, the three social functions are community centres, satisfaction of male need for leadership roles, and preservation of Korean culture and ethnic identity. Korean Canadian churches serve as community centres for meeting people, making friends, and exchanging information that is helpful for everyday survival and business.[26] In addition, Korean immigrant churches bestow leadership positions on adult male members, which is important for them, because it gives them roles that are difficult to obtain within the dominant society. Also, Korean immigrant churches preserve the Korean culture and system and fulfill many of the social and psychological needs of immigrants.[27] In sum, both the religious and social functions of Korean Canadian immigrant churches show that Christianity, the churches and Korean culture mutually encourage KCC women to continue their marginalized lives in the faith that Christ will break the bondage of sin

[24] Lee, 98-99.
[25] Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, "Pacific-Asian North American Religious Education," in *Multicultural Religious Education*, ed. Barbara Wilkerson (Birmingham: Religious Education, 1997), 212.
[26] Kim, *The Grace of Sophia*, 70-71.
[27] Ibid., 71.

in the form of sexism and racism. In these ways, Christ and culture are mutually sustaining for KCC women.

Religious Education for Conscientization

At this time, I would like to suggest religious education for conscientization that reveals the null curriculum in Korean Canadian churches. It would make KCC women critically aware of their internalized self-contempt and the sources of structural oppression, such as racism and sexism. The term "conscientization," which was popularized by Paulo Freire, refers to "development of the awakening of critical awareness."[28] With conscientization, the oppressed transfer from a "'naïve awareness'—which does not deal with problems, gives too much value to the past, tends to accept mythical explanations, and tends toward debate—to a 'critical awareness'—which delves into problems, is open to new ideas, replaces magical explanations with real causes, and tends to dialogue."[29] In this process, the oppressed become aware of and reject the oppressive consciousness within them. They become less dependent and freer, and are able to analyze the real causes of their political, social, and economic oppression. They also begin to engage in the transformation of society. In this sense, conscientization is not only intellectual analysis but also a praxis that leads to action and change.

Religious education for the conscientization of KCC women includes making them aware of their internalized self-contempt and marginalized mentality and helping them begin to see themselves as subjects of transformation. Only by seeing themselves as subjects can they separate themselves from such negative perceptions and exercise their creative potential.[30] In addition, religious education for conscientization includes making KCC women aware that "the personal is political,"[31] that they might see the real causes of their oppression, and engage with the Korean immigrant churches and Canadian society in transformative actions. Through such conscientization, women can "become aware that they are not isolated victims but members of an oppressed group that can turn its solidarity in oppression into solidarity in action and transform oppressive structures."[32]

Conclusion

I have provided a pedagogical suggestion for conscientization within the three cultures to empower KCC women. The process of writing this article provided me with an opportunity to become conscious of my own *han* in the form of self-hatred, low self-esteem, and powerlessness. It is my hope that religious education for conscientization can help other KCC women begin their own journeys of liberation along with me.

[28] Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Sheed & Ward Ltd, 1974), 15.
[29] Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans., and ed., Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 57.
[30] Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 82.
[31] Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, eds., *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 56.
[32] Ibid.