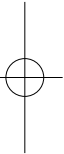
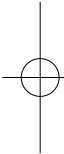


The Reproduction of Growth-Oriented Churches: Korean American Churches and the Politics of Infrastructure

Seo Dae-Seung*



(Abstract) This article uses an approach based on the politics of infrastructure to demonstrate how Korean American churches still function according to a growth-oriented ideology that prioritizes the growth of individual churches, despite calls for them to adopt a more active role in helping the Korean American community since the 1992 Los Angeles riots. To analyze this phenomenon, the article addresses a conflict that arose over a parking lot site when the senior pastor's preaching and leadership, intangible elements of church infrastructure, failed to translate into tangible infrastructure. I define the charismatic leadership of the senior pastor, represented by his preaching and regarded in Korean American churches as the main form of infrastructure driving church growth, as intangible infrastructure. I then examine how, when this intangible infrastructure translates successfully into church growth, linguistic and material infrastructure become a part of transcendental religiousness and remain invisible and, by contrast, how, when such translation fails to take place, the human and secular qualities of infrastructure become visible as objects of dispute. This article focuses specifically on the parking lot site that became a key cause of conflict in one Korean American church and how the site acquired prominence in the course of the church's internal dispute.



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* Research Fellow, Institute of Cross-Cultural Studies, Seoul National University.

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1. Introduction

The film *Land without People* shows the process of a Los Angeles (LA) megachurch forcibly evicting the residents of a low-income apartment block it owns in order to build a parking lot. The film is based on the case of an actual Korean American megachurch in the LA area. In this real-life case, an elderly Japanese American woman, the last resident of the block, has lived there since getting married in 1974 and regards it as her home, but she now must leave (Bak Jiho 2009a). The case questions the role that Korean American churches currently play in the local community, despite demands that they assume greater social responsibility after the 1992 LA riots.^{1,2} Amid the development of Koreatown and skyrocketing rents since the 2000s, churches are failing to function as havens for local low-income people.

This case clearly reveals the process by which Korean American megachurches, rather than working with the “outside,” prey on the outside to create a bigger “inside.” The bigger a church grows, the more inadequate its parking lot becomes. Expanding the parking lot is therefore seen as an essential process in laying the groundwork for growth of the church. Even among the so-called three Bs—building, baptism, and budget—larger church buildings and parking lots are regarded as most important of all, thanks to their ability to increase congregation sizes and church budgets (Bak Jiho 2009b). Pastor Robert Schuller, known for his pioneering introduction of marketing techniques in US churches, listed church accessibility, a big parking lot, consideration of the intellectual demands of audiences, services, a sense of presence, and good cash flow as principles for “selling” a church to “consumers.” Among these, he claimed, having a big parking lot was essential as its size determined the size of the church (Pritchard 1996). Like securing a large parking lot, marketing techniques for making churches more accessible to consumers went on to strongly influence other

¹ (Editor’s note) The 1992 LA riots were a series of civil disturbances that followed an acquittal of four officers of the LA Police Department charged with using excessive force in the arrest and beating of African American Rodney King. Koreatown in LA was a site of violent confrontations between rioters and Korean immigrants.

² The LA riots were a wake-up call for Korean immigrants to move away from their homeland-centered attitude and actively participate in mainstream American society. See Abelmann and Lie (1996) for more information on the changes in identity and belonging of Korean immigrants before and after the 1992 LA riots.

megachurches. A key example is Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, which has a parking lot covering 30 acres (about 120,000 m²).

On the other hand, the process of buying large plots of land for a big parking lot can spark conflict. A parking lot site was the direct cause of the dispute in which the megachurch mentioned at the beginning of this article has been embroiled since 2005. The 300-space lot that had been considered large in the early days of the church became too small to hold its growing congregation. The church was therefore buying up adjacent plots of land, gradually expanding its parking lot as it did so. But in 2005, a dispute arose between the senior pastor and the church in the process of acquiring parking lot land. Over the course of four years, the conflict became a major talking point in the LA Korean American community. Buildings and plots owned by churches thus have the dual qualities of demonstrating the growth of the church and, at the same time, easily leading to conflict. As infrastructural elements, parking lots provide potential for a church to grow but also bring a danger of schisms.

This study is based on participant observation of a Korean American megachurch in LA. In it, I attempt to examine the link between charisma, a core element of church infrastructure as represented by the preaching abilities of the pastor, and the parking lot, a tangible element of infrastructure expanded through this charisma. Taking the view that a growth model is at work that equates the sermons of a Korean American church's senior pastor with the vitality of the church itself, I examine the connection between the "listening community" formed by the senior pastor's sermons and the three Bs, from the perspective of infrastructural politics.

Korean American churches have grown rapidly since the 1970s, against a background of steep expansion in Protestantism that began in South Korea in the 1960s.³ Protestantism mushroomed amid structural changes in South Korean society, from the appearance of one megachurch led by a charismatic pastor to the subsequent birth of a megachurch for middle-class residents of Gangnam. Interestingly, this period also saw the most

³ According to Yi Wongyu (1997: 149), the number of Protestant worshippers in South Korea increased dramatically from 500,198 in 1950 to 8,037,464 (18.6 percent of the entire population) in 1991. However, the number of Buddhist worshippers in the country also rose sharply during this period (Lee and Suh 2017: 469–470), accounting for 27.1 percent of the overall population—a higher proportion than that of Protestants—by 1991. These figures stand in contrast to the Korean American community, of which at least 60 percent are known to attend Protestant churches.

rapid growth in Korean immigrant churches in the United States. This was due to a 1965 amendment to US immigration law that removed restrictions on Asian immigration, leading to a sharp rise in the number of Korean immigrants. Accordingly, the number of Korean American churches began increasing in earnest in the 1970s. In LA, the main focus of this article and the main Korean American population center in the United States, megachurches began appearing in the 1970s, mainly in Koreatown. By the 1980s, megachurches also began emerging in the city's suburbs as Korean Americans moved out of the city center.

In this process, so-called prosperity theology has functioned, along with increased prosperity among Korean immigrants, as a mechanism for theologically underpinning the growth of churches. In the 1980s, however, the trend of ongoing growth ended, and, from the 1990s, migration to the United States began to decrease. Church growth started to decelerate and, as the charismatic pastors who had grown their churches began retiring, church schisms became recognized as a major issue in the Korean American community. Earlier, too, echoing the unruly proliferation of various groups in wider Korean American society, breakups of small- and medium-sized Korean American churches were so frequent as to be cited as one reason for their growing number (Shin and Park 1988: 236). But most of the churches examined in previous studies were institutions with little power, and they failed to attract as much attention as schisms in Korean American megachurches from the 1990s onwards.

In this study, I focus on how the land and buildings owned by churches, which symbolize the "blessings" they have received, existed as invisible entities in the background of everyday life before coming to the fore when church disputes arose. From the prosperity-theological perspective that has influenced Korean American churches in the United States so strongly, acquiring better infrastructure is proof of greater divine grace. On the other hand, the significance of this divine grace remains confined within churches. I regard the charismatic leadership of senior pastors, represented by preaching, as a key factor driving growth in Korean American churches and as a form of intangible infrastructure. I aim to explore how, when this intangible infrastructure translates successfully into church growth, language and physical infrastructure become part of transcendental religiosity, becoming invisible; and that, conversely, when such a translation fails to occur, the human and secular nature of the infrastructure becomes visible as an object of dispute. This article is particularly focused on parking lot sites, a key

source of conflict in Korean American churches, and on the process by which parking lots are summoned to the forefront of internal church disputes. In this way, I examine aspects of the translation of infrastructure and its failure, which have until now escaped attention in studies of Korean American churches.

2. Theoretical Background

The growth-oriented discourse in Korean American churches can be seen as a process of rendering intangible and tangible infrastructure invisible as elements necessary for communing with God, despite their intermediary roles. Meyer (2011: 28) indicates that Max Weber and William James, while generally placing importance on personal encounters with God, treated external forms, or church structures involved in these processes, as secondary phenomena. Meyer takes this perspective to be a position of Protestantism, which developed in opposition to Catholicism and its valuing of sacraments and sacred images. In the paradoxical situation whereby direct connections to God can be created only through intermediaries, Meyer highlights the social processes that render these intermediaries visible or invisible.

Specifically, Keane (2007) shows the efforts of Western missionaries to separate language from material things within the semiotic ideology of Protestantism. Dutch missionaries in Indonesia rejected traditional sacrificial rites and formalized ritual incantations that can function as obstacles to direct communion with God. Efforts to meet directly with transcendental beings without going through material intermediaries are manifested, in one Zimbabwean church, as an emphasis on directly hearing the voice of the living Holy Spirit instead of using the Bible (Engelke 2004). Robbins (2017), too, offers a good illustration of efforts to eliminate material intermediaries between God and humans, and the conflict surrounding these efforts.

The question of what constitutes a religious intermediary is not necessarily determined by the material properties of an object. In Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches, for example, while the material character of the Bible is emphasized, sticky honey is regarded as a spiritual substance blessed by God, despite its materiality (Engelke 2007: 226). In Zambian Pentecostal churches, by contrast, the Bible is an important medium for direct com-

munion with the Holy Spirit (Kirsch 2011). The criteria for distinguishing between the material and spiritual qualities of an object thus differ according to the linguistic and semiotic ideologies within which that object is placed.

The question of how, in a Protestant church that emphasizes transcendence in the absence of intermediaries, a material intermediary that inevitably intervenes can be interpreted as immaterial, is well revealed in Handman's (2017) study of Guhu-Samane Christians in Papua New Guinea. These Christians believe that the "soft" linguistic infrastructure of Bible translation will bring the "hard" material infrastructure of a road to their town. Because a premodern environment, to them, signifies the influence of Satan, a road linking them to the outside world is seen as a sign of salvation. Here, a road, apparently totally unrelated to religion, constitutes an important part of Christian infrastructure, along with the Bible. In a similar way, in Korean megachurches, which have various places of worship in South Korea and overseas, large screens for live broadcasting sermons function as "holy infrastructure," despite merely being tools for conveying the preaching of the senior pastor (Lehto 2017: 399).

Recent anthropological studies of Christianity show how materialism is translated into religiously acceptable discourse. The megachurches with US suburban, middle-class congregations studied by Elisha (2011) emphasize to their members the importance of breaking free of materialism even while appearing to confer sacred value on money—in some cases, also borrowing corporate organizational models to achieve further growth. California-based Vineyard megachurches emphasize that earning and spending money is no longer something done for oneself but a way of engaging in "stewardship": the mere temporary management of assets given by God (Bialecki 2008). Such studies go beyond criticizing the presence of worldly desires within the religious and show how worldly desires are embodied in religious ways.

In this regard, the prosperity theology widespread in Korean American churches can be seen as a process of rendering invisible the material qualities of things required for church growth. Consequently, even things that appear purely material to outsiders can be seen by insiders as sacred and in transcendence of material qualities. But because such arguments generally focus on the invisibilization of intermediaries, there is little discussion of the converse process of intermediaries being rendered visible. Meyer (2011: 26) mentions the need to pay attention to aspects of both the invisibilization and visibilization of intermediaries, because the process of assigning religious meaning always entails a risk of failure. In Korean American

churches, too, religious infrastructure such as senior pastors' sermons, church buildings, and parking lots are accepted as pathways to God when they function properly, but they reveal their social and material sides, in addition to their religious sides, when they malfunction.

Among the six types of speech acts mentioned by Jakobson (1985), Larkin (2013) focused on the poetic function. In the poetic function, the material quality of the sign is emphasized more than its referential meaning. In Africa, for example, infrastructure such as roads, factories, and bridges sometimes do not function as expected; this is because winning government contracts and rewarding patron-client networks is more important. Here, it can be said that the infrastructure is "working properly" in terms of symbolic and social relationships rather than in terms of technical function. Emphasis on the poetic function of infrastructure goes beyond the question of whether it operates normally, creating questions of why the infrastructure exists and what it symbolizes. The parking lot land controversy that emerged at the end of the Y Church dispute process poetically summoned discussions that reached beyond the functional aspect of the parking lot—how the land should be used—such as the future that the land symbolized, and the social relationships involved in the purchase process.

In this study, I attempt to examine the process by which the parking lot site, a piece of "hard" infrastructure, acquired a primary role in the church dispute amid the declining influence of the sermons of the senior pastor—an element of "soft" infrastructure. In so doing, I intend to show how the religious infrastructure of churches, seldom touched upon by studies of Korean American churches, is not merely background physical infrastructure but space imbued with symbolic meaning. The parking lot land, despite appearing to be a secondary facility far removed from any religious significance, functions as an important piece of religious infrastructure in terms of prosperity theology. At times when elements of a pastor's charisma, such as preaching skills and leadership, fail to function properly, the social significance of tangible infrastructure acquires particular prominence. As I will describe below, the parking lot land only came to the fore as an issue when conflict within the church had reached its peak.

3. Subject Introduction

The subject of this study is Church Y, located in Los Angeles, in the United

States. It was built in 1973, becoming one of the first of many Korean American churches to appear amid a surge in Korean immigration following passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. After beginning as a home church, Church Y later rented an American church building, then, in 1975, purchased a synagogue near Koreatown. This reflects changes in the religious landscape resulting from the migration of white Americans from near Koreatown to suburban and western LA, beginning in the 1950s.

But the sharp rise in Korean migration caused the church to grow rapidly, too, soon leading to a shortage of space in its classroom and parking lot. Because Jews did not drive on the Sabbath and walked to the synagogue instead, the parking lot only had space for a few dozen cars, in contrast to the 900-seat capacity of the synagogue itself (Y gyohoe 1996: 190). Subsequently, Church Y began searching for a bigger piece of land, moving to its current location in 1989.

Church Y's growth story—beginning in the early 1970s as a home church, then renting an American church, and finally buying its own church building—is typical among immigrant churches. The most striking aspects of churches that grew into megachurches during this period were the hardships they experienced while in search of their own “home” and the thanking of God for his grace in helping overcome this adversity. Such stories take the form of testimony to divine grace. The process of acquiring a church building is portrayed as one of acquiring a “home” for the unimpeded enjoyment of Korean culture.

Inconveniences faced by Korean American churches as tenants in American church buildings—complaints about the smell of kimchi after preparing lunch in the church kitchen or being unable to use the building all day long without interruption because of having to vacate it for American services—lead them to build their own churches. The process of acquiring a church building, like that of home ownership among immigrants,⁴ is portrayed in ethnic and religious terms as the realization of the American dream. At the same time, it served to encourage sacrifice and reinforce a

⁴ Pido (2012) shows Filipino immigrants participating in the cultural logic of the American dream by owning homes in the suburbs of San Francisco. Home ownership among Filipino immigrants goes beyond economic logic and is linked to a cultural value, namely that of becoming a good citizen in US society through one's own hard work. As they themselves admit, immigrants cannot acquire complete cultural citizenship merely by owning homes. But home ownership is an important symbol both in US society and in the eyes of relatives in the Philippines.

sense of belonging to the church in the course of church growth and construction. “Church construction histories” telling of the process of buying the church building and secondary facilities such as the classroom and parking lot do appear to contradict emphasis of the transcendental nature of the church and the rejection of materialism. But such contradictions are eclipsed by the fact that the church building and land play the role of religious infrastructure for ongoing religious growth.

Today, Church Y is located immediately adjacent to a freeway, an advantage that allows easy road access to worshippers from locations across LA. From the 2000s, however, the continual growth of the church led to a lack of parking space. As a result, the church rented a nearby parking lot every Sunday and provided a shuttle bus for worshippers. In 2011, Church Y bought land for a parking lot, spending the huge sum of 10 million dollars in the process. At the time, the church planned to put the site to other uses, but the need for legal procedures, such as obtaining land-use zoning change authorization, led the church to use it temporarily as a parking lot. The debt incurred in the process of buying this land straight away placed a heavy burden on church finances. As the issue turned the mood in the church sour, the senior pastor left for South Korea, and a controversy arose over whether the church should keep the land or not. But then, a new senior pastor was appointed and the conflict over the land died down again. Below, I will examine the development of a discourse linking the sermons of Church Y’s new pastor and the shrinking of the church’s congregation. The diminishing power of words provides an important background to the increasing prominence of physical infrastructure.

4. Intangible Infrastructure: “Words that Fill the Soul”

In Korean American churches, sermons are regarded as the most important spiritual “product” for attracting worshippers (Bak Mungyu 2005: 206). Congregation size and Sunday collection revenue are monitored like the customer numbers and sales of a company. Indeed, churches constantly monitor such figures in the belief that they indicate the capacity of the church and its senior pastor. The church’s monthly officers’ meeting provides a forum at which each church department reports the statistics it has compiled. It is here that financial reports detailing income and expenditure, including number of service attendees, participation rates in smaller

church groups, and collection revenue, are shared.

Strathern (2000) introduced the term “audit culture” in the context of the United Kingdom in the 1990s, when universities began receiving external audits in order to reach their established targets. In audit cultures, more emphasis is placed on reaching given goals than on finding new models. Audits thus help create competitive entities rather than organizational development models. Through audits, universities, which are seen as removed from market principles—or supposed to be removed from them—are naturally incorporated into market models. Churches driven to religious materialism by statistics for the sake of organizational preservation and growth largely behave in the same way. Though churches are not subject to external audits like universities or companies, they are obliged to demonstrate to their congregations that the church is operating properly through the constant production of statistics.

A 2014 survey by Pew Research Center found “quality of sermons” to be the most frequently cited factor (83 percent) in choice of church among Protestants in the United States. This was considerably higher than the corresponding figure of 67 percent for Catholics (Pew Research Center 2016). Though no specific statistics are available for Korean American churches, liking or disliking the preaching of the senior pastor is generally recognized as the most important criterion in church selection. The better the sermons of the senior pastor, the more grace he can distribute among worshippers, like a “big man.” Preaching is therefore understood to play a decisive role in the growth of the church.

In this sense, the senior pastor is both a spiritual leader and, unofficially, a “religious entrepreneur,” responsible for maintaining and growing a business.⁵ Churches are also sometimes seen by insecure immigrants as models of business success. One Mexican church studied by Leon (1998) was first established in eastern LA, an area with a high Mexican immigrant population, and has grown to include more than 200 churches across the country, acquiring “mythical” status. Young immigrants living precarious lives in the United States want to develop their own churches and become members of this huge group, known as “the firm” (Leon 1998: 178).

Church Y does not pursue such explicit businesslike growth. Because of

⁵ The term “pastorpreneur” has been coined to describe the role of the pastor in US evangelical prosperity theology. This portmanteau of “pastor” and “entrepreneur” offers a good illustration of how US-style capitalism meets religion (*The Economist* 2015).

the ideology that standards different from those of the world should be applied to churches, it is commonly claimed, both in sermons and in the daily conversations of worshippers, that mundane success and religious success are different. But the senior pastor's sermons are judged to be a key driving force behind church growth. Like a corporate business plan, it is necessary for the senior pastor to share his growth plan with worshippers and to elicit their devotion to reaching these goals. At Church Y and other Korean American churches, it is believed that a church with the Holy Spirit on its side will inevitably grow. In such climate, failure for a church to grow is regarded as problematic. The pastor of one small church in the LA area, met by the author, bemoaned the difficulty that, due to excessive competition among Korean American churches, there were no new worshippers but only those "migrating" to megachurches offering good facilities and programs:

In any case, first-generation Korean immigrants want a decent building, some kind of system, and an environment that looks good. That aspect creates some difficulties. It's just like the way big companies end up taking everything and small companies disappear. ... There are lots of Korean American churches, and the competition between pastors is so intense. It's hard for big churches and for small churches, in different ways. So even when they say a church is growing, it just means people have crossed over from another church. How many people do big churches actually baptize? I've hardly ever seen it happen. For example, Church L has a good Newcomer Welcome Team that treats people moving from other churches or coming from wherever well, and shows them the facilities and the system, so they all end up settling there.

But worshippers tend to believe, as in the past, that "sermons with grace bring church revival," regardless of objective changes such as church size or the diminished standing of Protestantism. At Church Y, too, the expectation exists that the better the pastor's sermon functions as a channel leading people closer to God, the more material blessings the church will receive. Just as Korean Americans must engage in primarily self-employed economic activity and work to survive, pastors must survive in the fiercely competitive so-called listening market of grace in LA, home of the highest concentration of Korean American churches in the United States. There are 4,303 Korean American churches in the country (as of late 2014), of which 322 are concentrated in the LA region alone. LA has more than twice as many Korean American churches as Flushing, New York, which stands in second

place with 139. Moreover, when the 244 more Korean American churches located within approximately one hour's drive of LA—32 in Gardena, 30 in Torrance, 28 in Buena Park, 38 in Fullerton, 58 in Anaheim, 32 in Garden Grove, and 26 in Irvine—are included, the total in this area rises to 566 (Seo Insil 2015). And new churches are continually being added to LA's already-saturated religious market; one religious newspaper reported that the number of churches in Koreatown in LA had risen by 90 between 2013 and 2016, from 370 to 460 (Seo Insil 2017).

Despite this intensely competitive market, worshippers continue to believe that a church will grow if the pastor preaches well and invites an abundance of divine grace. The tiny minority of churches that do succeed in growing become “mythical” models of self-made success. Furthermore, the longing for charismatic pastors that share the joys and sorrows of immigrants while growing their churches through their own efforts remains undiminished. Worshippers believe that the more intense the sermons of the senior pastor are, the stronger and more intense the spiritual power of the church becomes. The sermon each Sunday is an important time for assessing this; pastors that are able to distribute more grace through their sermons can draw more worshippers to their churches. This sometimes functions as a source of pressure on pastors to achieve growth.

What, then, is considered a good sermon in Church Y? Criteria vary greatly according to personal preference, but worshippers fundamentally understand sermons as a process of listening to the Word of God. Yet given that a sermon must also relate to the present time and place, pastors face a dilemma of how to juxtapose the contemporary context of worshippers' lives with the Bible. Unlike the rituals of a *mudang* (Korean shaman), who directly receives and transmits the voices of deities, it is important that the sermon of a pastor maintain a humanly voice while expressing a Godly message within it. To achieve this, it is important to link the Bible to contemporary contexts. If insufficient emphasis is placed on the Bible, the sermon becomes a mere “story”; if the Bible is over-emphasized and the sense of contemporary context is lost, the sermon will not resonate with worshippers. Harding (2001), who has studied political participation by fundamentalist Christians in the United States since the 1980s, has explained the process by which preachers interpret and transmit ancient biblical language to fit new contexts as follows:

The Bible, which God wrote using human authors to pen his words, is for

fundamentalists the sole source of his authority on earth. Preachers convert the ancient recorded speech of the Bible once again into spoken language, translating it into local theological and cultural idioms and placing present events inside the sequence of Biblical stories. Church people, in their turn, borrow, customize, and reproduce the Bible-based speech of their preachers and other leaders in their daily lives. (Harding 2001:12)

Pastors are seen as spokespeople of God, officially speaking on his behalf. Their authority, too, derives from their position as intermediaries passing on this word. Because Korean Americans can now listen to the sermons of famous Korean pastors anywhere on the internet, their expectations of preachers are already high. Just as, as mentioned by Frazer (2003), Shilluk kings are liable to be killed on the sole grounds that physical weakening has compromised their perfection, a weakening of language leads to loss of worshippers and to enfeebled church leadership. In official church discourse, the direct link between the senior pastor's sermons and the number of worshippers is denied, but worshippers are sensitive to quality of preaching.

Problems with the subjective views of individuals on the sermons of Church Y's senior pastor began appearing in the numerical form of a sharp drop in number of worshippers. I was able to hear worshippers' views of the senior pastor's sermons while participating at one church group gathering. Above all, they emphasized transmission of the Word of God as it appeared in the Bible, basing their opinions on the premise that the pastor's eloquence and performance must be tools for transmitting the will of God and must not become the main features of the sermon. The role of the pastor, in the words of one worshipper, is "simply to read the Bible accurately and transmit the Word of God just as it is." But as soon as the senior pastor's preaching was mentioned, others started adding their own grievances regarding aspects of his communication, such as his tone of voice. Worshippers claimed to prefer speech that was easy on the ear to a forced style; they wanted sermons that would truly resonate in people's hearts when the pastor raised his voice.

This method of preaching was less about sermons to convey complex knowledge through logical structures and more about those that conveyed the contents of the Bible to worshippers in simple and powerful form, delivering new certainty for their wavering faith and, in the words of one congregant, "making you feel a shiver." In his analysis of leading Korean megachurches, Hong Yeonggi (2003: 250) pointed out that such churches

had been built by strong leaders with charisma and religious certainty. The congregants of Church Y, too, wanted their senior pastor to represent and convey divine authority.

The fact that Church Y was a megachurch was another cause of high expectations for its pastor's sermons. Duties at a megachurch are divided in such a way that the senior pastor is in charge of the Sunday service sermon and the overall management of the church; associate pastors are in charge of subsidiary organizations within the church and of managing the congregation. Worshippers wanted the senior pastor to give a performance "worthy of a megachurch" and grew increasingly dissatisfied as these expectations went unmet. Another problem was that the senior pastor's sermons were not arranged in a traditional point-based format, in which the preacher pre-announces three or so main points and then moves through them in order, but in a so-called storytelling format. His use of multiple non-biblical anecdotes and a story-like format made his message feel weak to congregants who were used to preachers "proclaiming" God's message.

One example was a sermon titled "The Race of Faith," in which the senior pastor preached that the important thing in life was to set a goal, and the goal had to be Jesus. Building on the sporty connotations of his title, the pastor cited numerous sports, from tennis to marathons to baseball, in a series of analogies. Finally, he mentioned the case of Jackie Robinson, the first African American Major League Baseball player. The pastor was attempting to give an easy explanation of the meaning of having one single goal: living for Jesus. But at one gathering following the sermon, congregants complained that it had contained no material from the Bible. One could not understand why the pastor was telling "stories about others" instead of talking about the lives of Bible characters. This congregant argued that the anecdotes used by the senior pastor were not from the Bible but secular, and that the case of Jackie Robinson had nothing to do with the Bible. Other worshippers agreed with this complaint. In actuality, the senior pastor had tried to convey a consistent message that one should race forward patiently while looking constantly to Jesus, and he had placed Bible passages on this theme in various parts of the sermon. But congregants had taken his anecdotes to be secular and, in the conservative mood of Church Y, the sermon's seeming lack of focus on the Bible had incurred their dissatisfaction.

Of course, not all worshippers took a negative view of the senior pastor's

sermons. One said that they gave congregants the space to think for themselves by not forcing content down their throats, and that they were good because they emphasized practicality rather than blind faith. But expressions of dissatisfaction continued to mount among congregants as the pastor's sermons consistently failed to meet their expectations of "strong" preaching offering direct moral lessons for enduring their week of hard living as immigrants in US society. Some worshippers took to social media to brand the senior pastor's sermons "humanist preaching" and criticize them. They claimed that the attitude of the sermons was based on the secular value of "postmodernism" rather than on biblical content.⁶

Congregants' language ideology regarding the sermons thus generally demanded charismatic testimony to and proclamation of episodes from the Bible describing the direct workings of God's omnipotence. The senior pastor's sermon was something that should bring worshippers into more direct contact with God and invite more divine grace to be distributed among them. Amid the dissatisfaction with the senior pastor's sermons at Church Y, a striking drop in congregant numbers began to show. More specifically, the sharp decline in the number of worshippers at Service 5, consisting primarily of those in their 30s and 40s, was a source of concern for church leaders.

Doubts surrounding the charisma of the senior pastor began emerging in earnest as an issue affecting church finance in October 2015, half a year before church elders demanded his resignation. The church had decided, due to its worsening financial situation, to fire 6 of its 16 full-time employees by the end of the year. At the church committee meeting, the termination of their employment was explained as an "offshoot" (*bullip gaecheok*) project rather than as the result of worsening finances, in order to calm the situation. Off-shooting means dividing an existing church in order to develop several new ones; it emerged as one way for large churches to distribute their power by voluntarily splitting into multiple smaller churches, located in different areas. Because of the positive connotations of this term, Church Y used it while imbuing it with religious significance.

But the off-shooting explanation seemed dubious to Church Y's congregation. The process needed to be conducted according to a specific roadmap, including searches for volunteers to move from the original

⁶ Within the church, the term "postmodernism" is generally used when criticizing the "humanist" trend in secular contemporary society, where "truth" does not exist.

church to the spun-off church and a location in which to establish the new church. But at Church Y, talk of separation and development had appeared out of the blue at a time of hardship for the church. The associate pastors who had been informed of their impending redundancy suddenly had to look for a place to establish a new church and to ask the congregants they knew to come to the church that they would be newly planting.

In addition to redundancies among full-time staff, the church's worsening finances led to a reduction in support for overseas missionaries, office staff cutbacks, and even the laying off of the church canteen chef. The problem now was who should take responsibility for the financial problems. The senior pastor's supporters attributed the problem to the parking lot land, which had been bought for a huge sum of money but was not functioning properly as religious infrastructure for the church amid the falling number of worshippers. The senior pastor's opponents, by contrast, held him responsible for having reduced the church's financial resources by letting its congregation shrink.

The next year, in 2016, elders at the church committee passed a vote of no confidence in the senior pastor, citing his lack of vision. The grounds they presented included an annual budget decrease of one million dollars, a reduction in Sunday service attendance numbers from 3,900 to 2,900, and the particularly serious desertion by younger worshippers in their 30s and 40s. But the senior pastor's supporters stressed the inevitability of shrinking of Korean American churches amid aging populations that were constantly

Table 1. Positions of the two factions in Church Y

Faction	Church session	Senior pastor's supporters
Blamed for shrinking congregation and revenue	Head pastor	Natural shrinkage; parking lot site
Aim	Replacement of senior pastor	Reaffirmation of elders
Main members	Majority of elders in church session, middle-aged and senior congregants, church officers [young worshippers in their 30s and 40s]	Retired church officers, elderly congregants led by officers
Organizational base within the church	Church session	Congregational meeting

reducing in size, falling immigration from South Korea, flight from Korean American churches by second-generation Korean Americans, and the relocation of worshippers to other cities and states. Those supporting the senior pastor attributed the church's financial problems not to intangible infrastructure as represented by his charisma but to the debt incurred by the purchase of the parking lot site under the previous senior pastor. Thus it was that the church session's quest to hold the senior pastor responsible caused his supporters to call the parking lot issue, which had until then lain dormant, back to the fore.⁷

5. The "Summoning" of Tangible Infrastructure: The Parking Lot Site Becomes Visible

Unlike the senior pastor's sermons, which are explicitly regarded as the church's most important infrastructural element, the church's material and tangible infrastructure generally exists in a state of invisibility. Questions of why the church is in its current location and what its market value is are barely discussed in official discourse. This is because a church is regarded more as religious "home" than in terms of its value as an asset. A church, as mentioned in the Bible, is regarded as the "body" of Christ (Ephesians 1:23), meaning that it has Christ as its head, and the congregation plays the role of a body that follows it. Here, the church refers not to a physical building but to the group of worshippers that constitute its members. Therefore, in a religious sense, the material nature of the church is something that must be transcended, and what matters most are the people gathered around God. From this perspective, all of the church's material facilities function as a structure literally "below" (the meaning of the suffix *infra-*) the surface to support and vitalize this human gathering.

But the material qualities of buildings and real estate in Korean American churches emerge from the background and come clearly into focus when the congregation grows and the parking lot becomes too small, or when the congregation shrinks and empty seats begin appearing in the church. The visibility of church real estate is thus closely tied to changes in congregation size. Such fluctuations lead in turn to changes in the amount of

⁷ Church session is a decision-making organization of the Presbyterian Church made up of church ministers and elders who are representatives of the laymen.

monetary offerings, which determine whether the church is able to remain in control of its own assets. When the congregation grows too big, the problem of having to buy a new parking lot arises; when it gets too small, it becomes hard for the church to maintain its parking lot and other real estate. Parking lots are therefore particularly prone to acquiring prominence within church real estate portfolios.

The parking lot bought by Church Y in 2010, too, normally existed in the absence of any particular meaning, like a floating signifier. Because it was located some distance from the church building, shuttle buses connected it to the church building on Sundays. The parking lot had an area of 7.5 acres (approximately 30,000 m²), with capacity for 900 cars; an unused building now stands on it. But when it was purchased, no agreement had been reached on the future use of the site. In an article about Church Y's purchase of the land, one local newspaper foresaw the possibility of the church building itself later being relocated there, but no agreement had been reached on the use of the land, and only a vague understanding existed regarding its use as a parking lot, and the building on it as a space for Sunday school or smaller church group meetings. Amid this uncertainty, ongoing concerns about the church's finances due to the huge price paid for the land remained among congregants even after the purchase had been finalized.

As a result, Church Y's motto in 2012, two years after the land purchase, was the Bible verse "Now give me this hill country" (Joshua 14:12). This quote is taken from the story of how Caleb asked Joshua to give him Hebron, an area still occupied by outsiders despite Caleb's age of 85, and of how Caleb was finally given Hebron. The hidden meaning of the motto was to encourage the congregation of Church Y, like Caleb, to harbor a vision of obtaining this land in the face of adverse circumstances. Though the senior pastor made no mention of the motto in his New Year message in the church newsletter, the editors made sure to give congregants a good idea of where "this hill country" was by placing a photograph of the church and its surroundings on the front page and adding a dotted red line around the location of the parking lot site. But it still remained unclear why the church had to own this land that had caused it to place itself in debt.

At the time, Church Y's newsletter ran a front-page article under the title, "Site H, the Promised Land – Its Progress So Far." The article portrayed the site positively as "promised land," informing readers that the need to obtain zoning change permission remained and urging them to

wait patiently. Subsequently, the new senior pastor took office and the parking lot issue sank below the surface once more. But in 2016, as outlined above, elders opposing the senior pastor began urging his resignation, provoking an all-out conflict with his supporters. In this process, the parking lot issue returned to the forefront of the controversy. The pastor's supporters began taking issue with the parking lot site, regarding it as the cause of the church's financial woes and labeling it a "Pandora's box."

The story of Pandora's box comes from a Greek myth. Pandora symbolizes the beginning of human misfortune and hope. In November 2010, Site H, which our church calls the "promised land," revealed itself like a Pandora's box. It emerged in all its splendor, sending a message of hopes and dreams to many church members. On the other hand, many more aware members demanded the publication of unclear information surrounding the purchase, which was conducted at lightning speed, leaving no time for consideration. The concerns and doubts of these members have gradually grown, but the church session has consistently ignored them. (Extract from a handout issued by supporters of the senior pastor.)

As the senior pastor's supporters tried to point out officially to church elders that the purchase of the parking lot site had been a mistake, the land, located far from the church building itself, returned to a position of prominence. The supporters raised questions such as why the land had been bought; why the church still possessed it even now, paying huge amounts of interest despite its financial hardships; and who should be held responsible. Responsibility for the church's financial trouble lay with the elders who were not selling the land, they claimed.

In this process, the land became a major focus of controversy within the church. Despite using the parking lot every week, congregants held various opinions about how to view it. This can be seen as a process of scaling the site on the part of congregants. Because the use of the parking lot site, bought for such a huge sum, had yet to be decided upon, and because its value as a parking lot had been called into question amid falling numbers of worshippers, conflicting views coexisted within the church on whether to regard it as a "promised land" for the future or to regard it as a problematic "Pandora's box"-like presence. This was similar to a process of acquiring knowledge about an unknown object.⁸

⁸ For a study of the de-escalation of fear, see Carr and Fisher's (2016) examination of how a huge dock, swept away from Japan by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake tsunami,

Even after some time has passed, the parking lot site remains the object of controversy, its status floating between the economic yardstick whereby it threatens to have a fatal effect on church finances and the long-termist yardstick whereby it is essential for the future of the church. In fact, “promised land” and “Pandora’s box,” the two metaphorical expressions used in reference to the land, sometimes appear to reveal the lack of a more accurate yardstick for the site, which can thus only be measured metaphorically. If the former metaphor defers assessment of the site for the future, the latter is a powerful illustration of how there was something wrong with the site from the start. These two metaphors, for the lack of an accurate yardstick to apply to the site, show different approaches to the question of how to handle it.

I was able to observe these two different ways of assessing the parking lot land actually being addressed in the form of a public argument at an internal church briefing session at the time of the dispute. The church held a briefing with the intention of clearing suspicions regarding the land. The event was an opportunity to examine how the land was rhetorically “scaled.” The temporary session moderator, sent to the general committee in place of the senior pastor during the dispute, began the unprecedented church gathering by expressing a sense of discomfort, saying, “I’ve given a lot of sermons, but this is my first briefing.” Sure enough, the church issue for which the most requests for explanation had been made by congregants was the parking lot site.

In order to explain the process of purchasing the site and plans to use it in the future, the session began with a presentation by an elder from the faction opposing the senior pastor. He gave a detailed explanation of the purchase process and associated expenditures. But the presentation only showed images such as bird’s-eye-view diagrams, forcing the audience to listen closely to his verbal account of complex procedures and numbers. The speaker reported that since the purchase of the site, the entire area around the church had been designated a redevelopment zone, with the zoning changed from factory to mixed, allowing commercial, residential, and industrial development all together, causing real estate prices to rise sharply. Next, he presented a blueprint showing how the site was to be used. The images he showed looked like a plan to use the land effectively

floated across the Pacific Ocean and landed on the US coast, where it went from being an immeasurable and extraordinary object of fear to a familiar and measurable object.

as a church building location, differing sharply from its current appearance as a parking lot. He claimed that this “plan” was just one of several being considered by the church, and it was not yet being implemented. In any case, the speaker confirmed that there was nothing suspicious about the past land purchase, and he attempted to shift perspectives toward the future in the form of plans for using the site. To quote,

I'd like to show you the various plans we've studied at the Site H development committee and the general facilities planning committee since 2011. [Shows image] Here's a plan we made at the Site H development committee for around 1,500 seats. We've drawn Joshua and Caleb halls here. Please keep clicking through the images. This is Rahab Hall, a two-story building with about 60 rooms that will provide plenty of room for use. We've been constantly drawing up plans for buildings like the main church hall. We haven't yet started actually implementing these plans, but [...] We're not saying we'll do everything like this; we're now at a research stage, consulting researchers about what plan would be best for our church.

But those on the senior pastor's side attempted to turn back the clock to the time of the site purchase. They began asking questions based on their suspicions about the purchase process. First, they complained that too many numbers had been offered in the presentation when explaining the acquisition process, and they asked why so much information had been shared only verbally and not in written form. One congregant claimed that the church could have used the site “for 600 years” if it had rented it instead of buying it, pointing out that the site had been bought haphazardly for a huge sum of money despite the decrease in congregant numbers since 2008. The congregant asked for an explanation of how this could have happened, the specific aims behind it, and the method of purchase.

In response, the temporary session moderator asked that, since the land purchase had been approved by the church session and the officers' meeting at the time, only suspicions regarding the purchase process be raised, rather than discussing the rights and wrongs of the purchase itself. This was a request to focus on and discuss any past mistakes, rather than taking issue with the entire past. Even after this, however, the senior pastor's supporters continued to treat these numbers not as objective facts but as objects of suspicion. One pro-senior pastor congregant cited his professional experience as a civil engineer to assert that the purchased land was not suitable for building on. He claimed that the necessary land designation change was not yet complete, that construction would take some time even after the

change was complete, and that building could not commence until the current debt was repaid, thereby expressing his doubts as to how the church could handle the financial problems caused by the parking lot. One senior deaconess on the senior pastor's side asked whether the building was to be used as a church hall or a parking lot and, if the latter, why it had cost so much. The speaker countered by asking who would have spent that much money just to buy land for parking, stating clearly that "[we] didn't do this just to get a parking lot." As the elder explained,

I didn't say we bought the land for parking. We attempted the purchase because we could use [the land] for both facilities and a parking lot. That's why we bought the site. We absolutely did not buy it just to use it as a parking lot. That's why our plan shows 60 rooms being created in Rahab Hall, and a main hall; we didn't buy it just as space for parking. That's what we reported to the church session, that's what we reported to the officers' meeting, and that's what we reported in congregational meetings too.

As this response shows, when it came to suspicions surrounding the parking lot land purchase and the question of how the site would be used, the elder viewed it not merely as a parking lot but as land to be put to a variety of uses, including relocation of the church building and use of secondary buildings. Although, almost 6 years after the purchase, there had clearly been no decision made on the use of the site, the purchase had been reported to the church session and the officers' meeting and congregational meetings. Anyone seeking to trace the problem back in time, like those speakers who had earlier raised issues, faced the difficulty of having to dig into matters that had already been approved by way of all these procedures. Simply raising issues was easy, but actually tracing them back in order to hold elders responsible would necessitate going back through the earlier decision processes.

An additional problem was the fact that some retired elders taking issue with the parking lot site had been involved as active elders at the time. Some people criticized them for being in favor of the purchase back when they were involved but were now raising issues with it. Thus, in addition to the burden of having to trace back the parking lot purchase decision through the church session and the officers' meeting and congregational meetings, there was now the criticism that those taking issue with the purchase were not themselves free from responsibility for it.

As critics were failing to make their points effectively, one elder from

the pro-senior pastor faction asked to speak. He said that the parking lot purchase had not been sufficiently considered, implying that this was the fault of the former senior pastor, thus ascribing ultimate responsibility for the land purchase to the figure who had led the church at the time:

A church should buy land with some kind of pastoral aim, after considering whether it's needed in terms of the church's mission. The fact that the land value has gone up means we've done well when it comes to real estate. If that wasn't the aim, then how does the fact that we're gathered here arguing about it 6 years on, with no specific aim, benefit the church? Wasn't the land bought by mistake, with no purpose?

This elder asserted that the parking lot had been bought for the sake of a "goal without a goal." While apologizing for having taken part in the decision to approve the expenditure for the land, in his capacity as a church session member at the time, he hinted that responsibility, ultimately, rested with the former senior pastor. But his attempt to simply blame the former senior pastor without presenting any evidence proved ineffective. The parking lot site again became a mere document, locked away in an office.

In sum, those on the side of the church session were unable to present a concrete plan for how the parking lot site, as a "promised land," would be developed or by what process. It remained unclear how the site would benefit Church Y, in either a religious or an economic sense; and all the session had shown until then was a fancy-looking bird's-eye-view plan for development that may or may not be built at some point in the future. The current senior pastor's supporters, by contrast, tried to connect the site to mistakes made in 2010, at the time of its purchase, constantly going only so far as to mention the former senior pastor but failing to state clearly who was actually at fault. As a result, the site remained in an ambiguous position between that of a "promised land" and that of a "Pandora's box." Its symbolic meaning remained undefined.

Not long after the briefing on the parking lot, more than 500 congregants set up a new church and left Church Y. The new church began by renting an American church building and started building its own religious infrastructure from scratch. By contrast, the parking lot site at Church Y, bought in anticipation of a growing congregation, remained more as a symbolic piece of infrastructure for the church's future than as a current necessity, due both to the existing congregation shrinkage and to the exodus of worshippers establishing their new church. This large piece of

land has become invisible as a promised land, guaranteeing that the church will regain its large congregation of old once the situation improves under the leadership of the new senior pastor.⁹

6. Conclusion: Korean American Churches Since the 1992 LA Riots

In this study, I have examined the dispute over a parking lot site that arose when the intangible infrastructure of one LA megachurch—the preaching and leadership of its senior pastor—failed to translate into tangible infrastructure. The site not only possessed functional significance as a place for parking vehicles but served as a symbolic space indicating the effectiveness of intangible infrastructure—the preaching and leadership of the senior pastor. Consequently, when this intangible infrastructure failed to function properly, the parking lot site summoned the past and future coexisting in the infrastructure, the social relations entangled with the site, and so on.

But the controversy over the parking lot is limited in that it continues to circulate within the framework of the growth-oriented model led by first-generation Korean immigrants. The parking lot dispute examined above was primarily among first-generation worshippers, especially ruling elders and retired elders, who had immigrated to the United States many years before and were now middle-aged or older. Because the devotion of these congregants had played a core role in the growth and construction of the church, their sense of ownership vis-à-vis the church was stronger than that of younger generations. By contrast, the opinions of young and second-generation worshippers were barely reflected in defining the meaning of the site as a piece of church infrastructure. Despite the increased political power of Korean Americans due to greater political participation by 1.5- and second-generation immigrants, in place of their first-generation counterparts following the 1992 LA riots, such changes were yet to be detected in Korean churches.

In spite of calls for Korean American churches to play a more active

⁹ Incidentally, the Korean American church mentioned at the beginning of this article, which had planned to use the apartment block site it had bought as a parking lot, ended up, after several years of serious conflict triggered by the parking lot purchase, selling the site in order to pay off its debts and eliminate the cause of the dispute.

role for the Korean American community after the 1992 LA riots, they have stuck to growth-oriented models centered around individual churches. As mentioned above, the theological model of Korean American churches can be seen as having been influenced by the rapid growth of churches in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. But Korean American churches, which have to recruit members within the ethnic framework of Korean American immigrants, face different challenges than those of their counterparts in South Korea. Because Korean American immigrants in the past experienced downward mobility while not becoming integrated into mainstream US society, Korean American churches provided alternative identities, bestowing social status within the church in place of mainstream society (Min 1992: 1389–1390). Korean American churches have grown as alternative communities led by first-generation Korean American immigrants; it is therefore hard for them to expand their boundaries by including diverse ethnicities and races, like American megachurches. Their members also acknowledge that churches led by first-generation immigrants will not survive in the long term. But, as we have seen above, expectations of church growth remain, and some churches do indeed continue to expand their tangible infrastructure based on the charisma of their pastors.

Church Y is not oblivious to calls for change from the Korean American community. In response to voices urging churches to become open communities and to make greater contributions to local and Korean American society, Church Y has made efforts to become more engaged with both since 2000. These aspirations toward greater openness, a rarity among Korean American churches, caused a sensation in the Korean American community. Interestingly, a church bazaar held to raise funds for the local community, as a major part of the drive for openness on the part of the church, was held in a parking lot just opposite the main church building. But, as seen above, the empty parking lot site, the farthest-flung element of the church estate, remains subordinate to the church's growth-oriented discourse. Moreover, the prevalence of younger members in their 30s and 40s voluntarily attending stalls at the church bazaar in the parking lot opposite the church building struck a contrast with that of the parking lot site dispute, which mostly involved middle-aged and senior congregants.

Church Y's attempts to become an open community since 2000, even while a politics of infrastructure existed within the church, can be seen as proof that the church now stands at a crossroads between a motherland-style, growth-oriented model and incorporation into American society. Its

large parking lot site, located next to a freeway, shows that Church Y is a successful Christian model minority.¹⁰ But though the model minority discourse recognizes success in a socioeconomic sense among ethnic Asians, it also positions them as “eternal outsiders,” who can never be assimilated among White people (Kim 2001; Zhou 2004). In the same way, the growing size of a church does not lead to enhanced social significance.

In fact, disputes over infrastructure are not unique to Korean American churches in the United States: they are also a problem for churches in South Korea, which share the same growth-oriented prosperity theology. Recently, one megachurch located in Gangnam, Seoul, occupied land below a nearby public street as part of construction work to extend its underground chapel. In a recent judgment, the Supreme Court annulled the church’s permission to use the underground space and ordered the church to restore the land to its original state. Though the church claimed the space to be a “spiritual public asset,” the court’s view was that a church was not a public facility open to the general public (Bak Jemin 2019). There is, however, a difference in the meaning of infrastructural politics: In the South Korean case, one huge element of infrastructure came into the spotlight in the context of the strong influence of churches in South Korean society and efforts to rein it in. But in Korean American churches such as Y, this was identified as a cause of failure on the part of the church to exert social influence in the Korean American community, which still existed in a fraught relationship with other non-white racial groups, even 20 years after the LA riots. This situation calls for a move beyond the expansion of exclusive infrastructure within Korean American churches, allowing them to become infrastructure for the wider Korean American community. This creates a need for Korean American churches to establish an alternative theological model to that of churches in South Korea.

Ever since the first Korean immigrants arrived in Hawaii in the early twentieth century, Korean American churches have functioned not only as religious institutions but as ethnic community hubs. Korean American megachurches provided relief during the LA riots in 1992, and, since the 2000s, Church Y has shown exemplary efforts to reform itself into a church working for the local community. Such actions show the potential

¹⁰ For a critique of how Christian model minority discourse based on white-centered evangelism makes Asian Americans internalize racial hierarchy in the United States by according them superior moral status over other races, see Yu (2016).

for Korean American churches to be more than just exclusive infrastructure existing for the sake of their own congregants. New attempts, albeit limited, by second-generation Korean Americans to distance themselves from materialistic success based on the ideal of the American dream of their parents and to expand their congregations beyond ethnic boundaries have been reported (Kim 2010). But the resources of Korean American communities remain concentrated primarily in the hands of churches led by first-generation immigrants and, within churches themselves, the generational transfer from earlier immigrants to 1.5-generation Korean Americans and new, younger immigrants from South Korea is a gradual one. In this context, further research is needed to explore the future infrastructural role of Korean American churches in Korean American society.

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Seo Dae-Seung is a research fellow in the Institute of Cross-Cultural Studies at Seoul National University. He received his Ph.D. in anthropology from Seoul National University in 2019. His research interests focus on Korean Americans and Christianity, the social differentiation of Koryoin return migrants, and the jury system and legal culture in South Korea. His recent publications include “종족 집거지에서 ‘열린’ 공동체로?: 한 LA 재미한인교회의 사례를 중심으로” [From ethnic enclave to “open” community? A focus on the Los Angeles Korean American church] (『다문화사회연구』 [Journal of multicultural society], 2019), “고려인 이민자의 사회경제적 분화에 따른 한국사회 편입 방식의 차이에 관한 연구” [A research on the difference of the incorporation modes to Korean society according to the internal differentiation of ‘Koryoin’ immigrants] (『다문화사회연구』 [Journal of multicultural society], 2022), “국민참여재판 배심평의에서의 언어사용: 한 그림자 배심 사례를 중심으로” [The language use in a jury deliberation: Focus on a shadow jury case in Korean jury trial] (『법과사회』 [Korean journal of law and society], 2019). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0791-0045>