

# RETHINKING ETHNICITY IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH KOREAN IMMIGRANT VOLUNTEERING IN THE UNITED STATES

CHIT SUM EUNICE NGAI  
*B.A. Candidate in Anthropology*  
*Cornell University, Class of 2024*

## 1. Introduction

Immigrant, defined as a person who is living in a country other than that of birth,<sup>1</sup> embodies crossing temporal, cultural, and national borders, often challenging even the notion of such boundaries. Thus, the ways that immigrants reconcile aspects of themselves from their country of birth with integration into their host country are complex and vary greatly across identities. In this essay, I aim to demonstrate how volunteering by Korean immigrants in the United States can reveal ways immigrants balance maintenance of their own ethnic identity while being integrated into society. While sociological studies have been conducted on what factors may influence trends in Korean immigrant volunteerism, they examine associations between volunteering and individual sociodemographic factors, such as age, gender, education level, cultural adjustment, and income. Yet they do not go in depth regarding the beliefs, practices, and social dynamics that undergird maintenance of ethnicity and belonging, which may lead individuals to experience social integration through different forms of volunteering. My paper aims to address this gap through a cross-disciplinary approach, complementing the sociological findings about Korean immigrant volunteering with anthropological analysis through frameworks about ethnicity.

First, I will provide a brief historical overview on Asian immigration to the US to contextualize Korean immigrants and explain the role of volunteering in immigrant social integration into US society. Then, I will describe how shifts in anthropological thinking about ethnicity, anticipated by Edmund Leach's pivotal ethnography *Political Systems of Highland Burma* and further built upon by Frederik Barth in his influential *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, can provide new insights on social integration through immigrant volunteering. I then analyze findings from three studies on volunteering by Korean immigrants through these frameworks to propose possible explanations for them. It is important to note that while the experience of the Korean immigrants in these studies cannot represent that of Koreans, Asians, or all immigrants as a whole, understanding the specificities behind their volunteering patterns can shed light on how ethnicity and social integration may be experienced by immigrant groups according to their own contexts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jessica Bolter, "Explainer: Who is an Immigrant?" *Migration Policy Institute*, last modified February 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/content/explainer-who-immigrant>.

## 2. Literature Review

### **2.1. Contextualizing Korean Immigration within Asian Immigration to the US**

According to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey from January 2022, the total immigrant population in the US hit 46.6 million, making up 14.2% of the total population—the highest number in US history.<sup>2</sup> And since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which ended exclusionary immigration laws limiting arrivals from Asia, migration from Asia to the US has grown considerably, accounting for 31 percent of all immigrants in 2021.<sup>3</sup> This especially affected the growth of the Korean immigrant population, which is the fifth largest foreign-born group from Asia.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of immigrants from the Korean peninsula are from South Korea, and they make up slightly more than 2 percent of the 44.9 million immigrants in 2019.<sup>5</sup>

Though immigration of Koreans to the US began in the mid-twentieth century after the Korean War, after 1965, the Korean immigrant population increased from 11,000 in 1960 to 290,000 in 1980, with the population nearly doubling to 568,000 as of 2000 and again to 1.1 million immigrants in 2010.<sup>6</sup> This population has decreased slightly over the past several years, but the US remains home to the largest South Korean diaspora population in the world.<sup>7</sup>

While most Asian immigrants before 1965 were low-skilled laborers, immigrants from Asia today have higher average household income than both other immigrants and natives.<sup>8</sup> More than half of Asians ages twenty-five and older (54%) have a bachelor's degree or more education, compared with 33% of the US population in the same age range, though these vary across ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> Korean immigrants tend to be highly educated and earn high incomes compared to overall immigrant and US-born populations.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this shift in Asian immigrants' economic status since the 1960s, especially as US immigration policy shifted to an economic goal of bringing in skilled labor needed by the increasingly globalized US economy, negative and inaccurate

---

<sup>2</sup> Steven A. Camarota et al, "Foreign-Born Population Hits Record 46.6 Million in January 2022," *Center for Immigration Studies*, last modified February 23, 2022, <https://cis.org/Camarota/ForeignBorn-Population-Hits-Record-466-Million-January-2022>.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Hanna et al. "Immigrants from Asia in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*, last modified March 10, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrants-asia-united-states-2020>.

<sup>4</sup> Cecilia Esterline et al. "Korean Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*, last modified April 14, 2022, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/korean-immigrants-united-states>.

<sup>5</sup> Esterline et al., "Korean Immigrants."

<sup>6</sup> Esterline et al., "Korean Immigrants."

<sup>7</sup> Esterline et al., "Korean Immigrants."

<sup>8</sup> Esterline et al., "Korean Immigrants."

<sup>9</sup> Abby Budiman et al. "Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population," *Pew Research Center*, last modified April 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>.

<sup>10</sup> Esterline et al., "Korean Immigrants."

perceptions of immigrants as “takers” of jobs and social welfare persist.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, views of immigrants as a cultural threat to national identity as the society experiences rapid demographic change<sup>12</sup> has led to discriminatory attitudes and actions toward immigrants.

According to a survey conducted by AAPI Data and Momentive in March 2022, 12.5% of Asian American respondents experienced a hate crime or incident in 2020, 15% in 2021, and not abating at 8% for 2022 just within its first three months.<sup>13</sup> And according to their survey from March 2021, nearly one third (31%) of 2,017 AAPI respondents worried about being the victim of hate crimes or incidents,<sup>14</sup> and 71% of 988 AAPI respondents listed race or ethnicity as one of the main reasons they thought they were treated unfairly. Given that around six-in-ten Asian Americans are immigrants,<sup>15</sup> and the persistence of these harmful incidents, it is important to understand the processes enabling or limiting Asian immigrants’ social integration in the United States. And because studies on volunteerism have revealed it to be an important avenue to immigrants’ social integration,<sup>16</sup> investigating Asian immigrant volunteerism’s role in social integration is highly relevant today.

Since Asian immigrant volunteerism varies across ethnic groups, host states, and timeframes among other factors, this paper contributes toward the literature by focusing on the topic of ethnic maintenance and social integration in three studies conducted between 2009 and 2022 on older Korean immigrants, a majority of whom reside in California. Because older Korean immigrants tend to have experienced more of both the home country and the host country, studying their experiences would provide a helpful perspective on how they balance social integration with ethnic maintenance. Moreover, as of 2019, not only do 30% of Korean immigrants in the US reside in California, making it the state with the most Korean immigrants,<sup>17</sup> but it is also a multicultural state where social integration and race relations are an important issue. This makes it an apt context from which to analyze Korean immigrant ethnic maintenance and social integration in the US.

## *2.2. Volunteerism as an avenue for immigrant social integration*

---

<sup>11</sup> Min Zhou et al., “The model minority stereotype and the national identity question: the challenges facing Asian immigrants and their children,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 233, doi: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1667511.

<sup>12</sup> Zhou et al., “The model minority stereotype,” 234.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Lee et al., “A Year After Atlanta,” AAPI Data, last modified March 16, 2022, <http://aapidata.com/blog/year-after-atlanta/>.

<sup>14</sup> Erin Pinkus, “AAPI Data | SurveyMonkey poll: 2021 American experiences with discrimination,” SurveyMonkey, accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/aapi-data-2021-discrimination/>.

<sup>15</sup> Budiman et al., “Key facts about Asian Americans.”

<sup>16</sup> Natalia Khvorostianov et al. “By Helping Others, We Helped Ourselves: Volunteering and Social Integration of Ex-Soviet Immigrants in Israel,” *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* (2016), doi: 10.1007/s11266-016-9745-9.

<sup>17</sup> Esterline et al., “Korean Immigrants.”

For immigrants, volunteering has become an especially important avenue for social integration. Immigrant integration has many measures, including linguistic skills, economic resources, and ability to navigate the host society.<sup>18</sup> Social integration specifically addresses the quality of interactions and social ties between immigrants and nonimmigrants in the host country.<sup>19</sup> As immigrants have lost some existing social ties upon their arrival, volunteering offers opportunities to rebuild social capital in the host society through developing experience and cultivating resources.<sup>20</sup> Studies on volunteering among ethnic minorities have noted that many ethnic communities have a tradition of mutual help between close families and friends, counted as informal volunteering outside formal volunteer organizations.<sup>21</sup>

Studies list two types of social capital that immigrants can accumulate through volunteering. First, bonding social capital refers to networks and associations within people of the same background.<sup>22</sup> Bonding social capital can be built through formal volunteering in ethnic nonprofits, as well as through informal volunteer settings within an ethnic group, such as babysitting for a neighbor.<sup>23</sup> Second, bridging social capital brings people of different backgrounds together.<sup>24</sup> Bridging social capital can be built through formal volunteering in mainstream organizations with people of different ethnicities.<sup>25</sup>

While bonding versus bridging social capital can be a helpful framework to differentiate the types of immigrant volunteering, it emphasizes the rigidity of ethnic categories as preceding the types of social capital immigrants can build. Yet developments in anthropology through thinkers such as Edmund Leach and Frederik Barth provided a framework for viewing ethnicity as a continually transforming process of social organization. Applying these frameworks in addition to social capital would provide a more holistic understanding on how immigrants and their host societies interact with ethnicity as a constructive process, to potentially drive volunteering patterns of immigrants.

### *2.3. Frameworks of ethnicity in anthropology*

---

<sup>18</sup> A. Stefanie Ruiz et al. "Influences of (Non)Engagement in Volunteering: First-Generation Immigrant Perceptions of Integration into US Society," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* (2022), doi: 10.1007/s11266-022-00469-4.

<sup>19</sup> Niklas Harder et al. "Multidimensional measure of immigrant integration," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(45) (2018): 11483–11488, doi: 10.1073/pnas.1808793115.

<sup>20</sup> Femida Handy et al. "Immigrant volunteering: a stepping stone to integration?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38(6) (2008): 956-98, doi: 10.1177/0899764008324455.

<sup>21</sup> Young-joo Lee et al. "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering by Korean Immigrants in the United States," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 22, no. 4 (2011): 811-830, doi: 10.1007/s11266-010-9176-y.

<sup>22</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 815.

<sup>23</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 815.

<sup>24</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 815.

<sup>25</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 815-816.

In the mid-20th century, there were a few key developments in anthropology that, despite newer debates, still provide helpful foundational understandings about ethnicity today. Previous popular and academic understandings saw ethnicity as a natural, universal group identity.<sup>26</sup> According to Clifford Geertz, attachment to one's culture persists despite nation-building projects because it constitutes a "natural" and "primordial" state of human experience.<sup>27</sup> Under these views, cultural differences were rigid and bounded, defined by territorial boundaries and objective cultural traits.<sup>28</sup> This implied that social relations in a multiethnic society can be explained as a result of inherent differences between groups.

Edmund Leach, through his ethnography *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, reoriented the study of ethnicity by positing that groups do not necessarily share distinctive cultural traits, but that they may be produced through subjective processes.<sup>29</sup> People can change their identity categories when it suits individual or group interests.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the boundary, instead of the culture group, constitutes the significant unit of analysis.<sup>31</sup> Frederik Barth later theorized this boundary to be the defining characteristic of ethnicity.<sup>32</sup> These frameworks mean that boundaries between ethnicities are not given, but are constructed through practices and depend on situational factors. According to Leach, even the maintenance of cultural difference can be seen as an action that undergirds social relations.<sup>33</sup> As will be seen, these anthropological frameworks will contribute significant insights to findings of the sociological studies outlined below.

### **3. Analysis of Study 1: Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering by Korean Immigrants**

Using data from the *Charitable Giving and Volunteering among Korean Americans Survey* in 2009, Dr. Young-joo Lee and Dr. Seong-Gin Moon conducted a study which focused on whether Korean immigrants chose to volunteer for ethnic or mainstream non-profits.<sup>34</sup> The sample consisted of 1,125 Korean immigrants, whose mean age was 44.6 (SD 10.2).<sup>35</sup> A majority (80.44%) of the respondents arrived in the United States at the age of 20 or older and had Protestant faith (70%).<sup>36</sup> Because the study specifically

---

<sup>26</sup> Viranjini Munasinghe, "Ethnicity in Anthropology," in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, accessed November 20, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1948V>.

<sup>27</sup> Richard E. Blanton, "Theories of ethnicity and the dynamics of ethnic change in multiethnic societies," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)*, no. 30 (2015), vol. 112: 9176–9181, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1421406112>.

<sup>28</sup> Blanton, "Theories of ethnicity."

<sup>29</sup> Munasinghe, "Ethnicity in Anthropology."

<sup>30</sup> Munasinghe, "Ethnicity in Anthropology."

<sup>31</sup> Munasinghe, "Ethnicity in Anthropology."

<sup>32</sup> Munasinghe, "Ethnicity in Anthropology."

<sup>33</sup> Munasinghe, "Ethnicity in Anthropology."

<sup>34</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 819.

<sup>35</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 819.

<sup>36</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 819.

focused on two categories of volunteering—ethnic and mainstream—it is a suitable study to understand how frameworks of ethnicity may impact volunteering patterns.

The study found that 86% of Korean immigrants volunteered for ethnic nonprofits, while 18% volunteered for mainstream nonprofits.<sup>37</sup> Those who volunteered for ethnic nonprofits were less likely to volunteer for mainstream organizations, and vice versa, meaning that immigrants often chose one or the other.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, this ethnic volunteering rate (86%) was much higher than the average volunteering rate by the general population (26%) in 2009.<sup>39</sup>

This predominance of ethnic volunteering among Korean immigrants can be understood first from two factors which highlight immigrants' agency. First, given that the main difference between mainstream and ethnic nonprofits forms is whether they are associated with Korean ethnicity, volunteering in Korean nonprofits can be one way through which one experiences and engages with their ethnic identity. As Barth argues, ethnic identity is based upon both self-ascription and ascription by others.<sup>40</sup> Volunteering in Korean nonprofits can be one form of self-ascription. Having their assistance received in the community can be a form of ascription by others, affirming that volunteers are part of that community. Ascriptions maintain ethnic boundaries, which are linked with situations of social contact between persons of different cultures.<sup>41</sup> This could explain why ethnic volunteering would be significant, and thus more preferable, to immigrants in a multicultural context.

Second, the ethnic volunteering rate (86%) being much higher than the average volunteering rate by the general population in 2009 (26%)<sup>42</sup> suggests that volunteering in an ethnic nonprofit may have a different cultural meaning to Korean immigrants. They may not recognize ethnic volunteering as a formal volunteering activity,<sup>43</sup> but instead find it a social norm, obligation, or standard behavior to help others in their own community. This could be explained by Barth's statement that "the identification of another person as a fellow member of an ethnic group [...] means that there is between them a potential for diversification and expansion of their social relationship to cover eventually all different sectors and domains of activity."<sup>44</sup> Within the ethnic group, ethnic volunteering melts into the background of their standard interactions, transcending categories of activity as a result of their shared ethnic identity.

Conversely, "dichotomization of others as strangers, as members of another ethnic group, implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgment of value and performance, and a restriction of

---

<sup>37</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 823.

<sup>38</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 824.

<sup>39</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 822.

<sup>40</sup> Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1969), 10.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 822.

<sup>43</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 822.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups* 15.

interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, volunteering in mainstream or interethnic nonprofits rather than ethnic nonprofits might constitute formal volunteering, as interactions outside the ethnic group take on more clearly defined and separated categories of interaction. Relationships here may be defined based on their function, as they do not have a context of an encompassing ethnic identity.

Yet as a minority group in the United States, in addition to these agentic factors on the part of Korean immigrants are factors by the host society that influence the predominance of Korean volunteering in ethnic nonprofits. The study found that perceived language barriers also make individuals less likely to do mainstream volunteering, while not affecting the likelihood of volunteering for an ethnic organization.<sup>46</sup> This may be explained through Barth’s framework: “in the total social system, all sectors of activity are organized by statuses open to members of the majority group.”<sup>47</sup> Mainstream nonprofits in the US are organized around English as the primary language, used by members of the majority group. The majoritarian group may freely choose whether to volunteer for mainstream or ethnic nonprofits. In contrast, “the status system of the minority has only relevance to relations within the minority and only to some sectors of activity.”<sup>48</sup> Applied to this case, this means that Korean immigrants, even if they wanted to volunteer for mainstream nonprofits, do not have this status open to them as volunteering is organized by the primary language of the majority group. Thus, the host society also has a part in maintaining this ethnic boundary. Immigrants who face a language or access barrier may have participated in ethnic organizations in place of the mainstream, because the host society inhibits their ability to socially integrate through the latter.

Yet, the study found that perceived challenges from cultural differences have no significant impact on whether Korean immigrants chose to volunteer for ethnic or mainstream volunteering.<sup>49</sup> The idea that a language barrier is negatively associated with participation in mainstream organizations, but challenges from perceived cultural barriers do not influence participation in mainstream or ethnic organizations, points to another agentic process behind the maintenance of Korean ethnic identity in immigrants. Because a majority of respondents reside in California, a culturally diverse area, and immigrant groups experience less acculturative stress in multicultural societies than in monocultural ones,<sup>50</sup> immigrants may feel more at ease in maintaining community within their ethnic group. Moreover, the neutral effect of perceived cultural challenges points to the idea that on the cultural level, excluding the systemic factor of language barriers, immigrants may choose to be involved in ethnic

---

<sup>45</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Lee et al., “Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering,” 826.

<sup>47</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Lee et al., “Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering,” 823.

<sup>50</sup> Lee et al., “Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering,” 823.

organizations to express their identity and pride in their own culture, rather than being forced to do so because the mainstream is not culturally available to them. This suggests that boundary maintenance through participating in ethnic nonprofits can also be a positive choice for immigrants' social wellbeing, serving a different purpose than volunteering in mainstream nonprofits.

The study found that volunteers in mainstream nonprofits were more likely to have a US-based education, to be married, to earn more income, and to own a home.<sup>51</sup> That most Korean immigrants volunteer for ethnic nonprofits, and that mainstream volunteers tend to have more resources, might be analyzed through immigrants' perceptions of group interests. Korean volunteers for ethnic nonprofits may see it as benefiting the whole group, including themselves. Conversely, volunteering in the mainstream community might be seen as a unilateral process of giving to someone else, because they may perceive a distance between their group's interests and the mainstream's interests. This is consistent with the resource theory framework, which posits that volunteering requires individuals to have resources that enhance volunteering opportunities.<sup>52</sup>

Korean volunteers in mainstream nonprofits, due to their further social integration through education or home owning, may see themselves as part of the mainstream group. This might induce them to volunteer for mainstream nonprofits, perceiving them as having shared interests which surpass ethnic boundaries. This potential difference in perception of mainstream and group interests could point to a tension underlying social relations between parts of the Korean immigrant community and the mainstream community. It insinuates that in order to increase opportunities for social integration through mainstream volunteering and connect communities through shared values that surpass ethnic boundaries, organizations may need to be more inclusive and accommodating on immigrants' terms.

#### **4. Analysis of Study 2: Volunteering among First-Generation Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese Immigrants**

Dr. Seungah Lee, Dr. Kimberly J. Johnson, and Dr. Jiyoung Lyu conducted a cross-sectional investigation of volunteer activity among adults aged fifty and older in four Asian ethnic subgroups, Chinese ( $n = 547$ ), Filipino ( $n = 229$ ), Korean ( $n = 490$ ), and Vietnamese ( $n = 546$ ), using data from the 2011-2012 California Health Interview Survey.<sup>53</sup> The study investigated whether factors including health, acculturation status, and sociodemographic factors had associations with volunteering. Given that this was

---

<sup>51</sup> Lee et al., "Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering," 822.

<sup>52</sup> John Wilson et al., "Who Cares? Toward an Integrated Theory of Volunteer Work," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 5 (1997): 694–713, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657355>.

<sup>53</sup> Seungah H. Lee et. al, "Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups Residing in California," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (2018): 33:369-385, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-018-9358-4>.

a comparative study between a few Asian ethnic groups, it provides a suitable context to study factors that differentiate the volunteering of Korean immigrants.

The researchers note that volunteer involvement for racial and ethnic minorities may not align with traditional civic organizations.<sup>54</sup> Involvements may include participating in faith-based organizations<sup>55</sup> and grassroots efforts within the community.<sup>56</sup> Midlife and older volunteers have contributed through educating the community on religious rituals, language, and other traditions, including food, music, dance, sport, or art.<sup>57</sup> This would be consistent with the analysis from the first study, that volunteering within ethnic communities serves a purpose of allowing immigrants to flourish through expressing their ethnic identity within the host country.

Regarding the study's findings, contrary to the researchers' expectations, none of the acculturation measures (English-language proficiency, recentness of immigration, and citizenship status) significantly affected whether Korean, Filipino, or Vietnamese immigrants participated in volunteering activity.<sup>58</sup> This finding is consistent with the previous study in which perceived cultural barriers had no effect on whether Korean immigrants chose to participate in ethnic or mainstream nonprofits. English-language consistency may not have had an effect on volunteering if Koreans chose to volunteer in contexts using Korean rather than English. Recentness of immigration and citizenship status may not have an effect if Koreans choose to volunteer within their ethnic group.

Moreover, the study found that education was not a significant factor to volunteer participation within the Korean ethnic group, though it had a salient role in volunteering among Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese respondents.<sup>59</sup> One possibility the researchers attributed this to was that according to traditional cultural beliefs within midlife and older Koreans, social status may be based more on age and family ties, rather than education or human capital.<sup>60</sup> Another possibility was the differing personal motivations of immigration: those who settle to be closer to family or intergenerational contact may have different volunteering practices than those who settle for career opportunities.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Lee et. al, "Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups," 371.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen M. Cherry, "Exploring the role of Catholicism in Filipino American community volunteerism and participation," *Sociological Spectrum* (2013), 33(1): 36–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2013.732859>.

<sup>56</sup> Iveris L. Martinez et. al, "Invisible civic engagement among older adults: Valuing the contributions of informal volunteering," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (2011), 26(1): 23–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-011-9137-y>.

<sup>57</sup> Jeni Warburton et al., "Passing on our culture: How older Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds contribute to civil society," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (2007), 22(1): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-006-9012-4>.

<sup>58</sup> Lee et. al, "Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups," 377.

<sup>59</sup> Lee et. al, "Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups," 380.

<sup>60</sup> Lee et. al, "Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups," 380.

<sup>61</sup> Lee et. al, "Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups," 380.

Another finding was that for Koreans and Vietnamese, unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and heavy drinking were positively associated with volunteering activities.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, good self-rated health among Chinese immigrants had a significant associative relationship with volunteering. According to previous studies, older Korean smokers who lived in rural areas had good social networks, measured in part by the number and frequency of contact with family and friends, compared to former smokers and nonsmokers.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, those with higher levels of positive social interactions were more likely to be current smokers compared to those with fewer positive social interactions.<sup>64</sup>

The unique factors to Korean immigrant volunteerism as found in this study—that education was not associated with volunteering, but that smoking was associated with volunteering—could suggest a more informal and culturally significant nature of their volunteering activities as compared to other ethnic groups. The researchers suggested that the activity of smoking can promote socialization, which leads to volunteer participation.<sup>65</sup> This supports the analysis of the Lee and Moon’s study, where the identification of members within the same ethnic group can give them a “potential for diversification of their social relationship to cover eventually all sectors and domains of activity.”<sup>66</sup> It may also explain why volunteering appears to span Korean immigrant social life across domains and can be affected by activities like smoking. Moreover, as in the analysis of the first study, volunteering in ethnic nonprofits might be seen by Korean immigrants as benefiting the whole group, including themselves. Thus, education, a commonly considered factor in the theory that more resources is associated with higher volunteerism rates,<sup>67</sup> would not be a significant factor in this context, as volunteerism among Korean immigrants may not be seen as a giving up of resources to others—but sharing them with one’s own community.

### **5. Analysis of Study 3: Comparative Study on Volunteering among Older Korean Immigrants in the United States and Older Koreans in South Korea**

A comparative study was conducted in 2022 by Dr. Miya Chana to determine the most important factors that influence the prevalence of volunteering among older Koreans in the United States and in Korea. The sample included 480 older Koreans

---

<sup>62</sup> Lee et. al, “Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups,” 381.

<sup>63</sup> E Hwa Yun et. al, “The role of social support and social networks in smoking behavior among middle and older aged people in rural areas of South Korea: A cross-sectional study,” *BMC Public Health* (2010), 10(1), 78–85.

<sup>64</sup> Yun et. al, “The role of social support and social networks in smoking behavior.”

<sup>65</sup> Yun et. al, “The role of social support and social networks in smoking behavior.”

<sup>66</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Wilson et al., “Who Cares?”

aged sixty or over from Los Angeles County and Seoul or Daegu in Korea.<sup>68</sup> It focused on the correlation between cultural factors, social resources, and volunteering. Because this study compares volunteering between Korean immigrants in the United States and Koreans in South Korea, analyzing its findings can offer an illuminating perspective on how the unique factors behind being an immigrant can influence social integration and ethnic maintenance underlying volunteering patterns.

The study found that the prevalence of volunteering among older Koreans in both countries was significantly different: 23.3% of older Korean immigrants in the US did volunteer work, compared to 14.2% of older Koreans in Korea.<sup>69</sup> This finding was consistent with prior evidence that older adults in Korea were less likely to participate in volunteering than older Korean immigrants in the US.<sup>70</sup> This would align with the research that underscores volunteerism as one viable method of social integration for immigrants. Immigrants face challenges including language constraints, cultural barriers, job-related difficulties, social isolation, and discrimination, which limit the capacity for social integration in the host society.<sup>71</sup> Volunteering for ethnic nonprofits can enable immigrants to build social networks, benefit from resources, and facilitate their job search through coethnics,<sup>72</sup> and volunteering for mainstream nonprofits has helped immigrants understand the host culture, enhance social participation, and indicate integration into the new community.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, as outlined in the analysis of the first study, if volunteering can be seen as a form of ethnic maintenance, it would be more significant for immigrants as opposed to their counterparts in the home country. This can be explained through the framework that the ethnic boundary is a social boundary formed through interaction with others.<sup>74</sup> Since ethnicity is formed through ascription by both self and others, the host society also plays a role in maintaining this ethnic boundary, whether through ascribing itself as part of a different ethnic group, or through systemic factors of exclusion, such as language barrier, whose negative association with mainstream volunteering was seen in the first study.

The study also found that older Koreans in both countries were more likely to participate in informal volunteering rather than formal volunteering.<sup>75</sup> However, older Korean immigrants in the US were twice as likely to report informal volunteering than older Koreans in Korea (25.8% and 13.8%, respectively). Time spent volunteering was

---

<sup>68</sup> Miya Chang, “Comparative Study on Volunteering among Older Korean Immigrants in the United States and Older Koreans in South Korea,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2022), 19, 7297: 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127297>.

<sup>69</sup> Chang, “Comparative Study on Volunteering,” 11.

<sup>70</sup> Chang, “Comparative Study on Volunteering,” 11.

<sup>71</sup> Khvorostianov et al.

<sup>72</sup> Lee et al., 815.

<sup>73</sup> Khvorostianov et al.

<sup>74</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Chang, “Comparative Study on Volunteering,” 11.

measured as the number of hours per month. Older Korean immigrants in the US reported volunteering more than twice as many hours as older Koreans in Korea.<sup>76</sup>

Regarding implications of this finding, the researcher notes that for many Koreans, cultural values such as filial piety, elder care, preservation of face, and social sanctions for enforcing moral standards influence life decisions.<sup>77</sup> These would influence how immigrants saw volunteering behaviors. Within these cultural values, informal volunteering might be seen as a cultural practice of the ethnic identity, tied to beliefs of helping oneself through the whole group, while formal volunteering might not have the same cultural obligations. This could explain why both groups tended to participate in informal volunteering.

That older Korean immigrants in the United States were twice as likely to report informal volunteering than older Koreans in Korea could once again point to the higher level of ethnic boundary maintenance of immigrants as opposed to their counterparts in the home country. Moreover, given that one form of volunteerism among immigrants can consist of educating the community about religious rituals, language, or other cultural traditions, there may be a higher need and therefore more of such contribution in the immigrant community, because the younger generations would have a different cultural experience to the older generation from growing up in the host rather than home country.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, an anthropological analysis, premised on ethnicity as a form of active social organization, further illuminated how agentive factors attributed to both Korean immigrants and the host society may shape the ways in which Korean immigrants experience social integration and ethnic maintenance through volunteering.

In the first study on mainstream and ethnic volunteering by Korean immigrants, that a majority of Koreans chose to volunteer for ethnic nonprofits over mainstream nonprofits could be seen as a result of both Korean and the host society's practices. On one hand, Korean immigrants may choose to socially integrate through engagement with their ethnic identity, community, and culture through volunteering in ethnic nonprofits. This implies that for them, social integration does not only consist of interethnic unity; rather, their groups' interests continue to be separated from that of the dominant group. At the same time, systemic factors shaped by the host society contribute to this. For example, language being tailored to the majority is one restriction on access to participation in mainstream society, which may limit Korean immigrants' opportunities for participation in mainstream nonprofits. Under the framework of ethnicity as self-ascription and ascription by others, both Korean

---

<sup>76</sup> Chang, "Comparative Study on Volunteering," 11.

<sup>77</sup> Chang, "Comparative Study on Volunteering," 3.

immigrants and the host society play a role in maintaining ethnic boundaries. This suggests that in order to increase immigrant social integration through volunteerism in mainstream society, the host society must provide inclusive and accessible methods for immigrants to do so.

In the second study on volunteering among First-Generation Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants, that none of the acculturation measures significantly affected whether Korean immigrants participated in volunteering was consistent with the first study's findings of a preference to socially integrate through interacting within one's ethnic group. That smoking was associated with volunteering pointed to a more informal and culturally significant nature of volunteering activities to Korean immigrants' social lives. That education was not associated with volunteering went against the theory that more education, meaning a higher level of resources, would be associated with higher volunteerism rates. This may be because Korean immigrants view ethnic volunteering as sharing resources within the group and furthering group interests, rather than a unilateral giving towards others.

In the third study comparing volunteering among older Korean immigrants in the US and older Koreans in South Korea, that there was a significantly higher prevalence of volunteering among older Korean immigrants in the US aligned with the research highlighting volunteering as an important avenue for immigrants' social integration. Moreover, ethnic maintenance in the host society, as well as a greater need for volunteerism in the form of educating younger generations about religion, language, or other cultural traditions may be reasons for the greater prevalence of volunteering for Korean immigrants compared to their counterparts in Korea.

As these case studies on volunteerism illuminate, the ways Korean immigrants balance ethnic maintenance and social integration in the United States are shaped by both individual and community agency, such as cultural expression, as well as limitations imposed by the host society, such as language barrier. This points to the importance of creating inclusive opportunities for immigrant social integration on the part of the host society. To address this, further understanding of social integration through mainstream volunteerism needs to focus on immigrants' own varied perspectives and desires for balancing ethnic maintenance and social integration. This will determine how everyday interactions between immigrants and the host society continue to evolve.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barth, Fredrik. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1969.

Blanton, Richard E. "Theories of ethnicity and the dynamics of ethnic change in multiethnic societies." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 66, no. 1 (1969): 1-6.

*States of America (PNAS)*, no. 30 (2015), vol. 112: 9176–9181.  
<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1421406112>.

Bolter, Jessica. “Explainer: Who is an Immigrant?” *Migration Policy Institute*. Last modified February 2019.  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/content/explainer-who-immigrant>.

Budiman, Abby and Neil G. Ruiz. “Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population.” *Pew Research Center*. Last modified April 29, 2021.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>.

Camarota, Steven A. and Karen Ziegler. “Foreign-Born Population Hits Record 46.6 Million in January 2022.” *Center for Immigration Studies*. Last modified February 23, 2022. <https://cis.org/Camarota/ForeignBorn-Population-Hits-Record-466-Million-January-2022>.

Chang, Miya. “Comparative Study on Volunteering among Older Korean Immigrants in the United States and Older Koreans in South Korea.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2022), 19, 7297: 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127297>.

Cherry, Stephen M. “Exploring the role of Catholicism in Filipino American community volunteerism and participation.” *Sociological Spectrum* (2013), 33(1): 36–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2013.732859>.

Esterline, Cecilia and Jeanne Batalova. “Korean Immigrants in the United States.” *Migration Policy Institute*. Last modified April 14, 2022.  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/korean-immigrants-united-states>.

Handy, Femida and Itay Greenspan. “Immigrant volunteering: a stepping stone to integration?” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38(6) (2008): 956-98. doi: 10.1177/0899764008324455.

Hanna, Mary and Jeanne Batalova. “Immigrants from Asia in the United States.” *Migration Policy Institute*. Last modified March 10, 2021.  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrants-asia-united-states-2020>.

Harder, Niklas, Lucila Figueroa, Rachel M. Gillum, Dominik Hangartner, David D. Laitin and Jens Hainmueller. “Multidimensional measure of immigrant

integration.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(45) (2018): 11483–11488. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1808793115

Khvorostianov, Natalia and Larissa Remennick. “By Helping Others, We Helped Ourselves: Volunteering and Social Integration of Ex-Soviet Immigrants in Israel.” *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* (2016). doi: 10.1007/s11266-016-9745-9.

Lee, Jennifer and Karthick Ramakrishnan. “A Year After Atlanta.” AAPI Data. Last modified March 16, 2022. <http://aapidata.com/blog/year-after-atlanta/>.

Lee, Seungah, Kimberly J. Johnson and Jiyoun Lyu. “Volunteering among First-Generation Asian Ethnic Groups Residing in California.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (2018): 33:369-385. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-018-9358-4>.

Lee, Young-joo and Seong-Gin Moon. “Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering by Korean Immigrants in the United States.” *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 22, no. 4 (2011): 811-830. doi: 10.1007/s11266-010-9176-y.

Martinez, Iveris L., Donneth Crooks, Kristen S. Kim and Elizabeth Tanner. “Invisible civic engagement among older adults: Valuing the contributions of informal volunteering.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (2011), 26(1): 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-011-9137-y>.

Pinkus, Erin. “AAPI Data | SurveyMonkey poll: 2021 American experiences with discrimination.” SurveyMonkey. Accessed November 20, 2022. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/aapi-data-2021-discrimination/>.

Ruiz, A. Stefanie and Sharon M. Ravitch. “Influences of (Non)Engagement in Volunteering: First-Generation Immigrant Perceptions of Integration into US Society.” *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. doi: 10.1007/s11266-022-00469-4.

Warburton, Jeni and Deirdre McLaughlin. “Passing on our culture: How older Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds contribute to civil society.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (2007), 22(1): 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-006-9012-4>.

Wilson, John and Marc Musick. "Who Cares? Toward an Integrated Theory of Volunteer Work." *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 5 (1997): 694–713. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657355>.

Yun, E Hwa, Yoon Hwa Kang, Min Kyung Lim, Jin-Kyoung Oh and Jung Min Son. "The role of social support and social networks in smoking behavior among middle and older aged people in rural areas of South Korea: A cross-sectional study." *BMC Public Health* (2010), 10(1), 78–85. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-10-78>.

Zhou, Min and Carl L. Bankston III. "The model minority stereotype and the national identity question: the challenges facing Asian immigrants and their children." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 233-253. doi: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1667511.