Throughout U.S. history, religion has played a significant role in immigrants’ experience and identity. Many of them experience alienation in the host society because they are not expected to be actively involved in the mainstream society. Thus, their social opportunities diminish. Interestingly, religion provides a sense of identity for immigrants other than spiritual support. This sense of identity acquired by religion signifies acceptance by society and others in the new land.

Korean Americans are known as devout Christians. A popular saying in Korean reads:

When the Chinese go abroad, they open a restaurant.
When the Japanese go abroad, they open a factory.
When the Koreans go abroad, they start a church.

An exceptionally high percentage of Korean Americans are Christians, while Christianity is only a minority’s religion in Korea. Because of the multifunction of the church, the Korean American Christian church has become the vital center for social interaction. The church institution defines the identity of its participants and provides a sense of empowerment for them. However, as a double minority, Christian Korean American women encounter a contradicting search for self-identity and empowerment in patriarchal churches. Yet, although Korean American churches are built upon a patriarchal hierarchy, Korean American women’s search for new self-identity and empowerment within the church has created gradual change. While their search for empowerment contributes to the development of a new feminist interpretation of Christianity, it also impacts the advancement of women in South Korea.

Part I: The Suppressed Past

In order to examine the gradual progress of Korean women’s search for
empowerment, one needs to understand the historical context of the status of Korean women. When Buddhism was the state religion, Korean women in ancient Korea had relatively equal status with men. Because Buddhism had “fewer tendencies towards suppression of females than many other religions,”ii Korean women enjoyed opportunities in social, economic, religious, and political activity and influence.iii For instance, three of the rulers were queens. However, the introduction of Confucianism under the Yi Dynasty led to a suppressing social ideology for Korean women. Confucianism “stressed a rigid hierarchical order of human relationship based on age, sex, and inherited social status.iv These strict social codes became the foundation of politics, economic, social structures, and gender norms at that time. Confucianism placed women in an inferior position. Men were superior, dominant, and strong; while women were expected to be subordinate, submissive, and lenient. Women were confined to the house, while men belonged to the outside world.v

Under Confucianism, women were expected to follow the expectation of the “ideal women.” The ideal women were supposed to be sacrificial, submissive, and devoted servants to their husbands and children.vi This self-less “warrior woman” figure was encouraged under the strict social codes. Korean women were not able to achieve an individual identity. For example, women “were identified only by their relationship to a father, a husband, or a son; they were called, “so and so’s daughter,” “so and so’s wife,” or “so and so’s mother.”vii They had to obey their fathers, husbands, and if widowed, their sons. This suppression of women’s individual self shows that women were viewed as a mere property of men.

These conditions continued until the introduction of Catholicism to Korea in the
late eighteenth century. Missionaries helped weaken the rigid class system and the barrier between sexes by preaching improvement of women’s status and promoting church activities for women. At the end of nineteenth century, Protestants also impacted the advancement of Korean women. The church services and Bible schools provided opportunities for Korean women to live beyond the confinement of home and learn organization skills. An important aspect of these Christian influences was that men and women were allowed to worship at the same place, although it was not a major intended purpose. They also preached for equality between husband and wife. Some of the missionaries themselves were women, thus they provided role models and inspiration for the Korean women. Another important contribution was that Christianity “brought Korean women into contact with a number of organizations in which Christian women would be expected to be active, including mission societies, temperance groups, and the YWCA.” Korean women were then able to have the opportunities to gain social, political, and organization skills through participation in worldwide organizations.

Part II: The Patriarchal Christian Life in the New Land

Statistics illustrate the importance of Christian churches to Korean American communities. The 1990 census indicates that Korean Americans settled around the four major cities: Los Angeles, New York City, Washington D.C. and Chicago (in diminishing population size). There were over 700 Korean American churches in the Los Angeles area alone by 1991. Over 70% of Korean Americans claimed to be Christians. However, Christians are not considered a vast majority in Korea because they only constitute about 21% of the population. These statistics show that there is a strong correlation between Korean Americans and their ethnic Christian churches. One
reason that accounts for this unusually high percentage of Christians among the Korean American community is that the immigrants mostly come from the urban middle-class in Korea, where Korean Christians are concentrated. Despite this, 40% of the immigrants converted to Christianity only after they arrived in America. xv

The multifunction of churches suggests its significance to the Korean American community. Ethnic Korean American churches are the focal point for social interaction. Other than spiritual and religious support, the Christian church serves various functions to the Korean American community. For example, the establishment of churches functions as the sociocultural center for community life and “a safe haven for its people.”xvi Because of the language barrier, they prefer going to Korean ethnic churches. The shared common language, cultural background, and identity as immigrants provide unspoken understanding for them. xvii Churches also serve as a refuge from racism and stress of acceptance; they do not need to be consciously aware of being “different” from the mainstream society, and try to seek acceptance from it. xviii Moreover, churches provide social and economic assistance for them; such as supporting job searching; apartment searching; driving; and everyday survival skills, like shopping, etc. This assistance is extremely helpful for immigrants.

Furthermore, churches provide Korean Americans a strong sense of belonging and identity. Being Christian Korean Americans strengthens their national identity and community acceptance.xix Immigrants often experience “a sense of loss of social identity through desocialization.”xx Due to language and cultural differences, they are generally not expected to, and cannot, participate actively in mainstream society. This sense of desocialization also causes them to search for a sense of belonging. Churches are able to
give them a place to gather together for social interaction. At the same time, church institutions also maintain Korean Americans’ native culture and ethnic pride.\textsuperscript{xxi} Churches are the social center for religious gatherings, as well as for traditional celebrations. Even more, some Korean immigrants believe that “to become a Christian in Korea meant to become Westernized or Americanized.”\textsuperscript{xxii} Because the major religion of American’s mainstream society is Christianity, becoming Christians make them feel that they can relate to the host society better.

One of the most significant functions of church to Korean Americans is that the church institution provides emotional support for the immigrants, especially women. They can share their immigrant experiences, complaints, and domestic hardship with their fellows. Churches also help Korean American women to accept life situations, such as “discontentment in marriage, loneliness, and guilt.”\textsuperscript{xxiii} Thus, by appearing as “a significant cultural institution, providing meaning, affiliation and support for many Korean American women,” the Christian church is a place for their adjustment to the host society. \textsuperscript{xxiv} For these reasons, over 60% of the Korean American church attendants are women, even though the gender composition of the total Korean immigrant population indicates that there are more Korean males than females.\textsuperscript{xxv} This shows that churches are highly important to Korean American women.

Despite the high percentage of women, the traditional Confucianism and interpretation of the Bible perpetuate structurally patriarchal hierarchy in Christian churches. Pastors, elders, and ordained deacons are “almost exclusively males.”\textsuperscript{xxvi} Women rarely get decision-making positions in a cabinet or church committee. Men with seniority are generally superior, and thus more easily to hold leadership positions. Thus
gender inequalities exist in these churches. Although some liberal second-generation churches try to refute these inequalities, “most leadership positions are still held by men.” This type of structure acts like an extension of Confucianism, although it might not be an intentional relation.

Under the discriminating structure of patriarchal churches, women’s roles pertain mostly to domestic chores. They are to prepare food, serve meals, and clean up “the tables of power, but not to sit at them.” These kitchen-related chores are considered less important than men’s work in church. Women’s limited roles in church illustrate their subordination to religion and their men. Additionally, male pastors and other male elders have strong influence on structuring the roles of women. They often intentionally or unintentionally attempt to “instill superiority over other members, similar to the system of Confucianism.”

Bo Seo, a young Korean woman and a member of a Korean American Christian church, speaks about her experience and view:

We have a youth group in our church. And every year we [the youth group members] have to elect a president. Although our group has more women than men, [added] we usually have 20 women and two or three men, almost every year the winners are males. The pastor always tells us implicitly that we have to elect a man. We had an elected women president a few years ago, but that was only because there weren’t any men in our group at all. [Smiled]. But even so, she was never given the “official” president position; she was just there. I don’t like this idea [inequality of women].

In spite of these gender and structural inequalities, Korean American women continue to participate in these churches because the ethnic Christian churches are so vital to the Korean American community. In fact, because of the importance of churches, Korean American women search for their new identity and empowerment within these patriarchal churches. They view the church institution as a representation of their society. For these women, to struggle for a new identity and a sense of empowerment is to fight
for their survival in their culture and community.

**Part III: The Contradicting Search for Self-Identity and Empowerment**

Although the structure of Korean American Christian churches is patriarchal hierarchy, the inequality actually stimulates the need for Korean American women to search for a new individual self. The search for a new construction of self and validation of identity is a way of empowerment to them. As a double minority, Korean American women are often lonely due to the conflict that arises between their individual self and the alienation from the outside world.

Within churches, they are excluded from the possibility of validating themselves through leadership; outside of churches, they are often alienated by the mainstream society due to various factors. Thus, many Korean American women experience the desperate need for self-validation through empowerment.

Taking Korean women’s historical context into consideration, a highly viable method of empowering themselves is the process or practice in which they appropriate their conditions to assert themselves. Their genuine self-identity is suppressed by the influence of Confucianism in patriarchal churches; thus, rejecting external suppression to search for their own internal self is a way of intellectual empowerment. Moreover, this self assertion and validation assist them to overcome structural inequalities. In addition, Korean women also contribute in changing other women’s conditions through their method of empowerment. It is through helping others that their sense of empowerment is strengthened.

Korean American women employ various methods to empower themselves under their own terms. Some of them justify their conditions by relating themselves with the
sacrificial image of self-less Christ. By doing so, they are able to validate themselves and be proud of being the “warrior women,” women who are willing to sacrifice for others, whether for their family or their religion. These women view Jesus Christ as their role model. For example, Song Hee Park is a 72 year old Korean American widow. She converted to Christianity seven years ago and she is a regular attendant of a Korean American Christian church. Song Hee Park is taking care of her son-in-law and her granddaughter while her daughter is still in Korea. As she explains,

[In Korean] Christianity has been a big part in my life. I rely and depend everything on God…I am not interested in achieving any position in church. My only intention is to serve God and the church. The position doesn’t matter to me…I am happy to take care of my family. They need me very much.

As a devout Christian, Park uses her religion as a justification for her conditions. She admires Christ’s selflessness and follows his good works. By serving her family and church without asking for return, she already empowered herself by justifying her condition and using it to validate herself.

The gradual intellectual progress of Korean American women and their increase in status illustrates the effectiveness of these unique methods of empowerment. While keeping their silence, churched Korean American women utilize their conditions for their advantage without confronting authority directly. For example, Korea American Christian churches celebrate Mother’s Day to demonstrate their appreciation and respect to women. The whole Sunday’s service is dedicated to women by recognizing them during the service. However, the celebration of Father’s Day, if any, is usually not as elaborate as Mother’s Day. The most effective strategy of empowerment is probably the re-interpretation of the Bible. Many Korean American women do not follow patriarchal preaching blindly. They read the Bible critically, and thus they grow intellectually. As Bo
Seo explains,

My pastor always uses this passage about how wives should please their husbands in the Bible, but I know there is another passage that reciprocates to this one, that husbands should also please their wives, although it was never mentioned.xxxv

Furthermore, Korean American women adopt multiple forms of rationalization to interpret the place in the Bible. Hwain Chang Lee, president of a Korean American program of the New York City YWCA, experienced a dilemma in searching for her genuine self-identity in patriarchal Christianity. She wants to pursue a “new metaphor” that can help women search for their own “freedom and experiences” and, at the same time, “serve notice to men that the old metaphors of the Confucian ideal and virtue…within the Biblical perspective, no longer serve a useful purpose, not for women, and--not for men.”xxxvi She thinks that because pastors are dominated by patriarchal thinking, they misinterpret the Bible. Then she argues that “traditional theology has ignored women’s experiences because men wrote it” in male-dominated societies. Thus women need to look for “herstory” that has been lost in “history.”xxxvii Moreover, she re-interprets the infamous passages that address the inferiority of women by applying historical context, or by indicating fallacies that arise from translation. She reaches her conclusion at the end of her book, that “men and women are equal co-partners who are called by God as partners, not to be served but to serve each other and to serve (simultaneously) God’s purpose as co-partners and fellow travelers in the common pilgrimage.”xxxviii Lee empowers herself by appropriating her gender status to re-interpret her self-identity in the Bible. Influenced by this intellectual growth, Lee further empowers herself by joining the Young Women’s Christian Association to help other women.
Gradual progress has been made due to Korean American women’s search for empowerment. The charter rules of the United Methodist Church have changed to allow women to hold higher positions. Seventy Korean American women have been ordained United Methodist ministers, yet most of them serve in non-Korean churches. According to one of them, “women pastors have not been given the opportunity to serve Korean congregations.” These women experienced great challenges, and they gather together to “talk about [their] pain and struggles as women clergy in the Korean community.” Nonetheless, these clergywomen believe that further progress will soon be made: “Remember, it took a long time for American churches to accept women clergy, and it's really commonplace now.”

Although one may argue that Korean American women cannot empower themselves substantially under the patriarchal church, one should not disregard and undermine the gradual, yet significant changes, that Korean American women have made in America. It may be true that the few women in leadership positions are “only symbolic figures,” but the new interpretation of their position in Christianity and their pioneer achievements laid a strong foundation for other women. Moreover, their intellectual growth and re-interpretation of Christianity impact the social, economic, and political progress of other suppressed women across the globe.

**Part IV: The Global Exchange of a New Feminist Interpretation of Christianity**

The re-interpretation of Christianity through feminist theology impacts the status of women in South Korea. This new interpretation fuels the growth of the *YWCA Korea*, the first Christian women’s organization in Korea. In 2002, Sang Chang, a former vice president of the *YWCA Korea*, became the first woman designated as prime minister in
modern Korean history.\textsuperscript{xliv} This shows that the Christian feminist organizations like the YWCA contribute to the advancement of Korean women by providing them with the necessary opportunities to develop leadership skills, as well as the prerequisites for political power.

The new interpretation of Christianity also brings another necessary step of advancement: education. Esther Park, a Korean American YWCA advisor who later became president of YWCA Korea for thirty years, contributed tremendously to the advancement of Korean women.\textsuperscript{xlv} She preached about the oppression of Korean women caused by Confucian social ideology. She also founded Bible and vocational schools for women. Illiterate women were able to learn how to read, as well as acquire working skills. Education, “a true liberation from the darkness,” changed their lives dramatically.\textsuperscript{xlvi}

The new interpretation of the Bible fuels the active participation of Korean women in South Korea. Even though Christianity is a minority religion in Korea in terms of the number of adherents, it is “more active than Buddhism in social, political, and educational activities and services.”\textsuperscript{xlvii} A photograph taken by a Canadian Jewish News source illustrates this change. Two-thousand and five hundred Christian pilgrims from South Korea arrived in Israel to promote peace between Palestine and Israel. They marched from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on an urban road. The photo shows that the front leaders of the march were two men at the sides, and two women in the center. They held the banner and led others in this peaceful protest. The position of the two women represents the activeness of Korean women; they are the center of active participation.\textsuperscript{xlviii}
The numbers of women holding leadership positions in the Christian church demonstrate the involvement and the progress of empowerment of Christian Korean women. Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea is the largest known Christian congregation. According to their statistics, there are approximately three times more women holding leadership positions (elders, deacons, etc.) than men. The number of female non-ordained pastors is approximately four times more than that of men.

The National Assembly of the Fifth Republic of Korea also depicts Korean women’s rising national leadership. Among the female National Assembly members, 65% of them are Christians; in contrast, only one male member is Christian. One of them explains the reason why she became politically active: “I had a philosophy and faith in contributing to the nation and society and my philosophy and faith are based on the Bible.” All of these women but two had leadership experience in Christian women’s groups. Clearly this demonstrates that the growth of re-interpretation of Christianity in women’s organizations impacts the Korean women’s search for empowerment, as well as active participation in the world.

Although Christian Korean women actively search for empowerment, limitations still exist. The women in the National Assembly are not able to reach full potential in male dominated assembly. There are a relatively large number of non-ordained women pastors in Yoido Church; but there is only one ordained woman pastor. Sang Chang was designated prime minister, but failed to be confirmed by the male-dominated National Assembly.

Conclusion

Under the influence of Confucianism and the patriarchal hierarchy of the
Christian church, Korean American women undergo a contradicting search for genuine self-identity and strategies of empowerment. They employ unconventional strategies of empowerment to empower themselves within the context of their culture and their religion. They also re-interpret Christianity and find themselves an empowering place in their once suppressing religion. The global exchange of these new feminist interpretations and strategies of empowerment through the YWCA impact South Korean women’s advancement tremendously.

Ethnic churches have provided an institutional base for cultural preservation, ethnic identity, and a place for self-empowerment for many different ethnic groups throughout U.S. history. For example, African American churches served as a refuge from outside racial discrimination. Churches also provided a place for their female members to develop their own self-identity and leadership skills. This study is also relevant to other immigrant groups because there is a parallel implication between them and Korean American immigrants. Thus, this paper provides information that might be relevant for other similar studies.

Due to limited time and space, some issues were mentioned, but not elaborated upon, in this paper. They are mostly the forces that drive Korean American women to search for a new identity and sense of empowerment. A language barrier is also one of the difficulties when interviewing the subjects. Further research is needed on the psychological process of the creating of the new feminist interpretation of Christianity. Additional research on the intricate cyclic relationship between the search for empowerment and a new interpretation of a religion is also needed.