

Article

Beyond Faith: Exploring the Roles of Korean Ethnic Churches in Shaping the Lives of Younger-Generation Korean Argentines

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Introduction

Since the beginning of Korean migration to Argentina in 1965, Korean ethnic churches have played a pivotal role in the community (G. Lee 1992; Mera 1998; Bialogorski 2004; J. Kim 2020, 2021). They were especially important for first-generation Korean immigrants, many of whom faced language barriers with Spanish and had limited familiarity with the local culture, as well as social and economic systems. Serving as essential support hubs, these churches provided a space where community members could gather each weekend to speak their native language and engage in cultural activities (Mera 1998; Bialogorski 2004). Beyond fostering social connections, they also functioned as key networks for sharing vital information on housing, employment, and business opportunities (J. Kim 2020, 2021).

Studies on ethnic churches in the United States suggest that while these institutions play a vital role in helping first-generation Korean migrants settle in the host society, their influence tends to diminish for the second generation (Cha 1994, 2001; Chai 1998, 2001; Kim and Kim 1996; Min and Kim 2005). As younger generations integrate into mainstream society, they often leave ethnic churches, which then serve primarily religious purposes. However, the integration patterns of younger-generation Koreans in Argentina appear to differ. A significant portion remains focused on a community-oriented lifestyle rather than integrating into Argentine society (J. Kim 2020, 2021). Many continue working in family businesses or find employment within the Korean business sector, particularly in the garment industry, and their social circles remain largely confined to the Korean community, often described as a “Korean bubble” (J. Kim 2020, 2021). In addition, while some large-scale Korean churches have started accepting non-Korean members, most still primarily serve Korean Argentines, maintaining a monoethnic and monocultural focus. Unlike in the United States, where Korean ethnic churches have increasingly embraced multiculturalism, Korean churches in Argentina remain largely homogeneous, reinforcing ethnic identity rather than fostering cross-cultural interactions. This

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distinct characteristic underscores the unique nature of the Korean community in Buenos Aires.

Given the unique context of a Global South country, the role of Korean ethnic churches in Buenos Aires may differ from those in the U.S. and other countries in the Global North. This study explores the evolving role of Korean ethnic churches in Argentina, particularly for second-generation Korean Argentines. Do these churches continue to serve the same functions as they did for first-generation Korean immigrants, or has their role significantly changed? Do they primarily reinforce Korean ethnic identity, thus hindering the integration of younger-generation Koreans into Argentine society? Additionally, what primary roles do these churches currently play in the lives of second-generation Korean Argentines?

This research seeks to explore the motivations behind younger-generation Korean Argentines' involvement in Korean ethnic churches, aiming to provide insights into the broader social and cultural dynamics that shape the Korean community in Argentina. The primary focus is to understand why younger members choose to engage with these institutions. By exploring their motivations, the study provides a deeper insight into the factors that influence their participation in church, involvement in community life, and integration into the host society. In particular, this research examines the church involvement of younger-generation Korean Argentines, considering their unique experiences in the Global South, compared to those of younger generations in the Global North.

To explore the motivations behind church members' involvement, we conducted an ethnographic study in Buenos Aires. Our aim was to understand the factors influencing individuals' decisions to become part of Korean ethnic churches, as well as their experiences within these communities. While we primarily relied on biographical interviews, encouraging participants to freely share their personal stories, experiences, and opinions related to the churches, we also sought to gain deeper insights into their perspectives on the churches' evolution, their social lives within both the Korean churches and the Korean community, and their level of integration into broader Argentine society.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection, based on ethnographic research in Argentina, and subsequent analysis were conducted throughout 2024 and 2025. Both researchers had prior experience conducting interviews within the Korean community in Buenos Aires, and our established connections facilitated the recruitment of participants. We employed a snowball sampling technique, in which existing participants helped recruit additional interviewees, streamlining the process. We carried out interviews with religious leaders, key figures, and younger-generation attendees from the two main Presbyterian churches, Che Il and Betel, both of which now offer services in Korean and Spanish. Through our prior connections, four pastors from Che Il and Betel—who were born in or immigrated to Argentina as children with their families—participated in in-depth interviews, providing valuable insights on these topics. In addition, we observed religious services and participated in Sunday lunches at both churches, engaging in conversations with Korean and non-Korean members, many of whom were later interviewed. We also compared the experiences of attendees at these larger churches with those from medium- to smaller-sized congregations across Buenos Aires, including Jung Ang, So Mang, and Yang Mok. While most participants were affiliated with the two larger churches, incorporating insights from smaller congregations allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of Korean ethnic churches and their members' involvement.

This article includes interviews with 24 Korean Argentines from the 1.5 and second generations, who were either born in Argentina or immigrated during childhood or adolescence. In this article, we use the term “younger-generation” to refer to those who fit this category, regardless of their ages. All participants currently hold key roles or are actively engaged in Korean ethnic churches. They ranged in age from their 20s to 50s, encompassing various age groups without a specific focus on any one. Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, while some were in Korean, depending on the interviewees' preferences. Both researchers attended the majority of the interviews, though some, particularly those conducted in Korean, were carried out separately. Interview lengths varied, typically lasting over an hour, with some shorter or longer. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, with only those deemed relevant to the article being translated into English. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect participants' identities, except where

participants explicitly consented to the use of their real names. This research greatly benefited from the use of the transcription software Turbo Scribe for both Spanish and Korean, which allowed for precise transcription of all interviews, subsequently checked by the researchers. Data from observations and personal conversations, along with the interviews, were included in this research, and all data were shared to support ongoing analysis and reflection.

During the thematic analysis stage, we examined the coded data to uncover recurring themes and trends concerning the motivations, reasons, and experiences of younger-generation Korean Argentines within Korean ethnic churches. The data were organized by drawing on specific theoretical frameworks from previous studies on ethnic churches and the involvement of Korean immigrants and the younger generation, as well as thematic categories encompassing a wide array of experiences and perspectives. These thematic categories included (1) Religious Faith, (2) Socialization among Fellow Korean Argentines, (3) Children's Education, (4) Practical Support, and (5) Language and Culture Retention, all informed by previous research on Korean ethnic churches overseas. While the first two themes were strongly represented in our data, children's education appeared less prominently, and the final two themes were largely absent. Accordingly, this article is structured around three main sections: (1) religious faith, (2) socialisation among fellow Korean Argentines, and (3) children's education. Issues related to practical support and language and culture retention are incorporated into the discussion of children's education. In conclusion, this research examines how these themes shape the relationships between Korean ethnic churches in Buenos Aires and the social integration of their members into the host society. Throughout the process, we made a conscious effort not to generalize individual experiences to the entire community. We approached participants' stories with sensitivity, integrating contrasting viewpoints and notable details where appropriate, in line with the bottom-up methodology of ethnographic research. Our ongoing critical reflections and efforts to balance overarching patterns with in-depth personal narratives are evident in the final analysis.

Previous Studies and Frameworks on Korean Ethnic Churches

Most research on Korean ethnic churches overseas has focused primarily on

the United States, with additional studies conducted in Canada, Australia, and Brazil. A key finding in U.S.-based studies is the notably high participation of Koreans in Protestant churches, with several works investigating the reasons behind this phenomenon (Hurh and Kim 1990; Kwon et al. 2001; Min 1992, 2010, 2013; Min and Kim 2005). Earlier studies primarily examined the role of ethnic churches in supporting first-generation Korean immigrants in the U.S. However, with generational change, scholarship has shifted its focus to second-generation Korean Americans (Alumkal 2001; Cha 2001; Chai 1998, 2001; Chong 1998; Goette 2001; Kim and Pyle 2004; Min and Kim 2005), exploring the growing trend of younger generations distancing themselves from or leaving these churches, while also examining the significant transformations occurring within these religious organizations. More recent research has taken diverse approaches to second-generation involvement, including studies by C. Lee (2023), N. Kim (2022), Park and Edberg (2020), and J. Lee (2017).

Several scholars in the U.S. (Hurh and Kim 1990; Kwon et al. 2001; Min 1992, 2013) have examined the factors contributing to the high rate of Protestant affiliation among Korean immigrants. For first-generation Korean immigrants, who often face social and linguistic barriers in the host society, ethnic churches serve as vital centers for fellowship and ethnic networking. These churches also assist with practical tasks and help immigrants access essential social services (Chai 2001; Kwon et al. 2001; Min 1992, 2013). Additionally, Korean churches play an important role in preserving Korean culture and language, running weekend language schools to teach Korean to the children of immigrants. Even non-affiliated families often send their children to these church-run schools to ensure their children maintain their heritage language (Min 1992, 2013). Consequently, while Buddhists are notably underrepresented among Korean immigrants in the U.S. and the number of Catholic adherents has remained stable, Protestant church attendance among Korean immigrants is significantly higher (Hurh and Kim 1990; Kwon et al. 2001; Min 1992, 2013).

Research on second-generation Korean American congregations has increasingly highlighted a marked decline in their participation in ethnic churches, a trend known as the “silent exodus.” This term refers to the large number of second-generation members leaving these churches without significant acknowledgment or attention (Cha 1994, 2001; Chai 1998, 2001; Min and Kim 2005). For instance, Cha (1994) estimates that more than 90 percent of post-college Korean Americans stop attending these churches. This

shift has contributed to the transformation of many congregations from a “church of family” to a “church of parents” (Kim and Kim 1996). In response, some large Korean churches have established English-language congregations to meet the needs of second-generation Korean Americans (Cha 1994, 2001; Chai 1998, 2001; Min and Kim 2005). Research on the younger generation in these churches indicates that many 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans now prefer English-speaking congregations, where church attendance is mainly driven by religious purposes rather than cultural or linguistic preservation, a priority for their parents (Min and Kim 2005). Additionally, Chai (1998) observes that second-generation members often identify more strongly as “Christian” with their “Korean” and “American” identities taking a backseat.

Despite the trend of disaffiliation, Korean churches remain central to preserving ethnic identity and providing a sense of belonging for the children of immigrants (Chong 1998; Ecklund 2005; Kwon et al. 2001; Min 1992, 2013; Suh 2004). While much research has highlighted declining participation, some studies have focused on those who remain engaged. Kim and Pyle (2004) examine factors supporting ongoing participation in autonomous congregations, and Chong (1998) explores motivations behind ethnic church involvement. S. Kim (2010) analyzes second-generation churches in Los Angeles, showing how hybrid spaces integrate multiple cultural influences. Recent scholarship has taken diverse approaches to second-generation involvement. C. Lee (2023) traces the transformations of Korean ethnic churches across different stages of migration. N. Kim (2023) investigates intergenerational worship in a Korean American context, emphasising its role in healing relationships between generations through shared meals and communal practices rather than church growth. Park and Edberg (2021) highlight that strong religious beliefs support emotional well-being and motivate engagement in daily activities, regardless of leadership roles or participation levels. Meanwhile, J. Lee (2017) documents non-Christian Korean Americans’ experiences within predominantly Christian communities, illustrating how religious and non-religious practices shape identity and social belonging. These studies, primarily focused on the U.S., provide a useful comparative framework for examining Korean churchgoers in Argentina, highlighting potential similarities and differences in second-generation engagement between the Global North and the Global South.

Studies on Korean ethnic churches outside the U.S., particularly in Australia and Canada, underscore their crucial role in fostering community,

preserving culture, and transmitting Korean identity among immigrants. Han (1994a, 1994b, 2004) focuses on first-generation Koreans and their engagement with ethnic churches in Australia. Han (1994b) examines the economic aspects of Korean immigrant churches in Sydney, highlighting their influence on both community growth and integration. In a related study, Han (1994a) provides an overview of Korean religious practices in Sydney, emphasizing the churches' role in supporting community activities. In his later work, Han (2004) contrasts the dialogical and segregative nature of Korean Christianity within Australia's multicultural landscape. In Canada, Kwon (2015) investigates the function and impact of ethnic churches in Vancouver's Korean community, particularly their contribution to social cohesion. Park (2010, 2011) explores the role of Korean ethnic churches in Montreal, emphasizing their efforts in preserving the Korean language and identity among Korean Canadian students, thereby fostering intergenerational continuity. Collectively, these studies illustrate the central role of Korean ethnic churches in community building and cultural heritage preservation across different diasporic contexts beyond the U.S.

In the Global South, research on Korean ethnic churches remains limited, with only two studies focusing on Brazil (J. Kim 2020, 2021). In one of them J. Kim (2021) examines the intergenerational and interethnic transformation of Korean ethnic churches in São Paulo, and in other (J. Kim 2020), the identity formation of second-generation Koreans after leaving these churches. However, no studies have been conducted in Argentina, particularly regarding the continued involvement of younger-generation Korean Argentines in Korean ethnic churches. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the role of Korean churches and the experiences of younger-generation Koreans in the Global South, offering distinctive insights into the relationship between ethnic church engagement, immigrant community dynamics, and integration into the host society, while also comparing trends between the Global South and Global North.

The Brief History of the Korean Community and Ethnic Churches in Argentina

Over the past 60 years, the Korean community in Argentina has evolved from a group of struggling agricultural migrants to a well-established

minority with thriving businesses, particularly in the garment industry. While Korean Argentines remain highly concentrated in the garment sector, some intergenerational changes are gradually occurring. The younger generation is beginning to integrate into various sectors and embody hybrid identities that blend Korean and Argentine cultural elements. Although marriage within the Korean community remains the predominant trend, intermarriages with Argentines and other immigrant groups are gradually increasing.

Religious institutions, particularly ethnic churches, have long been a central feature of the Korean community in Argentina, offering both spiritual support and practical assistance to immigrants. In the early years, Korean immigrants gathered for religious services in homes or rented spaces before eventually establishing churches in the Bajo Flores neighborhood. The first evangelical church, the Korean Union Church, was founded in 1966, followed by the Presbyterian Che Il Church in 1969, with several others emerging throughout the 1970s. These churches provided essential services beyond religious needs, including the preservation of cultural traditions, offering social spaces for community members, and assisting newcomers by providing information on housing, employment, healthcare, and business opportunities (J. Kim 2021).

During the 1980s and 1990s, evangelical churches flourished, with around 40 churches serving the Korean community. Catholicism was represented by a single church, and two Buddhist temples also existed. However, as the community grew and new generations emerged, the roles of these churches began to evolve. The focus shifted towards addressing the needs of the younger generation, particularly the second generation, and showing signs of fostering connections with the broader Argentine society and other migrant communities. In the 21st century, large Korean churches like Che Il and Betel began adapting to a more multicultural context, welcoming attendees from Latin American and other Asian communities alongside Koreans. While the incorporation of non-Korean members in these churches has remained somewhat focused on the Korean community with certain limitations, this shift reflects the gradual progress of a broader trend of integration and intercultural engagement within the host society.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact, reducing the Korean-Argentine population from approximately 20,000 to 15,000, as older immigrants returned to South Korea or relocated elsewhere, and younger Korean Argentines sought better economic opportunities abroad. Numerous smaller

churches closed or merged, while larger churches saw an unexpected increase in attendance. Currently, only about 20 of the original 40 Presbyterian churches remain.

Despite these challenges, the Korean community has maintained a strong sense of identity while fostering cross-cultural connections that enrich Argentina's multicultural fabric, making significant contributions to the country's cultural and economic landscape. Throughout the process of settling and integrating into Argentine society, ethnic churches, in particular, have played pivotal roles in supporting community members. Their influence continues to evolve, reflecting the ongoing integration of the community into Argentine society.

Religious Faith

Researchers have highlighted several social or non-religious functions of church membership within the first-generation Korean immigrant community (Chai 2001; Kwon et al. 2001; Min 1992, 2013; Lee 2023). The five most important non-religious functions of first-generation Korean ethnic churches include promoting fellowship and comfort, preserving ethnic culture, providing counseling and advice on social services, reinforcing members' social status and position, and sharing information about job and entrepreneurial opportunities (Huh and Kim 1990; Min 1992; C. Lee 2023). Similarly, for first-generation Korean immigrants in Argentina, practical reasons—such as obtaining information on housing, jobs, and businesses, alongside socializing with fellow Korean immigrants—were among the main motivations for attending Korean ethnic churches (Mera 1998; Bialogroski 2004). However, the reasons and motivations for attending Korean ethnic churches, as mentioned by most younger generations, differ significantly from those of first-generation Korean Argentines.

I went through two stages in my life. The first was when my mom forced me to go to church. To avoid making her feel bad, I went, but I was just going for the sake of it. [...] Then, at one point in my life, I had an encounter with God. (Alfio Lee)

Yes, at first, especially in primary school, I was forced to go. I was very young,

and it felt more like an obligation rather than something personal. At that age, I went because I had to, but from secondary school onward, I started going more on my own. [...] I liked the environment, mainly because of God, but also because I had spent my whole life in the church. Over time, I adapted, got used to it, and came to appreciate it. (Eduardo Moon)

Similar to the cases of Alfio and Eduardo, a significant number of younger-generation Korean Argentines mentioned in their interviews that they initially attended church due to their parents' expectations or obligations. However, over time, they developed their own religious beliefs and became more actively involved in Korean churches. Another common pattern among younger-generation Korean Argentines was attending church as children for social activities and friendships, only later becoming religious, as reflected in the following interviews:

When you were a child, when you were in primary or secondary school, my closest friends were always from church. When I was younger, I went to church because I liked it. At first, I came for my friends, and then, of course, I started coming for my faith. Many of them don't come anymore, but I still maintain the same relationships. (Andrés Im)

I made friends, and as I started to make friends, I would go to see them. Over time, it became a routine, like a group. I naturally became more involved in the church. I guess there was also a social purpose. [...] After that, I went to university, and from then on, I went to church not because of my parents, but by my own choice. The reason I started going was that, at that time, it wasn't just about friends anymore—it was about keeping my faith. (Sulki Pak)

As demonstrated in the interviews above, most of the interviewees seemed to have a strong commitment to their faith in God. Initially, many Korean Argentine churchgoers attended church due to their parents' expectations or for social connections. However, over time, they became more genuinely religious. This mirrors Chong's (1998) findings, where individuals, despite having Christian backgrounds, became truly devoted Christians after high school and began to become more actively involved in the church; they acknowledged their conversion or re-commitment to Christianity during their young adult years.

The pastors of the Korean churches confirm that faith is the primary motivation for younger-generation Korean Argentines to attend church,

although some members still attend for social and other reasons. In particular, with the rise of many sports and social clubs within the Korean community, the church is no longer the sole place to connect with fellow Koreans.

Nowadays, it's not necessarily about attending church for socializing. In the past, it was much more social. Today, I would say it still plays an important social role, but the social aspect alone isn't enough to attract people. There has to be, in my view, a focus on the message we are preaching; otherwise, there's no point in coming to church. (Pastor Arturo Kim)

We could say that a percentage of people still come out of a sense of social, cultural, or traditional reasons, but the majority now attend because of faith. I mean, if someone truly lacks faith, they won't spend their Sunday at church serving. [...] Korean churches are now doing services in Spanish. (Pastor Martin Kim)

These interviews with the two pastors suggest that faith is the primary reason most members attend church. This is why large-scale Korean churches, such as Che Il and Betel, began offering services in Spanish for younger-generation churchgoers. As highlighted in the interview with Pastor Martin Kim, it is important to preach in the language they feel most comfortable and familiar with. Furthermore, faith is the main motivation that keeps them attending church long-term, as demonstrated in the interview with Pastor Seongyeop Kim below:

It's faith, faith. We have to live the Christian life properly, but there's a lot of temptation outside. [...] People come here to be good believers. (Pastor Seongyeop Kim)

Our interviews align with previous studies on Korean churches in the U.S., which show that for younger-generation Korean Americans, religious faith is prioritized over other values such as the preservation of culture, language, or socialization within the Korean religious community (Chai 1998; Min and Kim 2005). However, our interviews reveal a variety of overlapping motivations, presenting compelling perspectives and experiences that illustrate the circumstances of the Global South, which we explore in greater detail in the following sections.

Socialization with Fellow Korean Argentines

For first-generation Korean immigrants in Argentina, the church served as a vital space for cultural, social, and practical purposes, acting as the primary venue for socializing and connecting with fellow Koreans. However, for the younger generation of Korean Argentines, ethnic churches are no longer the sole places for maintaining social ties and fostering relationships within the Korean community. Many younger Korean Argentines are concentrated in the garment wholesale sector in the Flores neighborhood of Buenos Aires, where they work closely with one another. Additionally, various sports and social clubs within the community, offering activities like tennis, golf, soccer, and paddle, provide opportunities for socialization. Despite the presence of these other spaces, interviews reveal that the church still plays a significant role in social interaction in addition to its religious functions. In other words, while younger-generation Korean Argentines no longer rely solely on the church to gather and socialize with fellow Koreans—unlike first-generation immigrants—the church continues to serve as an important space for connection and interaction among Korean Argentine churchgoers.

As discussed in the previous section, for most second-generation churchgoers in Buenos Aires, religious faith is the primary motivation for attending Korean ethnic churches. Nonetheless, even for those primarily attending for spiritual reasons, the social aspect of church participation remains highly significant, as evidenced in the interviews below:

It is a combination of all those things. Mainly, it is because of faith—or at least, I try to make that the main reason for attending church. But it is not always consistent; sometimes I attend more for faith, and other times more for my friends. There is also the habit formed over many years, not only in my current life but also in my past. That is why it is a mix of faith, socialization, and habits. Attending church is both about social relationships and maintaining a long-standing custom. (Christian Kim)

Those who lose their faith naturally stop attending church, but the social aspect remains very important. Especially when it comes to choosing which church to attend, I'm not sure faith is really the main factor. I think it's more of a social matter, a matter of relationships and friendships, really. (Diana Suk)

As reflected in the interview with Diana Suk, while faith is the main reason for attending church, the social aspect and relationships also play a significant role in choosing a church. She believes that larger churches offer more opportunities to meet young people of a similar age and socialize with them. Although she currently attends a small church where she has been a member since childhood and feels deeply connected to the other members, much like her own family, she has considered switching to a larger church to have more opportunities to meet young Korean Argentines. Like Diana's case, while religious faith is the primary reason for attending churches among younger-generation churchgoers in Buenos Aires, they also attribute another important reason for attending Korean churches to social factors and friendship. These are especially the key reasons why they choose Korean churches over Argentine ones. They feel much more comfortable socializing with Korean Argentines than with native Argentines, as demonstrated in the interviews below:

Although I have Argentine friends from primary and secondary school, I don't feel the same comfort as I do with Koreans. It's not that I feel uncomfortable, but with Korean relationships, I feel a special connection that makes me feel more at ease. It's easier for me to connect with Koreans. (Christian Kim)

I had Argentine friends, and I have relationships with Argentines, but I always feel more connected and share more with Koreans, especially in terms of values and problems. I feel more comfortable with my Korean friends. It's a matter of customs, habits [...] I have almost 100% Korean friends. I feel more at ease with Koreans. There's no need to explain Korean things [customs, habits, etc.] to them. (Ailen Park)

As demonstrated in the two interviews above, most of my interviewees feel much more comfortable hanging out and socializing with fellow Korean Argentines, and this is the reason why they choose Korean churches over Argentine ones. This aligns with earlier research conducted in the U.S. (Chai 1998; Wagner 1979; Emerson and Kim 2003) and Brazil (J. Kim 2020). According to Chai (1998), one of the primary reasons many second-generation Korean Americans continue to attend Korean churches is the opportunity to connect with others who share a similar cultural background, as they feel more comfortable and secure with fellow Koreans and can relate to them more easily. Other studies have highlighted that it is common for potential churchgoers to

seek out others who are similar to themselves, gravitating toward “homogeneous units” within the church environment (Wagner 1979; Emerson and Kim 2003). Additionally, while younger-generation Korean Brazilians value Brazilian culture’s diversity, they generally prefer socializing with fellow Koreans at church and feel more at ease in that setting, even though they can comfortably engage with local Brazilians outside the community (J. Kim 2020). In a similar vein, young Korean Argentines continue to attend Korean churches because they feel more at ease relating to fellow Koreans, and the church remains a significant space for socialization, even for those whose primary motivation is their faith.

During the field research, we found that for the majority, religious faith was the primary reason for attending church, with socialization being secondary, or they mentioned a combination of both motivations. However, we also encountered some second-generation Korean Argentines who attended church primarily for social reasons rather than faith, although such cases were not common. An example of this is Esteban Moon, who began attending church after marrying a second-generation Korean Argentine.

I believe, one, it’s to meet and maintain relationships with Korean people, and secondly, for my students. [...] For me, the most important role is socializing with people from your own community. That’s number one. Still, religion plays a role as well. Religious people go for the faith. Those are the two most important reasons for me. (Esteban Moon)

Koreans in Argentina occupy a unique and distinct social position within Argentine society. Although they have achieved significant upward economic mobility, they remain socially and culturally isolated, often working exclusively in the garment industry, where their business activities are concentrated. Their primary interactions are with employees, business partners, and customers, which results in slow and limited integration into the broader Argentine society (J. Kim 2021). While most of them belong to the upper-middle or middle class economically, many still remain geographically, socially, and culturally isolated, disconnected from the host society (J. Kim 2021).

Our interviews indicate that Korean Argentine churchgoers do not feel discriminated against or marginalized, particularly as many Korean Argentines have an affluent economic status in the host society. However, they find comfort in connecting with others who share their ethnic and cultural background.

Having a similar economic background, and more importantly, this sense of belonging to a community of like-minded individuals who are culturally connected, plays a crucial role in their ongoing participation in the church.

This contrasts with the experience of many second-generation Koreans in the U.S., where ethnic churches serve as a refuge for those who feel excluded from mainstream society due to their non-white status. According to Chong (1998), the strong ethnic identity and exclusivity seen among second-generation churchgoers reflect a defensive response to their perceived marginalization in American society. For many, the church offers a sense of belonging and group empowerment, enabling them to challenge negative stereotypes and assert a positive group identity. In her study, D. Kim (2004) also suggests that second-generation Korean American churchgoers felt ethnically and racially marginalized by the white majority. However, this sense of marginalization and the need for a refuge in the church does not apply to Korean Argentine youth. Instead, their connection to the church is largely driven by the desire to socialize with others who share their cultural background and similar social and economic status. This is akin to the experiences of the Korean community in Brazil (J. Kim 2021), where economically successful immigrant minorities remain somewhat isolated from the broader society but find solidarity within their own communities. This phenomenon illustrates the dynamic between immigrant groups who achieve economic success yet maintain a distinct cultural identity within the host society, particularly in the context of the Global South.

For the first-generation Korean immigrants in Argentina, the church was the sole place where they could connect and socialize with fellow Korean immigrants. However, younger-generation Korean Argentines have more options and the flexibility to attend church not only for religious faith but also as a space for socializing with fellow Koreans. The key difference in motivation between the two generations lies in the first generation's strong reliance on the church as their primary community space, whereas the younger generation attends church by choice rather than necessity.

Children's Education, Practical Support, and Language and Culture Retention

For first-generation Korean immigrants, practical reasons—such as obtaining

information about business, employment, and housing—were among the primary motivations for their affiliation with Korean churches. Because of the language barrier and their unfamiliarity with the local context for securing jobs or running businesses, they relied heavily on community networks and ethnic resources (J. Kim 2020, 2021). These churches served as vital hubs where they built connections and accessed essential resources, facilitating the exchange of crucial information for their livelihoods and settlement (J. Kim 2020, 2021). In contrast, younger-generation Korean Argentines, who are fluent in Spanish and well-acquainted with the social and economic contexts of the host country, do not need to rely on ethnic networks to the same extent. As a result, practical considerations related to business, employment, and housing are not primary motivations for their affiliation with Korean churches. None of our interviewees mentioned these practical factors as reasons for attending church. However, an interesting point frequently noted by younger-generation churchgoers is that churches serve as valuable spaces for their children's education. As the interviewees below observed:

I see that when they have children, they remember that the church is a good place for kids. So, many times I see that people who used to come to church, but no longer attend, still send their children. Because they know it's a good place. They know it's a place where they will learn good things, and they know they'll be around good people in general. (Alfio Lee)

When they get married and have children, they come back because family feels like they have to return to church, and the kids need to get to know God. Most of them return for that reason. I've heard this repeatedly, not only in my church but also in the cases of families from other churches. (Silla Kim)

Most interviewees who are parents mentioned their church involvement in relation to their children, emphasizing that they still value the church as a supportive and positive environment for them. Even those who are not religious believe that ethnic churches still serve as a good place for children. This is especially evident in some interviews where interviewees discussed about those families that transitioned from Korean Catholic churches to Betel Church, as suggested by the interviewees below:

From what I've seen, many people feel the need to take their children

somewhere for their well-being. A lot of people come to church because of their children. [...] The number of people at the Catholic Church is gradually decreasing, while many are moving to Protestant churches. I still think that, rather than faith or religious belief, many people come for their children or for other social reasons. Especially in the case of Betel Church, many people are transferring there. Recently, people have been saying that Betel Church is the most popular. (Soyoung Kim)

I have a close friend who originally attended a Catholic church, but she began attending Betel Church because her children wanted to make Korean friends. Their initial reason for attending was to help their children find Korean friends, but once they started going, the children enjoyed it so much that they continued attending every week. (Seulki Park)

Both interviewees emphasize the importance of providing children with a supportive environment, rather than strictly religious beliefs, as the primary motivation for some younger-generation churchgoers in Buenos Aires. The data suggest that, for some Korean Argentine churchgoers, attendance is driven less by religious devotion and more by the desire to support their children's social and cultural needs. The shift from Catholic to Protestant churches, such as Betel Church, further underscores this trend, as many younger-generation Korean Argentines view these churches as spaces offering greater opportunities for social interaction and community support for their children. In recent years, Betel Church has become particularly popular among parents with children. Unlike Korean Catholic churches, where services are mainly conducted in Korean, all activities at Betel Church, including services, are conducted in Spanish and are more closely tailored to children's needs, enabling them to engage with religious values while also developing a sense of belonging within the local context.

While most interviewees suggest that Korean churches provide a space for their children to make Korean friends and offer an opportunity to socialize, they did not mention learning the Korean language or participating in activities that help them feel rooted in their heritage. This trend contrasts with previous studies in the U.S., which argue that Korean churches play an important role in preserving Korean culture and language, particularly through weekend language schools designed to teach Korean to immigrant children (Chai 2001; Kwon et al. 2001; Min 1992, 2013). For example, Chong (1998) argues that church participation for the younger generation in the U.S. was driven by a powerful

desire to preserve their ethnicity and culture, not only for themselves but also for future generations. However, in the case of Koreans in Argentina, the intention is not necessarily to preserve their ethnicity and culture for future generations. Instead, churches are seen more as places to learn other values as well as religious one, making them positive influences on children. Thus, while Korean churches in Buenos Aires provide a space for learning and sharing good values and for integration into the Korean community for their children, their role in preserving the Korean language and cultural heritage seems less emphasized, compared to other contexts.

Korean Ethnic Churches and Social Integration into the Host Society

As previously discussed, Korean Argentine youth generally do not feel discriminated against or isolated. Those who attend schools or work with native Argentines interact with them without issues. However, they often find it more comfortable to connect with other Korean Argentines who share their ethnic and cultural background. Korean ethnic churches play a key role in facilitating these interactions for churchgoers, further strengthening their social networks within the community. The following interview supports this argument:

When my children were younger, they preferred friends from this country (native Argentines). They didn't like being called Korean and instead identified as locals. However, as they grew older, I found that religiously and culturally they didn't quite fit in, so naturally, they began connecting more with Korean friends at church. (Gye-yeon Lee)

As suggested in the interview above, some younger-generation Korean Argentines feel much more comfortable hanging out with fellow Koreans, and ethnic churches seem to play a role in facilitating their socialization within the Korean community. However, other interviewees attribute their limited integration to various factors, such as the concentration of businesses and residential areas, rather than solely to the influence of ethnic churches. Two interviewees in their twenties expressed this view:

The thing is, everything is concentrated in one place, and they all work in the same area in Flores. During the week, you meet Koreans for work, and on weekends, you see them at church as well. This happens frequently. Since everyone is concentrated in the same area, the pattern continues. (Ailen Park)

It's a cycle. Since they are within it, they naturally gather only with other Koreans in this circuit. In your children's schools, friends from the same church attend one school, and others follow. Children grow up in an environment surrounded by other Koreans. That's why some people don't interact with Argentines at all or prefer to associate only with other Koreans. (Elena Jin)

Both interviewees highlight the strong social and community ties among Korean immigrants in Buenos Aires, emphasizing how these networks are reinforced through shared spaces such as workplaces, schools, and churches. Many Korean families remain closely connected due to their work and residential concentration in areas like Flores. This geographic and social clustering creates a cycle in which Korean Argentines primarily interact with one another, extending their work and business engagements beyond weekdays into weekends through ethnic churches, as noted by Ailen Park. Moreover, this self-reinforcing nature of Korean social networks means that children grow up in an environment where their schools, churches, and friendships are predominantly within the Korean community. As a result, younger-generation Korean Argentines tend to have limited interaction with the broader society, naturally gravitating toward Korean social circles.

A distinctive aspect of younger-generation Korean Argentines is that, unlike their counterparts in the Global North—especially in the U.S., where younger Koreans tend to follow professional pathways and pursue mainstream-oriented social mobility (D. Kim 2004)—those in Argentina are heavily engaged in family businesses or employed in ethnic businesses within the garment industry (J. Kim and Koo 2017). This pattern is driven in part by practical considerations, such as the low salaries of professional jobs and the immediate financial returns offered by family or ethnic businesses, particularly in the garment wholesale sector (J. Kim and Koo 2017). Although this situation has been slowly changing in recent years, it remains a prominent feature of the community. Consequently, many Korean Argentines tend to lead community-oriented lifestyles. This characteristic of Korean migration in Argentina is crucial for understanding how

the involvement of younger-generation Korean Argentines in ethnic churches shapes their integration trajectories, as these processes are embedded within the broader social and economic context of the host society.

Moreover, for those who attend church, these spaces further solidify and strengthen social circles. Today, the church continues to play a central role in shaping and reinforcing the cohesion of its members, serving as a venue not only for religious activities but also for socializing, offering emotional support, and maintaining cultural ties. As churchgoers interact within this shared space, they naturally strengthen their bonds, creating an even more cohesive and insular network that is difficult to break out of. These dynamics highlight the significant role the church plays in reinforcing ethnic solidarity, further limiting interactions with the broader Argentine society. The interview with Pastor Arturo Kim further supports this argument:

Yes, I grew up with the same kids all my life, so they're not just people I met—they're true friends. I've known them since I was a baby, so it's really hard to move past that group of friends. On top of that, we share the experience of attending spiritual retreats together. There's a lot that makes forming other social relationships almost impossible. The church, in a way, acts as a protective bubble. It's not that it's intentionally closed off, but it's tough to break through that bond. (Arturo Kim)

The interview with Pastor Arturo Kim reflects the strong sense of community and bonding that develops within the Korean community in Argentina, primarily through shared experiences and cultural commonalities. He further emphasizes that the long-lasting relationships forged with others from the same ethnic and cultural background are strengthened by shared religious practices, such as attending the same churches and spiritual retreats. These experiences reinforce communal ties, making it difficult to form similar bonds with people outside the group. At the same time, they paint a picture of a deeply ingrained social network that can be challenging to break or replicate.

As explained in the previous section, Korean ethnic churches are not the only spaces where younger-generation Korean Argentines gather and socialize today. There are various clubs for golf, tennis, soccer, and paddle, among others, as well as numerous micro- and individual-level relationships and networks within the Korean community, both for business and socialization. Building

upon and extending beyond these already established community-based networks, ethnic churches serve as a central element in this social ecosystem for Korean Argentine churchgoers. They act as a “protective bubble,” providing a safe and familiar space where bonds among Korean church members are nurtured and strengthened.

As suggested in the interview with Pastor Arturo Kim and many other interviewees, Korean churches do not intentionally isolate their members. Rather, the shared experiences within these churches create a sense of comfort and naturally strengthen the community. Over time, this creates a self-sustaining social circle, making it difficult for individuals outside the community to integrate or form meaningful connections. This community-oriented dynamics inevitably affect and hinder Korean Argentine youth in their integration into the host society, reflecting the particular position of Korean Argentines in a Global South country such as Argentina.

Conclusion

The year 2025 marks a significant milestone for the Korean community in Argentina, commemorating six decades of immigration. Over this period, the community has achieved remarkable upward social mobility, particularly economically, through thriving wholesale and retail businesses in the garment industry. However, despite rapid economic progress, their social integration into broader Argentine society has remained slow. Many Korean Argentines continue to be concentrated in the garment industry rather than diversifying into other fields, even though they interact with local employees, business partners, and customers (Bialogorski 2004, 2019; J. Kim 2020, 2021). Moreover, most, including the younger generation, tend to socialize primarily within their own community despite attending local schools and universities. While there are some signs of intermarriage and engagement with mainstream society, overall integration has been gradual and limited (J. Kim 2021). Interview data highlight various factors contributing to this slow integration. One key reason is that many, enjoying a middle- or upper-middle-class lifestyle, find comfort in socializing with fellow Koreans who share similar economic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, their high economic status and position within local society, coupled with reluctance to integrate—often viewed as part of the

Global South—also significantly influence their integration. The motivations for attending Korean churches among churchgoers and the role of ethnic churches in Argentina, in relation to integration, should be understood in the context of the Global South, distinct from the Global North.

As noted in this study, many younger-generation Korean Argentines initially attended church as children due to parental expectations or as a way to socialize and build friendships. Over time, however, they developed their own religious beliefs and became more actively involved in Korean churches, ultimately identifying themselves as religious. This pattern resembles that of younger-generation Korean American churchgoers, for whom religious faith takes precedence over other values, such as cultural preservation, language, or socializing within the Korean religious community (Chai 1998; Min and Kim 2005). While religious faith remains the primary reason for attending Korean churches, social factors—such as the comfort of interacting with fellow Koreans—also play a crucial role. These social dynamics, together with a shared sense of cultural and economic background, help explain why younger Korean Argentines continue to favor Korean churches over Argentine ones, despite the availability of other social opportunities. For many families, attending church is viewed as a way to support their children's social and educational needs, rather than solely for religious devotion.

Additionally, while Korean churches in Buenos Aires serve as spaces for learning, sharing positive values, and fostering integration into the Korean community, their role in preserving the Korean language and cultural heritage appears less emphasized compared to other contexts.

Korean churches do not intentionally isolate members, but the shared experiences within these spaces naturally foster a sense of comfort and community. These churches play a vital role in promoting unity, offering emotional support, and maintaining cultural connections. As members interact in this environment, they form increasingly tight-knit networks, making it difficult to step outside these circles. The dynamics strengthen ethnic solidarity while limiting engagement with the broader Argentine society. Over time, they create a self-sustaining social network, making it harder for outsiders to integrate or build meaningful connections. This situation particularly affects the integration of Korean Argentine youth into Argentine society, highlighting their distinct position in the Global South. This contrasts with the experiences of younger Koreans in the Global North, as seen in previous studies conducted in

the U.S.

This study provides a unique exploration of the role of Korean ethnic churches in the lives of Korean Argentines, highlighting their motivations for participation, the functions these churches serve, and their broader implications for social integration. In doing so, it fills a critical gap in scholarship on Korean migration in the Global South. Nevertheless, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of integration processes, it is essential to also examine the experiences of those who no longer participate in these religious communities. Future research that considers the social engagement and integration patterns of non-churchgoers will offer a more holistic view of the diverse pathways of integration, contributing to a nuanced understanding of Korean Argentine youth and the factors shaping their adaptation to the host society.

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving role of Korean ethnic churches in Argentina, focusing on the motivations behind younger-generation Korean Argentines' involvement and the broader social and cultural dynamics shaping their community. Many initially attended churches as children due to parental expectations or social reasons but later developed personal religious beliefs and became actively engaged in these institutions. While religious faith remains the primary reason for attendance, social factors—such as the comfort of interacting with fellow Koreans—also play a crucial role. Additionally, many churchgoing parents emphasize the significant role these churches play in their children's education, prioritizing a supportive environment that fosters learning and instills positive values, which in turn facilitates their children's integration into the Korean community. Thus, while religious devotion is primary, these churches cultivate a strong sense of belonging and reinforce ethnic solidarity. However, this tight-knit environment may also limit integration into broader Argentine society, restricting cross-cultural engagement beyond the community. Offering valuable insights into immigrant community dynamics in the Global South, distinct from the experiences of their counterparts in the Global North, this study fills a critical gap in research on Korean migration, shedding light on generational shifts, the evolving role of these institutions in immigrant communities, and their impact on social integration into the host society.

Keywords: Korean ethnic churches, younger-generation Korean Argentines, religious faith, children's education, socialization, social integration, Global South