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**Christian Model Minority:  
Racial and Ethnic Formation in Asian American Evangelicalism<sup>1</sup>**

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The cover-story for the October 2014 issue of *Christianity Today* is titled “Asian American Ascent.”<sup>2</sup> The feature story’s subtitle asks the question: “Asian American Christians are growing in influence and audience. Will they be embraced by their broader church family?”<sup>3</sup> Helen Lee,

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Jane Iwamura, Yung Suk Kim, and anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> “Asian American Ascent,” *Christianity Today* 58:8 (October 2014), 1. On the cover, the sub-heading read: “They are finding their voices, leading churches, and connecting with people others cannot reach.”

<sup>3</sup> Helen Lee, “Asian Americans: Silent No More,” *Christianity Today* 58:8 (October 2014), 38.

the author of the cover-story, offers a cautionary tale as evidence of Asian American leadership in American evangelicalism remains elusive despite “unique voices and gifts” among Asian American Christians.<sup>4</sup> Across the country, Asian American pastors and leaders demonstrate church-planting and church-building skills, charismatic leadership, and academic prowess yet they “rarely headline major conferences, attract media attention, or top Christian publishing’s bestseller lists.”<sup>5</sup>

Asian American Christians feel a double marginalization: having grown up with discrimination in American society, they also endure a two-tiered existence in American evangelicalism. Lingering yet established stereotypes such as model minority and “perpetual foreigner” continue to dominate perceptions of Asian Americans. As an Asian ethnic minority in American evangelicalism, Asian American Christians sense a growing ambivalence toward their acceptance in the wider movement.

The uncertain outlook of Asian American Christians is exacerbated by the lack of racial self-awareness among Asian American Christians themselves. Ken Fong at Fuller Theological Seminary says that Asian American Christians “have been raised to think, *I have a born-again*

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<sup>4</sup> Asian Americans represent a diversity of Asian ethnic backgrounds. From Pakistanis to Japanese and everywhere in-between, Asian Americans are roughly six percent of the U.S. population. Among Asian Americans, more are affiliated with Christianity than any other religion at forty-two percent. The unaffiliated are second at twenty-six percent and Buddhists at fourteen percent. The usage of ‘Asian American Christians’ by the author, scholars, and commentators refer, for the most part, to second-generation Asian American evangelicals. According to a study of Asian American religions by Pew Research, “Among Asian American Christians, the highest self-reported attendance rates are among evangelical Protestants, 76% of whom go to services at least once a week, followed by Catholics (60% at least once a week) and mainline Protestants (42%). All three Asian American Christian groups attend services more frequently than do their counterparts in the general public.” “Asian Americans: Mosaic of Faith,” *Pew Research* July 19, 2012 [Accessed November 10, 2012 from <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/>].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

*identity, so I don't need to understand issues of self-identity.*"<sup>6</sup> The unexamined racial identity magnifies a disturbing trend in American evangelicalism that has garnered attention in recent years: appropriation of Asian caricatures and stereotypes for sensational aims. As Asian American church leaders become increasingly disillusioned with what appears to be series of missteps by evangelical leaders, this paper explores the complexity of the relationship by shifting the locus of attention from white evangelicals to Asian American Christians.

Focusing on Asian American Christians, the intention of this study is to gain a clearer picture of how the particulars of racial formation affect not only the relationship with white evangelicals but also the discourse of race within Asian American Christian community. To assist in this, the study will examine how the second-generation's conflicting experience with the first-generation immigrant church has contributed partially to a growing discomfort with the role of race and ethnicity in the church. Decidedly opposed to culture, especially Asian culture above the church, the second-generation promote a culture-free and color-blind church, a position on race shared with white evangelicalism.

However, this brand of multiculturalism based on color-blind theology creates a fault line from which ethnic culture is perceived as a threat to the church community's status quo. This study maps out the ripple effects that resistance toward ethnic culture will have on the larger discourse on race and ethnicity. Such an interpretation is necessary because Asian American Christians remain all but invisible in the narrative of American evangelicalism but questions

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46.

remain whether Asian Americans inadvertently perpetuate racial invisibility while maintaining themselves as the Christian model minority.

Concerns over the infiltration of ethnic culture in the church have been at the center of debate among Asian Americans but a culture-free and color-blind church undercuts effort in the Asian American church community to examine the complex ways race informs the lives of their parishioners who purposefully attend an Asian ethnic church. The internal resistance to grapple with these issues further eases the path of Asian American assimilation with white evangelicals. By doing so, the Asian American Christianity community relinquish the opportunity to challenge the homogeneity of an evangelical identity and to contest the meanings that attend the racialization of Asian American Christianity. What emerges is the self-reinforcement of the Christian model minority: the maintenance of white privilege, affirmation of middle-class standing, preservation of ethnic hierarchy in American evangelicalism, and compliance in the racialized formation of Asian Americans.

### **Model Minority Stereotype**

Ever since William Petersen coined the term “model minority” in a 1996 article in *The New York Times Magazine* that lauded the Asian Americans as the exemplary minority,<sup>7</sup> the

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<sup>7</sup> William Petersen, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” *The New York Times Magazine* (January 9, 1966), 20. “By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort.” (p. 20) One of the earliest studies on the social construction of model minority was H.L. Kitano and S. Sue, “The Model Minorities,” *Journal of Social Issues* 29:2 (1973) and F. Hosokawa, *The Sansei: Social Interaction and Ethnic Identification Among the Third Generation Japanese* (San Francisco, CA: R & E Research Associates, 1978).

“model minority” has become one of the dominant racial stereotype for Asian Americans,<sup>8</sup> a construct that Asian American activists and scholars have describe as “inaccurate, misleading, and a gross overgeneralization.”<sup>9</sup> While the model minority label appears to commend Asian Americans for their success, critics point to its “invidious” and “detrimental” consequences upon the Asian American community.<sup>10</sup> By pointing to selective statistics on economic success, Asian Americans in popular perception have become “racial bourgeoisie” in American society but their place in the racial hierarchy remains precarious as social constructions of Asian Americans render them vulnerable and susceptible in racialized politics.<sup>11</sup> Lisa Park writes, “The model minority myth functions as a political mechanism of control that alters one’s sense of reality to justify the unequal social order.”<sup>12</sup>

As Asian American scholars point out, the model minority construct is only a surface manifestation of the underlying struggles and anxieties in America’s racialized society. The model minority construct functions as a mechanism—checks and balances—to control or

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<sup>8</sup> “The racialization of Asian Americans has taken on two primary forms: racialization as non-Americans and racialization as the model minority.” Angelo Anceta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Suzuki, “Asian Americans as the ‘Model Minority’: Outdoing Whites? Or Media Hype?” *Change* 21:6 (1989), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Bob Suzuki, “Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype: Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Higher Education,” *New Directions for Student Services* 97 (2002), 25, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Mari Matsuda, “We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?” *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jean Wu and Thomas Chen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University), 558-564. Claire Jean Kim argues that Asian Americans are “racially triangulated” in a “field of racial positions.” Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics Society* 27:105 (1999), 106. Also see chapter 2: “White and Black” in Gary Okihiro, *Common Ground* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 28-54; chapter 2: “The Model Minority: Asian American ‘Success’ as a Race Relations Failure,” in Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America* (NY: Basic Books, 2002), 39-77.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Park argues how the model minority narrative conforms to notions of the American dream and democracy. Lisa Park, “Continuing Significance of the Model Minority Myth: The Second Generation,” *Social Justice* 35:2 (2008), 135, 136.

maneuver the racialized playing field. The ideological transaction of garnering the model minority prize creates a relationship between Asian Americans and dominant white society whereby in exchange for coming first among non-white ethnic groups Asian Americans continue the foreigner status; quietly remain respectful and obedient to the authorities; and enable the racialized instrumentalism of Asian Americans.

When Rick Warren used a Chinese Red Guard to extol the virtues of Asians and Asian Americans on his Facebook account in 2013, it created a racial subplot that captures our attention at least partly because Warren, as one of the most prominent evangelicals in America and world, added another layer of complexity to the model minority by coopting it into the American evangelical hierarchy and presenting the model minority as the status quo of the Asian American Christian community. The appropriation of the model minority to interpret Asian American Christians is only the latest instance in what Rudy Busto describes as the promotion of Asian American Christians by white evangelicals as “spiritual giants,” “zealots,” and “aggressive evangelizers.”<sup>13</sup>

Expected in exchange for being lauded as the exemplary Christian minority is the understanding of the existing racial hierarchy and Asian Americans’ tacit approval of their marginalized status. In 1997, J. Isamu Yamamoto wrote “Silent No More: Asian American Christians Are Still Viewed as an Invisible People” in which Yamamoto described a stained-glass ceiling “within the evangelical community that prohibits them from rising to leadership roles,

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<sup>13</sup> Rudy Busto, “The Gospel according to the Model Minority? Hazardous Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students,” in *New Spiritual Homes*, ed. David Yoo (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 179.

despite their qualifications.”<sup>14</sup> The status as an invisible people also underscores the role that white evangelicals play in shaping the course and themes of evangelicalism that in turn reinforces their position as teachers and mentors to Asian Americans. Pastor Yong Jin of Open Door Community Church in Atlanta appreciated the willingness of white evangelicals to help Asian American Christians “which is great.” But, he added, “We don’t want them to look down at us, thinking that we have a lot of zeal but little knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> Jin continued, “Our theology is mature, and the time has come for them to see that we can stand on our own merits and skills. We don’t want to be arrogant, but we also don’t want to be tokens.”<sup>16</sup>

Rick Warren took down the image on his Facebook and Twitter account and issued an apology but not before creating a firestorm of criticism in the Asian American Christian community. Warren’s image as well as the culmination of “repeated and offensive racial stereotyping” resulted in “An Open Letter to the Evangelical Church,” a collaborative effort to confront, what many Asian American Christians believe, institutionalized racism in the church.<sup>17</sup> Within a few months after the Open Letter was publicized, more than 1000 signatories added their names to vent their frustrations.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Isamu Yamamoto, “Silent No More: Asian American Christians Are Still Viewed as an Invisible People,” *New Man Magazine* May 1997 [accessed 10 October 1998 from <http://www.newmanmag.com/may97/ny197108.htm>]. The website no longer exists but the article can also be viewed from <http://cacforum.wordpress.com/articles/silent-no-more-asian-american-christians-are-still-viewed-as-an-invisible-people/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “An Open Letter to the Evangelical Church,” *Next Gener.Asian Church*, 13 October 2013 [accessed 15 October 2013 from <http://nextgenerasianchurch.com/2013/10/13/an-open-letter-to-the-evangelical-church-from-the-asian-american-community/>].

## Christian Model Minority

Contemporary studies agree that interpreting Asian American Christians as the model minority performs the cultural, religious, and racialized work of exposing the points of intersection faced by Asian American Christians as they straddle the model minority image and faith.<sup>18</sup> As an ethnic group that experiences high levels of education and economic mobility,<sup>19</sup> Asian American Christians also exhibit religious traits similar to evangelicals recognizes conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism as central to faith formation.<sup>20</sup> The striking similarities with evangelicalism produce a deeply felt awareness of the model minority image not only among Asian American Christians themselves but also white evangelicals and scholars researching them. Hard work, discipline, self-control, and obedience—a few of the virtues in evangelicalism—complement, according to Rebecca Kim, “Asian Americans’ familial and cultural upbringing and can help them stay on the model minority path of socioeconomic mobility.”<sup>21</sup> The overrepresentation of Asian Americans in evangelical organizations reinforces, according to Rudy Busto, “an upwardly mobile middle-class ethnic constant with the model

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<sup>18</sup> For an examination of Asian American Christians as civic model minorities, see Elaine Ecklund and Jerry Z. Park, “Asian American Community Participation and Religion: Civic ‘Model Minorities?’” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8:1 (February 2005), 1-21.

<sup>19</sup> Asian Americans as a whole “have the highest household income of any American racial group.” Timothy Tseng et al., *Asian American Religious Leadership Today: A Preliminary Inquiry* (Durham, NC: Duke Divinity School, 2005), 9.

<sup>20</sup> “There are the four qualities that have been the special marks of evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.” David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (NY: Routledge, 1989), 2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Y. Kim, *God’s New Whiz Kids?: Korean American Evangelicals on Campus* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 167.



minority image.”<sup>22</sup> Rita Sethi posits Asian Americans may “suffer the injustices of racial intolerance, in return for being later compensated by the fruits of economic success.”<sup>23</sup>

Based on these criteria, the Christian model minority explains the process whereby Asian American Christians have been doubly marginalized by both the model minority stereotype and white Evangelicalism. Theological considerations and evangelical ethos are made the important criteria for Asian American Christians and racial and ethnic issues are discredited as beyond the sphere of evangelical understanding and experience. Building on the model minority stereotype that sets Asian Americans apart from other ethnic groups for their laudable traits, the Christian model minority distinguishes between ethnic groups and highlights Asian American Christians as “exemplars of evangelical piety and action to which other evangelicals should aspire.”<sup>24</sup> Asian American Christians are aware of the Christian model minority image and some of them, as Elaine Ecklund explains, internalize the image and embrace an “unconscious schemas that reinforce a spiritual view of the model minority.”<sup>25</sup>

The Christian model minority image furthermore obscures ethnic diversity within the Asian American church and promotes a successful image of church development that belies the struggles and problems in Asian American churches. Focused on the successes of Asian American churches, the rhetoric diverts attention away from taking necessary steps to address

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<sup>22</sup> Rudy Busto, “The Gospel according to the Model Minority? Hazardous Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students,” 178.

<sup>23</sup> Rita C. Sethi, “Smells Like Racism,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 144.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>25</sup> Elaine Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals: New Models for Civic Life* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 143.

deep-seated problems. Highlighting Asian Americans as the exceptional minority not only divisively compares them to other ethnic groups, but it effectively situates them as a successful minority within American evangelicalism. While white evangelicals applaud the successes of Asian American Christians, the perception of Asian Americans as a successful, model minority undermines relations and generates tensions between ethnic groups including whites.

Drawing upon Michael Omi and Howard Winant's concept of racial formation, which they define "as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed,"<sup>26</sup> the Christian model minority represents the latest multifaceted construct that preserves the central character of the model minority stereotype but with added religious dimensions. Uncomplaining respect for authority, educational success, and middle-class attainment are a few of model minority stereotypes and the Christian model minority broadens the construction to encompass an evangelical identity to add a religious dimension to bind Asian American Christians willingly or unwillingly with complex and divisive representations.

Despite affirmation from evangelical circles as the exemplary ethnic group, Asian Americans not only remain subordinate in the racial hierarchy but also uphold the racial status quo. Although the white evangelicals' "color-blind" rhetoric suggests an egalitarian, 'equal-playing-field' racial outlook, Asian American church leaders nonetheless confront a "stained-glass" ceiling in the church that illuminates the reality of an unspoken yet firm racial hierarchy in

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (NY: Routledge, 1994), 55.

the background.<sup>27</sup> Asian American Christians' solidarity with American evangelicalism remains increasingly complex, defined by an evangelical culture that resists acknowledging systemic racial problems.<sup>28</sup> The privatization of the faith experience distinguishes evangelicalism and the individualization of one's conversion and faith formation shelters evangelicals from pressure to address racial structures and issues. Because sins are interpreted from an individual standpoint, racial problems or issues remain individually based, a phenomenon that assigns structural or institutional explanations to the problems of race as "irrelevant or even wrongheaded" since it implies the doer eschewing accountability for one's actions.<sup>29</sup>

The resistance to racial issues reflects what Emerson and Smith call the evangelicals' central tenets of accountable freewill individualism, relationism, and antistructuralism<sup>30</sup> but they maintain at the same time a racial hierarchy that perpetuates the model minority stereotype of Asian American Christians that renders them invisible, powerless, and foreign. Despite the individualistic and egalitarian narrative among white evangelicals, Asian American Christians remain hobbled by an unwillingness to grapple seriously with the racialization of Asian Americans and its implications. Lisa Park writes, "The notion of a model minority does not

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<sup>27</sup> A "stained glass" ceiling is a phenomenon whereby white congregations do not hire Asian American pastors, according to Rev. James Sun, leading to a "stuck" situation for Asian American pastors. Truong Phuoc Khanh, "Leadership of Big, English-Speaking Churches Seems out of Reach, Many Asian American Pastors Say," *San Jose Mercury News* (November 2, 2002), quoted in Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>28</sup> Evangelicals believe that the "evils of society stemmed from sinful individuals in need of redemption." Dispensationalism, a theological concept that divided human history into periods, exempted evangelicals from "the daunting task of social reform" and "allowed evangelicals to walk away from the problems of the cities and to concentrate on the conversion, or regeneration, of individuals rather than society as a whole." Randall Balmer, *Religion in Twentieth Century America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 78.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-80.

imply full citizenship rights but, rather, a secondary one reserved for particular minorities who ‘behave’ appropriately and stay in their designated space without complaint.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Asian American Church Leaders and Model Minority**

By positioning the Asian American church in contrast to the flaws of the Asian immigrant churches, Asian American Christianity aligns closely with American evangelicalism more than any other Christian movement or denomination. The Asian American alignment to American evangelicalism has been understood mostly as theological compatibility. Less understood are the racial disparities and the assumptions of whiteness as the norm in evangelicalism. With racial difference being defined mostly through a black/white binary, Asian Americans are generally perceived as positioned outside of the racial discourse. Such assumptions belittle Asian Americans’ experiences of racism as less damaging than the racism endured by African Americans and that Asian Americans in general aspire to whiteness. According to Rudy Busto, the relegation of ethnic difference to secondary importance represents “one of the most puzzling aspects” of Asian American evangelicalism.<sup>32</sup> Elaine Ecklund goes further and argues that Asian Americans even reinforce “images of themselves as model minorities.”<sup>33</sup>

The reluctance to identify and address racial discrimination demonstrates the way that Asian American Christianity negates the impetus to challenge racial systems and interprets

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<sup>31</sup> Lisa Park, “Continuing Significance of the Model Minority Myth: The Second Generation,” *Social Justice* 35:2 (2008), 135.

<sup>32</sup> Rudy Busto, “The Gospel according to the Model Minority? Hazarding an Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students,” 175.

<sup>33</sup> Elaine Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals: New Models for Civic Life*, 78.

awareness of racial discrimination as un-Christian. For example, Pastor Joseph preached that “to acknowledge discrimination or poverty is to ‘act like a victim’ and remove one’s focus from God.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Pastor Joseph’s perception of discrimination closely matches mainstream America’s view of Asian Americans. A poll conducted by *The Wall Street Journal* and NBC News revealed that “most Americans voters thought that Asian Americans did not suffer discrimination” but in fact received too many “special advantages.”<sup>35</sup>

Pastor Joseph asked the congregation, “How many people in this church see themselves as a victim? Jesus did not come so you would be a victim, but that you would overcome... Get your eyes off yourself.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, focusing on discrimination renders the believer to dwell on the human condition—not on spiritual matters. For many Asian American Christians, the disapproval of assigning structural explanations for human behavior identifies closely with white evangelicals who emphasize freewill individualism and relationalism that concentrates accountability on the individual and negates responsibility upon structural constructs and institutions.<sup>37</sup>

White evangelicals, according to Emerson and Smith, believe the “playing field as essentially flat and the vast majority of people as unprejudiced” and “many felt it must be the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>35</sup> Murray Polner, “Asian Americans Say They Are Treated Like Foreigners,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 1993, Section Because, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Elaine Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 78. “What is more, white conservative Protestants believe that sinful humans typically deny their own personal sin by shifting blame somewhere else, such as on ‘the system.’ “Evangelicals are thus also antistructural because they believe that invoking social structures shifts guilt away from its root structure—the accountable individual.” “For those we interviewed, the tools of individualism and personal relationships limited their ability either to recognize institutional problems or to acknowledge them as important.” 79-80.

blacks themselves who are to blame” if white Americans experienced less than friendly encounters with African Americans.<sup>38</sup> In a multi-ethnic discussion among Christian college students, African American students expressed racial concerns the most, followed by Latinos and whites. However Asian Americans remained quiet and “fulfilled the silent ‘model minority’ stereotype by remaining quiet through the discussions on race.”<sup>39</sup>

The adoption of the equal playing-field as the work-ethic overshadows racial considerations and exacerbates divisions between ethnic groups. Asian American church leaders reinforce a perception of the Christian model minority when they criticize other ethnic groups for “rioting” or “complaining” and extol the “moral superiority” of Asian American Christians.<sup>40</sup> An Asian American Christian says “the best American citizens are often Christians and work diligently in their chosen profession.”<sup>41</sup> Instead of challenging prevailing racial stereotypes by representing Asian Americans as complex subjects with multiple and contradictory experiences, Asian American church leaders reinforce a nonethnic construction of Asian Americans that advances a color-blind Christianity, a form of cultural relativism that erases ethnic distinctions for the sake of creating an evangelical identity. A great deal of effort by Asian American church leaders went into making Asian American Christians “culturally nonethnic” that would become the benchmark of the Asian American Christian experience.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca Kim, *God's New Whiz Kids?* 92.

<sup>40</sup> Elaine Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals*, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> In her study of Korean American evangelicals, Elaine Ecklund mentioned the effort of Korean American evangelicals to become “cultural nonethnic.” Elaine Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals*, 151.

Asian American church leaders steer their congregations away from an Asian ethnic culture and replaces it uncritically with a white evangelical culture. According to Ecklund, the actions of Asian American church leaders make “faith synonymous with American [culture]” rather than an ethnic one.<sup>43</sup> By consciously rejecting ethnic culture in their parents’ church, the second generation Christians “may be more similar to those of white Americans than to those of their [immigrant] parents.”<sup>44</sup> The approach taken by Asian American church leaders overlaps with the perspective of “most white Americans [who] honestly desire a color-blind society, and often oppose the color-conscious for that reason.”<sup>45</sup>

By relegating the contestation of racial discrimination as incompatible with evangelical Christian behavior, many Asian American Christians dismiss racial discourse and adopt a color-blind and nonethnic interpretation to racialized concerns. Rebecca Kim observes that second-generation Christians “commonly place their Christian identity above their ethnic identity, and some replace their ethnic identity with a broader Christian identity.”<sup>46</sup> The disappearance of ethnic identity in Asian American churches underscores the contentious issue of culture in the church that has become prominent in Asian American Christianity. The identity of second-generation Christians, according to David Kyuman Kim, has become rooted in religion that

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>44</sup> Pyong Gap Min, “Koreans: An ‘Institutionally Complete Community’ in New York,” in *New Immigrants in New York*, ed. Nancy Foner (NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), 196.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 89.

<sup>46</sup> Rebecca Kim, *God’s New Whiz Kids?* 9.

replaces a core ethnic identity “especially if it is an evangelical brand of Christianity.”<sup>47</sup> Ecklund describes how Asian American evangelicals pursue an “ironic” detachment from their ethnicity.<sup>48</sup>

### **Generational Conflict**

Asian American church leaders’ critique of ethnicity and culture stems largely from the way they perceive how the Gospel was overshadowed in the Asian immigrant church by ethnic culture.

Viewing the Asian immigrant church as hopelessly compromised, Asian American church leaders remain vigilant against ethnic culture for the fear of becoming muddled like the first-generation immigrants. In a 2005 Duke Divinity School study, *Asian American Religious Leadership Today*, one of the two “most acute tensions” in Asian American churches revolved around the antagonist attitude of second-generation Asian American pastors toward Asian immigrant churches that they consider to be fundamentally “dysfunctional and hypocritical religious institutions.”<sup>49</sup> The resentment stems partly from the first-generation’s “heavy handed and dictatorial” style of leadership and management.<sup>50</sup> A layer of protective concern guides Asian American church leaders who wish to shield the second-generation “from what they perceive to be a harmful and dysfunctional church subculture.”<sup>51</sup> Pastor Joseph, a second-generation Asian American pastor,

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<sup>47</sup> David Kyuman Kim, “Becoming: Korean Americans, Faith, and Identity: Observations on an Emerging Culture” (M.Div. thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 1993), 41.

<sup>48</sup> Elaine Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals*, 151.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy Tseng et al., *Asian American Religious Leadership Today: A Preliminary Inquiry*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 28.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.



sought to develop “a deeper and more sincere form of faith than that of their parents, one that separates [ethnic] culture from Christianity.”<sup>52</sup>

The work of the second generation represents a sustained attempt to reclaim “a truly spiritual Christianity” from the immigrant church without the interference of competing secular forces and activities.<sup>53</sup> In frustration, Joshua, an Asian American Christian, questions the intention of those coming to church when he asks how many people come to church “and not because of social reasons?”<sup>54</sup> Convinced that the immigrant church is “watered down and compromised,” Asian American church leaders aim to dismount the importance of socioeconomic mobility and secular priorities and install to its rightful place spiritual goals.<sup>55</sup> They question the “prominent” role of social activities in the Asian immigrant church. They urge the second generation Asian Americans not to repeat the mistakes of their parents’ church.

Although Asian American church leaders’ suspicion toward culture began with the practices in the first-generation Asian church, their perspective extends well beyond the ethnic community to include the broader discussion of culture. The inclusion of culture in the church, they argue, is particularly dangerous given the way in which culture is understood as a subjective human-made construction and therefore, at its basic level, an un-Christian enterprise. For example, the gospel, according to a second-generation Asian American pastor, is “captive to the

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<sup>52</sup> Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals*, 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>55</sup> Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*, 29.

culture” of the Asian-ethnic church. As one Asian American Christian noted, “In church, you play by Korean rules, not God’s rules.”<sup>56</sup>

Using the experience of the Asian immigrant church to expand on the notion that culture in general is inherently oppressive and ungodly, an Asian American pastor continued, “every nation and every culture is deeply pathological.”<sup>57</sup> The dominance of culture renders churches “powerless in almost all cultures, because empires and nations co-opt it.”<sup>58</sup> For this pastor and many others, the mission of churches is to disentangle itself from culture. He continues, “The question [for churches] was how not to be co-opted by our cultures of origin.”<sup>59</sup> This sentiment is illustrated by an Asian American Christian who critiqued fellow Asian American Christians who “understand Christian faith through the grid of” Asian culture that cultivates a “hypocritical” and contradictory disposition. As scholars have observed, the disdain of culture is not uncommon in Asian American Christianity. R. Stephen Warner notes the rejection of ethnicity among Asian American congregations and commented that second generation Korean American Christians “seem more eager to be known as ‘Christian’ than ‘Korean.’”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kelly Chong, “What It Means to be Christian: The Role of Religion in the Construction of Ethnic Identity and Boundary among Second-Generation Korean Americans,” *Sociology of Religion* 59:3 (1998), 282.

<sup>57</sup> Heather Roote Faller, “Spirit Moves in Multicultural Ways,” *Inspire* 13:1 (Fall 2008/ Winter-Spring 2009): [article on-line]; available from <http://www.ptsem.edu/PUBLICATIONS/inspire/13.1/feature3.php>; Internet; accessed 20 May 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 240.

## Replicating the Same Culture

As Asian American Christianity detaches itself from Asian ethnic culture and embraces American evangelicalism, it faces the contradictory pull of independence and assimilation, the yearning to participate in the mainstream, on one hand, and reticence to fully engage, on the other. By rejecting Asian culture and embracing egalitarianism and non-hierarchical structures—distinct American cultural values—Asian American church leaders' efforts to shed culture only accelerates their assimilation to American evangelicalism, a development not lost on scholars who study Asian American Christianity. Rebecca Kim notes the “paradox” of Asian American Christians: they “shed most of the practices and rituals of their ethnic community and embrace dominant, white evangelical practices and rituals, yet they resist assimilation and maintain ethnic segregation.”<sup>61</sup> In her study of second-generation Christianity, Elaine Ecklund writes, “By trying to divorce Christianity from ethnic culture, [Asian American Christians] are really adopting an unexamined ethnic culture similar to that of white American Christianity.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite efforts from Asian American church leaders to sanitize their congregations of racial and ethnic discourse, the persistence of inequality defined by color lines underscores the importance of race among Asian Americans. The church is the place where Asian Americans, according to Karen Chai, negotiate their “all-consuming identity” as Asian Americans, as Americans, and as Christians.<sup>63</sup> Kelly Chong writes that the second generation’s participation in

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<sup>61</sup> Rebecca Y. Kim, *God's New Whiz Kids?*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Karen Chia, “Beyond ‘Strictness’ to Distinctiveness: Generational Transition in Korean Protestant Churches,” in *Korean Americans and Their Religions*, eds. Kwon et al. (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001), 172.

an ethnic church is accompanied “by an unusually high degree of ethnic identity and consciousness” that forms a “refuge” or “defensive ethnicity” against society that discriminates and marginalizes them.<sup>64</sup> As a result, Asian American Christians emerge with significant contradictions: aversion to challenging racial constructs in the church and society yet keenly aware of the “generational, ethnic, and racial issues” facing their community.<sup>65</sup> A generation that publicly criticizes the immigrant and ethnic congregations but that resists complete assimilation with American Evangelicalism.

Asian American Christians’ ambivalence toward evangelicalism produces the recognition of the pervasiveness of evangelicalism’s culture and the desire to create their own space. Some Asian American churches have taken a selective approach to worship, appropriating elements from both Korean Christianity and American evangelicalism. In their effort to conceive variations of a workable formula, Asian American churches attempt to “fuse the best of two expressions of spirituality” such as *tongsongkido* (or union prayer) that Sharon Kim calls a “hybrid third space.”<sup>66</sup> The selective appropriation of worship styles reflects not only Asian American Christians’ dual religious heritage but also the desire to experiment with familiar and unfamiliar forms in a “spiritual laboratory.”<sup>67</sup> The adoption of variations in style represents not about contesting the racial status quo but rather experimenting with flexible forms of worship. Such grass-roots expressions of worship provide a range of styles and indicate a separate space

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<sup>64</sup> Kelly Chong, “What It Means to be Christian: The Role of Religion in the Construction of Ethnic Identity and Boundary among Second-Generation Korean Americans,” 261.

<sup>65</sup> Timothy Tseng et al., *Asian American Religious Leadership Today: A Preliminary Inquiry*, 27.

<sup>66</sup> Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> See chapter 4, “Spiritual Laboratories,” in Sharon Kim’s *A Faith of Our Own*.

wherein Asian American churches practice variant styles of worship that include those originated from Asian Christianity but this trend exists within an Asian American church culture that deliberately avoids overt display of Asian culture, such as Asian “language, holidays, and food.” In fact, second-generation churches “intentionally refrain” from speaking their native tongue and serving only Asian cuisine.<sup>68</sup>

The sensitivity with which Asian American church leaders have approached ethnicity and culture illustrates the pressure to refrain from cultural discourse and the limitations of Asian American narratives as tools for addressing the challenging racial injustice. By highlighting the incompatibility of Asian culture with Christianity, Asian American church leaders reject Asian culture as a significant reference point for Asian American self-understanding.

As hindrances to a purer, authentic Christianity, the presence of culture is understood as remnants of corrupted cultural attachments from a previous generation infused with ethnic customs. Pastor Joseph, a second-generation pastor, preached against embedded cultural sins found in the first-generation Korean church. He said, “There are certain sins that have been institutionalized. There are ‘corporate sins.’ Sin is equal to injustice...Judging in the Korean first-generation church: Social class is important. The church needs to work on this. Confucian hierarchy is important. Men are above women. The older are superior to the younger.”<sup>69</sup> A second-generation Korean American said, “More and more, I’m seeing how incompatible a lot of Korean values are with the Christian faith. The whole idea of Confucianism I think poses a lot of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>69</sup> Elaine Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals*, 102.

problems... Personally, I have a lot of struggles with Korean American ministry and those aspects that are influenced by the culture.”<sup>70</sup>

Among the numerous options of churches in America, many second-generation Korean Americans choose to attend a Korean-ethnic English ministry *yet* they “do not see themselves as ‘doing Korean church.’”<sup>71</sup> An Asian American Christian states, “My identity in Christ supersedes my identity as an Asian.”<sup>72</sup> The avoidance of ethnic culture in the church appears to be self-conscious and theologically affirmed in their understanding of church. The act of doing an Asian ethnic church somehow violates a fundamental tenet of religious practice by incorporating cultural and un-Christian elements. A second generation Asian American Christian woman commented that the more Asian culture is preserved, “the least likely [for him or her] to be a faithful Christian.”<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

The appropriation of Asian stereotypes has been repeated in a long line of caricatures by evangelical preachers, publishers, and authors. For example, LifeWay Christian Resource published in 2004 a Vacation Bible School curriculum with the theme *Rickshaw Rally: Racing to*

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Antony Alumkal, *Asian American Evangelical Churches* (NY: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2003), 114.

<sup>71</sup> Ecklund, *Korean American Evangelicals*, 57.

<sup>72</sup> Antony Alumkal, “American Evangelicalism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: A Racial Formation Theory Analysis,” *Sociology of Religion* 65:3 (Autumn 2004), 207.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. The condescension of immigrant culture and religion is not lost on the immigrant generation. Rev. Jin So Yoo, a first-generation Korean pastor in Los Angeles, observed the attitude of second-generation Christians when he said, “They [second-generation] see U.S. culture as ‘higher’ than Korean culture.” Joan Huyser-Honig, “Korean American Churches: From Generation to Generation,” *Vital Worship Stories (from Calvin Institute of Christian Worship)* 20 May 2009 [accessed 20 May 2009 from <http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/korean.php>].

*the Son* that advertised its program with a white girl dressed in kimono with chopsticks in their hair holding a wire-handle Chinese food takeout box.<sup>74</sup> Among the trinkets included in the material were a karate-kid key chain and name tags in the shape of Chinese takeout food boxes. In 2009, the Christian publishing house Zondervan published (and later removed and apologized for) *Deadly Viper Character Assassins: A Kung Fu Survival Guide for Life and Leadership*, a book designed to boost integrity and character among the youth. Standing in the way of “your leadership, integrity, and success” are “kung fu killers,” a “bloodthirsty” assassination squad “lurking in the shadows,” known as the Deadly Viper Character Assassins.<sup>75</sup> In its attempt at humor and stimulating interest, the book employed the easiest, basest stereotypes of Asian culture and character for its sensational aims, offering little more than the most juvenile account of Asian culture and peoples.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the appropriation of Asian culture is not surprising given the subordinate place of Asian Americans in the racial and religious hierarchy. As Asian American Christians eschew racial identity and issues, they are left without a conceptual framework to examine not only the complexity of racial formation but also to respond to the process of racialization. In effect, racial

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<sup>74</sup> On November 6, 2013, Thom Rainer, President of CEO of LifeWay since 2006, apologized for “Rickshaw Rally,” nearly ten years after its release. Rainer said, “As president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, I want to apologize. I am sincerely sorry stereotypes were used in our materials, and I apologize for the pain they caused.” “An Apology from Dr. Thom Rainer on Behalf of LifeWay Christian Resources,” Vimeo video 6 November 2013 [accessed 8 November 2013 from <http://vimeo.com/78735039>].

<sup>75</sup> “In this book we’ll introduce you to seven mortal enemies, the assassination squad. We refer to them as the Deadly Viper Character Assassins. Who are these kung fu killers? They are bloodthirsty hit-men lurking in the shadows plotting to undermine your leadership, integrity, and success.” Mike Foster and Jud Whilhite, *Deadly Viper Character Assassins: A Kung Fu Survival Guide for Life and Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 9.

<sup>76</sup> The Table of Content for *Deadly Viper*: Chapter 0: Nunchucks. Warriors & Master Po, Ch. 1: The Assassin of Character Creep, Ch. 2: The Assassin of Zi Qi Qi Ren, Ch. 3: The Assassin of Amped Emotions, Ch. 4: The Assassin of the Headless Sprinting Chicken, Ch. 5: The Assassin of Boom Chicka Wah Wah, Ch. 6: The Bling Bling Assassin, Ch. 7: The High and Mighty Assassin.

injustice, discrimination, and stereotyping will continue to be perceived as an action of an individual or group instead of part of a larger, systemic problem.

The self-imposed stigmatization of race and ethnicity within Asian American Christianity presents an enormous obstacle. At a time when an increasing number of young Asian American Christians no longer view the church as relevant to social concerns, Asian American church leaders are faced with a dilemma as Asian Americans view racial discrimination as one of if not the greatest challenge that they face in American society. Asian American Christian leaders' engagement with racialized formations is essential to the contestation of racial narratives within American evangelicalism and broader society. However it will require a honest and difficult introspection in order to combat internalized racial alienation. Long addressed and supported through a theological lens, new hermeneutical perspectives will be needed to formulate and re-orient existing approaches.

Secondly, Asian American church leaders need to re-assess its affiliation with American evangelicalism and examine institutional constructions of racial and ethnic identity. As Asian American church leaders fight extrinsic racial classification by both whites and other minority groups, they have an opportunity to address the challenges of racial injustice and reconciliation. The unexamined racial self-awareness ignores social hierarchies based on race but recurring missteps by white evangelicals will be reminders of the simple fact that race-related issues cannot be avoided.