

Book Reviews

Contentious Spirits: Religion in Korean American History, 1903–1945.

By David K. Yoo. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. xiv, 216. \$60; paperback \$21.95.

A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches.

By Sharon Kim. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. x, 200. \$72; paperback \$23.95.

Both of these books make important contributions to our understanding of Korean American religion. *Contentious Spirits* is the first (and so far only) book-length treatment of the foundational period of Korean American history. In it, David K. Yoo, a distinguished historian and director of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA, argues that two characteristics stand out in the history of the Korean American community between 1903 and 1945: (1) the encompassing presence of religion, more precisely, Protestantism, and (2) contentiousness among Korean Americans over how to fight for the independence of Korea, which was then languishing under Japanese colonialism.

In this period the total number of Korean Americans was about 10,000, the vast majority of whom were Protestants—“an estimated 90 percent of those who left Korea [for the United States] identified themselves as Christians [i.e., Protestant]” (p. 8). This is an extraordinary fact given that Christians represented at most 2 percent of the Korean population at the time, a singularity owed partly to some Protestant missionaries who encouraged Koreans to emigrate to the United States. Yoo’s narrative begins with 1903 because that was when the first group of Korean immigrants arrived in Hawaii; it ends in 1945, presumably because the end of World War II initiated a series of events that culminated in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which marked a new era for Korean and other Asian Americans, the era that gave birth to people covered in Kim’s book.

To make his argument, Yoo mainly examines the sparse records that exist on Korean American Protestant communities in Hawaii and Los Angeles. Specifically, he analyzes how Protestantism and contentiousness meshed with three sets of dual relationships that obtained among Korean Americans: migration and exile, religion and race, and colonialism and independence. The meshing is not always clear. Overall, however, Yoo provides a convincing narrative of the community, showing how Protestantism helped Koreans to acclimate to American culture despite their contentiousness, even though their faith in the end could not trump the racism that barred them from fully participating in American society.

While Yoo treats the foundational period of Korean American religious history, Sharon Kim, in *A Faith of Our Own*, focuses on the most recent period of that history, 1996–2006. Hers is a sociological study concentrating on twenty-two of the fifty-six second-generation Korean American Protestant churches she located in the Los Angeles area. All these are full-fledged independent churches, not English ministries of Korean immigrant churches or missions of white churches; all were founded by Korean Americans whose first language is English.

Kim, who teaches sociology at California State University at Fullerton, asks two overarching questions: What gave rise to these churches and what do they say about the spirituality of post-1965 second-generation Korean Americans? The author's answer, and the book's argument, is that these churches represent a hybrid third space embraced by the second generation that feels ill at ease both in the churches of their parents and in the churches of European Americans. Kim asserts, "By neither assimilating into mainstream churches nor remaining in the ethnic churches of their immigrant parents, but establishing their own independent religious institutions, second-generation Korean Americans are establishing that in today's American society, there are hybrid third spaces to inhabit" (p. 163).

While explaining factors behind the rise of this hybrid spirituality, Kim challenges some long-standing assumptions about second-generation Korean Americans: that they are less spiritual than their parents, that they abandon their parents' churches either to assimilate into white churches or to leave the faith altogether, that they more or less keep to themselves. This book is sure to reinvigorate conversations on the religious outlook of second-generation Korean Americans.

—Timothy S. Lee

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