



# Influences of Parents on Ethnic Identity Negotiation of Korean Immigrant Youths in Canada

## Les influences des parents sur la négociation d'identité ethnique des jeunes immigrants coréens au Canada

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to identify and explain influences of parents on the acculturative experiences of immigrant youths in the context of Korean immigrant families. The focus is placed on high levels of expectations that the first-generation parents have for their children in both academic and cultural domains. Korean parents often believe that high levels of educational attainment and retention of the heritage language are necessary for their children to succeed and become multi-lingual and multi-cultural within the Canadian society. Despite the consequent pressure and stress, 1.5- and second-generation Korean immigrants often seem to be able to adapt to the mainstream and heritage culture as well as values that they experience in Canada, which leads to the development of their hyphenated ethnic identity as *Korean-Canadian*.

**Keywords:** identity negotiation, ethnic identity, parent immigrants, Korean immigrants

### Résumé

Cet article cherche à identifier et expliquer les influences des parents sur l'acculturation de jeunes immigrants dans le contexte des familles coréennes immigrées. L'accent est mis sur la forte attente des parents de première génération pour leurs enfants dans les domaines académique et culturel. Les parents coréens croient que les niveaux les plus élevés de scolarité ainsi que la conservation de la langue d'origine sont nécessaires pour que leurs enfants réussissent et deviennent polyglottes et multiculturels dans la société canadienne. Malgré la pression et le stress qui en résultent, les immigrants coréens de 1,5 et deuxième génération semblent souvent pouvoir s'adapter aux cultures et valeurs de la société dominante ainsi que celles de la société d'origine, qui contribuent au développement de leur identité ethnique à trait d'union en tant que *coréen-canadiens*.

**Mots-clés :** négociation d'identité, identité ethnique, parents immigrants, immigrants coréens



## Introduction

In her article “Canadian as an Ethnic Category,” Rhoda Howard-Hassmann (1999) introduced the term “ethnic-Canadian” as a new ethnic category to refer to people from the multicultural groups of Canadian society: English-speaking, non-Aboriginal Canadians who are born outside of, or immigrate to Canada at young ages, but whose ethnic ancestry has origins other than English or even British (523, 528). It is worth noting that one’s identity as an ethnic-Canadian does not necessarily correspond with his or her legal status as a citizen. Rather, Howard-Hassmann argued that identity is a “state of mind” (11): one’s willingness to identify him or herself as Canadian becomes the binding factor amongst the ethnically and racially diverse populations of Canada.

There are numerous factors which contribute to the development of one’s hyphenated identity as ethnic-Canadian: the strong affiliation with the new country, which mostly stems from Canada’s willingness to promote cultural diversity, one’s ethnic ancestry and personal culture of choice, life experiences, and the connection with other members of the Canadian society. Mary Danico (2004) explains in her book, *The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawaii*, that the current notion of ethnic identity is “fluid and contextual,” “constructed and reconstructed depending on the situation” (50). The feeling of inclusion and belonging to the heritage as well as the mainstream culture and communities is essential to one’s development of hyphenated ethnic identity.

This paper examines the case of Korean immigrants in Canada by focusing on one of the most influential factors in identity development of immigrant offspring generations: parents. Korean immigrant parents are heavily influenced by Confucianism, which acts as the “ideological basis of family and value systems” (Kwon & Chuang 2012: 237). Indeed, Eunjung Kim (2008) pointed out that Confucianism is what accounts for the importance of family for Koreans: a strong sense of in-group within the family, as well as clear hierarchical relationships and obedience to authority are highly valued and accentuated (177). Thus, the significant role that parents play in Korean immigrant children’s acculturative experiences becomes crucial in the discussion of identity negotiation of the children.

## High parental expectations

A number of studies suggest that Asian parents have high levels of expectations for their children to succeed in academic domains (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Goyette & Xie 1999; Methikalam 2008). Such expectations are often based on heritage values

and customs that first-generation parents are accustomed to. The fact that most East Asian immigrants are a “voluntary minority group” (Ogbu 1998: 164)<sup>1</sup> is the primary reason accounting for these expectations. Samuel Peng and Deeann Wright (1994) argued that “many Asian parents instil guilt about parental sacrifices and the need to fulfill the obligation to succeed, be respectful, and obedient” (as cited in Methikalam 25). Besides leaving behind as a whole family the life that they had established in the homeland, another common example of parental sacrifices in the case of Korean immigrants is *kirogigajok*, or “wild-geese families,” where mothers and the children migrate to English-speaking countries for the children to pursue education in English while fathers remain in Korea as breadwinners, financially supporting their families overseas (Jeong & Bélanger 2012: 259).

## Importance of education

As mentioned, Korean parents place a significant amount of importance on education, as it is one of the core values that are rooted deeply into the Korean history. Traditional Confucian values of associating learning with one’s status, egalitarian ideas that were brought into the country from the West, and the collapse of the traditional class system in the early twentieth century have led to the prevalent belief in Korean society that any Korean can advance themselves through their own efforts (Park 2009: 50). Consequently, education has been valued in Korean society as a way of achieving status, power, and a means of self-cultivation. Under the influence of globalization and a job market which has become more competitive than ever, the status of English as a global language, as well as the importance of English in education and employment led to what the Korean society refers to as the *English boom*.<sup>2</sup>

Upon immigrating, first-generation Korean parents bring this value and belief into their lives in the host country. Acquisition of English as a second language is considered by Korean immigrant parents to be especially important for their children, especially 1.5-generation children,<sup>3</sup> to achieve: not only is proficiency in English

1) In his article “Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education,” John Ogbu (1998) defines voluntary minorities as those who willingly chose to move to the host country in the hope of a better future (164).

2) “English boom” is the term which refers to large amounts of money that Korean parents invest in English education for the children in the form of private tutoring classes, English camps, and language training abroad.

3) The so-called 1.5 generation refers to foreign-born youths who immigrated before or during their early teenage years to the host country. Coined by sociologists Ruben Rumbaut and Kenji Ima (1988), the term “1.5 generation” began to be used more prevalently in immigration studies to distinguish them from those with foreign-born parents who were born in the host country (second generation). Numerous studies have concluded that the acculturative experiences that 1.5-and second-generation youths encounter are particular to each group. For more on the previous research on 1.5-generation youths, see Jean Kim & Patricia Duff (2012: 84).



language their goal for their children to achieve upon immigrating, it is also believed to be an essential tool which the parents believe would allow their children to become competitive academically and professionally in the mainstream society. For example, Lindsey Paek's 2018–2019 study of Korean immigrants in Toronto<sup>4</sup> provided evidence for this fact: 37 out of 50 parent participants identified “better education for children (i.e., learning English)” as the primary reason for having immigrated.

In order to enhance their children's English proficiency and academic performance in school, first-generation Korean parents are more likely than White parents to use their resources by such means as supervising their activities outside of school, assigning additional homework tasks, providing a place to study at home, and investing in private lessons. In Paek's study of fifty first-generation Korean parent participants in Toronto, 15 out of 50 (30%) participants responded that they provided their children with supplementary support other than public school education for learning English, such as classes at a private tutoring institution. In parallel, Anne Saw, Howard Berenbaum, and Sumie Okazaki's 2013 comparative study on Asian American and White American college students reveals that Asian American college students experience higher levels of pressure for academic success and higher levels of parental expectations and criticism compared to White Americans (ii).

However, due to language and cultural barriers, first-generation Korean immigrant parents are unfamiliar with how things work in the new country. While providing support in their children's acculturative process using the resources that they are familiar with, such as cram school classes (*hagwon*),<sup>5</sup> first-generation Korean parents are often unable to advocate for their children's education. Therefore, immigrant children are placed under pressure to adapt to the mainstream society, and also are expected to become more independent. For example, *The Census Portraits: East Asian Students*, which was published by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2011, reported that Korean parents are “as or more likely to be involved in helping their children directly, but also have less involvement with teachers or school events” when compared to their English-speaking Canadian counterparts.

Such pressure may indeed put immigrant youths at risk of experiencing psychological distress during their acculturative process in the host country. Nonetheless, by experiencing the rigor and discipline that are evident in their parents' supervision of their attainments, Korean immigrant children become accustomed to a number of traditional family values which are prevalent in Korean society: high expectations

4) I conducted a study on Korean immigrants in Toronto, Canada, throughout the years 2018 and 2019 for the Ph.D. dissertation I am currently working on. The aim of the study was to identify different factors which could potentially contribute to one's negotiation of identity, including language proficiency, social groups one adheres to, and the resources provided by the parents, to name a few.

5) Cram schools, *hagwon* in Korean, are private academies which offer classes for students of all ages to train them for standardized exams as well as numerous academic disciplines, such as English.

in educational attainment, children’s obedience to parents, and submission of self to family (Kim 2008: 177).

Consequently, members of the Korean community in Canada have higher levels of education attainment when compared with the national average. According to Lindsay Colin’s report published by Statistics Canada in 2001, people with Korean origins in Canada are more likely than the mainstream population to pursue postsecondary and post-graduate education (13; see figure 1). A higher proportion of those of Korean origin holds degrees in highly technical fields, such as engineering, applied science, mathematics, computing and the physical sciences: 21% of Korean-Canadians, compared with 9% of all Canadian university graduates (13). More young people of Korean origin are considerably more likely than their counterparts amongst the mainstream Canadian population to be attending school after a certain age: 77% of Canadians of Korean origin between 15 and 24 years of age were enrolled in a full-time educational program, compared with 57% of all Canadians in this age range (14).

	Korean community (%)	Total Canadian population (%)
Less than high school	17.2	31.3
High school graduate	11	14.1
Some postsecondary	17.9	10.8
Trades certificate/diploma	2.3	10.9
College graduate	7.1	15.0
University certificate/diploma below Bachelor’s Degree	7.3	2.5
Bachelor’s Degree	26.8	10.6
Post-graduate Degree	10.4	4.8
Total with university degree	37.2	15.4

**Figure 1:** (Adapted from) Educational Attainment of the Korean Community and Overall Canadian Population Aged 15 and Over, 2001

## Bilingualism and biculturalism

Outside of academic domains, Korean parents also have high levels of expectations for their children to become bilingual in Korean and English, as well as bicultural through maintenance of the heritage language. Jean Phinney et al. (2001) concluded in their study of 216 second-generation immigrant youths and their parents that parents’ positive attitudes toward the retention of heritage language and culture



of their children enhance the ethnic identity development of children. In the case of Korean immigrant parents, a number of studies have concluded that they place importance on their children's retention of the Korean language. For example, Paek's 2018–2019 study of Korean first-generation immigrant parents revealed that children's acquisition and maintenance of Korean language was important for first-generation parents, as 30 out of 50 (60%) of the participants considered it to be *very important* and 18 (36%) considered it to be *important*.

In order to help their children retain the heritage language and culture, immigrant parents often teach the Korean language to their children at home. Through parental socialization at home, children are able to attach the content and meaning to their own ethnicity. It is thus through their parents that the child learns the notion of belonging and “home” and develops varying degrees of a sense of attachment to their ethnic background (Rumbaut 2005: 143). Paek's 2019–2019 study revealed that, other than daily communication in Korean, some of the other resources which are used by Korean parents to help their children learn and maintain proficiency in Korean include Korean books, educational video tapes, dictation, and the use of the Internet.

Maria Medvedeva's 2012 study of immigrant children of different ethnic origins examined the relationship between English and ethnic language proficiency and use of adolescents and those of their parents. It concluded that the dominant pattern of language choice was the ethnic language used by both children and parents in immigrant families, even amongst youths who preferred English. Otherwise, parents often communicated to their children in their ethnic languages while the children communicated to their parents in English (538). In the case of Korean immigrants, contrasting linguistic profiles and preferences of the parent and offspring generations may make communication difficult and thus cause family conflicts, as first-generation parents often have a strong preference for Korean over English and second-generation children for English over Korean. Toshie Okita (2002) and Stephen Caldas (2006) furthermore concluded in their studies that mothers perceived the commitment and attention that parents devoted to maintaining their ethnic language maintenance with children as extra pressure on the children, as well as family relationships (as cited in Medvedeva 2012: 541).

Outside of home, Korean parents expose their children to the ethnic community, which allows socialization and networking amongst members of the same ethnic group. Religious institutions provide an extremely useful site for the maintenance and growth of ethnic communities. According to Colin (2001), the majority of Canadians of Korean origin are Protestant or Catholic (11). This is reflective of the modern Korean society, where, according to the 2015 statistics, 44% of the Korean population has a religion; the majority of them identified themselves as Protestant or Catholic (“Religion” para.

1). Whilst Confucianism, along with Buddhism, is believed to be more influential than other religions upon the lives of Koreans, Confucianism is practiced as a “code of ethical conduct” (para. 3) in South Korea today more than as a religion.

In a number of studies, Korean churches have been identified as an important site of acculturation both as a religious as well as a cultural resource for the Korean ethnic community. In the Toronto area alone, there are over 150 Korean churches, for example, and they bring the Koreans together, providing assistance to newcomers with their new lives in Canada. Compared with other ethnic churches in Canada, Korean churches seem to have developed distinctive features that are particular to them: their focus of resources on the youth ministries, emphasis placed on evangelical overseas missions, as well as early morning prayer services (Bramadat & Seljak 2009: 185). Not only do Korean churches offer linguistically-based ministries in Korean and English, they also provide Sunday school classes for age-based groups, divided into early childhood, elementary, and middle school and highschool, as well as summer school, sports camp, and Korean language classes for youths. As a site that provides Korean and English service to different age groups of church members, Korean churches provide an occasion where “Koreans meet Koreans and, depending on the speech situation, use Korean” (Pak 2003: 270).

Seong Man Park and Mela Sarkar (2007) as well as Sarah Sok’s 2012 interviews of Korean parent and children immigrants reported a number of reasons which explain the parents’ wish for their children’s high level of proficiency in Korean. Beyond some of the pragmatic reasons, such as being able to communicate with the rest of the family in Korea, the possibility of meeting Korean people in the future, and the advantage bilingualism could give their children in the job market, the participants’ responses unanimously alluded to the Korean identity: they seemed to feel that one’s Korean identity is something that is passed onto the children like a “biological trait” (Sok 2012: 36). In this respect, the Korean language is viewed by Korean parents as a vital element of Korean identity, which they seek to enable their children to retain through education and socialization methods.

Proficiencies in both English and Korean are viewed by Korean parents as crucial tools which would allow their children to become bilingual and bicultural in the host society. Indeed, many studies have identified a positive relationship between one’s ethnic identity and the degree of heritage language fluency: Alison Imbens-Bailey (1996) concluded from her studies on first- and second- generation Armenian-Americans that bilingual adolescents demonstrated a closer sense of attachment to their ethnic community than those who were monolingual in English; and Carl Bankson and Min Zhou’s 1995 study on first- and second-generation Vietnamese youths from immigrant families in New Orleans revealed that retention of one’s ethnic language provides access to the ethnic community (as cited in Phinney et al. 2001: 138).



	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	1.5 generation	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation
Self-assessed proficiency in English (out of 10)	5.47	8.14	9.87
Self-assessed proficiency in Korean (out of 10)	9.81	8.4	2.27
Self-identification	Korean 52% Canadian 0% Korean-Canadian 48% I am unable to respond to this question 0%	Korean 26% Canadian 2% Korean-Canadian 68% I am unable to respond to this question 4%	Korean 0% Canadian 10% Korean-Canadian 90% I am unable to respond to this question 0%

**Figure 2:** Self-assessed Language Proficiency and Self-identification of Survey Participants, extracted from Paek’s 2018–2019 study

While language proficiency may provide immigrant children with ethnic contexts in their life in the host society and help them develop an ethnic identity, Paek’s 2018–2019 study of fifty Korean first-generation parents, fifty 1.5-generation, and fifty second-generation immigrant children in Toronto suggested that language proficiency may not be a solid indicator of one’s positive self-identification as ethnic-Canadian. Despite the fact that 1.5-generation participants proved to be most bilingual out of all three groups, a higher number of second-generation participants claimed a hyphenated *Korean-Canadian* identity (figure 2). Indeed, Clara Brown (2009) states in her case study of Korean-American college students that heritage language speakers have a higher chance of experiencing identity crisis, because “they have to deal with multiple and sometimes conflicting identities” (8). Throughout acculturative experiences, immigrant youths need to be provided with environments where they can develop a positive sense of belonging to both the mainstream and heritage culture.

## Identity negotiation of Korean children immigrants

Despite pressures and stress that children become exposed to, positive attitudes that Korean parents have for retention of the heritage language and culture seem to successfully support the immigrant children’s development of ethnic-Canadian identity. For them, ethnic identification that results from acculturative experiences may often be plural in its nature. In other words, as one develops a sense of belonging to both the mainstream and heritage culture within which they acculturate, they seem to claim a hyphenated identity as an ethnic-Canadian.

As Henri Tajfel argued (1978), “a firm sense of belonging to or strong identification



with the in-group” is necessary for one to develop a positive sense of identity (as cited in Noh et al. 2012: 175). In this respect, high aspirations that Korean immigrant parents have for their children to pursue high levels of education as well as to become bilingual and bicultural may be what provides the children with aspirations to belong to both the mainstream Canadian society as well as the Korean ethnic community. Situated within and between two cultural worlds, immigrant children must define themselves in relation to multiple reference groups and to the classifications into which they are placed by their native peers, schools, ethnic community, and the mainstream society, while developing a sense of belonging to their heritage culture and their host society and its culture. The resulting *in-betweenness*, which is one of the defining characteristics of ethnic-Canadians, presents the immigrant youths with many choices in areas such as “cultural practices, language use, and friendship” (Phinney et al. 2001: 136). In this sense, Korean immigrants in Toronto seem to be positively contributing to the Canadian multicultural mosaic scene.

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