

Korean American Youth

by Autumn Koo

More than a million Koreans live in the United States, representing the fourth largest Asian American ethnic group in America. Since the liberalization of the immigration law in 1965, more than 600,000 Koreans have immigrated to the U.S. Like many other immigrants, Koreans immigrate to the United States for economic opportunity and to seek a higher standard of living.

Korean culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism and its five cardinal virtues of moral-ethical human relationships between: father and son, husband and wife, the older and younger, between friends, and between lord and subject. The first three virtues apply to the Korean family unit. Traditional Korean family structure is characterized mainly by a hierarchical relationship between parents and children that mandates respect of children toward the authority of their parents. These strict family rules often create conflict between Korean immigrant parents and their children.

Approximately 70 percent of Korean immigrants regularly attend Christian churches, mostly Korean ethnic churches. The Korean ethnic churches provide social outlets to new Korean immigrants, such as fellowship, social services for church members, and opportunities to share their religious values as well as their experiences of living in America. Unlike other immigrants, Korean immigrants are distinct in that they tend to stay with their ethnically specific church even after adjusting to the new culture.

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Most Korean American youth, particularly those born in this country, cannot speak Korean fluently, whereas most adult Korean immigrants cannot speak English fluently. As a result there exists a lack of communication and understanding between parents and children. Korean American youth face hardships in adjusting to American society as a part of an ethnic minority, being subjected to alienation, prejudice, and discrimination.

Korean American youth are exposed to American culture and values at school, which often conflicts with the values taught at home by their parents. In an Anglo-American culture, the rights of the “individual” are stressed more than the strength of the “unit”. Korean American youth face difficulties juggling between the individualistic values of the American culture and the collectivistic values of their Korean culture. Like other Asian American groups, Korean Americans are often described as part of the “model minority,” having few personal or professional problems. Korean American youth face challenges living up to the expectation of this stereotype along with the high expectations from their Korean immigrant parents to perform well academically. Despite these challenges, Korean American youth actively engage in activities at school and in their communities. They strive to balance the two different cultures successfully by integrating the positive aspects of both cultures equally into their daily lives.

Non-Catholic Festivals

One of the most important celebrations among Korean Americans is the Chu-suk, or Harvest Festival, that occurs in August. This is also known as Korean Thanksgiving, and Koreans take time to commemorate their ancestors and be with their families. Family members from across the globe often travel back to their ancestral homes, and prepare special rituals and meals with their families. Special food is prepared, such as “Song-pyun,” which are rice cakes made of rice, beans, sesame seeds, and chestnuts. Chu-suk is a time to be with family and to be

thankful. Entire families will visit the graves of their ancestors and pay respects by offering them food.

Korean New Year is another important holiday for Korean Americans, and Koreans celebrate the Lunar New Year. This usually falls in the month of February, and is celebrated by feasting with family members and making offerings to ancestors, in the hopes of ensuring good fortune. It is also a time to reconnect with family members.

Korean Saints



Saint Andrew Kim Taegon: This first native Korean priest was the son of Korean converts. His father, Ignatius Kim, was martyred during the persecution of 1839 and was beatified in 1925. After Baptism at the age of 15, Andrew traveled 1,300 miles to the seminary in Macao, China. After six years he managed to return to his country through Manchuria. That same year, he crossed the Yellow Sea to Shanghai and was ordained a priest. Back home again, he was assigned to arrange for more missionaries to enter by a water route that would elude the border patrol. He was arrested, tortured and finally beheaded at the Han River near Seoul, the capital.

Saint Paul Chung Hasang: Saint Paul Chung, a lay leader, is considered a leading figure in the revitalization and growth of the Church in Korea. He was born in 1795 to a faithful Catholic family. After the 1801 invasions and the death of much of his family, Paul entered China clandestinely nine times and traveled the Korean peninsula gathering up scattered Korean Catholics. Despite severe hardship and persecution, he kept his faith and served as a sterling example of piety for others. St. Paul was martyred on September 22, 1839 at the age of 45 while still in seminary studying to be a priest.



When Pope John Paul II visited Korea in 1984 he canonized Saint Andrew Kim and his 102 companions along with Saint Paul Chung, 98 other Koreans and three French missionaries who had been martyred between 1839 and 1867. Their feast day is September 20.

St. Paul Chung in the Diocese of Arlington

St. Paul Chung Catholic Church was founded in 1996 in the Diocese of Arlington as an ethnic parish designed to serve the needs of the influx of Korean immigrants. It serves the Korean Catholic community, with approximately 5,200 parishioners, and is staffed by Korean priests.

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