Observation – Interview

Background: My contact is “Harold,” a Korean American Sophomore at the University of Illinois. Though he was born in the United States, he prefers to be listed as 1.5 generation (based on visiting Korea for long periods in the summer) and is a very ardent Roman Catholic. I conducted an interview with him on 23 February 2007.

What I Learned: After explaining my intended area of research for my iLAB project (Korean Catholics at U of I) to Harold, I was surprised and startled by his initial response. My initial question had been to ask where Korean Catholic students go in order to worship: since most Korean American Catholics attend all-Korean masses, but the local campus Church (St. John’s) does not have an ethnic Korean mass, I was curious to know.

Harold responded that some (Catholic) “FOBs” at his dormitory had asked him to attend a Korean mass at a local Church, St. Mary’s, in Champaign. Evidently St. Mary’s is the only Church in the Urbana-Champaign area to offer such a mass, and this interesting point of information brought two points to mind. (1) “FOB,” though used innocuously, seemed to carry the same connotations expressed in the “FOB and Whitewashed” article by Pyke and Dang, in that it was used to refer to “very ethnic” individuals that either chose to or were not able to assimilate into the mainstream campus. (2) An implication was made that those individuals who were either 2nd generation Korean American or 1.5 generation were more likely to attend mass in a non-ethnic setting vs. those who were recent arrivals to the United States (FOB’s).

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1 It is important to remember that this was not my first meeting with Harold: we were friends my Senior year of High School and I have seen him infrequently here on campus. I got the idea to interview Harold after running in to him at St. John’s one Sunday.
The latter of these two observations is most relevant to my studies, because it seems to support the notion that Korean Churches act as social/support groups for individuals of Korean heritage—all the more so for those students studying abroad here on campus. To expand on this idea, Korean Americans (including those in the 1.5 generation) who are more comfortable in the United States, both language-wise and culturally, seem to rely on this support network less than their “FOB” peers, thus creating a seeming gulf in the community. I latched on to this idea and asked Harold what he thought about it.

His response was general, but seemed to confirm my points. Harold made the point that for him and the vast majority of his Korean American/1.5 generation Catholic friends, the benefits of going to mass at a convenient location (St. John’s) trumped the advantages of going to an all Korean mass farther away (St. Mary’s) at 10 AM on a Sunday. However, the “FOB” individuals he described seemed to think the reverse—that it was better to go out of their way in order to attend an all-Korean mass. Thus, a loose assumption can be made that as Korean American Catholics become more familiarized to the United States, ethnic Churches begin to lose their importance. This finding is by no means set in stone, but it is merely an idea that I will have to keep in mind when conducting further research.