**PROVIDING REPRESENTATION: A CONTEXT
STUDY FOR THE M-NCPPC, DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING**

PLCY400: Senior Capstone Research Paper
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Abstract

This paper examines changes in Korean population trends in Beltsville, Maryland, and Prince George County, Maryland (P.G. County). Our report contributes to the existing body of research on Koreans in the United States (U.S.) by providing suggestions for how to fill the literature gap on Beltsville Koreans. In the 20th century, the U.S. Census and other government surveys did not correctly count Korean immigrants. Moreover, there is a shortage of information on the Korean immigrant community in the Beltsville/Route 1 corridor, whom settled in the late 1900s, started businesses, and vacated by the 1990s. We provide a methodology to inform a context study on all aspects of life for the Korean population, including push-pull factors, everyday life, geographic data, cultural influence, and significant places such as churches and restaurants.

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Introduction

In 2021, the U.S. was home to an estimated two million people of Korean descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Korean nationals started immigrating to the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century. However, they did not arrive in large numbers, especially in Maryland, until after the 1950s (Sullivan et al., 2023). At the time, Korean migrants cited the following reasons for leaving their home country: unemployment, few education opportunities, and political conflict (the Korean War and dictatorship) (Min 2011). In contemporary society, Koreans have much higher educational attainment than the U.S. average, with more than half of Korean Americans having at least a bachelor's degree (Noland, 2003; 7Research Center 2017).

Further, people who identify as Korean, whether they are immigrants themselves or children of immigrants, in the U.S. have significantly higher gross domestic product (GDP) per capita than the standard mean for Americans (Noland, 2003). At the same time, though, Korean Americans have been found to have higher rates of depression compared to other ethnic groups and depression is linked with family violence, substance abuse, and suicide (Kim, 1995). These mental health issues particularly impact elderly Koreans because of the stresses of immigration, resource limitations, and subsequent underutilization of mental health supports (Mui 2000).

The Washington DC Metropolitan (D.C. Metro) area is home to the third largest population center for the Korean diaspora, following Los Angeles and New York (Pew Research Center, 2017). Within the D.C. Metro area, Prince George County, Maryland has been a destination for Korean settlement, though this specific region is under studied. Our report discusses the need for a study on the Korean immigrant community specifically in the Beltsville, MD and Route 1 corridor. Given the lack of an existing methodology for drawing a connection and providing information on the Korean American population in the Beltsville area, we offer

recommendations to develop strategies for conducting such a study. We partnered with the Prince George's County Planning Department (PPD-MNCPPC) to analyze existing research conducted on Korean Americans to support their efforts to preserve and enhance cultural and historical resources. Our goal in this study is the answer the following research questions:

- What current research on Korean immigration to the U.S. exists?
    - Which methodologies were successful in producing ethnographic data about Korean immigrants?
    - Which methodologies could be applied to a local context like Beltsville?

Literature Review

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act restructured the immigration system. This relaxed certain restrictions and quotas about who could come to the U.S. Specifically, the National Origins Formula provided guidance for who could immigrate. The Origins Formula set quotas for preferred immigrants from Western Europe, such as Germany, Ireland, and The United Kingdom, and restricted immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Immigration History). In 1965, the quota for Korea was 100 people. However, in 1970, the quota was raised as 5,056 Koreans entered the U.S. ("Korea: Korean Population in the Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD Metropolitan Areas"). The influx came with those looking to grow and establishments intending to provide companionship and practical aid in adjusting to a new country, and churches served that purpose.

The Korean United Methodist Church of Washington is the oldest in the area. The church was established in 1948 in Washington DC, then moved to Silver Spring in 1980, catalyzing the community's growth with one-hundred-fifty Korean churches in the region by 1992 and two hundred fifty by 1995 (Kim). Later came The Korean Central Presbyterian Church of Virginia in 1973, and the church was a huge catalyst for integrating culture into day-to-day life for Korean Americans. With the massive increase, the DMV began to feel the influence and growth of its Korean population. We are a pillar of the greater Korean American diaspora in the United States, being the third largest, trailing only the Los Angeles and New York metropolitan areas ("Korean American Population Density Analysis by City"). As the population increased, so did the general civic engagement as donating, volunteering, and providing services in their local community were simply a part of daily life. Churches provided comfort and for some immigrants, Church

was like family in times of need and loneliness, and the church was also a place where the younger generations found and confirmed their cultural identity. Much of the information above is contained to Washington D.C. and Virginia, excluding P.G. County where neighborhoods like Langley Park, Beltsville, Adelphi Park, and White Oak claim greater than 40% of their population foreign-born (Maryland Department of Planning).

Our challenge is the lack of literature about Korean immigrants in the United States because this group is generally under-studied in the U.S. However, we have found some general information about Korean immigration to Washington D.C. While the literature available provides useful information about immigration, it does not explain Korean immigrants' impact in America. The literature we have reviewed hypothesizes the lack of studies is because Korean Americans comprise a small percentage of the American population.

Specifically for Beltsville, we encounter even more challenges accessing data and studies about Korean immigration and Korean Americans. Annandale, Virginia has the largest community of Korean immigrants (Chang, 2014). Like Beltsville, Annandale is a suburb of Washington D.C. A study on Korean immigrants conducted in Montgomery County, MD showed how difficult it is to conduct a study on Korean immigrants. The people who conducted the study in Montgomery County ran into many issues. They found insufficient information, needed help knowing where to start when researching, and found little success when trying to interview Koreans.

Findings/Discussion

Our project's main goal is to develop a methodology for a larger context study in Prince George County, Maryland. We experimented with strategies for analyzing Korean immigration and the Korean community in Beltsville, Maryland. In our quest, we ran into several problems, which we discuss throughout this paper.

The first and most significant problem we faced stemmed from the lack of demographic information collected on Koreans before 1980. This is due to poor record-keeping and demographic data collection. For one, the Census Bureau failed to account for Koreans as an ethnic group accurately. Further, we visited the Frederick S. DeMarr Library of County History, which the Prince George County Historical Society maintains. We sought to learn more about Beltsville at the library by scouring through old newspaper articles, census books, and other community survey resources. During this site visit, we only found one lead - an article from *The Beltsville News* about the daughter of Korean Beltsville business owners. After several email correspondences with her, she ultimately declined to participate in an interview, citing her lack of "any useful information for [our] research" (Choi 2024).

To expand on the poor record-keeping practices that hindered our data gathering efforts, large organizations responsible for collecting demographic information, such as the U.S. Census or American Community Survey, unfortunately, collected little data on Koreans, let alone Koreans in Beltsville. Before 1980, the government classified Koreans as "Other Races", along with many other Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern groups. Therefore, we did not have a means to accurately count or survey the number of Korean immigrants in Beltsville during this time. As mentioned, the DeMarr library provided minimal data, which highlighted the dearth of information on Korean ethnic groups in local data sources.

After 1980, data collection on Korean immigrants improved, and we found that between 1980 and 2000, the number of Koreans living in Beltsville slowly rose. By 2010, however, only 28 people of Korean ancestry lived in Beltsville, and in 2020, the Census Bureau counted only 25 people of Korean descent.

We pivoted to a qualitative approach because of the dearth of quantitative data on Korean immigrants in Beltsville. Aiming to remedy the quantitative shortcomings, we sought to interview people of Korean descent in Beltsville and ask them about their family history. Unfortunately, given the low numbers of Beltsville residents of Korean descent, we could not secure an interview. We tried to identify people of Korean descent through other Beltsville residents we interviewed, but that also proved unsuccessful.

We did obtain qualitative data on Korean immigrants in the United States as a whole. While reviewing existing literature, we found information on various issues pertinent to the Korean community. For one, the literature had an abundance of information on push factors that encouraged or spurred immigration to the U.S. from Korea. Some of the push factors included political instability, the Korean War, military dictatorship following the Korean War, regional tensions, and lack of economic opportunity.

During the 1950s, the Korean War contributed the most to emigration from South Korea. In this period, the U.S. maintained a quota system, limiting the number of Korean immigrants allowed to enter the country. Despite the quota system, Koreans could still come to the U.S. under special circumstances.

First, marrying an American allowed Koreans to enter the U.S. The deployment of soldiers to Korea as part of the U.S.'s direct involvement in the war resulted in American men marrying Korean women, who came to be known as military brides. At the end of the soldiers'

tours, they brought their Korean wives back to the U.S. The other special circumstance was transnational baby adoption, in which American families adopted Korean children.

Following the Korean War, the Korean Peninsula was mired in political instability. Due to South Korea's military dictatorship lasting much of the 20th century and regional conflict with the hostile North Korean regime, many Koreans sought a better life in the U.S., which became possible after the U.S. federal government lifted immigration quotas in 1965. During this time, Koreans had many reasons to leave Korea like a poor economy with low wages that were insufficient to cover the cost of living.

As mentioned above, the United States experienced changes in immigration policy in 1965, which complemented the push factors driving Koreans out of their home country. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act removed quotas placed on Asian countries, removing barriers to entry for people from Korea and promoting growth in Korean immigration. Before this policy, the U.S. Korean population was 11,000 and skyrocketed to 290,000 by 1980. Post Immigration and Nationality Act, Korean influence and representation increased across the D.C. Metro area. Churches, restaurants, and cultural centers were the main cultural pillars of Korean communities. The Korean Presbyterian Church of Beltsville and First Korean Baptist Church in Silver Spring grew alongside the population, providing fellowship, a space for maintaining tradition, and social services. Churches were integral to the communities they served. Further, cultural centers acted as hubs for growth as new Korean immigrants laid roots. Concurrently, Koreans in the D.C. Metro area became a smaller percentage of the immigrant population as Latin American and Caribbean immigrant populations grew extensively due to the same 1965 immigration reform law that spurred Korean migration.
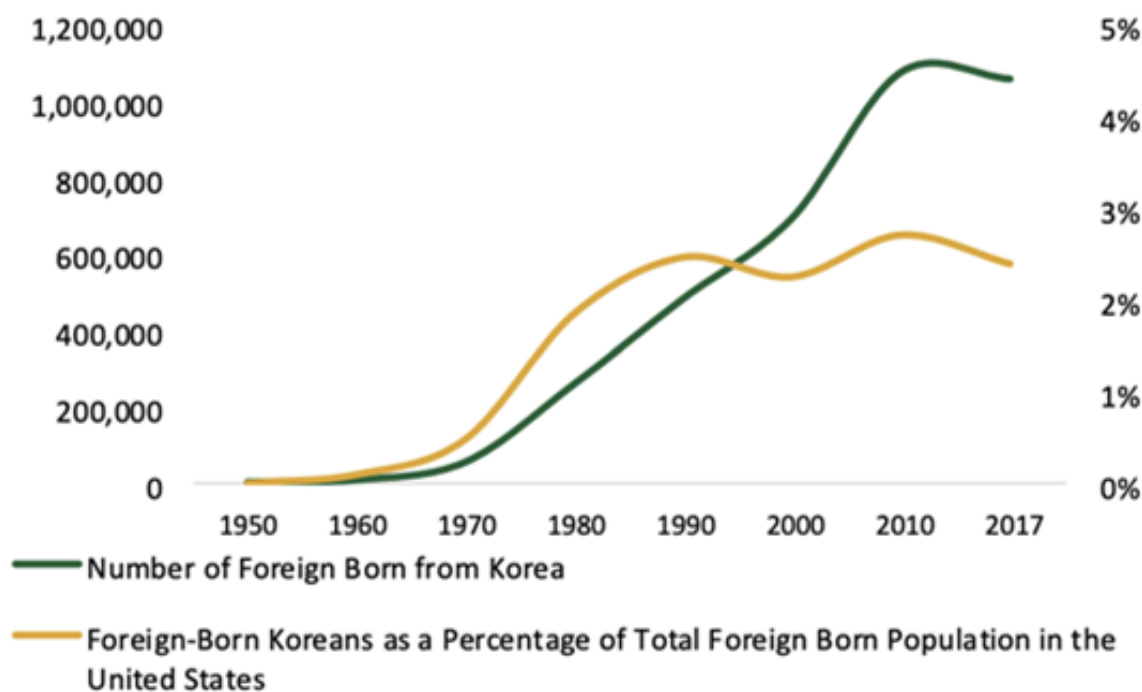
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. United States, 1850-2017. ipums.org extracts (the nativity variable was used for 1950, 1960, 1970 and the citizen variable was used for 1980, 1990, 2000, 2017)

Figure 1: Korean Immigrant Population in the United States, 1950-2017 (Source: Institute for Immigration Research - George Mason University). As the Korean immigrant population grew, so did other immigrant groups, making the proportion of immigrants of Korean descent decline. The increase in the number of foreign-born in Koreans started to increase starting in 1965 after the Immigration and Nationality Act was enacted.

Today, the share of immigrants of Korean descent varies across the region, with over 8% of immigrants in Fairfax and Clarke Counties (Virginia) hailing from Korea. On the other hand, only 1-2% of Prince George's County immigrants are from Korea.

Recommendations

1.   Interview People of Korean Descent

Renowned local researchers have carried out or attempted to carry out, similar context studies on Asian American populations. One of our team members spoke to a lead on the D.C. Asian American Context Study, Dr. Michelle Magalong. Dr. Magalong emphasized the importance of establishing trust and rapport with Asian Americans to carry out one's study objectives effectively. A key strategy to build rapport with the community is to engage in community outreach by tabling at festivals or events. Establishing a presence within the community helped her team meet and gather data on Chinese and Korean populations in D.C. For example, some interviewees referred the team to other members of their community, which the team subsequently interviewed as their next informant (a snowball sample).

In addition to interviews, as informed by the D.C. context study, this alternative could also involve oral histories. Compared to interviews, oral histories are more open-ended, allowing a person to tell a life story on their terms and letting the participant guide the conversation. Oral histories may reveal what one's childhood looked like, where they grew up, and what it looked like to grow up Korean-American. In our experience, having an informant dictate the conversation can draw very little helpful information if the moderator is untrained in facilitating. However, with trained oral historians, the expectation is that the information gathered from these broader narratives will be useful in providing qualitative data about Koreans in Beltsville. Further, having standardized training will allow the oral history and interview collection methods to be replicated.

One of the key components of having trained interviewers able to gather accurate information is having at least one or two team members fluent in Korean. A problem that our team ran into when attempting to reach out to a former Beltsville businessperson is that she was most comfortable speaking Korean and had limited English proficiency. Although her daughter offered to serve as a translator, we would caution the Prince George's Planning Department against putting the onus on additional community members to translate. Instead, we suggest our client meet interviewees where *they* are by providing interviewers who speak and understand Korean. Had our team had a fluent Korean speaker, we may have been able to conduct the interview with the wife of the late Sam Choi, former owner of Neil's Cleaners. However, given our limited time and the logistical challenges of coordinating a meeting between Mrs. Choi and her daughter, we were unable to carry out the interview.

2.   Focus on DMV Trends (Don't Trend on Me)

Throughout our research, we have been able to piece our focus together by starting with a big picture look of Korean immigration trends. Our research began with seeking to understand significant Korean population centers on the East Coast (New York, New Jersey, and Virginia), where Koreans make up a larger proportion of the current immigrant population. With this scope, we narrowed it down to Maryland and P.G. County through leads and connections within sources. We pinpointed push-pull factors, significant places, regional influence, social status changes, and gender role influence with our research, which led us to more information on the Beltsville community.

Replicating our methodology is critical to our end deliverable, and this proposed study method will apply to other demographics that The Prince George's Planning Department seeks to

understand. Research, planning, and inclusion have severely underrepresented the Korean population. Yet, many academic papers have provided context on a population comprising less than 1% of Prince George's County immigrants.

3. Consult Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Historical Data

Another possible route for conducting a context study on Korean Americans in Beltsville is analyzing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data. Geographic data paired with historical property deed data would provide information on locations where Korean families lived or held businesses. This strategy would utilize U.S. Census data and the American Community Survey to complement these data sources. These data sets would allow us to fill in holes that are present in the GIS data and the historical property data.

In contrast to interview or oral history data, the information gathered from this strategy would be primarily quantitative, which could limit the richness of the data. Using solely quantitative data eliminates the personal aspect of this project, which also can potentially create a generalization of the Korean population. This would limit representation because it could reduce the presence of Korean Americans to mere numbers instead of recognizing their cultural legacies, which often need to be quantifiable. However, given the obstacles we have faced trying to reach out to informants, this strategy may be more easily replicable depending on data availability on populations of interest across Prince George's County.

Conclusion

The dearth of information on the Korean community in Beltsville poses a challenge to the Prince George's County Planning Department because in failing to understand the history of this population, the Department misses out on catering to the needs of Korean Americans within their jurisdiction and preserving their rich cultural and economic impact. In neighboring areas, such as Washington, D.C. and Montgomery County, experts have attempted to carry out context studies, though on Asian Americans as a larger ethnic group. These endeavors to study Asian American groups reflect local trends in expanding regional knowledge on these under-studied communities.

In general, we found that people emigrated due to political instability related to the Korean War and subsequent military dictatorship in South Korea. Further, the desire for better economic opportunities and education spurred immigration to the United States. Before the U.S. federal government passed the Immigration and Quota Act in 1965 which opened immigration pathways for skilled workers and reunifying family members, the main ways for Korean residents to immigrate to the United States (and eventually gain citizenship) were through marrying an American, usually an American soldier, or through being transnationally adopted by American adults.

Between reviewing the literature and local newspaper archives, we found that poor record-keeping practices that failed to accurately capture data on people of Korean descent and overall little quantitative data on Korean Americans, especially in Beltsville left us with few sources to consult. Further, we attempted to carry out our own interviews, only conducting three: one with a longtime Beltsville resident and two with members of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) in D.C. context study. From our research, we propose the following

recommendations for courses of action the Prince George's County Planning Department can take to remedy this issue:

1. **Interview People of Korean Descent.** As informed by the successful AAPI in D.C. context study, interview 1st, 2nd, & 3rd generation Korean Americans and make sure to capture the diversity of experiences across generations. Build trust and rapport with community members by establishing a researcher presence in local events and festivals. Adequately train and pay researchers to ensure quality data collection. Complement more structured interviews with less structured oral histories that allow participants to provide personal recollections. We recommend having one or two team members fluent in Korean to facilitate conversations with people of Korean descent who are more comfortable speaking their heritage language.

2. **Widening the Focus Beyond DMV Trends.** Extrapolate social challenges, growth patterns, and information on culturally significant structures (such as churches and restaurants) from similar areas to make inferences about Beltsville's community. In particular, examine the New York metropolitan area and Annandale, Virginia, which both have large Korean populations and existing research on acculturation, social mobility, and integration as well as more thoroughly documented quantitative data.

3. **Consult Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Historical Data.** This strategy alone primarily would help gather quantitative information which decreases the richness of data gathered but offers a more replicable technique. This suggestion should not be carried out in isolation as we have already established that Census data on Koreans is limited prior to the 1980s and guessing Korean establishments or residents based on last

names is not reliable. However, paired with interviews or ideas taken from other metro

areas, GIS could prove useful in mapping Korean influence in the Beltsville area.

Utilizing a combination of the recommendations we offer would allow the Prince George's

County Planning Department to begin filling in the historical gaps about the Beltsville Korean

community.

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