

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Sociologists understand that human beings are social products. Particularly, George Herbert Mead asserts that human beings become “who they are,” that is to say, develop “self,” through the social process of adjustment and adaptation to one’s social context. Mead, therefore, explains self as follows:

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.¹

Nevertheless, Mead’s theory of self shows a double-edged process of self-formation: objective and subjective.² Objective process is a mechanical adjustment. People simply adjust to the social environment by adapting to the norms and patterns such as gender roles prescribed and sanctioned by the society.³ Playing those roles, an object self, that is, a social self, emerges. Social self, therefore, is passive and receptive. After making the mechanical adjustment, for betterment, people reshape themselves by changing or renovating the social situation. Mead names the self developed through the latter process, internalization, as “subjective.” Through the subjective adjustment, an autonomous self, “I,” evolves. “I” is a rationalizing and active self. Therefore, self is constructed through the objective and subjective cycle of social adjustment and renovation. Mead’s theory highlights that human “self” is constantly renewed and reshaped according to the change of social environment.

Mead’s theory of self has some problems for me. His view of the objective process may be convincing in understanding the self-formation of the powerless. Because the powerless do not have power or autonomy to alter their social situation, they merely adjust themselves to the given social situation. Then, they develop their selves

passively. However, as the Communist revolution in Eastern Europe and the former Russian republic in the spirit of *perestroika* and, especially, the 1992 riots in Los Angeles powerfully demonstrate, people are not simply mechanical beings. Though they may still not change the social situation for their own betterment, they do not simply accept it.

Then, what kinds of self are developed by the powerless who neither accept their lot nor change their social circumstances? Furthermore, how do the modern people who live with multiple values and in multiple cultures react to their social circumstance and develop their selves? Mead does not say anything about the above problems and, particularly, self-development in complicated social situations.

Nonetheless, Mead's view of the inseparable correlation of social force and its impact on the social members's lives astounds me. Korean immigrant *ilse* (일세: 一世) women, who grew up in the collective Confucian culture, today live in individualistic American society.⁴ Yet the Korean immigrant church which upholds the old cultural values and traditions is a powerful social context to most women. Women live in these two indispensable social realities. How do these social realities affect Korean immigrant women's lives? How do these women adjust to their new social environments? How do they react? Do they change their social environment for their satisfaction, or, if not, do they revolt? What kinds of self do they develop? These are the focal issues explored in this book, a revision of my doctoral Dissertation, "*The Religious Factor in the Adaptation of Korean Immigrant Ilse Women to Life In America*" (1991).

To most of the women I studied, living in the United States means adapting to new social contexts. In order to disclose Korean *ilse* women's adaptation for survival in their new immigrant situation, I employed a semi-open qualitative interview method. I selected twenty four women, aged forty to sixty, whom I have known for years from three United Methodist churches in northern New Jersey. Because most Korean women not only are unfamiliar with the concept of the interview but also do not reveal their private thoughts and lives unless they trust the interviewer or conversant, I chose my acquaintances as the objects of this study. Except for two college drop-outs, all have completed college or graduate school. All have lived in the United States more than ten years. Except for one, all had or have marriage experience at the time of interview.

Since social context is the primary variable for this study, it is appropriate to note that these women can be grouped into three categories:

1. six housewives whose major social context is home and the church, that is, Korean old culture
2. six entrepreneurial women among whom three have businesses mainly in the context of Korean customers and employees and three women engage in business which is not Korean-oriented
3. six professional women, such as medical doctors, nurses, and people in educational occupations, whose major context is non-Korean, that is, in mainstream American society
4. additionally, four women were interviewed as pre-tests. They were not necessarily United Methodists.

Interviews were held, mostly, at the interviewees' houses. They were conducted in the Korean language, tape-recorded, and translated into English for the purpose of citation in this book. Since the Korean community in America is relatively small and its members are closely related to one another, interviewees are identified by pseudonyms only.

Also, I have given the churches pseudonyms that indicate their uniqueness. For example, "Fellowship Church" signifies the church's strength in serving as a social gathering place. "Word Church" refers to the popularity of the pastor's sermons, which act as that church's main drawing point. "Holiness Church" stands out as one of the most fundamentalistic pentecostal Methodist churches in the northern New Jersey area; it stresses the centrality of the Holy Spirit, rather than fellowship or sermon, in church life.

As secondary sources, I used the existing literature, which is both scarce and fragmentary. For the theoretical work, the western theories such as those of Durkheim or Peter Berger contribute to understanding and analyzing the issues.

Following the first chapter (Preface and Introduction), the second chapter provides a historical description of the self-identity of Korean women through their social experiences in the Yi dynasty. The role of Confucianism and Korean Shamanism in forming women's identities will be examined. The third chapter discusses the social experiences of the contemporary *ilse* women prior to their immigration

and in their churches in America. It deals with the contrasting and conflicting situations inside and outside the church. The fourth chapter explores the impact of the Korean immigrant churches on women's lives, particularly in marriage and family in the United States, and women's reaction to the religious influence. The fifth chapter discloses the dynamic of immigrant women's adaptation to both of their immigrant churches and the host American society. The focus there is on the woman's process of self-development through their experiences, particularly in education and work, in two major social contexts. The last chapter is the conclusion, accompanied by the questionnaire and a brief description of the interviewees.

Before going into the main text, I want to make clear certain problems. First, *Women Struggling For A New Life* is an initial--not a complete--work to disclose issues and problems of Korean immigrant *ilse* women and the influences of the church and society on their lives. Since the interviews and observations were limited to twenty four women and three United Methodist churches in the area of northern New Jersey, the facts in the book can not be used as the basis of a concrete generalization of the Korean church and its women.

Moreover, it is neither a comparative study of gender and ethnic acculturation nor a theoretical study in feminism. It is, of course, not a history book. Therefore, certain issues such as abortion or problems of Korean men or historical details, though related to those of women and mentioned in the book, are not developed further because they are not my present focus. My work is a sociological study whose value and significance lie in "uncovering" the hidden lives of Korean Protestant immigrant *ilse* women in the United States for the first time in Korean immigrant history since 1903. This book, I hope, serves as a conduit for further studies of Korean immigrant women and the church.