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Communicating and Bridging Relationship Gaps across  
Language, Generational, and Cultural Divides:  
A Case of Asian Canadian Immigrant Churches in Toronto

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*“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”*  
Ephesians 4:29 New International Version (NIV)

In this chapter I endeavor to adopt an analytical approach to help interpret and understand the findings of this research on Asian Canadian immigrant churches study that pertain specifically to culture, communication, and relationship. It's an approach grounded in current knowledge of cross-cultural communication, intergenerational relationship, and transnational migration experience of Asian immigrant families. From such a standpoint, I will first report the findings from the interviews conducted with 50 Asian Canadian participants, including 30 lay people and 20 clergies, from 15 Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese churches across Toronto, Canada. A specific focus of the analysis is placed on the themes that reflect the intersection of culture, communication, and relationship within and among Asian Canadian churches, as emerged from the interview data/transcripts. Secondly, in the chapter I will carefully consider and analyze the themes/issues emerged from the interview findings in view of our current empirical and conceptual literature on: 1) acculturation, 2) Asian traditionalism, and familism, and 3) transnational immigrant experience.

### Communication in the Cross-Cultural Context

To better situate the current chapter on intergenerational communication and intercongregational relationship within Asian Canadian immigrant churches, it is essential to first delimit what we mean by 'communication' and what we know of communication across cultures. Drs. David Masumoto and Linda Jung provide a psychological definition of communication; they describe communication as: *“a complex and intricate process that involves the exchange of*

*message between interactants, both verbally and nonverbally.*"<sup>1</sup> As such, human communication system and ability is a distinctive, God given endowment to humankind with all its complexity and intricacy.

However unique, communication between people and groups can be complicated by other critical contextual factors, such as culture, language, and migration in intercultural or cross-cultural situations. In particular, Samovar et al. (2012) note that "*Intercultural communication occurs whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a person from a different culture.*"<sup>2</sup> Ethnic immigrant churches represent one such a cross-cultural complexity. In the case of Asian immigrant churches in Canada and the U.S., they are often comprised of congregation members with varying immigrant statuses, generational cohorts, degrees of acculturation levels in the host culture, and proficiency in one's heritage language (Taiwanese, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, etc.) vs. in the language of the host society (i.e. English and French in Canada). Despite many shared cultural roots and heritages between the congregations under the same roof, members of Asian Canadian immigrant churches (e.g., Chinese Canadian immigrant church) can vary significantly in their sociodemographic background characteristics. For example, a Chinese Canadian church might simultaneously house a Cantonese-speaking congregation, a Mandarin-speaking congregation, and an English-speaking congregation. Such a composition of diverse memberships sets up an example of 'intercultural' or 'cross-cultural' communication' dynamics. Therefore, intercongregatnt communication and relationship within

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<sup>1</sup> David Matsumoto, & Linda Juang, "*Culture and psychology*" (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2013), 248.

<sup>2</sup> Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, & Edwin R. McDaniel. "*Intercultural communication: A reader*" (13<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Boston, MA: Wadsworth., 2012), 8.

Asian immigrant churches are indeed complex processes involving bridging across language, generational, cultural, and even theological divides.

Operating from the above framework on culture and communication, it can be easily understood that while effective communication can enable us to convey our needs, wants, and wishes to other to garner resources and support across cultures and cultural groups, ineffective communication or a lack of communication can give rise to misunderstanding, resentment, and even conflict. For example, Chen's (2006) study of Taiwanese immigrant churches in California found that the transition from the traditional Taiwanese/Chinese unidirectional parent to child communication to a more egalitarian Western reciprocal communication between first-generation parents and their second-generation children is one example of communication challenge faced by immigrant parents both at home and in the church.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, poor communication or miscommunication can critically undermine interpersonal relationship, social harmony, and group solidarity, including families and churches within the body of Christ. However, adopting a new pattern of communication between Asian first-generation parents and their second-generation children goes beyond simply acquiring new skills on conveying and receiving message, it involves major adaptations and adjustments of social roles, statuses, and hierarchies within Asian immigrant families (Kim & Ryu, 2005), and by extension within Asian immigrant churches (Chen, 2006; Lee, 2014; Kim, 2019). These social, cultural, and familial influences will be carefully explored and considered in greater detail, as part of the interpretation of the study's results in the discussion section later.

#### Purposes of the Current Chapter

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<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Chen, "From filial piety to religious piety: Evangelical Christianity reconstructing Taiwanese immigrant families in the United State," *International Migration Review*, 40, (2006): 573-602. DOI: 10.1111/j.747-7379.2006.00032.x.

In this chapter I propose that the gaps and conflicts currently exist intergenerationally between first-generation, heritage congregant and the second-generation, English-speaking congregant within the Asian immigrant churches in Canada can be more fully and effectively understood from a comprehensive, socially- psychologically-culturally informed lens – a perspective that is well- grounded in the current knowledge of acculturation, East Asian traditional and family values, and transnational migration family experience.

### The Nature and the Sources of Intergenerational and Intercongregational Communication Conflicts

In general, these themes represent Asian Canadian Christian participants' perceptions and understanding of the nature and the impact of intercongregational communication on their relational, spiritual, and church lives. As a whole, there is a general yet overwhelming sense of a lack or even an absence of effective communication between different generation and ethnic-language congregants within Asian Canadian churches, despite worshipping under and operating from the same roof. These themes have multifaceted and multi-layered contents and implications. In particular, the themes reflect complex intersections among language factor, generation factor, and ethnicity factor overlaid with Asian familial and social values, cultural adaptation and identity of immigrants and immigrant families, and spiritual/faith/religious practices and traditions.

#### *Theme #1: Language Difference as Communication Barrier*

An obvious issue that contributes to cross-cultural communication difficulties and at times misunderstanding is not having a shared, common language medium between the parties involved. Not surprisingly, Asian Canadian participants in the current study clearly identified language problems between the heritage congregant and the English-speaking congregant as a

major underlying factor that impedes intergenerational and intercongregational communication and collaboration. This is evident in Ji-Yang's response, who is a Cantonese speaker and attends a church with Cantonese, Mandarin, and English congregation.

It can be a barrier because I don't speak Mandarin, and I can (only) understand English (a bit) but not too much. That could be a barrier between two congregations. It is quite difficult! You know you will not feel too comfortable in communicating in one of those languages (that you are not familiar with).

Ji-Yang further lamented:

If (we) all have the same language (then the problem may be solved), but it is difficult because we have different languages. For instance, we have been trying to arrange some Family worships in English, but the parents could not understand English, they don't go and no participation.

The issue of language barrier is significant and can have wide-ranging impacts on the various aspects of congregational life, as illustrated by Seok-Ho's response:

Communication is always a challenge, not just only day to day talks, but the whole church as a whole.

In view of communication obstacle due to linguistic concerns, some participants have attempted to bridge such a gap on their own initiative. For example Chen-Yi stressed the importance of first-generation Chinese-speaking congregation learning English, so as to improve the relationship with their second-generation English-speaking congregation.

I learn (English) not only for myself. I even encourage those from China, even (if) their English is not so good, go and try English service if you want to maintain your communication with your kids 20 years from now. If not, they cannot understand you, you cannot understand them, that's it, forget it!

*Theme #2: Intercongregational Differences in Sociocultural Affiliations, Identities, and Biases*

Language is also closely tied to one's sense of ethnic and cultural identity and their social-political positions. The participants' interviews also point to the fact that the congregational relationship between the heritage congregant and English-speaking congregant is further

complicated by with-in group ethnic and regional differences in addition to language hindrance.

This is apparent from the following quote by Ba-Men, who spoke about Mandarin vs. English services:

As for Mandarin and English, other than the differences in language, the topic is an issue: Mandarin group likes to talk about what happened in their mother country, including politics which might touch their feelings. But the younger generation wants to focus on what their facing in social media, how to deal with drugs, the school life, how to deal with parents and teachers etc., the focus are different and their patience are also different. The English (sermon) topic they like to be finished in 15 minutes (during the service) while the Mandarin people want it (the sermon) longer, up to one hour.

Similarly, within Korean churches, cultural and value reference points differed between Korean-speaking congregation and English-speaking congregation. Gan-Eun observed:

Many first generation members are very conservative as per the traditional Korean culture with its ties to Confucianism.

Ping highlighted the distinctive cultural tendency of 'face-saving' among older Taiwanese members' as one obstacle to social interaction and communication in the church.

It's part of Taiwanese culture that people like to save face, a lot of people have the "face problem". It's very hard especially (for) the older generation they feel that they don't like to change, just keep as it is.

That is, the relationship between the two congregations within Asian Canadian churches can be additionally challenged by the divergent interests, concerns, identity affiliations, and values of the respective congregants. A lack of common conversational topics and shared perspectives can obscure the effort and the desire for promoting intergroup and intercongregational within the church.

Incidentally, these divergences in intergroup interests and social-cultural-political identifications between congregants within the same immigrant church can lead to further schism due to underlying misconceptions and biases between church groups. In the following quote,

Shirley highlighted such an uneasy between members of Mandarin service and members of Cantonese service in her Chinese church. Shirley asserted:

(I) know from hearing from my parents speak because they're in the Cantonese congregation in their church and then we have a Mandarin congregation; they do not mix well at all. They have a lot of conflicts with one another because they sort of have different values in a sense, even though we're Chinese but Cantonese and Mandarin, we come from different parts of China. So everything is very different and they're always conflicting with one another, and I always hear my parents complaining about the Mandarin congregations, "Oh why are they doing this, it doesn't make any sense, they're ruining blah-blah-blah, our reputation" in a sense so it's sort of like we're all under one congregation but then there's different groups, the congregations are different groups.

The intergroup rivalry and suspicion, however, stands in opposition to the spirit of the Gospel as revealed in Melia's reflection.

The Mandarin people are constantly coming to us (Cantonese), but we just have this resistance because we're like "we don't know what to do with you because we don't speak your language", right. But I think that's, that's something that God's trying to tell us. It's like, how do you receive them despite, um, you're not equipped to speak perfectly, right.

Despite being in the body of Christ in the same 'church' and community, the intergroup tensions (e.g., between Mandarin vs. Cantonese congregants) can be palatable. The roots of these tensions and discords can often be found in the larger sociopolitical history and context between Mandarin-speaking congregation who are most recent immigrants in Canada from Mainland China, and Cantonese-speaking congregation who are mostly long-established immigrants in Canada from Hong Kong. This finding in the current study corresponds to Tse's observations of transnational Chinese churches in Vancouver.<sup>4</sup> Tse reported that contestations and between-group conflicts exist in the church life of Chinese Canadian churches housing immigrants from Hong Kong and those from Mainland China (the People's Republic of China). In particular, the

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<sup>4</sup> Justine J. K. Tse, "Making a Cantonese-Christian family: Quotidian habits of language and background in a transnational Hongkonger church," *Population, Space, and Place*, 17, (2011): 756-768. DOI: 10.1002/psp/640.

schism between these congregations often occur due not only to linguistic difference (Cantonese vs. Mandarin), but also perceived dissimilar educational backgrounds and biases between these groups.

*Theme #3: Intercongregational Differences on the Role of Immigrant Churches & the Approaches to Worship & Faith Expressions*

It is also apparent from the participants' responses that there exist intergenerational and intercongregational differences in the expectations and the conception of what the role of their churches should play and how expression of faith through worship should be manifested between congregants within the Asian Canadian immigrant churches. For instance, the first-generation often conveys a deep sense of nostalgia for one's cultural roots and a strong sentiment for preserving cultural heritage and communal-familial unity through their churches. This perspective is clearly articulated in the following two quotes. Debora, a second-generation Korean, noted:

I would love to see a little bit of something cultural for our children. Because they're third and fourth generations and I don't want them to lose the Korean culture. So that's more personal. I don't know if it's a church thing, it's as a parent of a Korean – I would love for them to know more, yeah.

Another Korean participant Ruth also stated:

A love for my Korean heritage, but it's definitely tied into church, 'cause that's the only place where I get my cultural influence from really.

A similar sentiment was expressed by first-generation Chinese participants, as Ji-Yang commented:

Culturally, if we are doing the work in the same language, then we should be able to communicate. And we hold the meetings according to our culture, like to have the festivals and Chinese New Year, we hold some parties or gatherings during those festivals. Yeah, we keep ourselves family-like, doing things according to our own culture, especially we are talking in the same language.

Taking together, these quotes point to the critical desire to see Asian Canadian immigrant churches to function as a ‘vessel’ or ‘instrument’ for ‘cultural transition’ or ‘cultural – a common perspective upheld by many first-generation immigrants and a theme repeatedly identified in the previous research of Asian American churches. However, these nostalgic expectation and wish of first-generation, heritage language speaking church members are often met with incongruous aspiration for the church and expression of the faith and worship style among the English-speaking, second-generation members. This following quote from Shirley poignantly speaks to this issue in the Cantonese-English Chinese church:

(It) feel(s) like the Cantonese (congregant) is a lot more reserved (than English congregant) and they don’t understand how the English side worships. I know that some older generation Chinese um individuals, they complain about the English service and their worship because they think, “Oh my goodness, why is this necessary? You can just sing some hymns, but why is it necessary to beat some drums, like it just causes a wreck? You guys lost all meaning of worship, there’s not like, you don’t need to do this, you’re just italicizing music and everything?” I don’t understand where they’re coming from because I definitely grew up in the environment where we would worship with guitars, drums, and everything. .... Sometimes I feel like they’re looking down on the English service, they feel like we’re belittling our faith in a sense, just because we’re steering away from the traditional way of worshipping.

Ji-Yang underscored a similar discord.

During worship, or singspiration, the 2nd generation like more singing, sometimes they danced as well, on the stage they danced, and they used a lot of instruments, or even drums. The 1st generation guys they don’t feel comfortable, they would say, “too noisy! This not singing to the Lord.”

The same concern was noted in Mandarin Chinese churches as highlighted by Ba-Men

Their (Mandarin congregants’ and English-speaking congregants’) patience are also different. The English (sermon) topic they like to be finished in 15 minutes (during the service) while the Mandarin people want it (the sermon) longer, up to one hour. This is a big difference. Especially the older one wants the longer sermon, they felt they learn more, but not the younger generation.

Interestingly, Ji-Yang suggested ‘compromise’ as a solution to bridge such a divide:

I think the only thing we could do is to compromise, compromise between the 1st and 2nd generation cultures. Like for instance, music during worship they could replace the 2nd

generation to play the music, you know, to the more lower the tune. And on the other hand, we can persuade the 1st generation to accept, to appreciate what the 2nd generation are doing.

*Theme #4: Intergenerational Gaps as Barriers*

It is important to note that all the preceding themes reviewed thus far, including language issue and intergroup differences in cultural identities, ministries, and worship styles, are influenced and interwoven with intergeneration factors. From an East Asian immigrant perspective, the intergenerational relationship can be viewed from a parent-child relationship within a family, which is typically characterized by a hierarchical, ‘top down’ relationship.

Brian noted:

You still have a generational gap. That adds (to other) challenges. Older people have older ways of doing things; younger people may want to do things in a different way,

Similarly, So-Young identified generation factor as a key contributor of communication problem between the different congregants:

I think the biggest challenge is the generational disconnect. Although being under the same roof is better than complete independence of EM, there is a lack of common ground between the EM and KM. Sometimes it feels like there are two separate entities under one roof.

Shirley’s expression below poignantly highlights a desperate ‘cry for help’ resulting from feeling that second-generation youth are not being heard by the first-generation ‘parents’ in her church. .

And we were not growing anywhere in size or spiritually, or the youth. There’s no youth anymore. It’s diminished, that whole side. It’s just gone. It’s not there either, it’s cause we were not heard. No one prioritized the English side, which is why the English side was only decreasing in size because it sort of, when you go to church you expect to be fed in a sense.

Susan asserted:

I think in a lot of times, like, advice from KM comes from a, like a very good intentioned place...a lot of times. Not all the time, though. Of like, we want to do things for you. But it’s like still like very – we are the providers for you or we are above you so we do this for you. But a lot of times, it’s like, “you don’t know what we want, or you don’t know what we need, but you just do these things for us.” And I’ve learned in the past couple of years, like, they do

things, but they don't tell us it's for us, so that we don't know that they've done these things so they've put all this effort into things...

Incidentally, these reactions coincide with Dae Sung Kim's observation about second-generation Korean American congregant's experiences in the U.S. Kim observed: "*They are typically dissatisfied with the Asian-style leadership of the church, the ethnic emphasis on church culture, and the lack of opportunity for the younger generation to realize spiritual growth.*"<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly in Ann's comment below, we see that these intergeneration conflicts observed in Asian immigrant churches can mirror intergenerational conflicts occurring within Asian immigrant families.

We go through so many of the similar things together. We can help each other out, like I know for us like. Because there's this generation gap and different cultures growing up, our values are a bit different from our parents, so sometimes that conflicts and it's really hard at home (as well).

Deborah, a second-generation Korean, spoke of the effects of the hierarchal relational structure in traditional Asian family on the intercongregational interaction in Korean churches.

they (first generation) treat us (second generation) as, you know..... we're adults now. Sometimes I find older Korean generations don't tend to acknowledge the growth of their children and older children. .... Always a kid, yeah. If they're older you just have to listen whether it's right for us or not.

Some participants, however, took a more hopeful and reconciliatory stance and offered potential solutions to address such a perennial generational gap within Asian Canadian churches.

So-Young, a first-generation Korean, stated:

Yes, first generation members need to watch over second generation members. This is because we come from different cultures. My children come from a very different place culturally and generationally. If we were living in Korea, the cultural and generational differences would not be as pronounced. But as immigrants if we do not take the time to study

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<sup>5</sup> Dae Sung Kim, "New missions with a new generation: The experiences of Korean American churches and missions," *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, (2019): 1-9.  
DOI: 11.1177/2396939319838911, 4.

the cultural differences between older and younger generations, the differences become insurmountable. So my children and I may end up not understanding one another culturally and emotionally. When first generation members observe a certain behaviour pattern among second generation members, it is easy to attribute that behaviour to the language barrier or Canadian school system. But that is neither fair nor completely accurate.

The participants' responses above indicate that second-generation Asian Canadian members' desperate needs to contest and change the existing 'status quo' of the relational dynamics between the two generation groups and the structural governance of the current Asian Canadian immigrant churches. In Sharon Kim's study of Korean American churches in 2010, she described this movement as 'shifting boundaries' with second generation Korean American Christians.<sup>6</sup> According to Kim, ethnic second-generation churches in North America are going through a period of experimentation and flux to redefine its parameters both across generations and across cultures. Conceptualizing from this perspective, many of the communication and relational difficulties observed in the present study can well reflect part of the 'growing pain' in the life of Asian Canadian immigrant churches, as the churches struggle and seek out new prospects and paths for their future.

*Theme #5: Wishes, Desires, and Means to Improve Intergenerational and Intercongregational Communication and Relationship*

Finally, during the latter part of the interview, participants were additionally asked to speak to what and how they would like to see changed and improved in their churches. The resulting responses were comprised of a wide spectrum of wishes, needs, and ideas. These points are summarized with highlighted key words below and the corresponding excerpts are included to illustrate the participants' positions.

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<sup>6</sup> Sharon Kim, "Shifting boundaries with second-generation Korean American churches," *Sociology of Religion*, 71, (2010): 98-122. DOI: 10.1093/socrel/srq002.

First of all, ensuring *openness, transparency* and *honesty* between congregants was suggested.

Ann contended:

I think more transparency or better communication skills.

Stuart also noted:

We need more open and honest communication; so members of church are able to say that they just want to change because the old ways are not working anymore. But first everyone needs to realize that tweaking and updating the worship does not mean that it is not good. Having an honest communication channel and implementing upgrades just mean that the church is open to change for the better. I feel that some members feel too criticized at times and take it too much to heart.

Secondly, promoting *equality, equity*, and *mutual respect* within the church family was sorely needed. As noted by Seok-Ho,

Members of the EM want the full recognition from the rest of the church. They do not want to be treated as second class citizens at the church or be regarded as rule breakers by older church members. In other words, they want equal treatment but are often viewed as rebellious children in need of discipline by some older church members. Members of KM want to be treated with respect regardless of age group and status within the church. Some young KM members have been criticized for their lack of respect toward older members in the past.

Similarly, So-Young contended:

As I mentioned before, the church is (currently) very adult-centric whether (it be) planning for church-wide events or coordinating worship service. I want High-C members, English service members, and all youth members to feel heard and equally valued at the church, regardless of age and count. I want them to be in equal standing with the rest of so-called ‘dominant’ group (i.e. Korean speaking adults) at the church.

To achieve a greater reciprocal understanding between and among congregants, some participants noted the need to challenge the existing hierarchy and the ‘top-down’ relationship pattern of traditional Asian families, which inadvertently permeates in Asian immigrant churches. This is evident in Shirley’s response, as she described the English-speaking youth pastor’s felt pressure from the Cantonese-speaking senior pastor of her church:

I do know that in a Chinese church setting, (what) I hear from my youth pastor is that there is a lot of pressure from the Senior pastors going down to the younger pastors. ....but there's a lot of stress. And again, this hierarchy, the head is almost always from the Cantonese side and they are first generation or immigrants, they weren't born here.

Thirdly, the need to establish and enhance *trust* and *humility* was also stressed by several participants.

Kate suggested:

I think for them (first generation) being able to trust us (second generation). I think that is a huge part where sometimes the older generation don't trust the younger generation..... the first generation being able to trust us and being able to um, maybe, just let go of that control and being able to know that this is the direction that we want to go towards 'cause it's new.

On the other hand, Shirley advocated for a greater trust through openness.

To be more open and vulnerable with us at least, but definitely, that expectation has not been met. Um, yeah.

Whereas, Sui-hui noted the importance of humility

Cut down on the disagreements, or the forgiveness, don't be so stubborn, always I am right and you are

#### Discussion

Based on the participants' interview results, the present study's findings highlight the prevalence of critical differences and communication and relational gaps between the heritage congregation and the English-speaking congregation in contemporary Asian Canadian immigrant churches. As such, at the first glance, at the surface, these Asian Canadian churches with multiple congregants appear to be a big ethnic 'family', a deeper level of analysis however suggests otherwise. As revealed in the participants' responses in this research, at multiple levels the heritage congregant and the English-speaking congregant co-exist but operate as two 'culturally divergent' congregational entities within the same church building. As one participant J-Yang claimed: "*They (the two congregations) are thinking differently, put it in a (simple) way, they are culturally different.*" In fact, this observation finds support in the tenet posited by Dae

Sung Kim about Korean American churches.<sup>7</sup> Kim suggests that first-generation Korean immigrant churches should view their ministry to their second-generation congregation as a ‘cross-cultural mission’ despite the superficial similarities between them. To more fully comprehend and accurately interpret the intergenerational and intercongregational differences and gaps with respect to communication patterns and social and interpersonal relationships within Asian Canadian immigrant churches as reported by the participants of the current study, the interpretation of the study’s findings calls for a broad social-psychological-cultural analysis. To this end, in the following I will offer three frameworks to help understand and conceptualize the five observed themes shared by the participants: acculturation, Asian traditionalism and familism, and transnational migrant experience.

#### *Acculturation*

Cross-cultural researchers and immigrant researchers such as Kuo have long attested that intergenerational differences and conflicts between immigrant parents and their children often stem from varying degree of their ‘acculturation’ to the host society.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Dr. John Berry, a prominent scholar on migration and cultural change, noted that ‘acculturation’ is a concept that describes the process and the experience associated with migrant newcomers’ cultural adaptation in their resettled, host society.<sup>9</sup> In essence, varying degrees and strategies associated with acculturation among immigrants dictate how they identify with their heritage culture and society (e.g., Taiwanese/Chinese/Korean home culture) vs. how they identify with

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<sup>7</sup> Kim, *New Missions*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ben C. H. Kuo, “Coping, acculturation, and psychological adaptation among migrants: A theoretical and empirical review and synthesis of the literature,” *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine: an Open Access Journal*, 2, (2014): 16-33.  
doi: [10.1080/21642850.2013.843459](https://doi.org/10.1080/21642850.2013.843459)

<sup>9</sup> John W. Berry, “Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation,” *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46, (1997): 5-68.

their host society (Canada). Accumulative research has shown that intergenerational conflicts among immigrant families, including Asian family, are linked to acculturation difference between their foreign-born, first-generation immigrant parents and their native-born, second-generation children of immigrants. As in Canada or the U.S., children of immigrants are typically more ‘acculturated’ (or ‘Westernized’) towards their Canadian or American norms, than their immigrant parents. Lee and Mock (2005) asserted: “*Conflicts may be caused not only by different degrees of acculturation, but also by religious, philosophical, or political differences.*”<sup>10</sup>

In fact, we observed clear evidence of communication difficulties and conflicts within Asian Canadian immigrant churches due to intergenerational acculturation differences. For instance, language barriers between members of the heritage service and those in the English-speaking service. In the present study, the participants’ responses suggest that first-generation congregant struggles with limited proficiency in English to be able to fully understand and converse with second-generation English-speaking congregants and vice versa. Additionally, we observe the impact of acculturation on the differential preferences of worship styles between the heritage congregant and the English-speaking congregant, which might lead to further intercongregational disagreement and discord. The former prefers and finds comfort in more subtle and traditional service and worship approaches, whereas the latter is dissatisfied the long-established approaches to service and styles to worship. English-speaking congregants often prefers more outwardly expressive worship style, with contemporary music and more open expression of faith. Hence,

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<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Lee & Matthew R. Mock, “Asian families: An overview”. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & N. Garcia-Preto (Eds). *Ethnicity & family therapy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 276.

these differences can be partly attributed to divergence in their cultural and acculturation experiences between immigrant parents and their children in Canada.

Considering the intercongregational communication difficulties and discords and from the framework of acculturation, it can be said that many of these differences in preference and behavior patterns between the first-generation, heritage congregant and the second-generation, English-speaking congregant reflect a natural and expected consequence of the larger process of cultural adjustment and adaptation experienced by immigrants and immigrant families. Some have referred to such a conflict as part of migrants' 'acculturative stress.'<sup>11</sup> These characteristics exhibited within Asian Canadian immigrant church parallels what Chung (2001) observed: "*In such cases, parents and children may reside under the same roof but live in different worlds with little connection and mutual understanding. Lack of fluency in a common language exacerbates the situation, leaving families few bridges to span the ever-widening gulf.*"<sup>12</sup>

The implication of viewing these intergenerational and intercongregational and communication and relationship tensions within Asian Canadian immigrant churches from the acculturation perspective is that both congregants should be encouraged to see these differences as an often 'normative' experience for immigrants and immigrant families, despite the distress and the discomfort that come with these differences. Such a perspective will help reduce the misconception and mischaracterization between members of the two congregations and bring about a greater empathic understanding of each other.

#### *Asian Traditionalism and Familism*

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<sup>11</sup> Ben C. H. Kuo, "Coping, acculturation, and psychological adaptation among migrants."

<sup>12</sup> Gim R. H. Chung, "Gender, ethnicity, and acculturation in intergenerational conflict of Asian American college students," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 7, (2001): 376-386. DOI: 10.1037//1099-9809.7.4.376., 377.

Immigrant churches often provide ‘a home away from home’ for immigrants, particularly newcomers. In such a capacity, immigrant churches often serve to both perpetuate and challenge traditional values. This points to the interconnectedness of family and church for ethnic immigrants. Relatedly, the participants’ interview responses on the intercongregant communication challenges further reflect that Asian traditional values, norms, and worldviews are implicitly operating and affecting the congregational life of Asian Canadian immigrant churches.

Moreover, the centrality of family and *familism* has a pervasive and persisting effects on Asian individuals and families. Asian Familism represents the value system that believes in family as a united entity striving to preserve harmony, cooperation, and respect and obedience from children to parents. One such example is the Confucian idea of ‘filial piety’. In essence filial piety promotes obedience, obligations, respect, duty, and honour by the children to their parents as an ultimate social goal and personal aspiration. Similarly, in a traditional Asian family, it has also been observed that the role of a father is to be a disciplinarian, and the role of a mother is to be nurturing and supportive to her children. Even though for Asian Canadian immigrant families have undergone some changes to their traditional values and familism, the enduring effects of beliefs and practices continue to shape the communication and relationship dynamics among Asian Canadian families as well as churches.

A case in point, as illustrated in the previous section the second-generation participants in the current study, mostly English-speaking, spoken of feeling being dismissed and alienated by the heritage congregation, for which the ‘parents’ or the ‘adults’ in the church occupy key leadership positions of the church. One Korean participant Seok-Ho asserted: “*they (second generation) want equal treatment but are often viewed as rebellious children in need of*

*discipline*". Another participant Susan related the message she received from the first generation congregant: "*We are the providers for you or we are above you so we do this for you*". These 'top-down' hierarchical, first-generation driven leadership style and structure continue to pervade among many Asian Canadian immigrant churches, as reported by the participants of the study. It is, therefore, imperative for the leaderships of first-generation congregant and of second-generation congregant within Asian Canadian churches to engage in a critical self reflection and dialogue about these traditional, culture-conditioned Asian values and role expectations. An open, honest, and informed evaluation and discussion is needed between the congregants to strike a balance between maintaining and preserving aspects of cultural strengths from one's heritage culture and venturing into new and productive ways of change. Such a bold attempt would likely go a long way in improving not only communication but also mutual understanding and relationship between the congregations across their various dividing lines.

#### *Transnational Immigrant Experiences*

Additionally, the identified differences in communication patterns, preferences, and relationship expectation between the members of the heritage service, who are typically the 'immigrant parent' generation, and those of English-speaking service, who are typically the 'children of immigrant' generation, can be conceptualized from the sociology and the psychology of transnational immigrant family. It has been observed that within Asian immigrant family, first generation parents often feel that they must be the keeper of their culture of origin, which include collectivistic traditions, values, and practices of Asian heritage, both at home and within the immigrant churches. This often stands in contrast to the increasing influences Asian children of immigrant experienced in and from the mainstream, predominantly individualistic white society, including socialization through schools, work places, and peers. In particular, first-

generation parents often reflect a more ‘other-focused’, collectivistic attitudes (i.e., deference, cooperation, obedience, and modesty), whereas second-generation children reflect a more ‘self-focused’, individualistic attitudes (independence, self expression, self sufficiency, and confident).

In the current study, we see a common reaction among first-generation participants but also some second-generation participants who sentimentalize and maintain the traditional role of Asian Canadian churches as a conduit of enculturation (i.e., learning about one’s home/heritage culture). For instance, one participant Debora recounted:

“I would love to see a little bit of something cultural for our children (in the church). Because they’re third and fourth generations and I don’t want them to lose the Korean culture. So that’s more personal.....it’s as a parent of a Korean – I would love for them (children) to know more (Korean culture), yeah.”

However, the intergenerational cultural conflicts between congregations can sometime stem from the view of English-speaking, second-generation youth and young people that the role and function of their churches should serve purely as a place of worship and spiritual learning, as opposed to an institution of cultural preservation and social connection. The challenge for Asian immigrant children is that even though they realize their obligations to their parents, family, and heritage culture, they expect and demand greater equality and respect from their parents and focus less on the demand for obedience. The end result is what we often see in a form of an impasse playing out not only within the immigrant family but also in intergenerational and intercongregational immigrant churches.

In short, the intercongregant communication and relationship difficulties in Asian Canadian immigrant churches should be analyzed and understood from the deep-seated social and psychological experiences of Asian immigrant individuals and family, including their

perceptions of the roles and functions of churches between the first-generation and the second-generation. Furthermore, the impacts of contextual and cultural socializations along the dimensions of collectivism and individualism on the two generations should be considered. In particular, both congregants should be helped to better understand their own and each other's sociocultural views, perspectives, and positions from collectivistic vs. individualistic value orientations.

### Practical Implications from the Current Chapter

In view of the findings of the current research project as described in this chapter, I will offer four suggestions for the consideration of Asian Canadian immigrant churches and readers of this chapter. These suggestions are meant to offer potential tools for Asian Canadian immigrant churches to contemplate ways for their churches to enhance communication, to cross cultural divides, and to build and repair relationships between generations and congregants.

First, members of intergenerational and intercongregant immigrant churches are strongly encouraged and urged to learn *how to listen*. The art and skills of listening is often not something people are born with naturally, and yet it is the foundation of constructive communication. Yet, as noted previously, open communication is often difficult and uncommon within traditional Asian families and churches. Within the field of counselling and psychotherapy, 'empathic listening' is the quintessential skill that a counsellor/ therapist/helper must possess in order to fully and deeply understand their clients' experiences and emotions. Empathic listening invites the conversants to listen to not only *what the other person says* (contents), but also equally important *how the other person says it* (the speaker's nonverbal expressions, emotions, underlying meanings, etc.). Empathic listening and communication is also characterized by genuine curiosity, openness, and non-judgmental attitude. These basic skills and manners of

conveying, sharing, and listening should be regularly discussed, cultivated and reinforced within the Body of Christ within and between members and churches, to help increase mutual understanding.

Second, as a springboard to facilitate and engage more constructive communication and relationship-building between generations and congregants, Asian Canadian immigrant churches may consider using the findings and the information generated from this current research project, *Asian Canadian Churches of Today for Tomorrow*, as the basis for forging new and critical conversations. That is, for the churches to use the results and the knowledge emerged from the current study and reported in this chapter and the book, to help reflect, examine, and dialogue about the experience and quality associated with their intergenerational communication and relationship within their congregations. In particular, churches would benefit from considering the state of their congregation, their issues, circumstances, relationships, and future from a broad social-psychological-cultural perspective, as propositioned in this chapter, in addition to a faith-based and spiritually-informed framework. Discussion and understanding from the common experiences encountered by Asian immigrants, families, and communities, including acculturation, Asian families and traditionalism, and transnational immigrant experiences discussed in this chapter would be especially relevant and informative.

Third, given that intergenerational gaps exist mainly between first- and second- generation congregants within Asian Canadian immigrant churches, the churches may greatly benefit from having a ‘cultural broker’ in aiding and mediating such intergenerational and intercongregational relationships. Ideal cultural brokers are those who understand the lived experiences and the worldviews of both generations. For example, 1.5-generation immigrants may fulfill such a role within immigrant churches. By definition 1.5 generation is considered the ‘in-between

generation' between the first- and the second- generation immigrants. Most of whom are well-versed in their heritage language as well as English; they are familiar with the 'cultural ways' of Asian traditionalism but are, at the same time, highly acculturated in the 'Canada ways' and/or the 'American ways'. Hence, immigrant churches may solicit the assistance and the perspective of trusted 1.5 generation as the cultural and relational bridge between generations. These bicultural individuals can potentially be an effective 'go-between' or mediator between the first- and the second- generation congregation members in resolving conflicts and building positive relationship.

Finally, as a recommendation for the future, Asian immigrant churches in Canada and U.S. may take cue from Dae Sung Kim's recent proposition. The idea for bridging the two congregations is for the first-generation church leadership to apply missiological principles in planting churches with the second-generation members. Kim asserted: "*Rather, the churches should invite second-generation Korean Americans to the kingdom of God in ways appropriate to them, just as overseas mission proceeds in planting indigenous churches.*"<sup>13</sup> In other word, Kim recommend that immigrant church should view and consider the ministry to and of second generation from the perspective of cross-cultural mission and as a church planting process. Under this provision, a second-generation church should be supported to strive towards the principles of self-governance, self-support, and self propagation. This model of ministry will empower and encourage ownership and independence of second generation congregant and remove paternalism that exists in traditional Asian immigrant churches. Kim envisions that such

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<sup>13</sup> Kim, *New Missions*, 6.

a model of Asian immigrant churches would promote a new paradigm shift for the future of these churches:

“No longer would they (first generation) think primarily in terms of teaching and transferring their faith and cultural practices to the second generation; rather, they would study how they could become an incarnational mission community that exercise patience, takes initiative, and identifies with the culture of the second generation.”<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter reports and summarizes the results of 50 participant interviews conducted in Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese Canadian churches, with multiple generation congregants, in the Greater Toronto Area. Distinctively, the chapter adopts a social-psychological-cultural lens in analyzing and conceptualizing the issues pertaining to culture, communication and relationship within Asian Canadian immigrant churches. The results suggest that intercongregant communication challenges and relational conflicts stem from 5 key themes. The intergenerational and intercongregational conflicts and difficulties within Asian Canadian immigrant churches reflect characteristics of cross-cultural communication, acculturation of immigrants and immigrant families, East Asian traditionalism, familism, collectivism, social hierarchy, and the relational dynamics within transnational immigrant families and communities. In concluding this chapter, I would like to draw readers’ attention to the complexity of intergenerational communication and relationship issues between congregants in Asian Canadian immigrant churches. The paradoxical feelings and attitudes, both positive and negative, associated with Asian Canadian immigrant churches for its members are profound, nuanced, and, at times, conflicting. In the following quote, Susan’s heart-felt description of her relationship with her Korean church summarizes up such a sentiment poignantly and vividly.

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<sup>14</sup> Kim, *New Missions*, 6.

I actually grew up in BC till grade four and we went to predominately white church... When I went to university, I explored a bunch of churches there. I explored multicultural churches white churches, Korean churches. At the core of it, I think maybe it's the way that my parents raised me. I'm still very Korean. And I crave something about Korean culture that is very familiar. Like it's familiar, and I love – it's ironic because sometimes I criticize Korean culture for being very formal and like you have to een-sa or like say hello to elders in a very specific way or use a very specific type of speech. But there's something very familiar in that in that like even though you're een-sa'ing to people like they've seen you grow up and it's kind of like family. .... But like there's something very communal about eating and like because we put it at such importance like there's a lot of bonding that goes around eating. So yeah, like. I think even if I were to switch churches, I think I would still choose a Korean church just 'cause like there's something, I don't know what it is. I can't really put my finger on it, but there's something familiar and core to me that I want to keep (through remaining in a Korean Church).

In closing, it is hoped that the findings and recommendations of this chapter may encourage effective communication, improve relationship, and enhance growth and harmony within and between heritage first-generation congregant/church and English-speaking second-generation congregant/church, and inspire Asian Canadian immigrant churches to envisage new hopes and visions into the future.

### Discussion Questions

- 1.) Considering the distinctive social, psychological, and cultural characteristics of Asian Canadian immigrant churches as revealed in this chapter, please identify, discuss, and compare how communication and relationship challenges faced by Asian Canadian immigrant churches may be different from: a) non-immigrant churches; and b) non-Asian immigrant churches.
  
- 2). Think about an Asian Canadian immigrant church with multiple congregations that you are a part of or that you know of. Discuss in what specific ways might the influences of acculturation, Asian traditionalism and familism, and transnational immigration, the three key cultural factors reviewed in this chapter, might have shaped or impacted the congregational life and the ministry of this church, particularly with respect to communication and relationship between and among congregants. Explain your observations and give specific examples to illustrate.
  
- 3). In view of the current chapter, what other additional issues do you see as critical in affecting intergenerational and intercongregational communication and relationship within contemporary Asian Canadian immigrant churches? What other ideas and suggestions might you have that could help bridge the gaps across the language, the generational, and the cultural divides for Asian immigrant churches in Canada?
  
- 4). Discuss your thoughts and reactions about Kim's (2019) recommendation that immigrant churches should view and consider the ministry to and of second-generation from the perspective of cross-cultural mission and as a church planting process?

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