Beyond immigrant ethnic politics?

Organizational innovation, collaboration and competition in the Los Angeles immigrant rights movement (1980-2015)

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CHAPTER 5.[119] ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY BEYOND ETHNICITY? SHIFTING ORGANIZATIONAL LOGICS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR IMMIGRANT RIGHTS IN LOS ANGELES

Abstract

Immigrant political organizations in the US have traditionally built political power by claiming to legitimately represent an ethnically defined group. However, the emergence of a number of multi-ethnic, class-based organizations over the last two decades has challenged this assumption, while raising questions about the ability of the institutional context to accommodate organizational change. Building on a neo-institutional theory of legitimacy, I examine the diverging legitimating strategies employed by two long-standing immigrant organizations based in Los Angeles, the Korean Resource Center (KRC) and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA). Through grant applications, organizational archival data and qualitative interviews, I show how KRC and KIWA, two groups embedded in the same socio-political context, have built unique yet equally successful legitimating accounts by adopting different organizational logics, one broadly based on ethnicity and one on class and multi-ethnicity. I suggest that KIWA and KRC's ideological differences, and their reliance on a different core of supporters – ethnic-oriented for KRC, labor-oriented for KIWA – drove the organizations towards distinct, yet partially overlapping sub-fields. By discursively mobilizing those connections, and by actively shaping the surrounding organizational environment, both KRC and KIWA were able to incorporate in the broader non-profit advocacy sector in Los Angeles.

Keywords: Immigrant Organizations; Social Movements; Worker Centers; Ethnic Organizations; Korean Americans

Introduction

Ethnicity and race have long defined the perimeters of urban politics in the United States (Wimmer 2008; Katznelson 1981; Mollenkopf 2013; Ngin and Torres 2001). Immigrant organizations have followed in this pattern, traditionally building political power in their American host societies by claiming to *legitimately* represent an ethnically defined group (Portes, Escobar, and Arana 2008; Dahl 1961). This strategy has been even more salient in the local politics of cities, such as Los Angeles, and notably in the context of the city's 1992 civil unrest and the narrative of ethnic reconciliation that ensued (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; Chung 2007; Pastor 2001b). Recent organizational developments, however,

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have challenged this assumption. The change has come, in part, as a result of the stronger alliance between immigrant organizations, labor unions, and a new generation of African American associations (Nicholls and Uitermark 2013; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010; Pastor 2001b). Over the last two decades, a number of immigrant organizations – recently grouped as *worker centers* (Fine 2006) – have forwarded the political interests of multi-ethnic immigrant constituencies through the discourses of socioeconomic inequalities and class. In doing so, they have built hybrid organizational forms that cannot be easily reconciled with established models of immigrant ethnic organizations (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010).

Examining this change in narratives and structures among immigrant organizations is crucial for understanding how they establish themselves and survive. That is, how they become legitimate collective actors, recognized not only by the constituency they represent but also by the broader field in which they operate. However, not all immigrant-based organizations gain legitimacy in the same way, use the same rhetoric, or draw support from the same audiences. Analyzing how new organizational models emerge and survive can help us better understand how broader institutional change takes place, as well as better appreciate the degree of flexibility of the local context in accommodating different types of immigrant organizations.

The Korean Resource Center (KRC) and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), two long-standing Los Angeles-based immigrant organizations, were selected for comparison with this purpose in mind. KRC was first established as an international solidarity group and later became an organization along the lines of ethnic representation. KIWA emerged from the same political milieu but embraced an intersectional, class-based framework of action, claiming to represent 'immigrant workers' across ethnic lines. Both groups have broadly combined identity-based service provision with political advocacy, supporting an agenda that calls for protecting and enhancing the rights of their immigrant constituency in the US. However, despite being located in the same geographical area and initially working with a similar population, the two organizations have employed different strategies to gain and assert legitimacy to their surrounding environment, building distinct organizational models.

This article aims to understand these two diverging paths and, in so doing, answer the following questions: why have these two organizations pursued different strategies to assert their legitimacy in almost identical contexts? How have they succeeded? Building on a neo-institutional theory of legitimacy that emphasizes the desirability and appropriateness of organizational actions within a normative context, I compare the historical trajectories of KRC and KIWA. I then turn to how the organizations discursively constructed their legitimating accounts over time, especially vis-à-vis donors and funders.

Literature review

Organizational legitimacy is inherently linked to organizational survival (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Suchman 1995). Immigrant political organizations are no exception in this respect. Their struggle to be seen by other social actors as *legitimate* is largely driven by their need to access material and symbolic resources (Suchman 1995; Vermeulen and Brünger 2014). Beyond the commitment of their constituency, such organizations also need backing from a wide range of external audiences – other organizations, churches, unions, media, funding agencies, and select institutions – who are not directly concerned by the issue at stake. External supporters become crucial in situations where the targeted constituencies come from underprivileged groups and lack economic resources, and organizations require technical expertise or critical mass to achieve a particular political goal (Walker and McCarthy 2010).

The pursuit of legitimacy poses significant constraints to the scope of collective action. Neo-institutional scholars have argued that newly formed organizations, if they seek higher chances of surviving, are generally expected to conform to the social values and norms of institutionalized organizational fields (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Walker and McCarthy 2010). Suchman's (1995: 574) influential definition, incorporated in my study, stresses this precisely, stating that legitimacy is the "generalized belief that an organization's actions are desirable, suitable and appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs." Organizational fields generally form from increasing interdependencies and mutual awareness processes among collective actors, with organizations gradually resembling each other's structures, discourses, and practices (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Once this process completes, social actors come to recognize certain organizational forms (or templates) along with their practices and discourses, as being natural within a given order of arrangements (Suchman 1995). New organizations therefore have to deal with existing "models, schemas, or scripts" (Clemens and Cook 1999: 446) that dictate the accepted range of possibilities within a given field. Each field will be guided by its own *institutional logics*: "organizing principles that shape ways of viewing and interpreting the world… [which] encode the criteria of legitimacy by which role identities, strategic behaviors, organizational forms, and relationships between organizations are constructed and sustained" (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005: 38).

Emerging organizations are not only constrained by the limitation of organizational possibilities. They also have to cope with an existing discursive context where there are already "established notions of who and what are considered reasonable, sensible, and legitimate" (Koopmans 2004: 451) concerning a certain field or issue. Within this context, only specific strategies of *categorization* and *classification* of the social world (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Brubaker 2004) are considered acceptable by most, if not all, the actors. They may revolve around notions of class, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, religion, or some combination thereof. Such strategies are socially context-dependent, historically

contingent and inherently contested, being the product of on-going political struggle where the most powerful social group imposes its own categories and meanings on the others (Wimmer 2008).

Organizations that challenge established organizational models and discourses may therefore face dire prospects of survival. As a matter of fact, it is still unclear how those new organizations empirically construct their legitimating accounts and successfully recombine elements from different organizational logics. Moreover, why similar organizations operating in similar environments may pursue unique strategies remains largely unexplained. Skilled institutional entrepreneurs can, to varying degrees, exploit external shocks or tensions between different institutions to create new logics, mainly by transposing or extending schemas from one context to another (Clemens and Cook 1999; Rao, Morrill, and Zald 2000). For instance, they may align an innovative organizational narrative with the "broadly accepted norms, values, and belief systems that constitute the master principles of society, such as truth, equality, and justice" (Haveman and Rao 1997: 1613-1614). In other words, they may create organizations that, at the surface level, adopt established structural features (organizational denominations, mechanisms of accountability, predetermined financial requirements) but, at the deeper level, challenge normative expectations within the very same field (Clemens and Cook 1999; Vermeulen and Brünger 2014).

Some scholars have suggested that the analysis of organizational linkages is useful for studying legitimacy, as it places a single organization within the wider field in which it is embedded (Vermeulen, Minkoff, and Van der Meer 2016; Baum and Oliver 1991; Wollabaek 2009). Others have stressed that networks are crucial for understanding why organizations adopt specific organizational logics (Clemens and Cook 1999), or why certain groups are more powerful than others in public discursive struggles (Wimmer 2008). These different streams of literature, however, have not paid enough attention to how different networks can impact legitimating strategies of similar organizations, particularly within the same context. Often, the assumption is that organizations with similar characteristics and embedded in the same context will attempt to gain legitimacy from the same institution in the same way, but this is not always the case.

In order to explain for this process, I propose to combine different conceptualizations of networks in my study. In one way, I consider networks as a *structural vehicle* on which models, practices, interpretative frameworks, and discourses travel between organizational settings, thus setting the conditions for bridging different institutional logics or creating new narratives (Clemens and Cook 1999; Wimmer 2008). When incorporated into organizational narratives, networks also become a *discursive device* (Mische and White 1998), "cultural constructions, [that] do not pre-exist, or exist apart from their enactment in conversation and discursive communication processes" (Knox, Savage, and Harvey 2006: 129). Therefore, organizational entrepreneurs may be driven towards a given legitimating strategy and organizational logics because of previous

or on-going interaction with specific actors. Organizations and individuals become part of a foundational "organizational infrastructure" (Nicholls 2003: 882), conceived as a system of relations which comes to characterize a specific organizational sector. This infrastructure, to its turn, allows the organization to develop, but also influences and limits the horizon of organizational possibilities over time. At the same time, organizational entrepreneurs may also discursively employ different types of linkages to gain legitimacy among third-party actors. Advertising those connections may suggest reliability and adherence to certain organizational values and principles (Baum and Oliver 1991; Wollabaek 2009), or rather convey support from the *community* it wishes to represent (Walker and McCarthy 2010; Vermeulen, Minkoff, and van der Meer 2016).

Methodology

My research focuses on the long-term legitimating strategies of KRC and KIWA, two immigrant organizations active in Los Angeles (LA) over the last three decades. Given the larger amount of material available and the peculiarity of its trajectory, KIWA is my main case study. The reason for comparing KIWA with KRC lies in the similarities that the two organizations share with respect to a number of characteristics: their ideological orientation, which can be broadly traced to the same wider political milieu within the Korean and Korean American Left; their intrinsic 'political' mission, supported by a variable combination of service provision, membership organizing and advocacy activities; the ethnic characteristics of the founders and of the early staff, largely composed of 1.5 and second-generation Korean immigrants; their co-existence within the same territorial, social, and cultural boundaries of the multi-ethnic neighborhood of Koreatown in Los Angeles. I therefore selected the two organizations for comparison in order to understand how they adopt diverging, yet equally successful legitimating strategies despite those striking similarities, eventually becoming part of two separate organizational fields structured around unique organizational logics.

To conduct this study, I relied on a number of data sources, which are cited throughout the paper to demonstrate the evolution of organizational trajectories at specific moments in time. Those included: archive (grant applications to funding organization and related material); interviews with KRC and KIWA former and current staff; public organizational material available online (internal reports, press releases, newsletters, and other digital information). Most of the archive material was assembled by Liberty Hill, a private philanthropy foundation, which has funded a number of LA-based immigrant advocacy organizations over the last 40 years, including KRC and KIWA, and kept detailed record of the whole funding process. Each application folder, ranged per year and per organization, generally included: a grant application (9-10 to 23-25 pages), prepared by the organization to apply for a specific grant; evaluations conducted by the Liberty Hill foundation during the selection process; correspondence between the

application and the foundation, such as grant agreements (few pages); an interim report (6-8 pages), describing the progress of the use of funds by the organization awarded the grant; a final report (7-10 pages), describing organizational achievements at the end of a funding cycle; miscellaneous material provided by organizations to back their application, including newsletters, newspaper articles, fundraising dinner booklets and organizational reports. The significance of the miscellaneous material varied greatly, both by organization and by year, being overall significantly richer for KIWA during the period 1992-2006. For KRC, information was available only for the periods 1983-1984 (on behalf of YKU), 1998-2000, and 2005-2015 (total of 11 application folders). As for KIWA, the data spanned the period 1992-2015 with some minor gaps – records were available so long as the organization submitted an application and was awarded funding (total of 20 application folders. KIWA folders also included selected folders of affiliated organizations MIWON and RWAK in 2000 and 2002, respectively. For the scope of this article, I mostly focused on the early years and up until the mid-2000s for both organizations, when each public legitimating strategy solidified.

I treated archival material and interviews as discursive products, assuming that grant applications and related material reflected KRC's and KIWA's official narratives as intended for an external US audience, i.e. a Los Angeles-based philanthropic organization. This assumption carries two caveats with it. First, that organizations are aware that funding applications are expected to comply with certain context-dependent technical and normative expectations in order to be considered by donors. Second, that the official narratives necessarily obfuscate the internal debates and disagreements within organizations, to the advantage of a seemingly homogeneous and coherent organizational story that is essentially the product of the organizational leadership. I adopted a methodological strategy that analyzed archive material to formulate legitimating accounts by focusing on the following dimensions: organizational historical accounts; objectives; structure, decision-making, and collaborations; projects, campaigns, and activities; financial metrics and sources of funding; identified memberships, audiences, and opponents. The literature reviewed and the research questions informed my coding strategy. I coded the material mostly through structural and descriptive coding, in my attempt to extrapolate underlying organizational logics as embedded in those descriptions – i.e. the organizational worldview, its view on social change, the criteria defining its membership, etc. I interpreted organizational linkages mentioned in the narrative in two different ways: as representing a flow of information, ideas, practices, and discourses between the main organization and the connected groups; and as part of the discursive legitimating strategy of the organization vis-à-vis the third-party donor agency.

I also conducted 11 interviews with current and former staff and volunteers: four were involved with KRC and eight with KIWA.[120] The interviews broadly focused on the same organizational dimensions explored in the archives, with a specific look on selected

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[120] One respondent was involved in both organizations.

periods of the organizational life between the early 1990s and the early 2010s. Respondents provided their own perspective on the development of certain webs of relationships that proved crucial, in their understanding, for the development of campaigns and the organization. They also clarified interpretation of some of the archive material.

The Politics of the Korean Immigrant Community in Los Angeles

The Korean Resource Center (KRC) and the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) are considered part of a small group of highly politicized organizations that emerged in LA's Korean immigrant community between the 1980s and the early 1990s (Chung 2007). Ideologically, each organization was inspired by a different thread of South Korea's pro-labor and pro-democracy movement during the 1980s, though both were firmly anchored on the left of the political spectrum (Louie 2004). Researchers have explained their emergence by singling out three intertwined factors that affected the immigrant community: the pro-labor and pro-democracy movement in South Korea; the 1992 civil unrest in LA; the generational change within the immigrant community (Chung 2007; Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña 2013; Louie 2004; Kwon 2010).

Since 1965, LA has been one of the major cities across the US in which waves of Korean migrants settle (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). As Korean immigration boomed in the following three decades, a significant percentage of Korean-owned businesses concentrated west of Downtown LA, which gradually became known across the city as 'Koreatown.' As the immigrant population grew and their activities and socio-economic status diversified, immigrant-led organizations of all types and political inclination established premises in the area, providing different financial, social, and cultural services that, due to cultural and linguistic barriers, local institutions could not (Chung 2007). This combination of residential, economic, and service concentrations, all catering to a specific immigrant group, soon earned Koreatown the definition of *ethnic enclave.* This happened despite the fact that the area was (and still is) inhabited by an extremely heterogeneous and ethnically diverse population, including a majority of Latinos (mostly composed of Mexican and Central American immigrants), as well as South Asian immigrants (mostly from Bangladesh) (Kwon 2010).

As LA's Korean community became the largest outside South Korea, the South Korean government also took strong interest in maintaining tight control over the political activities of its nationals in the US, specifically when those were directed at influencing affairs in the Korean peninsula (Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña 2013). Immigrant organizations sponsored by Korean institutions had little to no legitimacy outside the immigrant community, mainly because they did not need external backing to perform their functions (Chung 2007). At the time, the Korean community in LA was particularly sensitive to political developments in the homeland. The growth of South Korea's labor and democracy movements inspired a new generation of Korean Americans to formulate

alternative political projects to those of the government-sponsored traditional elites (Chung Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña 2013; Louie 2004). As news of the South Korean government's brutal repression of the movement travelled to the US, an emerging group of young Korean Americans, often born in the US from Korean parents or socialized in the American context at a very early age, connected with the home country of their parents in unexpected ways. The connections they forged with pro-democracy and pro-labor activists during this period considerably shaped their political consciousness (Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña 2013).

Taking place from 29 April to 1 May 1992, a second major event was short-lived but hard-hitting. Following the acquittal of four white LA Police Department officers who had been charged with the beating of an African American motorist, LA's inner city experienced one of the most violent rioting outbreaks in its entire history (Pastor 1995; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). What began as an expression of anger over the acquittal, soon devolved into widespread disturbances that included killings, arson and looting. Korean storeowners, most of which had shops located in South Central and Koreatown, were hit the hardest. By all sides, including social commentators and researchers, the event was seen through the lenses of ethnicity and race, with identities such as Black, Latino, and Korean heavily defining cleavages that were much more complex and woven in the broader social, political, and economic disempowerment of inner-city residents (Pastor 1995; Baldassare 1994; Chung 2007). For the Korean immigrant community, the event was financially devastating, but also dramatically exposed the community's powerlessness in local politics, as shown by local law-enforcement agencies' reluctance to intervene to protect the businesses under attack (Chung 2007). At the same time, the unrest put Koreatown and its surrounds in the spotlight, attracting the attention of mainstream non-profit groups, media, and private foundations, which began channeling their resources to the inner city to promote inter-ethnic collaboration.

For 1,5 and second generation Korean American political activists, often highly educated and perfectly comfortable in dealing with mainstream US institutions, this combination of events opened up an unprecedented political space to make their concerns be heard outside of the immigrant community (Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña 2013). It also allowed organizations such as KRC and KIWA, which were part of this milieu, to envision other sources of legitimization beyond the immigrant leadership.

The Korean Resource Center: Building Immigrant Ethnic Politics

From Ethnic International Solidarity to Ethnic Engagement in the US

KRC was established in 1983 by Yoon Han Bong, a South Korean activist who played a major role in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Seoul and Kwangju in 1980 (Louie 2004). Throughout the 1980s and up until the early 1990s, KRC mostly functioned as a

progressive community space for the local immigrant population, providing a safe haven where Koreans could share their common experience as immigrants, speak their native language and engage in cultural and political activities. Young Koreans United (YKU), the center's more politicized arm, was heavily engaged in raising awareness about the oppressive nature of the South Korean state and exposing US complicities with the regime. Although firmly planted on the left of the political spectrum, members of both KRC and YKU had diverging opinions on the future of South Korea (Louie 2004). Some promoted versions of liberal democracy, underscoring the fight against US imperialism in South-East Asia and emphasizing the quest for national independence and reunification. Others supported degrees of socialism, arguing that democratization in South Korea should come as the product of class struggle within the country. The center's political mission, as well as its popular charismatic founder, were key for attracting a small niche of committed volunteers, most of them 1.5 and second-generation immigrants. More or less at the same time that KRC was funded, South Korean activists encouraged the establishment of similar centers elsewhere in the US, respectively the Young Korean American Service and Education Center (YKASEC) in New York in 1984, and the Korean American Resource & Cultural Center (KRCC) in Chicago in 1986 (Louie 2004).

In this phase, the organization received little to no active support from audiences beyond a small core of committed activists with an immigrant background (Louie 2004). KRC, however, was not a foreign object in the Los Angeles organizational landscape. First, the organization officially registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, complying with local regulations governing voluntary political organizations. Second, KRC's ethno-national political dimension was quite common in LA among different international solidarity organizations comprising immigrants and political refugees from diverse countries (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). LA-based organizations such as the Guatemalan Information Center, or the Committee in Solidarity with the People of Salvador (CISPES) pursued a similar combination of public awareness-raising, ethnic identity-building, and service provision to the onsite immigrant community. While there is no direct evidence linking KRC's organizational trajectory to that of those organizations,[121] I suggest that KRC established itself within a growing organizational field where certain practices and discourses were already considered legitimate, this *de facto* recognition likely smoothening up the organization's transition to US advocacy and its later professionalization.

KRC's political mission started to change in the early 1990s, when the organization shifted focus from international solidarity to the concerns of the Korean

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[121] Former ED Joo Hoon compared the formation of KRC with the establishment of CISPES or the activity of Filipino exiles in LA. Interview with Dae Joo Hoon, former KRC executive director and current NAKASEC director, 21 January 2015 (herein cited as 'interview with Joo Hoon'). Moreover, a KRC grant application referred to the early 1980s as a "vibrant and provocative time when young Korean Americans were politically awakened by the anti-imperialist and democracy movements from Nicaragua, El Salvador, South Africa, the Philippines and South Korea." See "Fund for a New Los Angeles", KRC grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation, (p.2) 15 March 2007 (herein cited as "KRC 2007 grant application").

immigrant population living in the US.[122] On the one hand, the political situation in South Korea had become less pressing, as the country was well on its way to democratization. On the other hand, in making a connection between the 1992 Civil Unrest and anti-immigrant legislation (such as California Proposition 187 and the federal welfare reform of 1996), KRC stressed the vulnerability of Korean immigrants both as an ethnic minority and an immigrant group:

> The April 29, 1992 L.A. Unrest (Sa-I-Gu) and the anti-immigrant wave with Proposition 187 and welfare reform were two recent events which led many Korean Americans to reassess their understanding of the American dream. Korean Americans directly experienced the harsh effects of social and economic inequality, unfair immigration laws and immigrant scapegoating. As well, these events signified the need to educate young second generation Korean Americans to become socially conscious about their community and to defend their civil rights.[123]

In KRC's narrative, those events were seen as inherently related, and presented as an attack directed at Korean Americans as a *whole*. KRC emphasized the ethnic and racial component of both the disturbances and the legislative action, noting the unfair 'scapegoating' of *Korean immigrant community* by the rest of society, but also using this argument to urge Korean Americans to get politically involved.[124] This particular reading of the events provides a rationale for the organization's shift to legislative advocacy, as well as for its decision to treat legislative and socio-economic discrimination as a matter of *civil* rights.

KRC's transition was facilitated by the organization's pre-existing informal structure of members and supporters, but also by its decision to continue address the same type of public institutions. Another element that guided and facilitated KRC transition was the organization's embeddedness in a national network of 'Korean' organizations, which included YKASEC in New York and KRCC in Chicago (Louie 2004). Not only did the two organizations share similar principles and undergo a similar transformation to that of KRC, but also joined the LA-based group to establish the National Korean American Service Education Consortium (NAKASEC) in 1994. The network developed as a national infrastructure where participating organizations would regularly meet to share ideas, information, as well as human and financial resources.[125] It also tied the interests and logics of KRC to those of the other centers and of their national counterpart, as it formalized their common political struggle as Korean ethnic-based advocacy organizations.[126]

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[122] "Korean Resource Center 1998 Annual Report", KRC report, ca 1998-99, box 76/folder 10, LHFR archive.
[123] KRC, "Korean Resource Newsletter", KRC newsletter (p.5), no. 3, 1999, box 76/folder 10, LHRC archive (herein cited as "KRC 1999/3 newsletter").
[124] KRC newsletter 1999/3 and interview with Joo Hoon.
[125] In his interview Joo Hoon, also stressed a similar point.
[126] See "The Political Awakening of Korean Americans", KRC Website, withdrawn on 5 June, 2015 http://old.krcla.org/en/The_Political_Awakening_of_Korean_Americans

Those logics were retained and further developed in the late 1990s, when the organization decisively moved towards professionalization and budget expansion. KRC's then director, Dae Joo Hoon, began seeking external finances to cover major expenses such as headquarters maintenance and mortgage fees, expansion of organizational activities, and building a core of paid salary staff.[127] This last move signaled the beginning of the organization's dependence on a new type of supporter, philanthropic foundations, and considerably changed the organization's size and scope. Within the broader context of post-1992 Los Angeles, KRC recognized the lack of a 'Korean voice' in the local politics and went on to structure its political claim along these lines.

Placing Korean Americans at the Center of the Mainstream Immigrant Rights Debate

Throughout the late 1990s and the early 2000s, KRC elaborated an organizational platform that placed at its core the *political empowerment* of *Korean Americans*, stressing both the ethnic and immigrant dimension of this community. KRC planned to achieve this through a combination of "education, advocacy and grassroots organizing... [in order to] promote political and civic participation of Korean Americans... preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Korean Americans as part of multicultural America."[128] The identification of such organizational objectives implies an underlying logic where ethnicity is discursively used as a primary source of identification for members and staff as well as a principle for guiding the organization's political action within American society. Korean identity – loosely presented as self-awareness of Korean and immigrant history, culture, and language – thus becomes a way to unite different immigrant generations, children of immigrants raised and born in the US included, around a common political cause blending immigrant and ethnic rights.[129]

KRC structured its legitimating strategy in Los Angeles around two axes. One was the assertion of its role as a progressive political advocate of the specific interests of Korean Americans, an ethnic constituency which lacked a voice in 1990s local politics. The second was the recognition of its constituency's struggle as being similar to that of other underprivileged groups, mostly defined across ethnic and racial lines, coupled with an implicit acceptance of the broader US institutional system and its logics.

As for the first axis, the organization emphasized its ethnic commitment in the description of its cultural and educational activities, which were open to the *Korean immigrant community* at large and, unlike KIWA, were not explicitly antagonizing or excluding particular segments. KRC stressed that its staff mostly comprised 1.5- and second-generation Korean youth, and that its "core leadership represents different

[127] Interview with Joo Hoon.
[128] "Liberty Hill Foundation – Seed Fund Application", KRC grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation (p. 4), 14 February 1999, box 76/folder 10, LHFR archive (herein cited as "KRC 1999 grant application").
[129] KRC newsletter 3/1999.

components of the Korean American community (women, seniors, recent immigrants, students, low-income families, etc.).”[130] The description of board members also conveyed connections with an ethnic community at large, the immigrant experience, and progressive politics. It highlighted the member's “sincere involvement in and commitment to social justice issues,”[131] their civic engagement in a variety of local and transnational Korean associations, and their varied socio-economic status.[132] Through its association to NAKASEC, KRC built a double-layered narrative meant to challenge established advocacy groups and reinforce the legitimacy of both groups. KRC would represent the most immediate connection to the Korean immigrant constituency, mobilizing an “ethnic immigrant grassroots” base to support advocacy activities. Those included, for instance, the Californian campaigns to restore welfare for elderly immigrants or to gain access to higher education for undocumented youth,[133] or the creation of grassroots groups such as the elderly-led Community Health Promoters, and the undocumented student-led Alliance for Korean American Students in Action (AKASIA).[134] For its part, NAKASEC would - through its aggressive advocacy stunts – translate those concerns at the national level, with the aim of establishing “Korean Americans as a player in the welfare reform and immigration debate.”[135]

As for the second axis, KRC connected the struggle of Korean immigrants to larger issues within mainstream American society. Building on a tradition that emphasized institutional political engagement within a democratic system, rather than polarization around class inequalities, KRC and NAKASEC elaborated a framework that envisioned the political empowerment of the immigrant community as part of a process to make US society more just and equitable, all the more while fostering *multi-ethnic co-existence*. In suggesting the development of “a truly multi-racial and multi-ethnic civil rights agenda,” and in urging “more immigrant communities and ethnic communities [..] to become active players in the civil rights arena”[136] together with more traditional groups, the organization implicitly connected the struggle of Korean immigrants to that of other racial minorities present in the US, moreover inscribing its actions in the footsteps of the widely legitimated civil rights movement of the 1960s. KRC went about political organizing as a way to educate the immigrant community of its rights as American citizens, but also to encourage immigrants to embrace mainstream political engagement. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, KRC's main activities – legislative advocacy, voter education, and civic engagement – precisely supported the organization's acceptance of

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[130] KRC 1999 grant application (p.5).
[131] KRC 2007 grant application (p.3).
[132] KRC 1999 grant application.
[133] KRC 2007 grant application 2007.
[134] KRC grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation, ca. 2009; “Korean Resource Center (KRC) Final Report to Liberty Hill Fund for Change 2009,” KRC report to Liberty Hill Foundation, 11 August, 2010.
[135] The 1995 NAKESEC “Justice for Immigrants” Washington Post Ad Campaign involved raising over $50,000 for a pro-immigration reform ad to appear in *The Washington Post* (see KRC 2007 grant application, p. 7).
[136] See KRC 1999 grant application (p. 5).

the institutionalized US political mid system. KRC's network of collaborations also illustrates this pattern. The organization has since the late-1990s associated itself with a variety of established civil society organizations and institutions, mainly by formally engaging in joint projects, by joining a number of coalitions and alliances, and by endorsing campaigns organized by other organizations. Partners include renowned national and local advocacy organizations, such as the National Immigration Law Center (NILC); established immigrant rights groups, such as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA); 'Asian' advocacy organizations, such as the Asian Pacific American Legal Center; institutional actors, such as the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Those linkages, as described in the proposals, provided funding agencies a framework to interpret the organizational coherence of KRC and its reputation in the non-profit scene. They also showed that KRC had actively embraced the logics of 'alliance-building' and 'networking' – that is the idea that organizations should devote part of their time and budget to engage in collaborative work – which were particularly praised by progressive philanthropies.[137]

The Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates: Building Immigrant Class Politics

Building an Immigrant Working Class Organization in a Hostile Environment

KIWA,[138] formerly known as Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates – the 'k' in 'Korean' now standing for 'Koreatown' and the 'a' in 'advocates' for 'alliance' – is a LA-based non-profit organization founded in 1992 by South Korean-born activists Roy Hong and Danny Park. Throughout its over two decades of existence, the organization has mostly focused on workplace-based advocacy, addressing labor conditions and labor law violations in the Korean-dominated service economy of Koreatown and beyond. It has done so by highlighting socioeconomic inequalities *within* and *across* immigrant communities, representing a *multi-ethnic* constituency of *low-wage immigrant workers.*

Members of the same political milieu that established the KRC, Hong and Park grew up in the Bay Area, where the movement leaned more in the direction of Marxist, class-based international solidarity. During college, both volunteered for local labor unions, with Hong soon taking up a job with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). He worked there from 1983 until 1992, learning the ins-and-outs of the US labor union system and gaining insights into the work of one of the most progressive unions of the time, famous for ground-breaking campaigns such as the Justice for Janitors Campaign (J4J). Such experience acquainted him with the idea of *industry-wide* and *cross-*

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[137] Liberty Hill funding applications always included a section about the applicant organization's collaborations and coalitions, the organizational network being one of the metrics employed to assess the viability and credibility of a proposal.

[138] See previous work on KIWA and on some of its major campaigns. For example: Chung (2005; 2007), Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña (2013), Narro (2005-2006), Ha (2001), and Kwon (2010). Chung and Kwon, in particular, provide fascinating and complementary perspectives on this organization.

ethnic organizing. It also exposed him to the inefficiencies and flaws of the union machine, plagued by internal racism, lack of cultural sensitivity for the immigrant population, and sometimes blatant incompetence.[139] Partly disenchanted with SEIU and US unions, but also deeply moved by the most radical and 'workerist' wing of the pro-democracy movement as it was developing in industrial zones in South Korea, Hong and Park moved to LA in the mid-1980s. It was then that they established their organization in Koreatown.

LA's Korean immigrant community was predominantly conservative and anti-labor (Chung 2007). Even if KIWA did not necessarily emphasize a class-struggle rhetoric in Koreatown, merely mentioning the word 'worker' in Korean (*nadoja*) was enough for most immigrants to associate KIWA with the militant labor movement in South Korea (Kwon 2010). Despite an early attempt to reach out to large segments of the Korean community – by assisting business owners affected by the civil unrest – the organization could never really get beyond de facto recognition, let alone receive active support (Chung 2007; Kwon 2010). In fact, once KIWA began to target local businesses with gradual force – by filing wage claims on behalf of workers, organizing 'workers' rights seminars', staging pickets and protests, and later on launching public campaigns– the attitude of the immigrant elites and most of the middle-class turned to widespread hostility (Kwon 2010; Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña 2013). At the same time, KIWA's main constituency was extremely low-income, thus constantly thwarting the organization's effort to collect dues.[140] The long-term survival, if not success, of the organization therefore greatly depended on its ability to secure a basis of support beyond the immigrant population.

In its first years, publicly presenting itself as an organization committed to 'Korean immigrant workers', KIWA stressed both its class and ethnic dimensions. The organization did not immediately draw sharp class boundaries within the immigrant community, rather maintaining quite a loosely defined *worker constituency*. KIWA's narrative initially tried to 'proletarianize' most of the immigrant population – including small business owners, service sub-contractors, and their employees – as *all* part of a vulnerable, under-protected immigrant working class trapped in racially segregated, low-income work sectors. However, in so doing KIWA also flipped the mainstream reading of the civil unrest as a culturally motivated ethnic conflict:

> While the successful employers and business owners in the Korean community are highly visible, vocal, well organized, and well-funded, the struggling workers who make up the majority of the community have had to suffer silently because of lack of representation and basic legal/administrative resources for them. KIWA's rapid development since the inception

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[139] Interview with Roy Hong, 10 June 2014.
[140] In one of its applications to the Liberty Hill Foundation, KIWA foresaw no financial contribution whatsoever coming from members in form of membership dues. Moreover, the organization acknowledged that, since its establishment, the grants provided by foundations and philanthropies comprised 90 percent of its budget. See KIWA grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation, 7 January, 1994, box 47/folder 2, LHFR archive.

testifies to the overdueness of such services. The so-called 'Black-Korean conflict' must also be seen in the context of this disproportionate attention given to the business sector.[141]

Describing situations like Korean storeowners dealing with inner-city African American customers or a Korean factory owner employing 'Latino' and 'Korean' blue-collar workers, the organization stressed that ethnic and racial tensions were mostly due to economic disparities.[142] Moreover, those tensions were fueled by the lack of general understanding that economic disparities not only existed *between* ethnic and racial groups, but also *within* a given group. This perspective diverged from KRC's reading of the civil unrest, which mentioned no socioeconomic inequalities and instead emphasized shared victimhood among Korean co-ethnics.

KIWA did not radically challenge ethnic categorizations as a broader interpretative framework of social relations in LA. For once, the organization believed categorizations such as Korean, Latino or White were still salient in light of the institutionalized racism of American society. However, KIWA did question the suitability of an ethnic analytical framework alone for promoting serious social change. Not only because it masked asymmetries of power within the immigrant community, but also because it downplayed commonalities among the low-income strata of different immigrant groups, to the advantage of supposed cultural commonalities.[143] KIWA also believed that its analysis should not exclude gender, as immigrant women and LGBTQ people faced the additional burden of sexism and sexual discrimination.

Articulating Legitimating Strategies Outside of the Korean Immigrant Community

Close observers of KIWA's early history have emphasized that, while its leadership had clearly envisioned a working-class organization since its inception, it was only after the 1992 unrest that it strategically seized the opportunity to reach out to non-Korean immigrant workers, while at the same time highlighting its willingness to reach out to other communities of color.[144] KIWA's political vision, if completely subversive to the eyes

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[141] KIWA grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation (p. 3), 31 August, 1993, Box 43/folder 11, LHFR archive (herein citied as "KIWA 1993 grant application").

[142] KIWA 1993 grant application.

[143] This point was made repeatedly throughout the grant applications and was also expressed to me by Hong in our interview.

[144] Interview with Glenn Omatsu, 13 September 2016. Omatsu, a local researcher and activist who has supported and followed KIWA's activities since its early days, argued that Hong displayed on that occasion remarkable political intuition and calculation. Accordingly, Hong understood that the political climate was shifting and would become more conducive to multi-ethnic forms of organizing, as it indeed happened (Regalado 1994; Pastor 2001b). Moreover, Hong's and Park's experience with labor unions and industry-wide organizing approaches further convinced them that their efforts in Koreatown would necessarily need to include non-Korean workers. On another note, KIWA bolstered its public commitment to improving 'race relations', particularly between Koreans and African Americans, by engaging in a wider range of activities. Those included, among other things: the production of "A Bridge Towards Unity", a booklet meant to 'educate' the Korean, African American and Latino communities about the structural causes of the unrest and increase mutual understanding; the organization of a joint press conference with African American leaders on the 1st anniversary of the unrest; as well as the participation in the *Liquor Store Conversion Project*, a taskforce comprising of Korean, African American and other Asian organizations working on reducing the presence of liquor

of the immigrant elites, provided the basis for grounding the organization's legitimacy in other milieus. Two circles of supporters were key for this first period, and strongly influenced its organizational logics: young Korean American activists who supplied the manpower to run organizational operations and, as the organization developed, the intellectual tools to build and sustain its vision; progressive labor unions, which consolidated KIWA's status as a hybrid quasi-union organization. To its turn, KIWA strongly relied on these groups to legitimize itself vis-à-vis the larger LA progressive community of non-profit organizations and philanthropic foundations.

KIWA's analysis of the civil unrest, magnified by mainstream media and a creative outreach strategy that included summer trainings, internships and exposure programs, found a receptive audience in young, highly educated, second-generation Korean Americans (Chung 2007). Mostly educated in progressive academic venues, many students began to volunteer for KIWA over the years. Taking on daily tasks like administration, media relations, copyediting and researching, some were gradually incorporated as paid staff. Thanks to the ties that KIWA developed over time with different research centers, faculty members, and student collectives across LA campuses, the organization strongly benefitted from these resources in two other major ways. First, it enabled KIWA to quickly mobilize rank-and-file support for most of its public activities, such as pickets, and demonstrations. Second, it allowed KIWA to back organizational objectives and strategies with solid *activist research*[145] – scientific research being an important tool to legitimize organizations and their vision vis-à-vis institutions (Suchman 1995).

Despite Hong's and Park's reservations, labor unions were the first major institutions KIWA reached out to for external recognition. Between 1991 and 1993, KIWA staff assisted unions in a number of campaigns involving abuses and labor law violations by Korean businesses in LA. Critical was the Koreana Hotel campaign coordinated by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), during which Hong helped facilitate dealings between the union and the Korean consulate with the Korea-based corporate owners (Kwon 2010). KIWA's association to progressive unions in its early years proved crucial. That solidified its public reputation as an organization that, despite lacking the formal properties of an official labor group, was integral to the labor movement rather than to the advocacy non-profit scene.[146] Strengthening those relations, therefore, did not

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store in the inner city. See "A Bridge Towards Unity" (Kang et al. 1993); KIWA interim report to Liberty Hill Foundation, 14 September 1993, box 41/folder 1, LHFR archive.

[145] See, among others: various authors, "Workers Empowered: A Survey of Working Conditions in the Koreatown Restaurant Industry", 2000, box 83/folder 1, LHFR archive; or "Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads" (Sanchez et al. 2012).

[146] In a letter to a HERE union official dated 12 February, 1992 – just a few weeks before the official founding and inauguration of KIWA – Hong writes: "HERE is one of the most important unions with which we need to work in the future... your suggestions and endorsements are very critical to us in terms our overall plans and our ability to demonstrate to the rest of the labor community that we are already well on our way in intimately working with labor." Hong, Roy, endorsement request letter, 12 February 1992, box 3, KIWA archives (unsorted).

translate in concrete material resources for KIWA, but rather in symbolic capital that could hopefully be spent towards foundations, or in the recruitment of volunteers.[147]

Unlike KRC, KIWA went through this meticulous work of endorsement- and alliance-building since its earliest phase. Its founders presented KIWA as a unique organization, "arguably the first and only organization of its kind, not only in L.A. but in the country, working to build a grassroots community base among Korean immigrant workers and to build bridges with other ethnic community."[148] Hong and Park tempered KIWA's radical political message by *formally* adopting the organizational features that characterized more conventional non-profits, and established a 501(c)(3) organization. Fundraising dinners and galas were conceived as formal acts of public legitimation before LA's progressive community, not so much aimed at directly securing material resources – funds collected during these events were relatively modest – but rather at displaying the organization's ability to bring certain people and organizations to its side. Throughout the 1990s, KIWA also joined a number of coalitions with established progressive organizations, promoting its image as a *hyper-connected organization*. In a similar fashion to KRC, cross-referencing, mutual endorsements, and joint press statements with recognized civil society organizations became increasingly common practice for KIWA, as the same time revealing its ideological pragmatism for the sake of recognition. While this strategy did not really impact KIWA's organizational logics, it was crucial in highlighting the organization's visibility for funders, especially before it had any substantial track record.

From Korean Immigrant Workers to a Multi-Ethnic Immigrant Workers Constituency

Between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, KIWA began presenting itself as a predominantly working-class organization, loosening its ethnic connotation. KIWA's Koreatown Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign (1997-2000) and the Assi Market campaign (2001-2003)[149] were innovative efforts to together organize Korean and other immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America. The organization always stressed multi-ethnic collaboration, but this was the first time it worked *directly* with a multi-ethnic immigrant constituency in major projects. Within the LA context, a non-union dealing with workplace complaints across ethnic lines was ground-breaking. For this reason, KIWA introduced its decision in pragmatic terms. For one, workers in Koreatown businesses were ethnically heterogeneous, including many non-Korean employees in

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[147] Sue Cho, KIWA's financial officer from 1999 to 2003, confirmed what was already evident from KIWA's financial statements and internal notes, that is unions played a very marginal role in KIWA's financial and organizational development for most its existence, and did not provide significant manpower to support KIWA's campaigns (at least until the early 2000s). KIWA largely relied on a handful of private philanthropies, small donations and outside volunteers. Interview with Sue Cho, 16 September 2016.

[148] "Fund for a New LA", KIWA grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation (p.2), ca. 1992, box 41/folder 1, LHFR archive.

[149] The Koreatown Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign focused on improving working conditions for restaurant workers. The Assi Market campaign demanded living wages and unionization for the employees of a major Korean-owned supermarket. See Ha (2001) and Kwon (2010).

backdoor and delivery jobs in Korean restaurants and supermarkets. Also, Korean workers, unlike other groups, seemed more vulnerable to social pressure from co-ethnics to not challenge the status quo.[150]

KIWA's narrative emphasized the uniqueness of its multi-ethnic work, testified by an ability to overcome linguistic barriers – using interpretation during meetings and workshops and publishing material in English, Korean, and Spanish – and by hiring multi-ethnic staff, specifically with *Asian* and *Latino* background. It legitimated its aggressive tactics vis-à-vis Korean restaurants and markets by associating with the union principle of *industry-wide organizing*. The narrative highlighted the direness of its work and its efficacy, describing horror stories of workers' exploitation and harassment and KIWA's role in winning compensation and pressuring employers to improve conditions. It underscored KIWA's strong grassroots nature, epitomized by the ubiquity of 'the workers' in all public documents.[151] KIWA's political commitment was also reflected in its organizational structure and decision-making process. It encouraged the formation of self-defined *multi-ethnic constituent-led groups*, which depended on KIWA for organizational support but were formally independent. The Koreatown Restaurant Workers Association (RWAK)[152] and the Immigrant Workers Union (IWU)[153] are two such examples. The strategy aimed to incorporate immigrant workers within the life of the organization and serve as a final step in their political empowerment as self-helping autonomous subjects.

The more KIWA's narrative became radical and innovative, the more KIWA took an active role in changing the surrounding organizational environment. Projects such as the Summer Activist Training (SAT),[154] which exposed participants of immigrant Asian background to the principles of class-based, multi-ethnic organizing, or the Asian Pacific Garment Workers Collaborative,[155] which paved the way for the creation of the multi-ethnic Garment Worker Center (GWC) in the late 1990s (Milkman, Bloom and Narro 2010), were instrumental in extending the intersectional, class framework to the experience of other Asian immigrant groups.[156] KIWA also reinforced this process by

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[150] Interviews with former KIWA organizer Elizabeth Sunwoo, 3 June 2014 (herein cited as "interview with Sunwoo").

[151] One example among many of workers' presence in KIWA's public narrative is "Victory at Love Boat Restaurant: A Workers' Testimony", in "KIWA News", KIWA newsletter (p. 3, 15), vol.5 spring 1996, box 6/ folder 7, KIWA archive.

[152] "Fund for a New Los Angeles" RWAK grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation, 4 September, 2001, box 88/folder 6, LHFR archive. RWAK was formed as a member-led organization representing restaurant workers in the Koreatown area. Some of its coordinating staff, like Jung Hee Lee, were hired following KIWA's worker rights training in the Koreatown restaurant industry. Interview with Jung Hee Lee, 26 November 2014.

[153] "Fund for a New Los Angeles", KIWA grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation, 2 April, 2001, box 83/folder 1, LHFR archive (herein cited as "KIWA 2001 grant application"). IWU, with KIWA's support, was created to spearhead the immigrant worker-led unionization campaign at Assi market in Koreatown. Max Mariscal, one of the market employees, was elected as IWU president and was later hired by KIWA as organizer. Interview with Max Mariscal, 11 June, 2014.

[154] "Fund for a New LA", KIWA grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation, 30 November, 1994, box 51/folder 8, LHFR archive (herein cited as "KIWA 1994 grant application")

[155] KIWA, Thai CDC and APALC grant application to Liberty Hill Foundation, 1 September, 1995, box 50/folder 4, LHFR archive (herein cited as "KIWA/TCDC/APALC 1995 grant application").

[156] KIWA grant application 1994; KIWA/TCDC/APALC grant application.

encouraging the development of new organizations that shared a similar political vision, such as the Thai Community Development Center (TCDC), or the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC), which were both first sponsored and hosted on its premises.

KIWA also skillfully established itself within the larger *immigrant rights movement* in LA. The product of a political convergence built over years of close collaboration, KIWA, CHIRLA, PWC, GWC, and the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA) formally joined, becoming a network that would amplify the multi-ethnic worker center narrative for the larger public. The result was the Multi-ethnic Immigrant Organizing Network (MIWON), established in 2000, with the goal of addressing "unjust immigration laws and other major issues affecting immigrant communities and particularly undocumented workers."[157] In recognition of KIWA's important role, one of its staff was later assigned to coordinate the network, which was officially hosted on KIWA premises under the fiscal sponsorship of CHIRLA. On the one hand, MIWON further consolidated the relationship among this core of organizations, whose closeness had made one's reputation reliant on that of the others. On the other, MIWON linked workers' rights to the bigger battle on state and federal immigration legislation, particularly through the highly visible May Day Marches which the founding organizations first launched in 2000.[158] In proposing a class-based, multi-ethnic counter-narrative to the mainstream ethnic and civil rights frame, the MIWON organizations not only challenged the legitimacy of Washington, DC-based advocacy and policy groups that were accused of being disconnected from the daily reality of most immigrants,[159] but also distanced themselves from the more traditional narrative of organizations such as KRC. Despite MIWON's fading role after the historical 2006 immigrant rallies in Los Angeles, in the early 2000s the network was able to successfully present itself as a collective of immigrant-led, membership-based political organizations, and consolidated its organizations' legitimacy in the local progressive scene (Milkman, Bloom and Narro 2010).

These developments are important to keep in mind when looking at KIWA in more recent history. After a bitter struggle, the failure of the Assi Market unionization campaign between 2002 and 2003 tarnished the organization's track record and drained its human and financial resources (Kwon 2010). Throughout the late 2000s, the organization responded by abandoning more confrontational tactics such as direct action and unionization, reframing its commitment to the immigrant working class by explicitly incorporating a socioeconomic spatial dimension in its narrative (Kwon 2010). By identifying low-wage immigrant workers both in their capacity as *workers* and *residents* of Koreatown, the organization could justify greater involvement in issues such as housing, healthcare, and gentrification,[160] but was also able to retain (if not expand) its sources of

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[157] CHIRLA, KIWA, PWC MIWON grant application, ca 2000-01 (p.1), box 15, KIWA archive (herein cited as "MIWON 2000-01 grant application").

[158] MIWON 2000-01 grant application; KIWA 2001 grant application.

[159] Interview with Sunwoo.

[160] Interview with Alexandra Suh, 5 November 2014.

financial support. By the end of 2005, KIWA officialized its cross-ethnic commitment to workers and Koreatown residents by changing its name to the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance.

Conclusion

Organizational legitimacy is essential for immigrant organizations but may be achieved in different ways and through different strategies. This study highlighted how two immigrant organizations embedded in the same socio-political context employed different strategies to gain legitimacy among mainstream institutions. KRC mostly reproduced the typical pattern of politically incorporating immigrants as 'ethnics', largely responding to normative expectations of the surrounding institutional environment, to get recognition. KIWA challenged this pattern, producing a counter-narrative that, beyond ethnicity, mobilized notions of class and economic justice to advance the political inclusion of immigrants as 'workers.' Organizational leadership skillfully seized on political openings in the aftermath of the 1992 unrest to align KIWA's class focus with the narrative of ethnic reconciliation and multi-racial collaboration that emerged in LA's progressive milieus.

In highlighting the similarities of the organizations and their diverging legitimating strategies, I point out to the ability of KRC and KIWA to actively shape their organizational logics, as well as the broad organizational field through their action. My chronological perspective underscored the importance of decision-making in the early phases of an organization, as informed by its founders' backgrounds and early connections. The trajectories of KRC and KIWA also suggest that organizational logics, once consolidated and legitimated, do not easily change and become strongly path-dependent.

This analysis builds on previous literature on organizational legitimacy, further suggesting that, within a broadly limited perimeter, alternate (but equally successful) public legitimating strategies are possible within the same context. KIWA and KRC's ideological differences, and their reliance on a different *core* of supporters – ethnic-oriented for KRC, labor-oriented for KIWA – drove the organizations towards distinct, yet partially overlapping sub-fields. However, in discursively mobilizing those connections vis-à-vis the same public institutions, the two organizations also provided local funders with a legitimate framework to interpret their distinct organizational logics. As a result, both KRC and KIWA managed to become part of the broader non-profit sector of immigrant advocacy organizations in Los Angeles.

This article analyzed organizational legitimating strategies as a cohesive collective product, assuming that public archives represent the official views of their organization. To fully appreciate all the levels of the legitimating process, it may be fruitful to investigate other interrelated dimensions through other sources. A stream of research

incorporating ecological perspectives could further investigate how organizational templates, frames, and discourses diffuse across organizational fields and populations, and how popular they become as measures of legitimacy. A second stream, more concerned with micro-dynamics, could address the construction of legitimating accounts by organizational staff, examining the internal discursive struggles that occur when producing a cohesive narrative of self-presentation. Such analyses may provide a more nuanced understanding of how legitimating strategies are shaped and how ideas and schemas are concretely mobilized to form a coherent account for outsiders.