



Ethnic Resources Reviving: *The Case of the Korean Ethnic Economy in Bom Retiro, São Paulo*

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Abstract

Ethnic economies change over time. Generally, it is believed that in the beginning, because immigrants do not possess sufficient class resources, immigrants utilize ethnic resources more, and later—once class resources are formed—they tend to utilize more class resources. In generational terms, because the younger generation face lower linguistic and cultural barriers they might arguably leave ethnic economies behind and enter the mainstream economy. However, the ethnic economy in São Paulo displays a different picture. Second-generation Koreans are still involved in the ethnic economy and the resource utilization pattern is not a simple linear progression from ethnic to class. Based on these observations, this research aims to analyze how the Korean ethnic economy in São Paulo has changed over time in terms of resource utilization patterns and attempts to interpret the change within the context of Brazil as a Global South country. The fieldwork revealed that unlike other cases of ethnic economies, ethnic resources are reutilized in a different form and the issues of informality and trade protectionism that are prevalent in the Global South are related to the change in the Korean ethnic economy.

Keywords: ethnic economy, Korean immigration, Global South, ethnic resources, class resources

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Introduction

Compared to the general economy, in ethnic economies that consist of immigrants, ethnic resources are utilized in addition to class resources (Light and Gold 2000). This is because, due to linguistic and cultural barriers in the host societies, immigrants are frequently unable to find proper employment opportunities so they rely on ethnic resources to find alternatives (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990; Light 1984; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Wang 2012). It is generally believed that over time—or by generational shifts in immigrant communities—immigrants utilize more class resources compared to the early stage of ethnic economies. Consequently, the importance of ethnic resources diminishes, and this shift can be caused by different reasons, such as competition in saturated ethnic economies, sufficiently accumulated class resources, different profiles of new immigrants, and the growth of businesses (Airriess 2006; J. Kim 2021; Light et al. 1999; Min and Bozorgmehr 2000; I. Yoon 1991). Moreover, some studies point out that because the second or younger generation has fewer, or no, problems with language and culture they will seek opportunities outside the ethnic economy, and so gradually the ethnic economy will wane (Barrett et al. 2002; Jones et al. 2012; D. Kim 2006; Portes 1997; Portes and Shafer 2007; Teixeira 2006; Waldinger 1986b, 129).

The situation is seemingly similar in the Korean ethnic economy in São Paulo, Brazil. For decades, since the early 1970s, Koreans have been involved in the garment industry in the São Paulo neighborhood called Bom Retiro. The Korean ethnic economy that is based on the garment sector prospered and created a distinctive economic landscape (Chi 2016a; Choi 2011; Moon and Jang 2014; W. Yoon 2015). As Koreans have operated garment businesses in Bom Retiro for almost half a century similar to other cases, ethnic resources are to some extent no longer a crucial factor in the local Korean ethnic economy, while class resources have become more important. The relegation of ethnic resources is implied in the following quote: “Here [Bom Retiro], it is a small area and everybody is a competitor.”¹ Yet, when

1. Garment business owner (male, age 42), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, April 11, 2019.

informants reflected on the past, there were certain reasons for Koreans to cluster together and—in contrast to the recent competitive atmosphere—ethnic resources were intensively utilized in the early stages of the Korean ethnic economy.

However, this shift from ethnic resources to class resources has never been linear in Bom Retiro. First, industrial conditions of the main industry, not only time, are related to how and what type of resources are utilized in ethnic economies (Fong et al. 2008; Logan et al. 2003; Min and Bozorgmehr 2000; Wang 2012; Werbner 2001; Zhou 1998). In the case of Bom Retiro, a shift in the 1990s from mass production to fast fashion, and the proliferation of informal garment traders in another garment neighborhood—Brás—were the major industrial changes. Second, even though the absolute number is not as large as the first generation, second or younger-generation Koreans remain in the ethnic economy, rather than simply leaving. Furthermore, their resource utilization pattern is different from that of their parent's generation. Third—and most importantly—the significance of ethnic resources has not only diminished, but there are certain signs that ethnic resources in a different form are gaining more importance among the younger generation, which differs from other cases of ethnic economies.

Therefore, the main arguments are two in this article. First, over time ethnic resources do not always lose their importance but can revive. Second, younger generation immigrants do not simply leave ethnic economies behind, instead, they use ethnic resources in different ways compared to the elder generation. To support these arguments, this research mainly delves into the literature on ethnic economies, adopting qualitative research methods. In addition, because most studies on ethnic economies are centered on Global North experiences, I have attempted to understand the particularity of the Korean ethnic economy in Bom Retiro in terms of the Global South context. The next section of this article illustrates the theoretical background followed by the research method and research area. Then a short history of Korean immigration and the Korean ethnic economy, along with changes in resource utilization patterns, will be presented. The final section concludes this article and suggests future research directions.

Theoretical Background: Ethnic Economies

What are ethnic economies? Even though the term can be used in many different ways, it does not necessarily contain any positive or negative connotations. For instance, according to Light and Gold (2000, 10), “Ethnic economy is ethnic because the personnel are co-ethnics.” More simply, Kaplan and Li (2006, 2–3) define ethnic economies as “[the ways] in which ethnic groups intersect with almost any sort of economic activity.” Regarding these definitions, Light et al. (1994) assert that even though many ethnic economies are characterized by the geographical concentration of ethnic businesses and ethnic resource utilization, these are not the inherent conditions of ethnic economies.

There is another term that must also be clarified—*ethnic*. Ethnic is “an adjective that refers to differences between categories of people” (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990, 112). Additionally, this definition indicates that members of ethnic groups are aware of their origin and culture. In the case of Koreans in Brazil, while first-generation Koreans identify as Korean, possibly second-generation Koreans define themselves differently. Yet, based on a survey of young Koreans, Im et al. (2009) found that these individuals are aware of their Korean ethnicity, thus, the Bom Retiro garment industry, which consists of Korean businesses, is a case of an ethnic economy.

Ethnic economy itself does not say anything about the geographic concentration of economic activities of immigrants and resource utilization within ethnic neighborhoods. Thus, *ethnic enclaves*, a subcategory of the ethnic economy (Light and Gold 2000, 15), might be a better concept for understanding spatially concentrated ethnic economies like that of Bom Retiro, which contains diverse clusters of Korean businesses. According to ethnic enclave theory (Portes 1987; Portes and Jensen 1989; Wilson and Portes 1980), one of the classic theories that explain ethnic economies, self-enclosed minorities are economically more successful than minorities in the mainstream economy. This is because similar to industrial clusters characterized by information sharing and close coordination between firms in certain geographic areas (Scott 1988), ethnic enclaves contain spatially clustered businesses that allow immigrants to easily utilize ethnic resources

(Light et al. 1994; Moon and Jang 2014).

So, what are ethnic resources that are used in ethnic economies, including ethnic enclaves? Ethnic resources “are any and all features of the whole group which coethnic business owners can utilize in business or from which their business benefits” (Light 1984, 201). In this sense, examples of ethnic resources include institutes for immigrants (Zhou 1998), vertical or horizontal integration of ethnic businesses (J. Kim 2020; Raijman and Tienda 2000; Werbner 2001; I. Yoon 1991), employment of coethnics (Teixeira 2006; Wilson and Portes 1980; Wong 1987), apprenticeship among coethnics (Iskander et al. 2013), rotating credit groups (Light and Gold 2000, 114–115) and reliance on coethnic customers (Airriess 2006; Kaplan 1998). These resources will be discussed in detail later, but in brief—at the early stages in *Bom Retiro*—established Koreans helped newly arrived Korean immigrants, shared information, formed capital through rotating credit groups, and learned and taught about the garment business by working together.

Distinct from ethnic resources are class resources. Light and Gold (2000, 83–84) explain the term class resources originally referred to as “cultural and material endowment of bourgeoisies.” This is in contrast to the core characteristic of ethnic resources, which is universality within the group irrespective of class position. For example, if a Korean immigrant’s proficiency in the Korean language grants access to a Korean association, this constitutes an ethnic resource because the Korean language is a distinctive attribute of Koreans. On the other hand, possessing more wealth is a class resource because it can be utilized regardless of ethnicity. In this sense, Min and Bozorgmehr (2000) define class resources as the sum of financial and human capital, with examples being education, fluency in the host country’s language, personal savings, and business experience. In ethnic economies, even though class resources are not completely separable from ethnic resources, class resources can be witnessed in parallel with ethnic resources (Light and Gold 2000, 83), and many times if class resources become more important, ethnic resources become less important and vice versa (Light 2005).

Because the importance of each ethnic and class resource is subject to

change, it is easy to imagine that the pattern of ethnic resource utilization changes too. However, existing literature on ethnic economies has relatively overlooked this possible *change*. After the classic theories on ethnic economies that mainly explore how ethnic economies form and how they benefit immigrants (Bonacich 1973; Light 1972; Waldinger 1986a; Wilson and Portes 1980), several authors have attempted to explain how ethnic economies change over time, especially in terms of generational shifts. Yet most of these studies highlight how younger immigrants leave the ethnic economy because they have more access to the mainstream economy or utilize more class resources than before (Airriess 2006; Jones et al. 2012; J. Kim 2020; Kloosterman 2010; Light et al. 1999; Waldinger 1986b, 129; I. Yoon 1991) without explaining how ethnic resources are utilized in different ways and what factors lead to these different patterns. This is not different in overseas Korean studies. For example, Dae Young Kim (2006) reveals that second-generation Koreans in the United States are leaving the ethnic economy, but does not explain further how it has changed. In the case of Argentina (J. Kim 2021) and New York (Min 2012), while younger Koreans leave the ethnic economy, the remaining Koreans tend to utilize more class resources than before. Although these studies successfully illustrate the change in the ethnic economy, they overlook the possibility that ethnic resources can be utilized differently.

Therefore, drawing on the case of Koreans in Bom Retiro in this research, rather than supposing second or younger generation Koreans are leaving the Korean ethnic economy or are simply utilizing more class resources, I attempt to illuminate how ethnic resources are utilized differently between the two different generations and how this difference is related to broader changes in the garment industry.

Research Area

Bom Retiro is a district in the city of São Paulo. The area has hosted Korean immigrants and the garment industry for decades. As recently as 2011, when Korean garment firms there were still performing well, Korean



Figure 1. Location of garment firms and Korean businesses in Bom Retiro, São Paulo

Source: Locational data collected by the author.

garment firms in Bom Retiro occupied 65 percent of the locally available workspace (Choi 2011). According to the latest statistics provided by the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the number of Koreans residing in São Paulo decreased from around 50,000 in 2011 to 35,000 in 2021, possibly a result of the declining ethnic economy that will be discussed later. Fig. 1 is a detailed map of Bom Retiro showing the location of garment stores, garment subsidiary firms, and general Korean businesses. In 2016, it was estimated that around 1,400 to 1,700 Korean-related businesses were located in this neighborhood (Chi 2016b, 97). However, this number is possibly much smaller now.

Research Method

This research employed qualitative methods, primarily using interviews for data collection. The fieldwork was conducted from January to July 2019. I relied mainly on interviews that were semi-structured and open-ended. The main questions were about respondents' business activities and their social networks. To identify potential interviewees, the main approach was snowball sampling. Two interviews with second-generation Korean Brazilians were conducted in English while all the others were done in Korean.

I interviewed 36 Koreans in total, 13 were garment wholesalers and three were raw material or service suppliers to wholesalers. Eighteen of them operated non-garment-related businesses, including restaurants and language schools. Even though these Koreans were not directly involved in the garment industry some of them had previously operated garment businesses and some could provide additional information about the industry from a third-person viewpoint. In addition, I interviewed the president of the Korean Association and a consul from the Korean Consulate. The length of interviews varied but was mostly between 45 to 90 minutes. Besides interview data, I referred to books about Korean immigrants written by Koreans. These include *Beurajil hanin imin osimnyeonsa* (Fifty Years of Korean Immigration to Brazil) (Beurajil hanin iminsa pyeonchan wiwonhoe 2011) and *Brasil e Coreia: 50 anos de amizade* (Brazil and Korea: The 50 Years of Friendship) (Y. Kim 2013). These sources provided additional historical background beyond what my interviewees recalled as the historical trajectory of the Korean community in Bom Retiro.

The Garment Industry in Bom Retiro and Korean Immigration

Since the construction of Estação da Luz (Luz Station) in 1867, Bom Retiro became the entry point for immigrants because the station connected São Paulo with the main port city, Santos. The large immigrant group that settled in the neighborhood were Jewish people who migrated to Brazil from

Europe in the 1930s to escape political oppression (Choi 2007). Jews joined the garment industry that had previously been established by Italians. Jews in Bom Retiro developed the district into a garment manufacturing and wholesale town. Small retailers from all over the country flocked to Bom Retiro to buy clothes while subsidiary and raw materials firms clustered in the area (Choi 2007).

Until the 1960s, Korean immigration to Brazil was sporadic and the Korean community in Brazil remained relatively small. At the beginning of the 1960s, the Brazilian government was interested in developing inland areas, partly to resolve the regional disparities of the country. For this reason, the Brazilian government wanted to attract more labor to cultivate its supposedly *virgin* interior (W. Yoon 2015, 31). The first immigrants traveling by government support arrived in Santos on February 12, 1963. These official immigrants were set to engage in cultivation work in the inland frontier of Brazil following the immigration program directives between the Brazilian and Korean governments.

However, Koreans faced immediate problems with the land they were promised. The amount of money they received for farming was insufficient, and the land was either infertile or had already long been occupied by native Brazilians (Y. Kim 2013, 45). Furthermore, many of these immigrants did not have relevant experience in farming. Because of all these reasons, Koreans decided to leave the assigned land to find opportunities elsewhere (Y. Kim 2009, 54). Within three years of their arrival in Brazil, 90% of the Korean immigrants had settled in the city of São Paulo and later the Brazilian government banned Korean immigration because Koreans did not comply with the original agreement (Buechler 2004).

The first Korean businesses were selling whatever they had brought with them from Korea (W. Yoon 2015, 53). Frequently, without enough capital to rent or buy space for stores, they worked as peddlers selling door to door. Later, Koreans started to produce clothes because at that time in Brazil the garment industry had low linguistic, financial, and technical entry barriers (Chi 2016a; Choi 2011; Moon and Jang 2014). It is not clear when the first Korean wholesale business was launched, but according to two former presidents of the Korean Association in the 1970s Koreans realized

that wholesaling promised better profits than retailing or subcontract work and started to become more involved in the wholesale sector in Bom Retiro. Because word of the good fortune being enjoyed by compatriots in Brazil soon spread to Korea, despite the ban on immigration of Koreans, many Koreans continued to migrate—albeit illegally—to Brazil for better opportunities. Then in the 1980s, Koreans began taking over Jewish businesses and became one of the major players in the Brazilian apparel market (W. Yoon 2015, 55).

Ethnic Resources in the 1970s and 1980s

In the 1970s and 1980s, ethnic resources were utilized intensively. According to this study's informants, newly arrived immigrants from Korea were aided by established Korean migrants in Brazil. Korean churches or even random Korean households accommodated new immigrants and found them jobs. Many times this job-seeking process was necessary because after the ban on Korean immigration many Koreans stayed in Brazil illegally. Also, coethnic labor helped Korean garment businesses because their informal status allowed proprietors to pay less than the legal minimum wage (Chi 2016a; Choi 2011). However, regardless of its initial importance, the Korean ethnic economy did not rely on coethnic labor for a long time and soon started to hire illegal Bolivian immigrants (Buechler 2004).

When Koreans started new garment businesses, two ethnic resources played important roles. The first is a job called *vende* in Portuguese. The main role of *vendes* is that of middleman, moving back and forth between garment stores and textile stores. At garment stores, they recommend new textiles and receive orders, then they deliver these orders to textile stores. When textile deals are finalized, *vendes* are paid a commission based on the total amount of sales. *Vendes* worked exclusively with Koreans in Bom Retiro and Brás, another garment neighborhood in São Paulo. When I asked the informants who currently work or used to work as *vendes* nobody told me they were working for non-Korean firms. Without a doubt, this extensive connection between Koreans in the industry was possible because of their

proficiency in the Korean language. Therefore, this *vende* system can be said to have functioned as an ethnic resource connecting and facilitating Korean businesses. Furthermore, because they are not directly hired by anyone, they could work with different textile dealers and garment businesses, which means they were able to observe how different firms operate and spread information to others. Thus, by working as a *vende*, new immigrants could learn about the garment industry and also accumulate capital for their own future stores. In addition, *vendes* themselves had an apprenticeship system. Experienced *vendes* trained *saekki* (child in Korean) *vendes* who had no experience in the industry.

The second is *kye*, or rotating credit groups. A *kye* refers to a group of people who maintain close relationships and among which each member contributes periodically to fund-raising. Each member then has access to the total pool of funds raised in each period when it is their turn. In this way, members' contributions act as savings and the amount they withdraw during their turn is equivalent to the lump sum of their contributions. Although there is no official punishment or external enforcement mechanism for violating the rules, a violator's social reputation will be impaired (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). In Brazil, *kye* have mostly been used to accumulate starting capital, especially benefitting new immigrants who did not have access to formal credit. The following quote from a Korean describes the mechanism of *kye*. Even though he has not personally participated in any *kye* he could explain it, speaking to how *kye* was prevalent enough that even non-participants recognized its importance:

Before, Koreans trusted each other. *Kye* allows people to expand their business. For example, there were even *kye* of like 100,000 or 500,000 [US] dollars. Then a person who does not have capital can start a business based on *kye* and continuously pay back their debt. [...] And if you violate the rules then nobody will believe you, which means you will never survive here.²

2. Service provider (male, age 65), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, May 29, 2019.

In addition to providing start-up capital, the *kye* was also a channel of information, similar to *vende* work. By being a member of a *kye*, newcomers could learn how to run a business in Brazil. A former garment business owner shared her experience when she joined a *kye* and explained how she learned from other members:

I knew one [social] group president. I did everything she told me. [...] Later she invited me to a *kye*. A person like me whose sales are quite low could not be a member of this *kye*. It was only for rich Koreans. But she invited me. She told me I can use some money if I want. She helped me like this. She was truly a savior for me. [...] When it was my turn to get the money she told me to do this and that...I could not survive by myself. She helped me until I closed my stores.³

Besides capital and learning, if a Korean immigrant wanted to start a business but could not because of his/her undocumented status, it was common to borrow the names of Korean permanent residents. Also, introducing workers to others, taking on subcontract work among Koreans, or sharing information at churches represented alternative ways of utilizing ethnic resources.

On the other hand, class resources were not fully formed or utilized intensively as ethnic resources. As mentioned in the previous section, Koreans could enter the garment industry because of the industry's low linguistic, financial, and technical barriers. Thus, even though Koreans did not possess class resources—proficiency in Portuguese, savings, prior experience in the industry, design or management skills—they could still successfully establish their businesses in Bom Retiro. Thus, in the early stages of the Korean ethnic economy in Bom Retiro, Koreans relied heavily on ethnic resources while class resources played a minimal role.

3. Former garment business owner (female, age 70), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, March 19, 2019.

From Mass Production to Fast Fashion since the 1990s: *From Ethnic Resources to Class Resources*

Until the 1990s, Korean garment businesses in Bom Retiro were not vulnerable to competition. When Koreans entered the garment industry the domestic market was highly protected by the government's import substitution industrialization strategy, which was prevalent in the Global South at the time (Bruton 1998). In more detail, the tariff rates for both apparel and textiles were nearly 100 percent, the two highest among other product categories (Castilho et al. 2012). As a result of the lack of competition, mass production of a small number of models was enough to run a successful business. One informant who runs a garment business told me that when mass production was the norm Koreans produced 100,000 pieces of the same model and simply switched textiles and subsidiary materials such as buttons for the next season.⁴ Some Koreans even joked that if a piece of fabric just has holes for arms and the head it was good enough to be sold, even if inferior in quality.

However, the situation has changed drastically since the 1990s. First, nationally, from 1988 to 1994 the Brazilian economy gradually opened its market as part of the process of accession to the World Trade Organization. On June 23, 1990, it also made the garment sector accessible to the global market. As a result, Korean garment businesses had to compete with imports (Chi 2016a). Second, and most importantly, the advent of fast fashion was the main trigger leading Korean garment firms to compete with each other. According to Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010, 168), the core idea of fast fashion is to “capitalize on fashion that is not in the stores of their competitors” and fashion seasons became shorter, with five seasons in a year whereas there used to be only two seasons. Thus, if one's response to a fashion trend is late, it can drag down businesses because customers will already have bought what they need from swifter producers. In the case of the garment industry in Bom Retiro, Korean firms adopted the fast fashion

4. Garment business owner (male, age 55), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, June 26, 2019.

strategy after trade liberalization in the 1990s, commonly engaging in small-batch production and embarking on fashion trips to Europe and North America to capture the latest trends (Chi 2016a).

With this adoption of fast fashion, the main and core business strategy of Korean garment firms became to constantly produce different models by promptly responding to the latest trends. One garment freelancer who worked for Korean garment firms strongly insisted that such a strategy of no or slow change means being squeezed out of the market because soon every store in Bom Retiro would display almost the same products.⁵ Because of this time-sensitive business strategy, Korean garment firms themselves were obliged to rely more on class resources, meaning that ethnic resources—especially the *vende* system and *kye*—started to lose their importance. Class resources, more specifically relevant skill sets and capital from other sources, have become the main factors in operating a garment business. This is because the required level of skill and capital became much higher than that prevailing at the time when Koreans entered the garment industry. For example, one informant told me that he spent USD100,000 to open a store in the 1990s when the industry was reorganizing towards fast fashion, but now that same amount of money would not even be enough to renovate a store.⁶ For this reason, most new garment business owners, even though the number is not meaningful, already own enough financial capital, or depend on their parents who used to own a successful business, not *kye* or income from *vende* work. On the skills side, investing in intensive labor is insufficient. Under the fast fashion system, the business owner must know about fashion and how to professionally operate a business, otherwise, it is not possible to respond to customer demand and the Korean wholesaler will lose out to the competition. One garment business owner summarizes the overall situation of practicing fast fashion:

Now you only make hundreds of pieces of one model and have to produce

5. Garment freelancer (female, age 28), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, March 27, 2019.

6. Garment business owner (male, age 55), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, June 26, 2019.

another. This means we need to invest more in developing new models [...] Also, the production processes are way more complicated than before because we need to produce a variety of models. It is really tough. Before, let's say a person who has no idea about garments could be lucky enough to make a great success from a [single] model and continue the business. But now only people who know how to make clothes can survive....I think before, you could come to Brazil and learn how to make clothes but now this is not enough.⁷

In contrast, the *vende* system and *kye* cannot provide sufficient information and capital compared to the pre-fast fashion era. First, *vendes* are not as important as before. Even though *vendes* circulate a certain degree of information, now the information they transmit is not crucial because the complexity of information is higher. For example, one *vende* mentioned that successful business owners already know what type of textile they need from other sources while only unsuccessful ones ask what textile is popular.⁸ Furthermore, their role of middleman has also diminished because now textile firms have opened showrooms in Bom Retiro to directly transact with garment wholesalers. In the case of the *kye*, it is unclear whether Koreans can raise sufficient capital from them, but what is clear is that many *kye* have been dismantled due to fraud scandals. As a result, none of the Korean businessmen, including those from the non-garment sector, said they are a member of a *kye*.

Present: *The Decline of the Garment Industry and the Revival of Ethnic Resources*

Even though the Korean ethnic economy has been subjected to real competition since the 1990s, Korean garment firms continued to grow and the 2000s was the golden era. Korean garment firms were busy responding

7. Garment business owner (male, age 55), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, June 26, 2019.

8. *Vende* (male, age 31), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, April 23, 2019.

to high demand for their products because of the commodity boom in the 2000s (Chi 2016a; Choi 2018). But according to the field data, as early as 2010 the golden age had ended and the Korean ethnic economy began to decline. There are several reasons behind this downward trend. The simplest explanation would be the overall economic recession in Brazil. However, none of the respondents cited the recession as the main reason because they believed some garment firms were still performing well. The other reasons mentioned by the respondents are imports from China, new garment complexes in other states, and most importantly, the other garment neighborhood, Brás. These background factors are to some extent related to the Brazilian context as a Global South country.

In a form of Global South-South cooperation to strengthen their voices in international politics, Brazil and China have established partnerships (DeHart 2012). Or if expressed differently, they have done this in the name of the BRICS agenda (referencing the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) (Cardoso 2013; Stenberg 2012). Trade between two countries is no an exception. The majority of respondents agreed their market has been encroached upon by the availability of Chinese clothes. Trade figures make the situation clearer. As Posthuma and Bignami (2014) illustrate, Brazilian garment imports increased from \$999 million to \$1.6 billion from 2010 to 2011, and based on available data from the World Bank, this figure peaked at \$3.8 billion in 2014.

Bom Retiro used to attract small retailers countrywide because other states did not have such a wholesale market. However, some informants commented that retailers in other states no longer need to visit Bom Retiro because they have wholesale markets in their home state. According to these informants, the emergence of these new wholesale complexes was facilitated by some state governments' attempts to attract more businesses by providing incentives such as lower taxes, while some states persisted in the country's long tradition of protectionism. It was hard to obtain any official data, but based on available statistics, the number of garment producers in Brazil grew by 18 percent between 2008 and 2012, indicating a general increase in the number of competitors in the country (Posthuma and Bignami 2014).

The most frequently mentioned reason (and regarded as the most

important by informants) behind the decline was the emergence of informal traders in Brás. Informality in urban economies in the Global South is identified as a chronic issue (De Soto 1989). In the 1980s, when many Global South countries had to *open* their economies because of the debt crisis and the subsequent structural adjustment programs, domestic manufacturers could only compete with foreign goods by relying on informal labor and avoiding tax burdens to cut costs (Safa 1986). In Brazil, when the commodity boom ended and the economy began to stagnate in the late 2000s, the economy restarted on an informalized basis (Saad-Filho 2015). Considering these background factors, it is not surprising that informal traders also appeared in the garment industry. As mentioned earlier, Brás is another garment wholesale neighborhood of São Paulo where many Koreans had—or have—their formal garment businesses. Now two different types of businesses, characterized by a high level of informality, *boxes* (originally an English word) and the Dawn Market (Feira da Madrugada in Portuguese), are directly competing with Korean garment firms in Bom Retiro. Because of their informal nature, it is hard to identify when these two forms became prevalent, but Le Blanc (2016, 229) asserts it was around 2007 and 2008, which corresponds to the time when the Brazilian economy restarted on an informalized basis.

Boxes are small cubicles partitioned by plastic walls in stores or *shoppings* (an English word used in Brazil to mean shopping malls). The Dawn Market, as the name indicates, is a garment market that opens from 2 am to 5 am and where merchants simply set up their stalls on the streets. The most important difference between these two and the garment firms in Bom Retiro is that *boxes* and stalls in Brás do not pay any taxes. For this reason, Korean garment firms face significant disadvantages in price because they are formally registered businesses. Moreover, sometimes the informal traders copy the design of clothes from Korean firms and produce garments with cheaper textiles to offer similar clothes at a lower price point. As a result of the price difference and design copying, Korean garment firms are continuously losing customers to their competitors in Brás.

To cope with these new competitors, in addition to firm-level strategies such as investment in design and quality, Korean garment firm owners are

making greater collective efforts than before and these efforts were realized as a new garment association. This indicates Koreans realized class resources that enabled their success in the 2000s are insufficient in the current situation and additional resources—ethnic resources—can complement them. This is the origin of the revival of ethnic resources. An association was established by young Koreans in 2019 when this fieldwork was conducted. The name of the association is Associação Brasileira da Indústria de Vestuário (henceforth ABIV), which means the Brazilian Garment Industry Association. There has never been such a neighborhood and industry-level association in Bom Retiro before.

The members of ABIV pay monthly fees and attend meetings. There are many different benefits its members can enjoy but the primary activities of ABIV are related to the proliferation of informal traders in Brás. First, ABIV opened a rest area and a parking lot to attract more customers. Guides organize bus trips to Bom Retiro for small retailers and the retailers and guides can park their buses at the lot and relax in the rest area. ABIV made this effort because *shoppings* that host informal traders have these facilities. Second, and more importantly, ABIV politically represents the garment businesses in Bom Retiro, especially urging the city and federal government to regulate informal traders and the Dawn Market. In 2019, when fieldwork was conducted, the founding members of ABIV met the president of Brazil to discuss this issue. This arrangement was possible because the founding members had external networks with politicians. Interviews with ABIV members revealed that businessmen who are skeptical about ABIV even admitted this was the first time there was a collective political voice for Korean garment businesses. Even if there is no short-term change, the political representation of Korean garment businessmen is an important first step.

Because the membership is open to non-Koreans in Bom Retiro, ABIV is seemingly not a case of an ethnic association. When I interviewed one of the founding members, he insisted that ABIV is not only for Koreans but for the garment industry as a whole in Bom Retiro.⁹ However, the founding

9. ABIV member (male, age 39), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, July 4, 2019.

members are all second-generation Koreans and the Korean Consulate supported the endeavor politically and financially. Another evidence of its Koreanness was witnessed at the launching event. The Korean national flag stood next to the Brazilian national flag and a congratulatory message was delivered by the Korean consul. Moreover, first-generation Korean members expressed a desire to support these young Koreans and revealed their excitement for Korean's collective effort in the Bom Retiro garment industry. Therefore, ABIV is not significantly different from other ethnic association cases as a form of ethnic resources.

However, I do not argue that the new association is necessarily more helpful than older forms of ethnic resources. Because of the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic soon after the inauguration of ABIV, the benefits to Bom Retiro are especially hard to understand. Nonetheless, ABIV appears to be an important topic of study. This type of ethnic resource has never existed before in Bom Retiro, providing evidence that Koreans created and utilized a novel form of ethnic resource.

Discussion

To fully understand this new form of ethnic resource, ABIV, three questions must be addressed. What is the difference between the current and previous ethnic resource utilization patterns? In addition, how can this difference be explained? And lastly, is the case of the Korean ethnic economy in Bom Retiro significantly different from other cases? The simplest answer to the first question would be that the earlier form of ethnic resources was more on an individual level, whereas ABIV is a group-level form of ethnic resource. Yet, this answer does not fully capture the distinction. Any type of ethnic resource inherently contains the meaning of a "group" that is differentiated by culture and language (see definition of 'ethnic resources' provided earlier).

Another possible explanation involves interpreting the old form and the new form in terms of social networks; while the earlier form of ethnic resource was characterized by strong interpersonal ties, weak ties prevail in

the present form. Here, briefly, strong ties refer to networks that are cohesive and intimate but exclusive, and weak ties refer to networks in which members are loosely linked but also connected to other networks (Granovetter 1973). According to Granovetter, even though actors in weak ties are not intimate, because they are open to other networks these ties can bring more new information that can eventually be helpful for economic activities. This explanation corresponds to the argument of Flap et al. (2000) and Bouk et al. (2013) that ethnic businesses having weaker ties perform better than those with strong ties. In a similar vein, in Bom Retiro, the older forms—*kye* and the *vende* system—were strong ties, and the present form—ABIV—is a weak tie. Possibly, the *vende* system is not as intimate as the *kye*, but as strong ties are defined by mutual contact more than twice a week (Granovetter 1973) daily transactions of *vendes* with textile dealers and garment wholesalers can be understood as strong ties. In the case of ABIV, I believe it is a weak tie because the members do not know every other member but still work together toward specific goals, meet infrequently, and utilize external networks outside of the Korean community. Moreover, the level of commitment is much lower than with *vendes* and *kye* that involve money and social reputation.

The second question is why such a different form—an ethnic trade association—emerged. Put simply, as the industry was declining, Koreans decided to establish connections via ABIV to conduct their businesses more efficiently. Although these are weak connections within the ABIV, this is due to generational differences. The founders are all second-generation Koreans, not first or 1.5 generation.

The first step to understanding the difference is to examine why young Koreans are still participating in the ethnic economy. Because of the lack of official data, it is unclear if the majority of second-generation Koreans remain in the ethnic economy. However, many informants told me the generational shift to the second generation in the garment industry is not smooth because they have more career options and Koreans without sufficient class resources cannot survive in the industry. The situation is no different from cases in North America, where more and more young Koreans seek opportunities outside of the ethnic economy because self-

employment is not a viable option due to competition with mega-retailers and other immigrant groups (D. Kim 2006; Min 2012). However, the reason some Koreans remain in the ethnic economy is possibly different. In the case of North America, young Koreans stay in the ethnic economy because they have failed to accumulate sufficient human capital (or in other words, class resources) to enter the mainstream economy (D. Kim 2006) or start another type of business (Min 2012). On the other hand, Koreans in Bom Retiro remain because they believe regardless of the unfavorable industrial conditions, garment wholesale still promises better returns than salaried work, and they are equipped with better designing and managerial skills than the older generation (Chi 2016a). The interview data also revealed the same logic. A café owner told me he will soon quit his job and join his parents' garment business because it is where the real money comes from.¹⁰ While a first-generation informant asserted young Koreans think being an employee is a "fiddlestick," so even sometimes return to the ethnic economy from the mainstream economy for higher monetary returns.¹¹ As Dae Young Kim (2006) illustrates, in North America some second-generation Koreans also voluntarily remain in the ethnic economy because they can expect a higher economic return there. However, regardless of their intention, they do not possess enough human capital to seek professional careers in the mainstream economy because they drop out of school or pay less attention to their academic performance. The Korean ethnic economy in Bom Retiro is still different because even Koreans who hold professional degrees, such as in law or accounting, start their career in the ethnic economy or come back from the mainstream economy for economic incentives (Choi 2011).

Therefore, a possible explanation for the different ethnic resource utilization patterns is their identity and status as immigrants in Brazil. First-generation Koreans retain a strong Korean identity and their social network rarely extends beyond the Korean community. This was clear from the field

10. Café owner (male, age 29), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, April 18, 2019.

11. Garment business owner (male, age 42), interview by author, São Paulo, Brazil, April 11, 2019.

data because no first-generation respondents said they had joined any type of non-Korean group. In addition, for the first generation, their participation in the ethnic economy was primarily based on economic motivations, but also it was the only option for most of the immigrants because of linguistic and cultural barriers. On the other hand, second-generation Koreans participate in Korean networks but are also active in other non-Korean networks. And they decided to remain in the ethnic economy even though they have more choices. Moreover, many first-generation individuals mentioned Koreans need to help each other because they are Korean whereas second-generation individuals who joined ABIV said Koreans need to collaborate to cope with economic hardship. Therefore, first-generation Koreans established more intimate and cohesive ties based on their Korean identity, while second-generation Koreans were motivated by more economic rationales and their weaker Korean identity led them to rely more on weak ties than strong ones.

The last discussion is the question of whether the Korean ethnic economy is necessarily different from other ethnic economies. As illustrated in the theoretical background, ethnic associations are prevalent in other ethnic economies to protect their collective interests, and Korean ethnic economies are no exception. In Argentina, as Jihye Kim (2021) illustrates, a Korean association of entrepreneurs has supported the Korean ethnic economy, and this is not different in the United States (Chung and Oh 2018; Min 1996, 2). In this sense, ABIV itself is not truly new. However, the core difference in the case of Brazil is that ABIV, an ethnic trade organization, was established recently by second-generation Koreans. In the United States, ethnic trade associations were established in the 1970s and 1980s, and in 1992 in Argentina. It is hard to conclude first-generation Koreans established these associations, yet, because Korean immigration to Argentina and the United States began on a full scale in the 1960s, it is also hard to conclude second-generation Koreans played important roles. Thus, ABIV itself as a form of ethnic resource is not new or special compared to other cases, however, the importance is that no similar association had not existed in Bom Retiro prior, and for Koreans in Brazil, it presents a new way of utilizing their ethnic resources.

Lastly, is the Korean ethnic economy in Bom Retiro different because Brazil is a Global South country? Generally, different socio-economic and political contexts are intertwined with ethnic economies (Kloosterman 2010; Waldinger 1986b), and this applies to Koreans in Brazil as well. Yet, import substitution industrialization and informality are more prevalent in Global South countries and they are closely related to the change in the Korean ethnic economy. In North America, major urban areas began to suffer from deindustrialization in the 1970s, and immigrants found niches in urban manufacturing by becoming involved in flexible production, which was unavailable for large manufacturers at the time (Waldinger and Aldrich 1991). On the other hand, in Brazil, Koreans could successfully operate their garment business because the industry was highly protected by the government until the early 1990s, and flexible production was a trigger that brought competition to the Korean ethnic economy. In terms of informality, it is obvious that ethnic entrepreneurs rely on informal labor in North America, especially by working with family members or paying below minimum wage (Bonacich 1973; Waldinger 1986b, 157), and these phenomena are also present in Korean businesses (Chung and Oh 2018; D. Kim 2006; Min and Bozorgmehr 2000). While informality is a firm-level issue in North America, in Brazil, informality is more prevalent throughout the garment industry and informal traders are directly eroding Korean businesses. As previously mentioned, the informal traders were a major reason behind the establishment of the ABIV. Therefore, it is hard to understand the Korean ethnic economy in Bom Retiro without contextualizing it as a Global South country.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this research was to capture the temporal dimension of ethnic economies. Rather than assuming younger generation immigrants leave the ethnic economy behind in accessing the mainstream economy, this research attempts to understand how resource utilization patterns can change in ethnic economies over time and to identify the potential

background to these changes. To achieve this goal, this research focused on the case of the Korean ethnic economy in the Bom Retiro area of São Paulo.

The main finding of this research is that at the beginning of the Korean ethnic economy in Bom Retiro, ethnic resources were important, while more reliance was put on class resources with the shift to fast fashion. Finally, ethnic resources began to be utilized once again in addition to class resources when Korean garment firms started to decline. This revival of ethnic resources is not a usual process compared to other cases in that linearly class resources are utilized more or young immigrants leave ethnic economies. In detail, in the 1970s and the 1980s, because Koreans did not have sufficient capital and knowledge, they had to form capital and acquire business information by joining rotating credit groups (*kye*) or working as textile middlemen (*vende*). Because these arrangements were only open to Koreans and were characterized by intimacy, the *kye* and the *vende* system were strong-tie ethnic resources. Later, when Korean garment firms adopted fast fashion from the 1990s, Korean garment manufacturers utilized more class resources, such as design or managerial skills, and drew on savings from their families. After the industry started to decline in the 2010s mainly because of informal traders in Brás, Koreans established a garment association, ABIV, which represents a new form of ethnic resource. The difference is that, compared to the early form of ethnic resources, ABIV is a weak tie that only loosely links its members.

This difference between ABIV and the other two, *vende* and *kye*, can be explained by the generational factor. First-generation Koreans have a stronger Korean identity and had no other options. Consequently, they relied on strong ties, whereas second-generation Koreans are not confined to the Korean ethnic economy yet established ABIV, a weak tie that could be beneficial for their businesses. The last point of this article is that the change in the Korean ethnic economy, especially its resource utilization pattern, is to some extent tied to the broader context of the Global South. The tradition of import substitution industrialization facilitated Korean businesses but was also related to the emergence of new garment complexes in other states. In addition, informality in urban economies, which is prevalent in Global South countries, is closely related to the new informal competitors in Brás.

Because this research is based on a single case, first, it is hard to generalize from the experience of the Korean ethnic economy and argue that new forms of ethnic resources are utilized in the later stage of ethnic economies. Thus, for future research, it would be helpful to explore other cases of ethnic economies that are old but still vibrant. From an analysis of these additional cases, it will be easier to discern if ethnic resources play any or different roles even after the initial stage of ethnic economies. Second, even though I have attempted to interpret the change in the ethnic economy within the Global South context, it is not clear if these contextual factors necessarily lead ethnic economies in certain directions, as experienced by the Koreans in Bom Retiro. Yet, because the majority of research on ethnic economies is centered on the Global North and relatively ignores the temporal aspects of ethnic economies, this research can contribute to our understanding of ethnic economies in the Global South and how they can change over time.

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