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Minorities in South Korea

Abstract

This case study explores the situation of foreigners living in South Korea. The aim of the article is to show how many foreigners live in South Korea and why they choose this country for their destination as well as how they are perceived by the Koreans. Today's homogeneous Korean society is the result of a long period of isolation as well as the Korean mentality, characterised by a sense of superiority grounded in a pride in the people's origins and traditions. Researchers today show that there is an increasing number of foreign residents in Korea, a country which attracts foreigners with its cultural richness, wide range of development opportunities and disposable income relative to tax. However, due to the Korean attachment to culture, people coming to the Korean Peninsula have difficulties adopting and developing careers and making friends with the natives. One important turning point in Korean history is the end of the Korean War, when the American army was stationed in various parts of the country for many years. It was the first time the Koreans had been forced to live with such a large group of foreigners from outside of Asia. It is estimated nowadays that about 96% of population of the Republic of South Korea are native Koreans. About two million foreigners make up the remaining 4%.

Keywords: South Korea, foreigners, immigrants, intercultural marriages, homogeneous society, assimilation.

1. Introduction

Although South Korea is still largely considered a demographically homogeneous country, it has one of the highest rates of increase in the number of people born abroad. Every year about thirty thousand foreign nationals obtain Korean citizenship. The population of South Korea is over fifty million people and despite that it is one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in today's world (G.-S. Han, 2007). Furthermore, the vast popularity of marriage between Korean men and Asian women from other countries creates a field for discussion about the obviousness of nationality for younger generations of Koreans. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Korea had remained a closed kingdom and a need to open up to the West was brought about during the Japanese occupation in the early twentieth century; contact with the West was systematically intensified during the stationing of American troops within the state. It was not until the late 1980s that the country independently opened itself to the economic and cultural influences of the West, and in 1989 allowed unlimited emigration of the Korean people (K.-K.

Han, 2007). However, the immigrant population of Korea was still not perceived as a part of society, but only as tourists not planning to settle. Koreans are classified as an isolated nation, the Korean population being probably one of the most ethnically and linguistically uniform in the world. Part of Korean society believes that they are almost completely an ethnically pure nation, something which has visibly changed in recent years. The subject of foreign nationals is not always a welcome one: there are also opinions that foreigners are dangerous and even spread disease. However, with an increasing number of foreigners in Korea, these opinions, especially among younger generations, are in decline, giving Korean society the chance to become more diverse in terms both of nationality and perhaps also language (Seol, 2010).

A more interesting question might be who is coming to South Korea and why immigrants have started coming to Korea. It is worth pointing out that it is usually not easy for a foreigner to live in Korea without being perceived as an 'alien'. Koreans often use the word 'alien' instead of foreigner, so for immigrants it sounds unfriendly. In spite of the word alien being a legal term in English, there are various definitions of this word. The Oxford dictionary describes alien as:

1. Belonging to a foreign country
2. Unfamiliar and disturbing or distasteful
3. Supposedly from another world (The Oxford Dictionaries, 2018).

For people who do not come from countries where English is the mother tongue, the word alien could be associated with an unfriendly meaning. Koreans are the island among nations, but in their culture there is a certain distance from people from abroad as a result of the country being closed to other nations for many years (Kim, 2007; H.-K. Lee, 2008).

2. Minorities in South Korea: Background and Today's Situation

Nowadays, the populations of national minorities in South Korea are growing systematically. In May 2009, the number of foreign residents exceeded a million, at 1 106 884, according to research carried out in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Public Administration and Defence. The majority are immigrants from China, with 71% of them being people of Korean origin who have Chinese citizenship. In general, the Chinese with Korean ethnicity make up 40.1% of foreigners in Korea and 41.4% of people with non-Korean nationalities, including those who have Korean citizenship, but not by birth. By 2013, the number of foreigners permanently residing in South Korea increased to 1 576 034 and in 2005, according to Statistics Korea, about 373 000 foreigners came to the country, of which 41.4% for economic reasons, 19.8% planned to stay for several months, 6.4% for permanent residence, and 5.2% intended to study in Korea. In September 2015, according to the Korean Ministry of Government Administration and Internal Affairs, the number of foreigners, including seasonal employees, exceeded 1.8 million people, and thus 3.4% of the population. Research conducted in August 2017 shows that the number of foreigners in South Korea dropped from 3.4% to 2.8%, half of whom were Chinese citizens, in a large part of Korean ethnicity. A significant group nowadays consists of immigrants from Vietnam—9.4% of foreigners in Korea. Thailand is in third place and Thai immigrants comprise 5.8% of foreigners living in Korea. The fourth largest national minorities in Korea are the Americans and the Filipinos. As a response to the rapid growth in South Korea's migrant population, academic and policy-related

discussions on multiculturalism are becoming increasingly significant. According to the Korea Times, the number of foreigners surpassed 1.76 million people in 2016 (The Korea Times, 2017).

3. Minorities in South Korea: Numbers and Professions

The structure of the Korean population underwent significant changes after the Second World War with its division, and then after the conclusion of a mutual defence agreement entered into by South Korea and the United States under which American armed forces were stationed in the country. South Korea's opening to immigrants from all over the world coincided with rapid economic and democratic development and far-reaching socio-political change. Since then, the number of foreigners has been constantly increasing. South Korea, one of the most economically developed countries, attracts people from all corners of the world (Lim, 2010). Although these are predominantly immigrants from Asian countries, a significant proportion also includes such nationals as Americans and Canadians. According to the data from worldatlas.com there are 69 000 foreigners from Central and Eastern Asia. The population of Russians is large, amounting to around 15 000 people. The largest group of foreigners in Korea, however, has always been the Chinese. In 2005, the Chinese population of South Korea amounted to 697 000, which brought them close to 55 % of all foreigners in the country (Korean Ministry of Justice, 1993; 2013). This value has showed a clear downward trend in recent years, caused by both emigration and a very low local native Korean birth rate, as well as increasing immigration on the part of foreigners. A large proportion of the Chinese population in Korea are labourers, occupying mainly Seoul, but resident also in many other parts of the country where they can count on facilities such as Chinese schools. The second largest group of foreigners are equally Americans and Vietnamese (each group over 7%). The purpose of stay of Americans in South Korea may have a very different character—some of them are in military service, others work in specialist positions, others are simply tourists (Kim, 2011). The American population, despite extremely strict restrictions regarding non-Asian immigrants, amounts to 150 778. There are 28 500 military personnel and civilian employees from the United States throughout the country, of which more and more are settling in Korea along with their families. (Statistics Korea, 2013). Most of them have come to Korea to teach English as native speakers of the language. Vietnamese men are primarily unskilled workers, while

Vietnamese women come to Korea to marry, according to the Chosunilbo, one of the most famous newspaper in South Korea (The Chosunilbo, 2007). The fourth largest group of foreigners are Thai, who constitute about 5 % of the foreign population. Next in order are other Asian nationalities, such as Filipinos or Japanese. Men from South Asian countries often come to South Korea to perform the so-called 3-D jobs (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) (Lee, 2008).

This is because the majority of residents have moved to urbanised areas seeking employment in corporations, leaving behind a shortage of workers in factories or construction companies. They are mainly residents of Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand. They find employment mainly in the industrial suburbs of Gyeonggi-do in Ansan (Kim, 2011). The most numerous non-Asian minorities apart from Americans are Canadians and Australians, and groups from Europe—the British and the French. There is also a group, albeit not a large one, of immigrants in South Korea from Poland (Lim, 2010). According

to OECD report *Trend in International Migration* this minority in Korea can currently be numbered at around 5 000 to 6 000 (OECD iLibrary, 2004). The presence of Poles may be indicative of the fact that they have somewhat opened themselves to Poland. They are certainly a group of people whose reasons for emigrating to Korea could be numerous. One could be economic, as Korean companies have entered the stage of expansion and have been successful in European markets, making huge investments in Poland, as did for example LG and Samsung. Most Polish immigrants seem to have another reason to migrate—their Korean spouse. Some couples constantly travel between Poland and Korea, living a few years alternately in each country. The largest group of foreigners in Korea live in Seoul. They have their streets or housing estates there. The most recognisable of them are: Filipino Street, Chinatown, Japanese village, French village, Nigerian street, Islamic street, German Society, Mongolian Tower, Nepalese street or people from Central and Eastern Asia. In these places there are many restaurants with food from their native countries, coupled with numerous institutions where the personnel speak these languages. The communities of foreigners usually try to assimilate into Korean society, simultaneously maintaining their own cultural heritage. Ties within the community are strong; members help each other and help those who are just starting life in Korea (Seol, 2010). Such mini-towns ease immigrants' adaptation to life in Korea. Many communities establish Korean schools for children from their mini-cities to help them better assimilate into society by learning the Korean language, history, traditions and culture and prevent them from being isolated. These communities, however, also organise events and performances to cultivate their cultures and traditions (G.-S. Han, 2007).

Like many other countries before it, Korea has woken up to the fact that in order to keep social cohesion strong, there needs to be some process to assist new arrivals with integration. To that end, the Korea Immigration Service Foundation was established to, among other aims, assist citizens of other countries residing in Korea to feel at home here, which includes plans to develop better understanding of immigrant by Koreans and vice-versa.

The Korean Immigration and Integration Program (KIIP) is part of that plan. This program is designed and implemented by the Ministry of Justice, through its Social Integration Division. The program consists of two halves: Korean language training and Understanding Korean Society (Korean Ministry of Justice, 2013).

Koreans claims that assimilation into society is achieved not only through learning about language and culture, but also through marriages between foreigners and Koreans. The number of marriages between foreigners and Koreans has been steadily increasing over the past few years. In 2005, 14% of all marriages in South Korea were marriages with foreigners, totaling about 26 000 marriages. Most of them were between Korean men with other Asian women from poorer backgrounds. The number of immigrants who come to Korea to teach English has grown from less than 1 000 people in 1988 to over 20 000 at the beginning of the 20th century (Ministry of Employment and Labour, 2010).

As a response to the rapid growth in South Korea's migrant population, academic and policy-related discussions on multiculturalism are becoming increasingly significant. However, the term is used in a rather different way than in Australia, Canada or Europe. It refers to a specific category of people, namely marriage migrants, rather than expressing a social value or a foundation of government policy (Castles *et al.*, 2012).

4. Minorities in South Korea: Korean Immigration Law

Korean immigration law is very strict, especially for non-Asian people. Koreans also have reservations about marrying people from outside of Asia, as can be seen in the stricter provision regarding the granting of citizenship through marriage. The government has imposed regulations on people applying for citizenship by introducing, inter alia, two prerequisites: the first is taking a language exam and passing it with a high score; the second condition concerns the financial situation of a person applying for citizenship after obtaining the marriage certificate (Watson, 2010). A foreign spouse must earn at least \$14 000 annually. These measures are designed to prevent the main causes of conflicts of such mixed marriages, such as communication problems and low income. A significant proportion of immigrants come to Korea for the prospect of a well-paid job, both blue collar workers and those considered to be white collar workers lured by the opportunity to develop promising careers (Korean Ministry of Justice, 2013). The Guardian published an article, which states that

South Koreans workers have some of the longest weeks among members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, behind only Mexico. South Koreans still work about 400 more hours a year compared with workers in the UK and Australia, about 10 additional standard work weeks. (The Guardian, 1 March 2018).

The immigrants are often unaware of the Korean work ethic, which is hard to understand for people from a different culture. This leads to an inability to adapt to and meet the high expectations. Discrimination against employees from abroad is a common occurrence. The lack of legal regulations guaranteeing the equality of foreign and Korean employees is still visible (Ministry of Employment and Labour, 2010). A frequent problem is the disrespectful attitude of employers and supervisors towards employees of other nationalities, which in extreme cases may even manifest in non-payment of wages.

In 2008, South Korea introduced the Act on Support for Multicultural Families, designed to form the basis of support for 'stable family living' (Article 1 of Support for Multicultural Families Act).

This Act is indeed the only law that provides a legal definition of *the multicultural* in the South Korean legal system by defining *a multicultural family* as a family comprised of a Korean national and a foreigner (or a Korean national naturalised through marriage) who has a marital relationship with the former (Article 2).

At present, marriage migration seems to be declining, and fewer local authorities are subsidising it. Marriage migration gives rise to 'multicultural families', which are seen as problematic by many Koreans, because they go against their belief in ethnic homogeneity. A central policy problem is thus to ensure that foreign mothers are able to bring up their children to speak the Korean language and to conform to Korean cultural values (Bélanger *et al.*, 2010).

5. Minorities in South Korea: Korean Perception of Foreigners

Due to its Confucian roots Korean society still has problems with accepting immigrants, which means that people from other cultural backgrounds, raised to respect other values, have problems with adapting to the local lifestyle (K.-K. Han, 2007). At the same time, the manner in which Koreans classify foreigners,

dividing them primarily according to skin colour, and secondarily according to nationality, which together with subjective assessment based on stereotypes is the basis of their attitude and behaviour towards foreigners, is clearly visible (Kim, 2007). Fortunately, the young generation of Koreans

(...) seems to be characterized by a much greater openness and gives hope' for changes in relation to foreigners in their country in the coming years. Many saunas or public pools and even bars do not allow foreigners, for which the only given reason is lack of Korean citizenship (Watson, 2012).

Korean employers openly admit that they prefer to give a job to a Korean, rather than a person from abroad with the same qualifications. A person without a good education, knowledge of English, Korean and at least the basics of Korean culture may have problems finding employment. Discriminatory behaviour often does not result in any legal consequences and public awareness of such behaviour is very limited. Foreigners living in South Korea try to highlight the problem to the government, but their efforts to push legislation have so far failed. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that Koreans, despite this, do not hate foreigners; their reluctance towards immigrants is rooted in the Korean cultural and national identity rather than anything else. Many foreigners find Koreans very polite and welcoming (Amnesty International, 2009).

6. Minorities in South Korea. Conclusions.

This case study explores the situation of minorities living in South Korea. Although living in South Korea is not easy for a foreigner, many of them find this country very interesting. South Korea became an even more attractive after the World Cup was held there in 2002. The country invested in intense self-promotion, expanded its touristic appeal, as well as being home to a burgeoning Korean pop culture. A country with a strong economic standing is an attractive destination, as it provides high standards of living and many opportunities for development on the labour market as well as on a personal level. Moreover, many media and government initiatives are being developed with the aim to show the value of other nationalities in Korean society and to tackle the problem of Korean citizens' behaviour towards foreigners, an example of which are movies with foreign actors and talk-shows with guests from outside Korea. Foreigners willingly come to Korea for a variety of reasons, ranging from tourism to employment. According to many researchers and sources the number of foreigners in South Korea is still increasing and will soon reach 2 million people.

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