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**Korean Identities: What Does It Mean to be Korean American in Korea?**

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Returning to Korea after thirty-four years’ absence has filled a void in my adult life. As a child, my siblings and I immigrated with my parents to the U.S. to pursue the “American Dream.” We dreamt of flushing toilets, abundant fruits and vegetables, chocolates, candy, meats, and anything that our hearts desired. On a plane ride over to the States, we all changed our Korean names for American ones hoping that this would make us “American” or at least sound American to American ears. What we did not consider was that no matter what we called ourselves, we would always be perceived as Asian first. For many immigrants, the adaptation period in the U.S. is strenuous and psychologically draining. While adult immigrants have their set of problems, the children immigrants are the involuntary immigrants who did not necessarily choose their path, but merely followed their parents.

In my book The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawai’i I examine the experiences of those who immigrated to Hawai’i as children, and the role of family, community, and society at large on the construction of 1.5 ethnic identity. I argue that it is not so much the age of immigration, but rather the socio-cultural environmental factors that shape and create this unique identity. Furthermore, I argue that becoming 1.5 generation is a process rather than an ascribed generational label. Economy, politics, pop culture-media, history and other aspects of one’s environment often shape the dynamic and fluid nature of identity. Thus, the experiences of those living in Hawaii are unique to those Korean Americans because Hawaii’s rich history, location, and distinct culture imposed on them the question of what does it mean to be Korean [page 116] American, local Korean, or Korean in Hawai’i. Through my research I find that the intersection of class, location, and space impacts identity formation, and the experiences of Korean Americans living in Korea are also shaped by these factors as well.

Identity formation and politics has long been an interest of mine for I have lived it personally. Returning to Korea has been an amazing eye opener for me in regards to how I see myself and other Koreans. As a child immigrant in San Francisco, California, I experienced a typical urban experience of racial slurs, discrimination, and fights between ethnic groups. However, living in a suburban area where I was only one of four Asian American kids also complemented my childhood, and there was pressure to suppress one’s ethnic identity and blend in. These two experiences taught me early on about ethnic relations, class inequality and struggles, and ethnic identity options. While living in San Francisco, being Asian or perceived as Chinese was powerful due to the much publicized “Chinese gang” in San Francisco. Many African American, Mexican, and white students assumed that I knew martial arts and often feared me. I did take some martial arts so it wasn’t hard to frighten those who were prone to bullying. However, growing up in the suburbs with a predominantly wealthy white community altered my identity expression. Instead of wearing Ben Davis pants and t-shirts, kids were wearing polo/alligator shirts and Calvin Klein jeans. Instead of playing tether ball and fighting during recess, kids in the suburban area sang, played getting married and divorced, and talked about Saturday Night Live. Because of growing up initially in a multi-ethnic city, being a person of color was desired. In addition, the interactions I had outside of school taught me that no matter what I did to be “American,” I would never blend. My experiences living in the suburbs, however, were quite different. The experience there taught me that being a person of color was an anomaly, and I felt pressure to suppress my ethnicity for I stood out too much. In both communities, I was seen plainly as the Asian girl.

Growing up, I always felt very proud of being Korean, but at times did not like the Korean adult friends of my parents. I never fully understood this contradiction in me till I began my research on Korean Americans in Hawai’i. The resocialization process of the children of immigrants is one that contradicts what they learn at home. Schools, television, [page 117] magazines, educational books, and the news taught me what I thought was the ideal family, an average day in the life of a teen, and what it meant to be successful, beautiful, and accepted. The role of the media impacts all racial and ethnic groups in that it prescribes a notion or myth of what reality is. Such images contradicted my immigrant family life. Hence, there was a strong sense of “what’s wrong with my family.” However, residing in Korea has helped me realize that identity formation and politics have much to do with the need to belong, adapt, and be accepted.

The U.S. and Korea often force their citizens to choose sides. You have to decide where your loyalties lie and pick a citizenship or allegiance. Despite the fact that we are living in a global community, there is still much pressure to choose one country, one culture, and one way of life. Yet, the growing numbers of diasporic identities transcending borders have challenged this notion. Living in Korea has rewarded me with many opportunities to observe, converse with, and educate both gyopos and Koreans about what it means to be a 1.5 or subsequent generation American of Korean ancestry, and how this generation of Korean Ameri-cans shares a distinct experience from other Korean Americans returning to Korea.

There is one thing that 1.5ers share with other Korean gyopos: they are faced with the reoccurring question of “what does it mean to be Korean, Korean American or Korean gyopo?” Based on observations and in-depth interviews of Korean Americans living and working in Korea, I examine the experiences of Korean Americans in a country that is outwardly homogeneous, I draw on my research of the 1.5 generation to discuss how Korean Americans who are bilingual and bicultural are able to negotiate language boundaries and optionally switch their identities, however, unlike the 1.5 generation Korean Americans in Hawai’i who are bilingual and understand both Korean American and American culture. In Korea, Korean gyopos are forced to learn contemporary Korean culture, for most Korean Americans only know of Korea as they remember in their childhood, what their parents have told them, or what they see on popular Korean dramas and the news. More recently, Korean pop culture has dominated the Asian landscape and is increasing its influence in the U.S. as well. In particular the Korean [page 118] dramas or soap operas have gained a large audience and have led to organized tours of Korean drama settings throughout Korea. In addition, women from Japan and China tour to Korea in search of the “gentle Korean man” depicted in the dramas. Such stereotypes are quite contrary to the pre-existing stereotypes of Korean men as sexist and domineering. Thus, the images of Korea through the media are quite different from what Korean gyopos were raised to believe. Still, the 1.5 generation is unique in that they still have an understanding, if not an appreciation, for Korean culture. While they may not know pop culture or common slang expressions, they still express feeling connected to Korea and its people. For second and subsequent generation Korean Americans, as well as adopted and biethnic and biracial Koreans, Korean culture is a bit unclear to them. This has much to do with Korean culture’s fluid past. The influence of colonization, war, and global economy has shifted Korea’s culture in many ways. Hence the way Korean Americans view Korea is based on what they or their parents learned about Korea when they lived there. However, the various events in Korean history marks how Koreans have adapted and responded to the various changes in Korea.

Historical Markers in Korean Immigration

The year 1903 marked the 100th anniversary of Korean immigration to Hawaii. It was only three years after the Royal Asiatic Society’s Transactions journal was established and even then there were clear signs of a Korean diaspora taking place. Korean laborers, who were recruited to work on the plantations, left Korea to pursue economic opportunities that were not available in Korea at that time. These pioneers of Korean immigration left their home, their culture, and family in hopes of helping their families who remained in Korea. Yet the politically turbulent Korea made sojourning difficult for those who were caught in Hawaii and other parts of the continental United States as the Japanese occupied and colonized Korea from 1910-1945. This early period is significant for several reasons, the foremost being that it marked the forced settlement of many Korean migrant workers who had initially planned on returning to Korea. However, because of the occupation that was taking place during this period, many Korean Americans instead opted to work in Hawai’i and the U.S., as well as work toward forming a[page 119] collective body who fought for Korea’s independence. However, even after Japan relinquished Korea in 1945, the Korean War became another factor in which Koreans began to lose sight of returning home. As many early Korean immigrants came from the northern part of Korea,1 those yearning for home were once again forced to remain. By this time, the second generation (American born) Koreans was becoming more visible in Hawai’i and the U.S. The anti-immigrant sentiment of the U.S. started with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, followed by the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement Act. In 1924 the U.S. officially restricted the immigration of Japanese; and since Korea was at that time colonized by Japan, the migration of Koreans stopped as well. Thus, the Korean population in Hawaii settled there, had families, interracially married, and merged into the local culture. The new generation of Korean Americans no longer had dreams of returning home, for Hawai’i became its home.

The notion of home changed, however, after the Korean War and the Immigration Act of 1965. The Korean War brought in “war brides” and the beginning of Korean adoptions. Thus, the limited immigration from 1945-1965 was primarily of war brides and orphaned adoptees, most of whom were biracial Korean children. After years of limited migration, the Immigration Act of 1965 reunited families and opened the immigration gates for Koreans and other previously banned ethnic groups seeking the “American Dream.” However, for these immigrants the attempt to make a new home in the U.S. was fraught with racism and bigotry on the part of White America, as well as Asian Americans who have been in the U.S. for several generations. The immigrants were tola to go back to where they came from, and were often the victims of racial epithets and violence. It is not surprising that post 1965 immigrants experienced such hostility during this time. After all, it was the peak of the civil rights movement and the United States was filled with racial tension. While the Asian Americans who grew up in the United States fought for civil rights along with their African American and Chicano brothers and sisters, the internalized anti-immigrant sentiments or the need to prove that they were truly Americans resulted in making the new immigrants the “other” or “FOBs” (fresh off the boat). As America taught them during the internment period of the Japanese of wearing buttons that stateu, “I am not Japanese,” or even earlier during the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act where [page 120] Asian workers wore labels stating “I’m not Chinese,” Asian Americans during the post 1965 era instead expressed prejudice toward the new FOBs by making fun of their accents, dress, and foreignness along with their non-Asian friends. Hence the new immigrants were forced to create enclaves where they felt at home.

For Korean immigrants, the church became the social and cultural support where they knew that they could speak and hear their language, eat Korean food, and form relationships with other Koreans. This was particularly important for those who did not have their extended families with them. Consequently, the church became many immigrants’ second family. It is not surprising that many Koreans converted from Buddhism to Christianity. In Hawai’i the church was a natural place to meet, since most of the Korean laborers were recruited with the help of the church.2 But even after the 1965 Immigration Act, the church served as a central location for newly arrived immigrants who were looking for a sense of community. One Korean immigrant in the documentary 7th Train states that going to church helped fill a void in his immigrant life. The growing church membership also had to do with the fact that most Korean Americans could not afford to call Korea on a regular basis, airfares were expensive and the internet nonexistent.3 But as the internet became more available to the public in the late 1980s and 1990s, their connection to the “homeland” became more frequent. In addition, the economic boom of the ‘80s and Korea’s globalization in the ‘90s not only made Korea an economic force in Asia, it also opened up the gateway for diasporic relations between Korea and the U.S. Finally, the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, also known as Sa-I-Gu (4/29), marked the day when the world witnessed the burning of Koreatown in Los Angeles. While many believed this incident was sparked by the “Black-Korean conflict,” the reality was different. While there were tensions in Los Angeles between Koreans and African Americans, the “conflict” was media generated, and the news failed to draw the connection between institutionalized racism that played the most critical role in the Los Angeles uprising.

There were many incidents that led to the Los Angeles uprising. The end result, moreover, was not an attack on Korean merchants as a lot of the media made it out to be, but rather response to the institutional racism ana injustice that African Americans have faced in the U.S. The[page 121] riot was the first multi-ethnic riot in the U.S.,4 and it taking place in Los Angeles had more to do with the Rodney King verdict than the Korean- black conflict. In the early 1990s, there was another “black-Korean” incident in Los Angeles between a store merchant and a 16-year-old African American girl name Latasha Harlins. A Korean merchant caught Ms. Harlins stealing a bottle of orange juice. The confrontation between the two led to a physical attack by Harlins and then a fatal shooting by the merchant. All of this was caught on video tape, and the merchant was seen shooting the girl in the back as she was leaving the store. Despite the clear evidence of wrongdoing, the Korean merchant was given probation and the African American community cried that the life of a young girl was worth only a slap on the hand.

There was also another incident in Riverside, California of a young African American woman, asleep in a car, who was awakened by police officers tapping on the window. While the details of the incident are still contested, the outcome was that the police shot and killed the young woman. Police officers stated that they saw her reaching for something that looked like a gun, but community activists argued that it was racially motivated and a misuse of force. This heightened racial tension was fueled further by the economic recession that hit the United States and the growing anti-immigrant sentiment in California. Then the videotaped beating of Rodney King surfaced and the trial of the accused police officers had Americans glued to their television sets. On April 29, 1992 the officers were acquitted and the community responded with random acts of violence in their own communities. The uprisings devastated African American communities and Korean merchants’ livelihoods. Consequently, Koreans moved their places of business and their families to nearby Diamond Bar, California, Orange County, and some even returned to Korea. The land that was once considered the American Dream quickly turned to a harsh reality of racism and discrimination. The Los Angeles uprising was also a time when many 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans were forced to recognize that racism impacted their lives as well. Despite speaking perfect English and having “American” friends, Korean Americans saw that the world still viewed them as foreigners. This event forced many Korean Americans living in Los Angeles as well as those living in other parts of the U.S. to [page 122] reexamine what it meant to be Korean in the U.S.; especially for those who were hiding their ethnic identity and trying to fit in, they could no longer hide from their culture and ethnicity.

The pre-millennium period created many opportunities for Korean Americans to return to or visit Korea for the first time. The transnational market opened the doors for Korean transnational workers, those seeking jobs as English teachers, and import/export businesspeople. Postmodern technology also opened the gates for those who wanted to go to Korea to learn Korean, connect with lost family members, or pursue jobs as pop stars/entertainers. Consequently, since the 1990s we have seen a growing number of Korean Americans moving to Korea for various personal and professional reasons. So the combined factors of Korea’s strengthening economy, a U.S recession, and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising led to a wave of Korean Americans returning to Korea. We no longer saw a large Korean immigration, but rather the migration of Korean Americans going back to Korea.

Korean Americans in Korea

In Korea the label of Korean American brings out various images in the minds of Koreans, for the term American typically represents those of European descent, hence when one identifies as Korean American, looks of confusion surface. Are these people half American (white) and Korean? Or does the concept refer to anyone who is an American citizen or a legal resident of America? In the U.S. the term Korean American is debated among Korean Americans, Asian Americans, and other “Americans.” What does it really mean to be Korean American, Korean, or American for that matter? While many will argue that anyone who is a citizen of the U.S. is American, the reality in the U.S. is that those of Asian descent are seen as foreigners before they are seen as Americans. Even if their passport shows their nationality, when most people think of what an American person looks like, they think of a white person. When people of Asian descent state that they are “American,” they are often asked a follow-up question of “but what are you really? Where do you come from? Where do your parents come from?” Thus, regardless of whether one is first, 1.5, second, or subsequent generation Korean American, they are reminded that they are not seen or perceived of as [page 123] “American.” Thus Korean Americans, like other Asian Americans, are thought of as perpetual foreigners.5

In Korea, however, the concept of Korean American is foreign since many Koreans think of a Euro/white American. Hence when someone identifies as Korean American, there are questions that follow. This is largely due to the fact that in Korea, Koreans who migrated to other countries and grew up elsewhere are referred to as gyopos. There are no real clear distinctions made between Koreans who migrated to Canada, Europe, South America, or North America. They are all described as Koreans who left Korea. In fact, the Korean diasporic communities are quite diverse. Many Americans and Koreans alike know very little about the mass migration of Koreans to Russia, Cuba, Mexico, Europe, and elsewhere. Yet the recent developments have lifted the transnational borders bringing in the various gyopos back to Korea. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “some 6,500 gyopos have been returning to Korea every year over the last four years in search of work, their roots and even marriage.”6 This number, however, does not account for those who come to Korea as tourists and end up staying teaching English privately as tutors or working in other positions “under the table,” nor Korean adoptees who returned home to be reunited with their birth families. Furthermore, the statistic fails to recognize those Koreans who apply for an F-4 visa which gives them almost the same rights as Koreans. Thus, the U.S. embassy has a difficult time keeping track of Korean Americans residing, working, or vacationing in Korea. A representative from the U.S. embassy states that because not all Americans sign in with the embassy, it is difficult to keep track of how many Americans, let alone Korean Americans, are in Korea at one given time.7 However, there is a growing Korean gyopo presence. Koreans from the U.S. seem to dominate the Korean landscape, but there are also a significant number of Koreans from Canada, Japan, and European countries as well. The problem of locating these groups is that when they all walk along the streets, they blend in and are otherwise undetectable, unless they begin to speak their home language. But even with the language aspect, it is not always clear if they are Korean American.

A Korean American student at Ewha Woman’s University stated that she could tell Korean Americans from Koreans “by the way they dressed, [page 124] wore make-up, and presented themselves.” She added that it was especially easy to detect Korean American women because they “wear eye liner, less foundation and powder make-up, and have thinner eye brows.” This student felt very strongly that she could easily tell Korean Americans from Koreans, but after a semester of trying to prove her theory, she confessed that her hypothesis could not be proven for she found that looks alone could not identify Korean Americans. So why is it so difficult to locate Korean Americans in Korea?

There are obvious places where Korean Americans congregate in Seoul. Apgujeong in Gangnam is a focal point of interest for many Korean Americans with disposable income. This area is filled with cafes, bars, restaurants, and clubs catering to the rich. It is a place where celebrities and wannabe celebrities hang out to be seen. One Korean American gyopo male states, “it is the ‘in’ place, and that is what draws young Korean Americans. To be where it is trendy, ‘in’ and hip.” You can also locate Korean American in their thirties and forties at the international schools throughout Seoul picking up their young children from school, fou can also periodically meet Korean Americans in Itae-won, but most Korean Americans stay away from what they describe as the military hub or the “Tijuana of Korea.” Finally, you can locate young Korean Americans teaching English at the Korean language institutes at the various universities or at one of the 960 English hagwons in Seoul.

Despite the many places where Korean Americans hang out, there is still no visible “community” of gyopos in Seoul. This has much to do with the ability of Korean Americans to blend in with other Koreans. Walking on the streets or riding the subways, they look very much like any other Korean. It is only when they speak that they are distinguished. The ability of Korean Americans to blend in perpetuates the impression among foreigners that Korea is a homogeneous society. While racially this may appear so, there is a diverse ethnic and racial population that exists in Korea. For example, ethnic Chinese, Japanese, biracial and multiethnic Koreans have long lived and worked in Korea. However, the discrimination against these groups has kept them out of the popular discourse on Koreans. While the Chinese are the second largest ethnic group in Korea, few people acknowledge or recognize this group as an integral part of Korean culture. Instead, the Chinese are discarded. [page 125]

Since the 1980s Korea has received a growing number of migrant workers from the Philippines, Pakistan, Nepal, Indonesia, India, and Vietnam. Yet these communities have been “invisible” in the Korean landscape until very recently. One growing phenomenon is the advertisement in the countryside around Seoul for Vietnamese, Filipino, and Thai wives. One reason is the shortage of potential Korean brides. Since the early 1990s sociologists have warned of the profound implications of South Korea’s gender imbalance, which is considered one of the highest in the world. In 1997 there were 100 males to every 113 females; according to recent statistics, the ratio of men to women in Korea is expected to increase by at least three percent within the next ten years. The combination of this gender imbalance and the inability of working farmers to attract Korean women has resulted in a neo-picture bride industry bringing in women from developing Asian countries and from Russia. The lack of Korean females has led many Korean male nationals to seek wives abroad, particularly in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam, as well as ethnic Koreans from rural areas of China.8

The implication of this is not only the growing number of interethnic relationships, but the cultural conflicts that arise between the husbands and wives, as well as the challenges that biethnic children face in Korean schools, neighborhoods, and general Korean society. In addition, questions of ethnic identity are sure to surface among this population. Even among non-Korean women married to Korean men, some begin to assert a Korean identity. On a subway ride to City Hall in Seoul, I overheard a Korean man trying to explain to his woman companion how the subway system works. The woman spoke broken Korean with what sounded like a Filipino accent. I turned to the woman and asked her in English it she was Filipino and she looked at me and responded in broken accented Korean, “hanguk salam y eh yo.” meaning “I am a Korean person.” I found this to be an interesting response since she clearly did not look or sound Korean, and the fact that her male companion had to explain the subway system and what was written on the walls reflected the fact that she was new to Korea. Still, she claimed a Korean identity. She could in fact have Korean citizenship as a growing number of Southeast Asian women do after marrying a Korean man. One Filipina states that she is[page 126] now “Korean”, yet she identifies herself as Filipino with Korean citizenship. The self identification of these women and children will be interesting to examine in the future and the fluidity and complexities of identity formations is sure to surface. Still, Korea is not a country known for its tolerance or acceptance of biracial children. However, there are signs that things may be changing.

Most recently, Heinz Ward, the Super Bowl MVP player, came out and openly stated that he embraced his Koreanness. A single mother of Korean ancestry raised Ward after his African American father left them. He expressed a closer connection to his Korean side, stating that his mother speaks very little English and therefore he was raised biculturally and bilingually. Furthermore, he commented that there were many African American mentors, but very few Korean ones. Surprisingly, his statements hit a chord with many Koreans and some newspapers questioned whether Koreans would rethink how they treat biracial children, and redefine what it means to be Korean. In addition to Heinz Ward, Daniel Henny became a hot ticket in Korea’s model and drama industry. His father is British American and his mother is Korean American and he speaks no Korean. His mother was adopted when she was not yet one year old. Still, he has gained a large fan base despite the fact that in the dramas, he only speaks English. Henny also visits and volunteer at the orphanage where his mother resided for a year. Is he Korean? The U.S. Olympic skier Toby Dawson also came into the Korean news spotlight after reporters revealed that he was adopted as a child after being found by the police in Busan, Korea. Even though he was raised by Caucasian parents and lived in predominantly white neighborhoods, Koreans have also claimed him as their own. Is he Korean nonetheless?

While cases like these are not new, and in fact biracial children were the first to be adopted during the 1950s, the reception toward biracial children and people has never been warm in Korea. In fact, biracial children still comment on how difficult it is to attend Korean schools where other kids tease and beat them because they are mixed. One Korean woman says, “if you do something great or admirable, Korean people will adopt you as their own whether you’re a Korean [gyopo] or mixed. But, if you do something that is shameful to the Korean race, they will quickly turn on you.”9 This is not because Koreans are a harsh group of[page 127] people. On the contrary, many people have pointed to the generosity and warmth of Koreans. There is a coexistence of intimacy and distance in Korean culture that is often difficult to understand If Koreans have cheong10 for you, you are forever a part of their life and have an established relationship with them that is hard to deny. However, if there is no relationship, whether it is due to work, friendship, or family, a person in many ways does not exist in the eyes of the average Korean. This is changing a bit with the younger generation, which is becoming more global minded and open to dialoguing with foreigners. However, such behavior and ideology are still uncommon.

Thus, the experiences of foreigners vary among those who feel that Koreans are warm and generous to those who find them rude and discon-nected. These feelings, along with the impression that non-Koreans don’t matter or even exist, have much to do with the ideology of Korean culture that if you do not have a relationship with someone, then for that person you do not matter—not in a cold and heartless manner as it may sound, but in that Koreans invest their energy and efforts in family, friends, and colleagues. If there is some kind of relationship, Koreans are very warm and endearing. For example, people who work in Korea have relationships with their colleagues. The expectation of maintaining a team environment is how other scholars have described Japanese business culture. One can also have a relationship with a local street vendor frequented on a regular basis. When you become a regular at his or her booth or store, you have a relationship as a “regular customer.” So if there are regular interactions, Koreans are very friendly and thoughtful. The curtness and so-called “rudeness” come about from the same people who are kind and thoughtful when there is no established relationship. For many Korean Americans, they move to Korea with various expectations, Some have said that they decided to “try” Korea to get in touch with their roots, while they have stated that they felt that it would be a good place where they wouldn’t stand out as much as they do in the States. While there are distinct reasons for each Korean American, for those who are traveling to Korea for the first time, they expect a welcome from their fellow Koreans.

Ethnic identity is a complex topic, and the manner in which it is con-structed has much to do with the process by which one’s ethnicity is[page 128] constructed and shaped. Increasingly ethnic identity is recognized as being fluid and contextual. The notion of ethnic identity is constructed and reconstructed depending on the situation.11 Individual and group attempts to address ethnic boundaries and meanings for ethnicity are best understood as “a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual identity and group organization.”12 The way we construct our ethnic identity is the result of structure and agency, the interchange between ethnic groups and the larger society. Consequently, behaviors and actions of ethnic groups are a product of the social, economic, cultural and political environment.13 The current global environment has led to the return migration of many Korean gyopos searching for personal and professional opportunities in Korea.

Korean American Experiences in Korea: “What are you?”

Encountering the question “What are you?” is a common experience of Korean Americans living in the U.S. As a racialized society filled with racial and ethnic distinctions, Koreans regardless of their generational status have had to answer this question at least once in their lives. Ethnicity is an important factor for most because it allows people to situate and place another to them. For Korean Americans this question has different meanings depending on who is asking the question and how they ask it. The response varies from “I’m American, I’m human, I’m Korean, I’m Korean American, I’m Asian,” to “I’m a New Yorker, I’m a Southerner,” and so on. The options for ethnic identity are vast, and depending on the social-cultural and generational experiences of Korean Americans the way they see themselves varies. However, for most Korean Americans this question reaffirms the notion that many people do not view Koreans as just Americans, but still as someone who is foreign. Thus, Korean Americans have expressed in many studies that they do not feel American, nor do they feel Korean. This constant state of aimlessness or marginality has led to Korean Americans questioning their ethnic identity, but it has also led to many choosing various options and adapting when needed.

Korean Americans living in Korea respond to this question in varying ways. Some Korean gyopos have gone as far as to change their American names for their Korean ones. One biracial Korean gyopo says that[page 129] his name is Mark, but for business purposes he uses the Korean name Joon.14 He says that Koreans have a hard time pronouncing American names, but it has also made it easier for him to interact with others via the internet. Since most of his clients inquire about his services via email first, he is able to give the impression that he is “Korean Korean.” Such changing of American names for Korean ones is not unique to the Korean gyopo experience. Many Korean immigrants to the U.S. changed their names for American ones in order to fit in. Such adaptation is a way to make living in a foreign place more familiar. Not all Korean gyopos change their names, but they quickly realize that in order to blend in or fit in, they have to adjust their behavior and dress.

While Korean gyopos are in many ways indistinguishable from other Koreans, gyopos and Koreans alike state that the way in which one behaves and dresses is a clear giveaway to where one is from. Hence, Korean gyopos alter their style of hair and dress so that on the street it is difficult to differentiate them from anyone else. In addition, behaviors quickly change. Heterosexual Korean men who are used to approaching women they find attractive find that in Korea such behavior is an instant indicator of being foreign. Men in Korea do not show a woman that they are interested, nor do they show that they find a woman attractive in any way. Walking down the street, a woman can easily go through a whole day without a man looking at them. This is contrary to the experiences of women in the U.S., where they are looked at, smiled at, and approached by men. However, for non-Korean women from Europe, Russia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, their experiences are strikingly different.

In Korea, if you are different, people will stare for long periods of time. For non-Korean women, they are also harassed by men on the street who assume that they are prostitutes, and hence they are faced with dealing with propositions from Korean men who assume that they are “working girls.”15 Such crass behavior is amplified during the evening hours, after men have been drinking. One South Asian American woman stated that living in Korea has been a difficult experience due to the constant inappropriate propositions and treatment she gets from Korean men. She has come to a point where she now looks at all Korean men with disgust. While non-Koreans cannot hide their race or ethnicity, Korean gyopos are able to hide behind their ethnicity to some extent. [page 130]

While they may be able to hide their nationality, they are still women, and Korean American women state that the sexism that exists in Korea is glaring. While sexism continues in the U.S., Korean gyopos, both men and women, describe Korea as “a man’s world.” When I asked a Korean gyopo male how Korea is for women, he responded, “I’m glad I’m a man.”16 Women are paid half that of men in Korea, and the expectations of women are to be subservient to men. However, there are signs that some of this is changing. The rigid views about gender and sexuality appear to be weakening as the younger generation becomes more exposed to the international community. One sign is the Korean comedy Chubu Quiz, which is a story about a house husband who goes on a quiz show. The idea that a woman works while the man stays home and takes care of the family is an anomaly. The Korean government has long held the man as the head of the household regardless of whether he actually is or not. Furthermore, there is a growing presence of women in the business sector. But Korea is far from being an egalitarian society. It is still very much male dominated in politics, business, and education.

In addition to sexism, homophobia is very much internalized. Much like the U.S., the country is institutionally heterosexual. Koreans, however, go as far as denying that homosexuality exists in Korea. Ask any Korean over the age of thirty where gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or trans-genders (GLBT) hang out and the response is consistently, “there are no homosexuals in Korea.” The reality is that there are GLBTs in Korea, but they are discreet and still very much in the closet. In Itaewon, an area that is heavily foreign with a U.S. military presence, there is “homo hill” where bars and clubs cater to the GLBT community. According to one Korean woman in her thirties, Namsan Tower also has a stairway where people can hike to the top which at night turns into a rendezvous spot for gay men. Furthermore, there are also gay bath houses in various parts of Seoul. There are also places where lesbians hang out, most noticeably in a park near a university. Still, the majority of Koreans will tell you that there are no homosexuals in Korea. This mantra has been muted a bit by the release of the very first gay focused Korean film. Last November, Korean filmmakers released a film entitled The King and the Clown which became a huge hit with the Korean audience. It is a story about a love triangle between a king, his concubine, and his male clown. The[page 131] clear gay themed film has proved to be a blockbuster hit in Korea to the surprise of many who view Korea as a conservative, Christian based country. Film analysts state that as a result of its popularity, they have opened the film in more theatres throughout Seoul. Its popularity, some say, is an indication of a changing Korea, one that is more tolerant of diversity and sexual orientation. Others state that they see it merely as a fad following the success of Brokeback Mountain. That being gay has become a fad and that there are questions to whether such sentiments will remain. Korea’s culture is filled with contradictions. There is a cultural paradox of wanting to remain true to Korea’s way of life and the reality of a Western capitalistic influence.

Korean gyopos who are bilingual and bicultural also have an easier time fitting in to Korean culture. Living in Korea is quite difficult for a foreigner. The everyday way of life is strikingly different from the U.S. While there have been more English signs and an increased interest in teaching young children English, Koreans still do not speak English. This is quite surprising since Korea spends close to sixty billion dollars on English education and some parents even succumb to tongue surgery on their children hoping that a slit on the back of the tongue will allow the children to pronounce English like Americans.17 Consequently, Korean children are fascinated with anyone who can speak English and often stare and smile when they hear English spoken. For Korean gyopos, speaking English has its advantages and disadvantages in Korean society. The advantages are that with a growing need for English teachers, Korean gyopos find that they can teach English from anywhere from thirty to sixty dollars an hour at the various hagwons in Korea and as private tutors. However, some Korean Americans have stated that when they speak English in public spaces, they have had Korean people yell at them in Korean: “You think you’re better than us because you can speak English! Stop showing off.” People who are bilingual are able to respond, which diffuses the interaction. However, if a Korean gyopo cannot speak Korean, then they hear: “You are Korean. Why don’t you speak Korean?”

Being able to speak Korean is very helpful for Korean gyopos. Even if it is not perfect, it provides an opportunity to communicate and to establish a relationship with other Koreans. In addition, the Korean[page 132] language allows one to communicate emotions and thoughts in ways that are different from English. Aside from language, those who have an understanding of Korean culture appreciate the Korean people, while those who are not familiar with Korean ways of life find Korean people rude. One 1.5 generation Korean American woman named Lisa expressed why she loved Korea and the people while others didn’t.

There are things that Korean people do that I just really love. They look out for you, you know? They call you, take you out to eat, and treat you so well. They will put food on your plate as you’re eating and say ‘try it，you’ll like it’ or ‘this is good for you.’ That is just so sweet, you know. But I know that there are other Koreans who think that is just rude. Like they are telling you what to do or something, but I don’t see it that way. Koreans do come across a bit direct, but I like that. (Lisa Shim, January 19, 2006)

Lisa interpreted the interactions with other Koreans very differently from those who are unfamiliar with the way Koreans do or say things. Many foreigners complain that Koreans are forceful in their interactions, from shoving their elbows into you, to telling you that you are fat, to telling you what to eat and drink. Korean gyopos who are accustomed to Koreans understand that such directness is cultural and there is no meanness behind it, but others questions why Koreans have not adjusted to the international environment and amended their ways toward foreigners. Such expectations of Korean people are the idea that Koreans should conform to a particular mode. After all, they are one of Asia’s superpowers. Yet such sentiments neglect to consider that while Korea has become a capitalistic giant in the global economy, there is a clear distinction in the lives of those who have wealth vs. those who don’t. This is not unique to Korea. It occurs in most capitalist societies. In Korea, however, the hardship for the poor, elderly, and disabled is increased by the fact that Seoul is the fifth most expensive city in the world in which to live. One thirty-five-year-old second generation Korean American woman name Marni stated, “When I came to Korea two years ago, I couldn’t understand why they treated me the way they did. We have the same [Korean] blood, but why do they treat me so.”18 This sentiment is common among those Korean Americans who come to Korea with the expectation of having a warm reception, only to be faced with Koreans[page 133] “yelling” at them for not speaking Korean or not being Korean enough. These interactions force Korean gyopos to reexamine what it means to be Korean. In the U.S. Korean Americans are not seen as Americans, but Koreans, and in Korea they are not seen as Koreans, but Americans. They are neither, and feel marginalized from both communities. This state of being in-between is very similar to the experiences of the Korean American 1.5 generation who feel that they are neither truly Korean nor truly American.

What do Korean Americans think of Korea?

Korean Americans returning to the States often complain of being discriminated against during their stay in Korea. Hence, Korean Americans stated that they are not considered American in the U.S. or Korean in Korea. Others, however, returned to the States with fond memories of their Korean brothers and sisters, with established cheong and firm friendships they cherish. Thus, it seems that most people have extreme experiences. Either they love Korea or they hate it. Such extreme emotions have much to do with the Korean Americans themselves and their expectations of what Korea will be for them. Moreover, it has much to do with their understanding and appreciation for Korean culture that will dictate how they feel for the people and country.

Many Korean Americans who work in Korea find themselves with more disposable income than they would have in the States, While the cost of living is very high in Korea, many Korean Americans have their housing provided and are paid better than their Korean counterparts. Hence, they live large in Korea and find that the economic benefit outweighs their inability to adapt to the culture. For those who are bilingual and bicultural, they love Korea, for they feel that they have the best of both worlds. Korean gyopo women find it to be more of a challenge living in Korea for multiple reasons, not only because of the sexism that permeates here, but also the unrelenting expectation of women to be thin, beautiful, young, and subservient. Consequently, Korean women have noted that eating disorders among young Korean women is a growing social problem. Living in Korea is difficult for many foreigners, but one can say that it is the case for any foreigner living anywhere. However, the challenges arc compounded by the lack of diversity in Korea and the [page 134] outwardly homogeneous image that Korea has maintained. For Korean gyopos there is the constant negotiation and navigation of what they look like on the outside and how they feel inside.

NOTES

1. Wayne Patterson, The Ilse: First Generation Korean Immigrants in Hawai’i, 1903-1973 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000).

2. Ibid.

3. There are different points of view when the “internet” actually began. Some scholars state that it began with the Pentagon in 1969, while others argue that the beginning for the public came much later, in the 1980s, (http://www.nethistory.info/History%20of%20the%20Internet/begining.html)

4. Edward Chang and Russell Leong, ed., Los Angeles: Struggles Toward Multiethnic Community: Asian American, African American, & Latino Perspectives (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995).

5. Mia Tuan, Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

6. AM News: South Korea, http://www.smc.org.ph/amnews/amn040731/eastasia/ southkorea040731.htm.

7. Email correspondence from US Embassy American Cvil Service office, Sept. 18, 2005.

8. Janet Jun, “Int’l Marriages Spark Human Rights Issues: Human Rights of Migrant Wives Infringed,” http://theseoultimes.com/ST/?url=/ST/db/ read.php?idx=1664.

9. Interview on November 24，2005 in Seoul, Korea conducted by Mary Danico.

10. “The balance of cheong attachments may be best reserved for those which involve affection, but it can also include work colleagues and others who may even be disliked, but to whom there are nevertheless extended obligations. While cheong has some cost, it is also a source of security and satisfaction. Your cheong partners, notably your family and close friends, are those whose company you will seek, and who will extend you help in times of difficulty. Although cheong is a Korean label, its substance is of course found in every world culture to varying degrees.” (http://72.14.203.104/searchq=cache:tfH0OuHNc4cJ:ask.metafilter.com/mefi/10490+korean+word+for+intimacy+love+jeong&hl=en&ct=client=safari posted by stavrosthewonderchicken at 7:34 PM PST on Sept. 27, 2004.)

11. Mary Danico, The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawai’i (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004); Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” Social Problems 41 (1994):1001-26; J. C. Mitchell, “Perceptions of Ethnicity and Ethnic Behavior: An Empirical Exploration,” in Urban Ethnicity, ed. Abner[page 135] Cohen (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1974)，1-36; Jonathan Okamura, “Situational Ethnicity,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 4 (1981): 452-65.

12. Nagel, 1.

13. Ibid; Jonathan Okamura, 1991. “Beyond Adaptationism: Immigrant Filipino Ethnicity in Hawai’i.” Social Process in Hawai’i 33 (1991); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960’s to the 1990’s (New York: Free Press, 1994).

14. All names used in this paper have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

15. A common term for prostitute.

16. Interview with Jim Shim, Man 14, 2006.

17. Kim Kyoung-wha, “Korean Short Cut to Fluency,” The Age, Oct. 18，2003.

18. Interview on November 16, 2005 in Seoul, Korea conducted by Mary Danico.