
EurKorea 2013: European Perspectives of Korea

Acta of the conference held at Trinity College Dublin, 7th to 9th November 2013

Texts by

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**KOREAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES IN AMERICA AND IN IRELAND: BREAKING THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF ETHNIC PATTERNS**

1. *Introduction*

The experiences and paths toward integration of different ethnicities to the United States (and for that matter, Europe as well) are as diverse as the nations of origin themselves. Common in these ethnic integration patterns are the typical inter- and intra-group discriminatory attitudes. While the former may be explained as cultural and ethnic inertia, the latter form of discrimination intriguingly reveals an ethnic individual’s inherent tendency for self-preservation and self-advancement at the expense of future collective political empowerment. Usually, overcoming this “double-whammy” against newcomers requires several decades of failed-attempts of immigration and employment until a critical mass is finally reached, with the subsequent acceptance of a representative-ethnic voice by both host nation and immigrant societies. It is within this American immigration context that the Korean experience in Ireland (and the UK) can be viewed, in contrast to those found in other European countries. In order to break the potentially vicious cycle of several decades-worth of countless individual disappointments and wasted talent, we show that active voluntary engagement to assist the poor and underprivileged within Ireland may be a way forward for
harmonious acceptance amongst, and may be beneficial to, the Irish people.

The history of immigration of Koreans to the US is comprehensively documented by experts in the field (Kim 2004, Reimers 2005, Yoon 2005, Schwegendieck 2012), two of whom are speakers at this conference. Briefly, the influx of Chinese due to the California Gold Rush (in search of the “Gold Mountain”) and the first transcontinental railroad (from 1849 and extending into the 1880s) whetted the appetite for fostering further immigration from other Far-East Asian countries. In the case of Korea, diplomatic relations between Chosun and the US commenced on 22 May 1882 through the “Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation”. In the same year, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by the US Congress (6 May 1882), prohibiting any immigration of Asians to a significant degree. Despite these regulations, American capitalism being ever so practical, the first Japanese immigrants were allowed to arrive and work on the sugarcane and pineapple plantations (Hawaii) and the fruit and produce farmlands (California) in 1885. Following this example, the first significant number (103 men, women and children) of Koreans arrived in Honolulu Harbor (aboard the S.S. Gaelic) on 9 January 1903. For three more years, this “first wave” of Korean immigrants totaling 7,226 arrived in Honolulu on 65 different ships and persevered under difficult conditions.

Meanwhile on the Asian Continent, the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905) was mediated to peace by US President Theodore Roosevelt (later earning him a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts). Hoping to take advantage of this political flux, the court of Chosun sent Syngman Rhee (later to serve as first President of the Republic of Korea) to convince the US to return Korea to sovereignty. This attempt failed, and served as one of many reasons for Japan to force Chosun to accept
protectorate terms in 1905. The complete relinquishing of Korea’s independence through the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty followed a few years later in August 1910.

2. Young Koreans step up to save the fate of their country

The pro-active spirit of young Koreans abroad during this turbulent period is well exemplified by the little-publicized actions of two young men by the name of Jang In-Hwan and Jeon Meong-Un. The story begins with Durham White Stevens, an American who worked to advance the ever-expanding interests and ambitions of the Japanese government through his employment with the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and later as a Japanese-appointed civil servant of the Chosun Foreign Office (1904). Stevens acted as a strong and vocal proponent - and with his western ethnicity, more convincingly from the perspective of the outside world - for the protectorate status of Chosun. In 1908, his writings and statements that justified the Japanese occupation - such as those in a newspaper interview commenting that “Koreans lacked the ability to be independent” and that “Koreans were benefiting from the presence of Japan in their country” - infuriated all Koreans at home and abroad. When word of his visit to the United States reached the Korean community in San Francisco, young Koreans confronted him to protest on 22 March 1908. On the following day, a completely coincidental merging of two separate plans by two young Korean men occurred. Jeon attempted to shoot Stevens but fails and while engaged in a fight, Jang succeeded in fatally wounding Stevens with his firearm. Both were arrested and tried, and while Jeon was acquitted, Jang was found guilty of second-degree murder, serving ten years of an original twenty-five year sentence in
California. Both Jang and Jeon were awarded the Order of Merit for National Foundation by the Korean government in 1962 and are considered patriots in Korea. (An interesting vignette of history involving Syngman Rhee can be added here. As a student in a Master’s program at Harvard University, Rhee was asked to come as translator for the two Korean defendants and flown over to San Francisco through a voluntary collection by the Korean American communities in the California Bay Area and Hawaii. After a short stay, Rhee declined to help stating that he “did not wish to help a murderer” and returned to Boston. It goes without saying that this episode not only demonstrated early on Rhee’s selfishness and lack of concern on matters directly impacting his compatriots, but also that he failed to allow due process take its course, as neither Jang nor Jeon could be considered guilty of these charges prior to their trial).

The reader will surely agree that a description of this historical event does not imply the condoning of violence in any way, shape or form, for such an act should have its just consequences (and indeed Jang did serve a real prison sentence for the crime committed). However, one of the reasons for mentioning this example is to highlight the integral role of the young Koreans and Korean Americans in the immigrant communities. In fact, during the early 1900s, various local and grass-roots organizations to advance the independence of Korea were established, providing crucial support and information to those back home as well as unadulterated, frontline news of the situation unfolding on the Korean peninsula to the US public. Jang, a member of Daedong Bogukhoe, met Jeon, a member of the Gongnip Hyeophoe, when the two groups held a joint meeting in 1908 to discuss Stevens’ spiteful declarations against the Korean people. (It should be stressed that at these meetings, there was no conspiracy discussed to
kill Stevens). In addition to these organizations, militant reservist groups to train young Koreans to be ready for battle with the Japanese were founded - one of the pioneering schools being *The Young Korean Military School* (June 1909) in Nebraska, established by Park Yong Man, a fellow prisoner of conscience with Rhee going back to their imprisonment in Hansung (Seoul) in 1904, and the *Maengho Dahn* in Los Angeles and San Francisco (1930s). The impact of young Koreans was also demonstrated in the founding of the Korean Society in New York (1921), carried out with the leadership of Korean students at Columbia University (Kim 1959-2004).

Hence, politically, the Korean communities in the US - and especially the young Koreans and those involved in the Christian community - have admirably demonstrated their social conscience relating not only to Korean based events, but also to those of other third-world countries (Yoon 2005). From the humble beginnings of their necessity for survival in the Hawaiian plantations; the patriotic urgency and activism to save their country from the oppressive colonialism of Japan; through the heartbreaking Korean conflict (1950-1953) where the post-World War rhetoric of competing superpower ideologies led to the realities of pitting brother against brother to the result of more than one million dead Koreans (civilian and military) and 142,000 military casualties for the United Nations armed forces (Hastings 1987); continuing with demonstration activities against the military dictatorships that spanned approximately twenty-five years; and finally to the fully civilian democratic governments since 1993 (Cumings 1997), a steadfast endeavour has taken place in north America to assist and support democracy and justice for the Korean peninsula.
3. Inter- and intra-group discrimination

Having said this, an inescapable fact is that, notwithstanding the proactive engagement of the Korean immigrant communities towards various political causes, socio-economically speaking, the Koreans are still very much (perhaps too comfortably) on their own. Rather than employed at well-established private or public sector institutions, a quarter of all Koreans in the US are self-employed, a figure twice the average of the nation as a whole. Koreans are owner-managers of 25,000 grocery and liquor stores throughout the US, many of these stores having previously been owned by Jews and Italians, and situated in predominantly black neighborhoods. Although numbering a total of approximately 1.1 million people (2011 statistics; Table 1), rather than geographically spread throughout the fifty states (or at least amongst the urban centers), one-fifth of all Korean Americans are found to reside in the Los Angeles-Long Beach Metropolitan Region (Reimers 2005). Hence, a lack of true integration with the general community has been clear, its negative ramifications leading to tragedies such as the April 1992 Los Angeles riots where 4,500 shops (mostly Korean) were burnt down. To make matters worse, frequent schism and division within Korean organizations and societies are prevalent, with rival associations frequently sprouting up whenever there is a leadership change. Hence, what is emerging (or has already emerged) are competing conflicts. No longer do the issues strictly deal with friction between the Korean and the dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultures (or others Hispanic cultures), but unnecessary and divisive intra-community conflicts are to be found as well.

It should be stressed that such occurrences are not limited to the Korean immigration experience in America nor is this found only amongst Koreans. One well-known example is skin
color-based discrimination amongst African-Americans (Weinstein 1990, Russell et al. 1992). In the Hispanic community, fluency in Spanish has brought about employment discrimination (Lopez 2011), although it may be argued that fluency in language serves as a valid job performance indicator. Since there are obvious differences in life experiences, language, culture, and values between the early generation and the second, third and further generations, much of this has and can be explained by generational differences (Healey 2008). Such a narrative is certainly valid when the majority of members of a certain ethnic group share a common historical lineage based upon coherent waves of immigration - a result of immigration policies of the host nation at that time, for good or for worse (Glazer 1987). Korean immigration to the US serves as a good example of this. Although the initial wave could be traced to the historic immigration approximately one hundred years ago, a more populous wave of immigrants arrived on the shores of the United States in the 1960s-1980s due to favourable immigration policies such as the 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration Act and the 1965 Hart-Celler Act (Reimers 2005, Yoon 2005, Kim 2004, Kim 2008). Monitoring subsequent generations of these immigrant waves has led to various theories of social cohesion, be they positively contributing or disruptive to the social fabric.

Turning our eyes towards Europe, intriguingly, the population statistics and the ratio of Korean nationals (expatriates) to naturalized citizens serve as a useful approximation of the theories mentioned above. In countries where there were defined waves of immigration (including open adoption policies of Korean children), one finds that the proportion of naturalized citizens is relatively high (Table 1). Key examples are found in the Scandinavian countries where the percentage of naturalized citizens is approximately 30 to
55% (mainly due to the generous adoption of Korean infants) and particularly with Germany (24.8%; mainly due to 1963 Korean-German Labour Recruitment Agreement resulting in a large influx of Korean miners and nurses - Thomas 2013). These figures are comparable to those of Japan (36.1% naturalized citizens) and of the US (50.3% naturalized citizens), demonstrating that the policies of the host nation decisively determine the makeup of its immigrants. In these countries, the leadership of the Korean communities usually consists of naturalized citizens, as they are more-or-less fully assimilated and hold significant socio-economic positions in their respective societies. As a result, the naturalized citizens are capable and well-experienced to guide the social and political discourse with the citizens of the host nation when such matters arise.

By contrast, for those western countries that did not legislate a relatively open immigration environment (to non-EU citizens), the percentages of naturalized citizens are markedly lower. Countries like the UK, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium and Portugal belong to this group. (Malta is excluded due to its extremely small total population). In these countries, while most of the naturalized citizens are spouses and children from inter-ethnic marriages, the Korean nationals mainly consist of:

(i) professionals hired by various private and public sector institutions in the respective countries;

(ii) diplomats, government civil servants and adjunct staff assigned to various international organizations;

and (iii), to a larger extent, sojourners (3rd/4th-level students or contract laborers and researchers) who live in these countries for a defined period (usually on the order of a few to several years).
(Note that Ireland - emphasized in Table 1 - has one of the largest overall Korean communities when based on per million citizens. In addition, the percentage of naturalized citizens is exceedingly small - 4.8% - whereas the percentage of Korea nationals is one of the highest - 19 out of 20 Koreans belong to this cohort - 95.2%).

In both cases, inter-group and intra-group exchanges and experiences are moulded and melded, and given sufficient time, the invisible hand of supply and demand for human resources should be able to determine the aspirations and needs of the Koreans belonging to their respective communities. In other words, both components - be they naturalized citizens or expatriates - would be able to share the resources and representation in a fair and just way. Furthermore, the policies of the Korean government towards overseas Koreans would ideally be flexible enough to support both cohorts.

Unfortunately, as commonly observed when a competition of resources is present, this is occasionally not the case. In other words, one cohort is able to over-represent itself at the expense of the other. Furthermore, this may occur regardless of any pressure from the host (or "privileged") population (Schaerer 2008).

See table 1 on next page.
Table 1. Overseas Koreans in Western Europe
(Order of countries is based on total population of Koreans residing.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Korean Nationals</th>
<th>Naturalized Citizens, etc</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Numbers Per Million Citizens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>42,990 (91.8 %)</td>
<td>3,839 (8.2 %)</td>
<td>46,829</td>
<td>62,752,000</td>
<td>746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>23,704 (75.2 %)</td>
<td>7,814 (24.8 %)</td>
<td>31,518</td>
<td>81,798,000</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>11,898 (93.8 %)</td>
<td>786 (6.2 %)</td>
<td>12,684</td>
<td>65,372,000</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>3,920 (94.7 %)</td>
<td>221 (5.3 %)</td>
<td>4,141</td>
<td>60,724,000</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>3,151 (77.2 %)</td>
<td>929 (22.8 %)</td>
<td>4,080</td>
<td>46,175,000</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>1,934 (78.4 %)</td>
<td>538 (21.6 %)</td>
<td>2,472</td>
<td>7,912,000</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>1,948 (81.6 %)</td>
<td>439 (18.4 %)</td>
<td>2,387</td>
<td>8,424,000</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>922 (40.0 %)</td>
<td>1,128 (55.0 %)</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>9,449,000</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>1,663 (93.9 %)</td>
<td>108 (6.1 %)</td>
<td>1,771</td>
<td>16,693,000</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1,006 (94.2 %)</td>
<td>62 (5.8 %)</td>
<td>1,068</td>
<td>4,577,000</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>751 (91.1 %)</td>
<td>73 (8.9 %)</td>
<td>824</td>
<td>11,048,000</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>392 (68.4 %)</td>
<td>213 (31.6 %)</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>4,953,000</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>348 (93.5 %)</td>
<td>24 (6.5 %)</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>5,388,000</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>267 (83.2 %)</td>
<td>54 (16.8 %)</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>11,300,000</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>214 (73.0 %)</td>
<td>79 (27.0 %)</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>5,571,000</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>151 (91.5 %)</td>
<td>14 (8.5 %)</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>10,557,000</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>160 (99.4 %)</td>
<td>1 (0.6 %)</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>416,700</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>40 (80.0 %)</td>
<td>10 (20.0 %)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>518,300</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>578,135 (63.9 %)</td>
<td>326,671 (36.1 %)</td>
<td>904,806</td>
<td>127,817,000</td>
<td>7,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1,082,708 (49.7 %)</td>
<td>1,094,290 (50.3 %)</td>
<td>2,176,998</td>
<td>311,588,000</td>
<td>6,987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: (1) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Republic of Korea (2011)
(2) World Development Indicators (WDI), World Data Bank, World Bank Group (2014)
The beginning of intra-group discrimination is usually unintended, and often not even targeted against one's own ethnicity. As depicted in Figure 1, a struggle for survival in a foreign country is a typical way of how things unfold. Lack of "communication skills" (usually implying fluency of language) and/or lack of networking with members of the host country compel the individual to associate primarily with members of the same ethnicity. Through diligence, ingenuity and intra-group teamwork, a certain level of financial/ emotional satisfaction is attained after a defined number of years. The margins of profit are wafer-thin though (or in the case of an ethnic society/association, the chances of climbing the leadership ladder are limited), and it therefore follows that expanding the number of stakeholders becomes undesirable. Hence, a restriction of the opportunities to new incoming members is inevitable.

Typical methods to keep the number of stakeholders to a minimum consist of:

(i) limiting the qualifications of membership (for example, mandating a number of years of residency, imposing a high threshold for membership fees);

(ii) a passive attitude in notifying the public (for example, limiting the exposure to selected web pages);

and (iii) programming activities/events that are relevant to only the current membership.

A vicious circle ensues (Figure 1). (Interestingly, this circle need not be limited to ethnic or social discrimination. Such a diagram would nicely suit the practices found in business monopolies/ oligopolies or even organized crime).
As such, the inherent human tendency for self-preservation and self-advancement make it rather difficult to lay any direct blame on such closed-loop activity.

The important lessons are as follows:

(i) The experiences and paths toward integration of different ethnicities to various countries are as diverse as the nations of origin themselves. Because there is variability in the immigration practices, the composition of immigrants (naturalized citizens as well as Korean nationals) is also likely to be very different.

(ii) When there exists discrimination (intra- and/or inter-), the odds against the disadvantaged make it very difficult for them to fulfill their aspirations.
(iii) The immediate result is countless individual disappointments and wasted talent, sometimes extending for a number of decades.

(iv) A transparent and fair method of accurately assessing the needs of overseas Koreans (as well as other ethnicities) is necessary in order to prevent one particular cohort over-representing themselves at the expense of other cohorts.

(v) Policies should be devised and implemented to ensure a level playing field (Takaki 2000).

4. The Korea Young Volunteers’ Union (KYVU) - A proposal to establish a new volunteer organization

In light of these realities, and inspired by the early twentieth century community organizations formed by the pioneering young Koreans in America, the author and approximately fifty University age students have formed a Charter Committee to explore the feasibility of establishing a volunteer organization for the Korean nationals in Ireland.

The objectives include:
(i) Engagement with, observation of, and learning from the host society (Ireland) through volunteering various services not only to fellow Koreans, but also to the general public.
(ii) Being useful to the public through one’s service, striving to be an element of change, and more importantly, preparing to be changed (in attitude, outlook, and expectations) as well.

Finally, (iii) to foster sustainable, lasting relationships with all citizens involved, endearing them to the membership and the ethos of the organization.
Although still in the Charter Committee stage, for two straight years (2012 and 2013), KYVU has hosted a “Christmas Meal on Christmas Day” event for international students and Dubliners who may not have had the chance to join friends and family during the Christmas to New Year break. In addition, the encouragement of Small Activity Groups has led to the founding of the “Korean Music Society Dublin”, allowing talented musicians to perform together and “compare notes”. Also, key public lectures given by distinguished guests such as H.E. the Ambassador of Korea and others have encouraged the young members to think out of the box and plan/ponder a better future.

It is our expectation that by contributing to the local (indigenous) communities, not only will there be a fair representation of all members of the Korean community, but more importantly, a fruitful and mutually beneficial cooperation between the Korean and Irish people that will serve as an immigrant model for other countries too.

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