

Transnational Identity Formation of Second-Generation Korean-Americans Living in Korea

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Increasingly, Asian-Americans migrate back to Asia for lucrative business and employment, a result of the stunning triumph of capitalism in Asia. This is particularly true of Korean-Americans. As South Korea comes to the forefront of the global capitalist system, there is a growing demand for English speakers to satisfy the perceived need for Korea to connect to the rest of the world. Who better than second-generation Korean-Americans to play this role? Korea is beginning to recognize the importance of *Kyopo*¹ migrants and is facilitating transnational ties, making it easier for Korean-Americans to live and work in Korea. The migration of *Kyopos* back to Korea is a case of transnationalism.²

There are a number of studies on transnational phenomena and a few studies of how Anglo-Americans personally cope with their entry back to the United States after having lived abroad for an extended period. The children of American missionaries are typical examples. However, very few studies have been done on the transnational migration of children of immigrants and no known studies have focused on depicting the experiences of the *Kyopos*' transnational migration between the United

1. In general, a *Kyopo* is any ethnic Korean who has lived abroad for most of their lives. In this paper, the *Kyopo* depicts second-generation Korean-Americans in particular.

2. I myself am a case of transnational migration. My family left Korea in 1973. As new immigrants in Canada, my brother and I often had to fend for ourselves against racial discrimination, being picked on by boys bigger and older than ourselves because we were Asian. Our father taught us the phrase, "Leave me alone" (from the song by Ian Hunter of the same title). Twenty-three years later, in 1996, I returned to Korea to work for two years. Thinking I was finally "home," my expectation was that I was going to love Korea; I was with my own people. However, I was surprised to find that I hated Korea during the first six months. It never occurred to me that I was actually going through culture shock in the country which I considered "home." In reality, this was the beginning of my transnational existence and identity formation.

States and South Korea. This article seeks to make a contribution to the study of transnational migration of Korean-Americans between the United States and Korea.

However, because of the breadth of the topic and the lack of previous research, the study will necessarily focus on identity formation from a translational perspective, and in particular, the role discrimination plays in transnational identity formation of *Kyopos*. The research was conducted in Korea where the author interviewed many second-generation Korean-Americans living in Korea.³ The results, it is hoped, will have ramifications for how transnationalism will continue for future generations of Asian-Americans since Linda G. Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc ask whether transnationalism will continue to the second and third generations (1994, p. 242). At the very least, this research will raise awareness and understanding of second-generation Korean-Americans in order to facilitate their role in shaping Korea to be a significant world player in the arenas of education, economy, and religion.

Identity Formation and Transnationalism

One of the major struggles of the adolescence stage is the search for identity. There is an added dimension to identity formation for someone raised in a culture that is foreign to that of their parents. These second-generation children of immigrants in America have a difficult time finding their identity in the face of discrimination and other basic immigrant issues. During their most formative years, *Kyopos* must form their identity in vastly different cultural contexts. Further, role models, significant for adolescents in determining identity, are limited. Thus, the *Kyopo* may take longer to find a cultural identity or a role that fits in their respective Korean and American contexts. As the *Kyopos* move in and out of different cultures, they must cope with conflicting cultural identities. Whether someone is a second generation or one-point-five (1.5) generation makes a difference in the type of ethnic identity selected. Those born in Korea would identify themselves more as Korean, while those born in the United States would identify themselves more as American. Although Korean-Americans have adjusted socio-economically to the American milieu and would identify more with being American, they are often looked upon as outsiders in the political and cultural arenas in America's mainstream.

3. The research was part of my Ph.D. dissertation at Trinity International University. See Ji-hoon Jamie Kim, "Second Generation Korean American Christians in Korea: The Migration of *Kyopo* from a Transnational Perspective" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity International University, 2003).

Three Perspectives on Ethnic Identity

Min stated that there are three perspectives on ethnic identity: primordial, structural, and social construction. The primordial perspective emphasizes those characteristics such as physical, language, religion, culture, and historical similarities of an ethnic group that draw a group of people together (Min, 2002, p. 6). Often religion and language have the strongest effects on integrating members into an ethnic group. For the Kyopo population, religion, and language may not be factors that draw them to a Korean identity since Christianity is not unique to the Korean culture and almost all Kyopo migrants are more fluent in English than in Korean.

The structural perspective refers to those factors associated with places of settlement, socio-economy, and experience with racial discrimination. For Anglo-Americans, they have been accepted as authentic Americans. However, for members of a visible minority, their identity is imposed on them by societal expectations (Min, 2002, p. 9). As long as structural barriers exist, Korean-Americans will always be viewed as aliens and foreigners.

The social construction perspective examines ethnicity as a socially constructed view in social interactions (Min, 2002, p. 11). Ethnic minorities are not passive recipients of ethnic identities imposed upon them by the society. They actively formulate how they want to be presented and categorized by the society at large. People have multiple identities and the ethnic minority chooses how they want to be portrayed at a given situation (Min, 2002, p. 12). The Kyopo chooses at times to be an American and at other times to be Korean, depending upon when it is convenient and advantageous.

Korean-Americans and Transnational Identity

What then is the identity of second- and third-generation Korean-Americans in the United States? Identity is defined as “that part of the totality of one’s self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one’s construal of past ancestry and one’s future aspirations in relation to ethnicity” (Christou, 2002, p. 11). Social construction views identity not as a static entity, but as a dynamic and fluctuating entity due to social interactions (Christou, 2002, p. 12). In light of their marginalized experiences in the United States, do the Kyopos abandon the traditional construct of Korean-American identity and assimilate the varied reconstructions of Asian-Americans? Do they have more in common with the second- and third-generation Chinese-Americans than with native Koreans? Cheung and Kuo have found that as the succeeding generation stays longer in America, their ethnic

identities are diluted (Christou, 2002, p. 13). It is natural then that many Korean-Americans feel that they have little in common with their native counterparts except the color of their skin and a common ancestry. Korean-Americans feel misunderstood and unappreciated by native Koreans and this appears to be the collective experience of the *Kyopos* who migrate back to Korea.

Much like the African-American identity, some people are advocating a pan-Asian identity as a form of transnational identity. It could happen such that prior identities defined by nation-states may be replaced by people group and experience-oriented identity formation. Rather than feeling Korean, the second-generation children of immigrants sense a kindred spirit with others who have gone through similar issues and experiences growing up as a visible minority. They may identify with other Asians in America over those in Korea because the latter did not share the same experiences growing up as children of immigrants. In other words, they have more in common with Asian-Americans than Koreans. As time and distance dilute the nation-state identity and affiliation, there is a strong possibility that succeeding generations will identify with other Asian-Americans and align themselves with them over their own Korean ethnic identity.

A significant danger of globalization is homogenization. Instead of celebrating our diversity, there is a tendency to downplay the differences and celebrate our unity. Appadurai (1996) predicts a homogenizing trend of globalization. If he is correct, there will be a tendency that Korean-Americans will abandon their Korean nation-state identities, giving more allegiance toward pan-Asian identities. In the endorsement of globalization trends, there is the danger of homogenization of all identities into the partial assimilation trend of Asian-American identity. Therefore, this present author advocates a global-local identity instead of abandoning one's nation-specific ethnic identity for a pan-Asian identity. While moving toward a global embrace of Asian-American identity, the local Korean-American identity should be fostered as well. Can transnational identity challenge the prevailing influence of the nation-state? Transnational ties and migrations do not foster transnational identities. No overarching institutional unity or a coherent value and belief system can override a national culture (Tsuda, 2003, p. 247).

Transnational Migration and Discrimination

Assimilation models do not give an accurate account of the immigration experience of the visible minorities in America. Multiculturalism is an alternative to assimilation models; however, it is not sufficient in explaining the phenomenon of the second generations migrating to

their ethnic homeland. Multiculturalism addresses the multiplicity of roots inherent in the United States. However, it does not address the issues inherent in the transmigrant forms beyond America's borders. Multiculturalism addresses the issues of acknowledgment and empowerment in the nation, but does not address issues in an international context (Basch, 1982, p. 288). However, multiculturalism is better than the assimilation model if one is aiming to understand the rights and activities that are conducive to transnational ties. If the countries of immigration have liberal democratic policies such as multiculturalism, the immigrant populations have greater opportunities and incentives to uphold their cultural distinctiveness and ties to the countries of ethnic origin (Faist, 2000, p. 214).

Transnational theories have been employed by contemporary behavioral scientists in the analysis of the late twentieth-century migrations of non-European peoples to the United States. Race, it is claimed, separates the experience of the Europeans of the past from the non-Europeans of today. Although there were exceptions along the way, the whiteness of the Europeans allowed them to settle comfortably in the United States, with full access to rights and to opportunities when compared to other visible minority communities. Thus, the Europeans are properly understood within the frameworks of assimilation models. The migration patterns of non-Europeans, in contrast, may take a different approach because as non-whites they may never be allowed to assimilate into American life on equal terms, and it may be advantageous to establish transnational migration patterns. One of the reasons why many migrants maintain a transnational existence is because they are discriminated against in America. Due to their color, they experience blocked mobility, racism, and discrimination. Faist stated that serious obstacles to socio-economic integration or cultural recognition are conducive to the transnationalization of political and cultural activities (2000, p. 214). Transnational members of the first generation receive respect and self-worth from their homeland but in this research, the members of the second generation have major obstacles that do not foster a long-term commitment to their country of ethnic origin.

The Kyopos' Experience of Discrimination in America

In 1852, records of racial prejudice against the Chinese in San Francisco were produced with European immigrants calling for "California for Americans" (Dirlik, 1998, p. 296). The propaganda stated that Asian-Americans were unwelcomed strangers. Although Chinese labor had been crucial in building railroads that connected the lines belonging to Central Pacific and Union Pacific, they were left out of

the photographs. The exclusion of Asians from American history exemplifies the alienation of Asians. Discrimination in North America has undergone dramatic changes in the twentieth century. The human rights movements of the 1960s have reduced much of the open blatant racism. However, some forms of racism are more difficult to confront. Many children of immigrants have grown up with blatant open racism from other children that cannot be muzzled by legislation. Moreover, they have also experienced the subtleties of covert prejudice from the society at large by such innocent questions and remarks as, "Your English is so good. Where did you learn it?"

Respondents in this study indicated that they have experienced racial discrimination, which has affected their identity formation. People are affected by their environment, which molds their perception of the world and self especially if their culture is in the minority. For SC, living in America was difficult:

Living in the States was difficult because of identity issues. Prejudices and stereotypes are especially in seminary. There is paranoia, wondering whether that person treated me badly because of my racial background. Conservative Christianity undermines differences. The second generation's identity is defined by discrimination. When someone is cursing at you not because of what you have done, but because of who you are. This undermines one's value. (SC, a Kyopo in Korea for two years)

Now that SC lives in Korea, he is more relaxed and believes, "If people are cursing at me, it's because of what I have done and not because of who I am."

CK feels that very few people who have grown up in Korea understand Korean-American issues of racism, identity crises, and their American ways:

The people around you, they don't even think the way you do. You hold a conversation with someone and they don't understand racism or identity crisis, or having to deal with just certain things which we deal with as Americans. They don't understand these things. (CK, a Kyopo in Korea for one year)

KB, has lived in America for almost thirty years. People still ask her where she is from. Now her family is in Korea; she and her husband decided to return so that the children can learn the Korean language and culture. Race and discrimination are factors in KB's mind as she reflects upon the upbringing of her own children. Most Kyopos interviewed here are similarly affected by racial discrimination. Discrimination and race issues become formidable factors in the formation of their identity.

Reverse Discrimination in Korea?

The Kyopo respondents believed that they left discrimination behind when they arrived in Korea. However, they were disappointed to discover reverse discrimination when they arrived in Korea. Even though they may look Korean, most Kyopo migrants realized that they cannot incorporate socially into the Korean society. Most native Koreans who have never lived outside Korea cannot understand or appreciate the Kyopo. KB shares how she felt being discriminated against during her job interviewing process in Korea:

When I first started to apply for a job, they told me that they didn't want Korean-Americans but wanted Caucasians. You are really second-class. I have five years teaching and counseling experience in schools. In a couple of interviews, I gave them a piece of my mind. They had the nerve to hire me after telling me that they didn't want me here. They did not trust Korean-Americans because they thought that our English was not good enough. We would edit things and then they would give it to a Caucasian to proofread our editing. Those kinds of discriminations were hard. It was bad because I am not really American because I am Korean, and then in Korea, I am not really Korean or American. (KB, a Kyopo woman who has lived in Korea for two years.)

The main competitors for English-related work are Caucasians. In America, Korean-Americans were discriminated against by the "white Anglo-Saxon" communities. In Korea, Kyopos are second-class citizens compared to the Caucasians. SC shares his experience of discrimination for Anglos in Korea:

Resentment toward Americans is growing in Korea, but at the same time there is a subtle respect. Korean-Americans realize this. An example is that English *Hak Wöns* (institutes) want Caucasians rather than Korean-Americans. I felt this weird preference for white Americans. White Americans are elevated; white Americans talk down to native Koreans. (SC, a Kyopo who has been living in Korea for two years.)

Native Koreans, in their aspirations to live in America, cannot understand why Korean-Americans would want to become expats living in Korea. Some assume that these Kyopos have failed in the American system or are running away:

There was reverse discrimination. People here think that there was something wrong with this guy. Either this guy totally failed in the United States or he is running from something. Most people go to the States to study and not come here to study. People told me this after knowing me. Everybody leaves Korea. These days there are a lot more people coming

back to Korea but back even a few years ago, there weren't many. (PK, a Kyopo in Korea for six years)

Sometimes native Koreans resent the lifestyles of Kyopo individuals as if the latter group was boasting. Kyopo migrants need to be able to talk about themselves in order to place value and validation of their experiences from the past. Having lived abroad, Kyopos may naturally talk about their experiences overseas. However, some native Koreans may mistake this for boasting. LR shares his observation of native Koreans toward Kyopos:

Korean natives have a hidden bitterness against Kyopos. Westerners are revered. However, when Korean-Americans or Korean-Canadians who come here (Korea)... how should I say... they are *mooshi* (put down) pretty badly. Korean natives are envious and jealous. They have to bust their backs buying tapes to learn English. And here we are speaking English so easily. They have to go through such a hard time getting into college, and here we are coming back getting the best jobs because we have our education and English. We have it much easier and we have it much better than they do. The opportunities that we have, they didn't. (LR, a Kyopo in Korea for three years)

There is not only the reverse discrimination, but in a Confucian society, there is the inherent hierarchical view toward the young. In a Confucian society, where age, marital status, position, and experience are highly regarded, Kyopos may feel that their voices are not heard. This phenomenon may not be discrimination, but simply be something that is inherent in the Korean society as a whole against those who are young. What some Kyopo migrants view as a reverse form of discrimination may not be discrimination at all. Rather, this may be how native Koreans view and treat all young adults. SC gives his insight about the way Koreans view age and experience:

In terms of suggestions, they (native Koreans) listen to white Americans. I think it comes with age and experience. On the other hand, Americans are more inclined to listen to Korean-Americans. (SC, a Kyopo in Korea for 2 years)

Almost every Kyopo migrant interviewed indirectly shared that they have experienced racial discriminations in America. Racial discrimination is not simply a "black" versus "white" issue in the United States; there must be recognition that people of other racial backgrounds ought to be included in the dialogue. Although America has advanced tremendously since the 1960s, there is a need to address racial issues in all facets of American life, especially in the conservative Christian circles where racial

issues are rarely addressed. In understanding the assimilation models of non-white immigrants and their descendants, it may be advantageous to examine different models such as a transnational model.

Kyopos as Hidden Foreigners in Korea

Pollock (2001) states that those who live without ethnic distinctions based on physical attributes have a different experience from those who look physically different from the majority. When the Kyopos return to Korea, they are surrounded by people who look like them but are quite different from their American peers. According to Pollock, they are hidden immigrants in Korea. However, rather than referring to Kyopos as hidden immigrants, it is more fitting to categorize them as hidden aliens or foreigners. Kyopos are not immigrants in Korea but rather foreigners who may stay from a short period of time to an indefinite number of years. All the Kyopos interviewed were planning to return to the United States at some time in the future.

Living as a hidden foreigner, the expectations are harder to define for the Kyopo. Koreans look at Kyopos and assume that they know everything that indigenous Koreans do because of their appearance. When Kyopos act in a way that is incongruent with Korean culture, then the natives believe that there is something wrong with them. Consequently, Kyopos will feel out of place. Based on similar appearances, the Kyopo is expected to speak and act like any native Korean in every way (Pollock, 2001, p. 55). "Relating as a hidden immigrant (foreigner) in any culture may be one of the greatest cultural challenges that many TCKs (Third Culture Kids) face" (Pollock, 2001, p. 56).

Kyopos are often misunderstood. In America, they are asked where they are from. When they answer, say, "Chicago," they are probed further with the question, "So where are you really from?" Further remarks regarding their fluent English skills are inadvertently condescending. In America, Kyopos are considered foreigners by the majority despite the fact that America is their home. On the other hand, in Korea, they are expected to behave as if they grew up there. When they are not proficient in the Korean language, they are reprimanded; they should know better.

Most of the foreigners in Korea stand out and are treated as foreigners. When a Caucasian foreigner acts in a strange way, native Koreans dissociate the act from the actor by dismissing the act as coming from a foreigner. As an example, an Anglo-American will be seen as a foreigner and his cultural faux pas will be excused as being "ugly" American. No one in Korea expects them to speak Korean, nor practice Korean customs. When a Caucasian person speaks Korean or does something remotely

Korean, he/she brings delight to the natives, who then responds with praise.

When Kyopos act awkwardly, that action is attributed to the Kyopos. They are judged wrongfully. Kyopos sense that they are being frowned upon. The surrounding people reproach them for their culturally inappropriate action. Few people will recognize that these Korean-Americans are really foreigners; that is, they are more American than they are Korean. It would be much easier for the Kyopo migrant to look physically different from the majority. Koreans will be more forgiving if they appeared like foreigners outwardly. Kyopos cannot be accepted for who they are. They are not accepted by American and Korean societies for their transnational identity.

Kyopos do not fit fully into the American society. They are aliens in Korea. They experience a culture shock different from a Caucasian foreigner and misunderstood by Koreans, Americans, and sometimes themselves. They are ethnically Korean but their physical appearance is deceiving; they are American inside. Yet, they are not totally American because they were raised in the Korean-American sub-culture. They cannot claim to be fully Korean to the native Koreans. On the other hand, they are not accepted as completely American by the mainstream society. JM makes an observation about looking like a Korean and being an American in Korea:

Because of the physical appearance of a Korean-American, local Koreans have certain expectations which the Korean-American often does not and/or cannot meet. One or both of the sides have to make certain attitude adjustments or else the relationship could become disastrous. (JM, a Kyopo in Korea for four years)

Some Kyopo respondents claim that they can bring the best of both worlds. Many have been educated in respected institutions, as well as having propensity to understand and learn the Korean language and culture quickly. However, many respondents felt that their educational and cultural strengths were not fully utilized both in America and in Korea. AL gives the following suggestion about utilizing Kyopos in Korea:

More and more people in Korea must realize the importance of bringing back Kyopos. To bring best practices, technology, innovative ideas and take them seriously, they must be placed in important positions where they can actually initiate change. Right now Kyopos meander. They do not know how to go about doing things. There needs to be a centrally located agency where they can strategically place Kyopos into posi-

tions where they can make a difference. (AL, a Kyopo in Korea for three years)

Some of the Kyopos interviewed believed they received the worst of both worlds. They are not given the privileges of neither the native Korean nor the Anglo-American. They do not have the legal privileges of a Korean citizen and are not rewarded for their cultural and language privileges of a Westerner. As an example, some institutions give Anglo-American teachers certain perks such as a residence in Korea but Kyopos are expected to take care of their own housing arrangements. JC shares how Koreans treated him as a foreigner and a native at different times according to their convenience:

I was betrayed by my own country because Korea treated me as a foreigner with regard to my legal status. When it was advantageous for Koreans to treat me as Korean, they treated me as such and when it was advantageous for Koreans to treat me as a foreigner, they treated me as a foreigner. (JC, a Kyopo in Korea for six years)

Kyopos who have returned to Korea as transnationals are hidden foreigners and as such, they find identity formation a challenge, as they had in America, because of subtle differences and discrimination.

Concluding Remarks

An analysis of identity formation among Kyopos living in Korea showed that discrimination has played a significant role. The assimilation model does not give an accurate account of identity formation because of the experience of discrimination, which visible minorities in America share. A more accurate account of the Kyopos' identity in Korea may be derived by utilizing transnational models of analysis. Kyopos living in Korea, therefore, are better understood as transnationals more than ethnic minorities or simply as persons with a multicultural identity.

Due to the experience of discrimination, the second-generation Kyopo migrants are in a position to understand those who are marginalized in a given society. As South Korea becomes a lucrative country for foreigners to make money, there will be a greater influx of foreigners coming into Korea for employment, both legally and illegally. The Kyopo migrant can make tremendous contributions in reaching out to this population.

The Kyopo migrants are foreigners in Korea although ethnically they may be Korean. They cannot be looked simply upon as Koreans, but as hidden foreigners. Although they may have a propensity toward

Korean language, culture, and food, the Kyopo migrants ought to be treated as foreigners, as if they were going into a foreign country to live and to work. They experience culture shock and need time and effort to acclimatize into the Korean culture.

In order to facilitate the significant role that Kyopos can play in helping Korea to be more internationalized, a better attempt must be made at understanding this population. The role that discrimination has played in shaping the Kyopo population must be understood in order for the Kyopo to be appreciated and utilized in Korea. The native Koreans should be more aware of undue expectations as they work with the Kyopos. There must be recognition that Kyopos are hidden foreigners living in their parent's homeland. As foreigners are given leniency, Kyopos ought to be given the same leniency. Kyopos are highly educated and they have propensity to learn other cultures. In order to utilize these strengths, the Kyopo ought to be better understood and appreciated. Schools, businesses, and churches ought to provide education and awareness when native Koreans and Kyopos work together in the same environment; this will prevent unnecessary misunderstanding and relational friction. The secular organizations are far ahead of Christian institutions in utilizing the potential of the Kyopo. If the Korean Christian organizations and churches would take the time to understand the Kyopo population, the Korean Church will be in a far better place to advance into the global opportunities that lay within Korea and abroad.

Not only can second-generation Kyopos play a major role in Korea, they can also play a more significant role in the conservative Christian community in America. There ought to be more transparent discussions on the issues of race within the Evangelical communities. Most Kyopos interviewed in this research experienced racial discrimination in the hands of the Anglo population, including the conservative Christian community. Amongst many of the race issues to be discussed, one of them might be the underrepresentation of the children of Korean-American immigrants in conservative Christian organizations. There needs to be an examination whether the Kyopo population is underrepresented or marginally represented in the institutions of conservative Christians. Rather than being in positions that represent areas of marginalization, are Kyopos represented in disciplines and positions enjoyed by the majority Anglo population? Many Kyopos are well educated, highly skilled, and devout in their Christian faith, but they are probably not proportionally represented in conservative Christian institutions. When second-generation Kyopos are better understood, they can be utilized to their full potential in Korea, America, and the world.

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