

**Title: Discovering the South through the Korean Diaspora. Koreans in Argentina and Latin America**

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This article presents a general overview of Korean migration in Latin America in order to contribute to the debate about new meanings of mobility and transnational networks in today's world.<sup>1</sup>

I reflect upon the particularities of Korean communities in Latin America, understood as diasporic movements<sup>2</sup> that impart very particular characteristics to the relationship of migrants with the Korean State and with those states they travel through and settle in during their migratory journeys.

This debate calls upon us to reflect on the ways in which some communities position themselves in the urban space of global cities, making it clear that the new circuits, types of settlement, and communication between the world's cities must be considered fundamental for thinking about this period.

The current period reveals new logics of behavior ever more permeated with a transnational dimension, but which take on their own inflections in local dynamics. Diasporic cultural configurations are physical and symbolic spaces that enable certain groups to transcend the barriers imposed by state regulations. However, the elements that allow this relatively successful articulation in the global market are also those elements that promote certain discriminatory tendencies, stemming from a subtle reaction to cultural diversity.

First, I will present a few lines about the Korean diaspora in Latin America. Then I will focus on the processes of settlement and circulation in order to account for the characteristics of spaces of community sociability and their global connections, especially with relation to the capacities to adapt to different contexts. Finally, I will conclude with a reflection on mobilities during the current phase of capitalism, proposing that we understand them from the perspective of the mobility/alterity pair.

### **About the Diaspora**

The displacement of the population from the Korean peninsula began long ago. By the end of the *Choson* Dynasty (1890) there were already population flows toward China and Manchuria, primarily as the result of droughts and famines. Later, with the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and the Korean war (1950-1953), there was a large expulsion that gave rise to many of the world's Korean communities. It was in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that migratory currents began to feed already existing communities and form new ones, including those of Latin America. This view is in

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation has a socio-anthropological focus and uses a variety of qualitative approaches and sources of documentation ranging from 1991 to 2011. Priority has been given to in-depth interviews and fieldwork in the Buenos Aires Korean community. These reflections are the product of broader research on Korean migration over the last fifteen years, conducted in Korea (June 1998 to June 1999, August 2004 and September 2008) and in Los Angeles (October 2008). The rest of the countries analyzed were studied using secondary sources in a number of languages.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of the Korean *Diaspora* has been discussed in Mera (2010), "El concepto de diáspora en los estudios migratorios: reflexiones sobre el caso de las comunidades y movilidades coreanas en el mundo actual," in *Revista de Historia* No. 12; Universidad Nacional del COMAHUE ISSN 0327-4233.

agreement with that of Lee Kwang Kyu (2000:6), who divides the history of the migration of the Korean people into 5 periods:

The earliest migration of farmers toward Russia and China, the second period of patriotic emigration, the third period of labor migration to Japan, the fourth period of voluntary migration to the Western Hemisphere and the fifth of business migration to the South East Asian countries and the rest of the world, including Australia and New Zealand.

Currently, Korea has about 7 million people living outside the peninsula. According to the Republic of Korea's Migration Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Commerce, in 2011 there were 112,980 people living in Latin America: 50,773 lived in Brazil, 22,354 in Argentina, 11,800 in Mexico, 5,205 in Paraguay, 12,918 in Guatemala, and about 4,000 in Chile, Peru and Ecuador. These communities maintain a high level of inter-regional mobility supported by friends and family established in others countries of the region.

Communities began to settle in Latin America in 1960. According to Kim Ill Soo (1981), a migratory current of 30,000 Koreans moved to Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia with the purpose of establishing agricultural colonies. In particular, as of 1962, small isolated groups began to arrive on the continent. These communities would be fed with additional families in the following decades and finally with the currents that began to arrive starting in 1985.

The reasons for choosing Latin America include the large size of the territory and the wealth of natural resources, the peacefulness and good quality of life, the educational possibilities for their children, fear of a new invasion from North Korea, and the fact that for many migrant families, Latin America was an intermediate step in pursuit of the "American dream".

### **Arrival and development in Argentina and Latin America**

The arrival of Korean migrants in Argentina was, since its beginning in 1965, seen as rural migration. However, the agricultural settlements did not succeed, because the majority of migrants did not have rural experience and because they were in poorly developed regions, with precarious infrastructure and few educational and health services. For these reasons, they ended up moving toward urban regions and large cities like São Paulo, Asuncion and Buenos Aires, to engage in commercial activities (Lee, Kyo Bom, 1990; Mera, 1998; Lee Kwang-kyu, 2000).

A neighborhood—"Baek-ku"—began to take shape right away, and a very intense network of sociability started to develop in the City of Buenos Aires. The greatest growth took place in the 1980s and 1990s, when these groups underwent a process of rapid integration both in local economic life (in small- and medium-sized garment manufacturing and retail and wholesale commerce) and in the educational system (the presence of Korean students in the best schools and university of Buenos Aires, and a diversity of graduates and professionals of Korean origin in different public and private spheres), as well as in its own institutional development (associations and churches, services and shops).

The community's shops and services became concentrated in the Baek-ku neighborhood, including bakeries, movie rental shops, clothing shops, beauty salons, hairdressers, dentists, parking lots, auto mechanics, supermarkets, rice shops, restaurants, fish stores, real estate agencies, computer stores, gift shops, the Golf Shop, the Argentinean Confederation of Tae Kwon Do, accountants, pharmacies, taxi companies, travel agencies, etc. All these shops and services were for the Korean

community; in fact, the menus, signs and prices were in Korean (Mera, 2005).

These spaces allowed an intense associative life to develop, such as: 1) bars and karaoke bars for different ages; 2) churches (Catholic, evangelical and two Buddhist temples); 3) associations, media (newspapers and radio) and various shops. In addition to the Korean Association in Argentina, there is a diverse range of others: for different provinces of origin, for graduates from different universities and schools in Korea, for different work activities carried out in Korea prior to migrating, as well as sporting, artistic and writing associations. There are also associations related to the different life choices in the city of Buenos Aires: for shop owners, manufacturers, professionals (physicians, lawyers, accountants, etc.), students, golf players and the elderly. These include the Club for Calligraphers, the Study Group on the Culture of Korean Immigrants, the Fine Arts Group, among others. This wide range of institutions plays a very important role in the way in which people order their daily lives and strongly contributes to the development of the life of the community in our country (Mera, 2005). The existing associations have been consolidated and new ones have emerged, such as the Asociación de Profesionales Universitarios Coreanos (APUC, Association of Korean University Professionals), the Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios (AUCA, Association of University Students), Medicina Integral Coreana (MIK, Comprehensive Korean Medicine), Instituto Coreano Argentino (ICA, Korean Argentinean Institute), associations for writers, for painters, etc.

These characteristics of the strengthening of the community explain the tension between the conservative ideology of the adults and elderly, "living as if they were in the Korea of yesteryear," and the more flexible behavior of the youth. The "Korean Identity in Argentina,"<sup>3</sup> is, then, a product of the negotiation between the different Korean segments—age, gender, religion, migrant generation time, economic and professional activities, etc—in the Argentinean historical context.

However, with the worsening of the economic recession in the mid-1990s, which would culminate in the crisis of 2001,<sup>4</sup> this associativity was drastically weakened. The entry of Korean migrants decreased, but above all an exit (re-emigration) began, bringing about important social changes. The crisis accentuated on one hand the re-emigration of many families, and on the other hand the tendency of youth to drop out of school in order to engage in garment-related activities, like their parents. The abrupt drop in the number of people in the community had a direct impact on social life, which in principle means fewer people, fewer businesses, less movement, less sociability.<sup>5</sup>

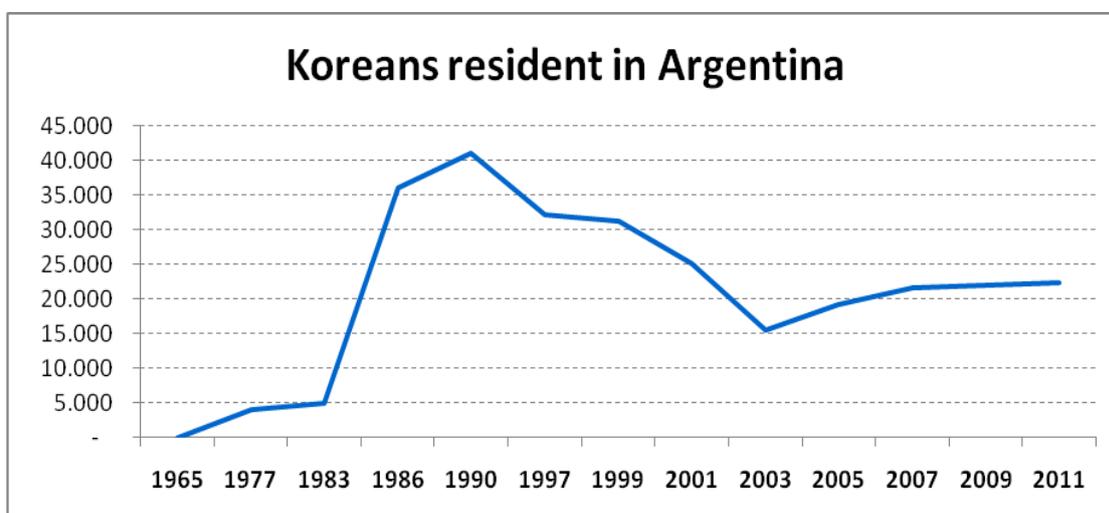
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<sup>3</sup> We understand identities as relational positionalities in which history and tradition play an important role in the dynamic, constant reconfiguration of spatial organization (Arfuch, 2002, Massey, 2005). In this sense, the identity of a migrant community is not automatically transferred from the country of origin, but rather reconstructed on the basis of interactions between social structures, class contradictions and cultural models of the home country and models from the host country, as well as dialogue with other diasporic communities. These are identities in continuous, multiple evolution, that can not be identified with either the country of origin or the host country. Belonging implies an identity awareness related to a type of identity negotiated in the local context and fed by transnational actors and networks (Mera 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The recessionary phase in the Argentinean economy worsened in the third trimester of 1998, accumulating by the third trimester of 2001 a drop in the per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 16%, a significant reduction in total investment (close to 33%), and a sustained rise in unemployment that stabilized at levels above 15% and that by May 2001 affected 21.5% of the economically active population. In this context, problems in the labor market intensified, which in turn led to an increase in poverty, including more than 20 million people by May 2002 (estimates from the System of Evaluation and Monitoring of Social Programs at the Ministry of Social Development). The economic situation was joined by a severe politico-institutional crisis and a strong social protest movement that culminated with the resignation of the president at the time, de la Rúa.

<sup>5</sup> We note a movement of the shops in Once and the Baek-ku neighborhood toward Av. Avellaneda due to growing insecurity and the increasingly greater concentration of shops and activities in this area. The movement of commercial activities was followed by the restaurants,

We can observe these changes in the following table, which shows the number of residents from the community's earliest days in 1965, to its height in 1990, when there were an estimated 41,000 Korean residents, and its abrupt drop up to 2003.<sup>6</sup>



Despite these abrupt changes in the social life of the Korean community in Argentina, we can observe some dynamics that allow us to reflect on the particular form of intercultural dialogue that, from the perspective of the mobility/alterity pair, enrich our analysis.

### Community cohesion and institutions

Social ties are articulated around many Korean ethnic institutions, such as churches and community associations. Religious institutions are the heart of the community's social networks, in particular Korean evangelical and Catholic churches. Attendance at these churches goes beyond spiritual needs, as they serve many important secular functions. Koreans tend to concentrate in the same neighborhood for most social activities. This spatial concentration enhances Koreans' social networks and their solidarity based on "ethnic identity." As I have observed elsewhere (Mera 2008, 2010), this is a kind of settlement that implies a strong rooting in the local territory and a symbolic continuity with the territory of origin, which is articulated through networks of sociability. Associations and churches act as a centripetal force that makes conscious efforts to reconstruct a collective identity. According to the literature on other Korean communities around the world, like in Latin America, both the beginning and the articulation of social organization has largely taken place around the churches (Lee, Kwang Kyu 2000; Yim, Seong Sook 2000; Han, Gil Soo 1999; Min, Pyong Gap 1992 and 1998; Park, Kye Young 1997; Choi, Keum Joa 1991; Kim, Ill Soo 1981; Hurh, Won Moo 1980; Shim 1977, Mera 1998). The authors all emphasize the fact that the ethnic nature of the Korean churches is repeated in other countries and that they form part of a strategy that tends to improve personal economic situations thanks to the networking

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other services linked to more intense day-to-day activity, and the movement of young professionals who relocated their offices and studies in the booming area.

<sup>6</sup> Prepared by the author with data obtained from the Institutions of the Korean Community in Argentina, from Lee Kyo Bom (1990), from the Department of Migration at the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Trade (1997), and from Korea's Department of Migration at the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Trade (2011).

that they enable. In fact, they are multidimensional churches (Han, Gill Soo 1999) that create information, solidarity and support networks that effectively enable rapid economic growth. That is, the churches' functions and activities should not be understood only within the framework of religion, but rather as complex individual, family and group sociopolitical strategies.

In this sense, the family structure is complemented by this type of social organization, strengthening personal, family and social relationships as a result of the ties and networks linked to Korea and to its migrant communities.

Thus, family and churches constitute the core of the identity that seeks to preserve the cultural capital of origin, despite the changes over time and the history of the different phases of migration. In education, we see a successful insertion of young people, through both Argentinean and Korean schools. This is because young people develop relationships with both Argentinean and Korean communities, while elderly Koreans maintain their own strong social networks, establishing the minimum necessary relationships with non-Koreans. It is in this context that the meaning of "being Korean" is debated. "Us-them" limits are established through language competency, food, belonging to a shared history and a respect for certain daily rituals and behaviors. Hence, identity is defined by attending Korean churches and associations, by endogamic marriage practices and acceptance of the conducts taught by adults and the elderly.

These family and social networks in Korean diasporic communities promote types of concentration in certain sectors of the urban economy that make it easier for them to obtain employment and access to a range of benefits in the context of the host society. Korean immigrants' economic activities in Argentina are concentrated in the garment industry: garment production and wholesale/retail of garment products. In general, Korean community members have experienced an accelerated process of upward social mobility that is a result of the tight organization of the Korean community and Koreans' strong work ethic. They have thus been able to sustain small productive and commercial enterprises—despite the harsh economic crises—largely thanks to social networks and to the system of independent entrepreneurship that has allowed them to achieve stability and enhance their opportunities and social positions.

### **Change, local/transnational adaptation**

We base our analysis on the notion that these communities' forms of territorial inscription and sociability, their ways of circulating, of experiencing cities and their integration in the economic and the political sphere—transnational<sup>7</sup> and local—condition their positions in the world system in different ways (Wallerstein, 2001), somehow or other questioning the cultural domination exercised by modern Nation States.

These re-emigrants become actors who, grounding on their objectified identities in urban spaces and their own forms of social organization, become incorporated into the new host cities, sticking firmly to their own esthetics, languages, food and traditions.

To account for this tension, we propose thinking about the diaspora as a particular form of experiencing "global mobility". We therefore look to Tairrus (2000), who within the mobility paradigm proposes the idea of *circulatory territory*, which accounts for the socialization of spaces according to logics of mobility. In this sense, the mobility/alterity

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of *transnationalism* makes it possible to explain flexible citizenships (Sassen, 1999, 2010), transnational forms of organization (Bauman, 1999; Appadurai, 2007). The notion of transnational allows us to think about migratory space in terms of (material and symbolic) relations, and avoids the problem of remaining tied to the traditional relationship between Nation State and a migrant community in a host country.

pair emerges as a step beyond the approaches that prioritized the concepts of integration/identity.

The possibility of transnational circulation enjoyed by members of Latin American Korean communities is due to the fact that they become integrated into the host country without assimilating, maintaining a strong sense of belonging to a Korean identity grounded in an intense associative life. Thus, the *mobility/alterity* conceptual pair, in constant tension, also allows us to explain the ability to adapt to the recurrent local, regional and global crises (economic, politico-institutional and/ or social).

First, the family contributes to establishing an economic life with strategies implemented in a joint fashion by its members. Thus, while during times of economic stability the family facilitates the establishment of family-owned businesses for its members, in times of recession and crisis it is the sphere that provides the tools for re-emigration.<sup>8</sup>

Second, in the same way that the Korean neighborhood and associative networks facilitate life in cities of settlement, their existence in other cities around the world facilitates forms of transnational circulation and settlement. In the different “Koreatowns” migrants find services, restaurants, schools, real estate agencies, jobs, information about finding employment, etc.. This re-emigratory process renders continuity to the movement initiated by the family when they left Korea.

In addition, the experience of having lived in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay becomes fundamental for those that re-emigrate to the US. Most of the young re-emigrants interviewed in Los Angeles in October 2008 claimed to have worked in Korean or international companies where they put their three languages and all their experience from Latin America to use—in the family garment business, in dealing with local suppliers, in their knowledge and use of different codes, etc.<sup>9</sup> In Los Angeles, it is very common for these people to work for Korean owners/bosses, have Mexican (or Latino) workers under them and act as intermediaries with American suppliers. This place of intermediary is also a place of tension and an encounter of identities that is a product of their mobilities. Moreover, internalizing the multiple play of values that articulates those of their society of origin, those of the host society and those of their lived experience in the diaspora leads them to prefer each other for friendships and sociability in general.

Fourth, social networks also help with displacement as re-emigration requires preparation: language study, certification of university degrees, visas, travel and the pursuit of business, employment and professional opportunities, etc., which is possible thanks to already settled families that offer the conditions for all of this (housing and work until finding employment or setting up an independent business). Language works in the same way; there is a tendency, especially amongst the youth, to know the different languages (Korean, Spanish, and English). The shared Korean language and the second and third languages offer ideal competencies for competition in the international market and for establishing self-owned businesses. But affective relationships also form a part of this complex process of re-emigration in the diaspora. Endogamic marriages facilitate circulation in transnational networks and insertion into the other communities around the world, and families provide shelter and material and emotional support.

We can say that the reproduction of ethnic cultural capital in tension with local experience mobilizes community networks for re-emigratory movement. Community social capital provides the networks that assure travel and the first steps of settlement, and cultural capital—through degrees obtained and knowledge of

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<sup>8</sup> The high degree of re-emigration to other countries in the region was discussed in Mera (2009) “Diáspora coreana en América Latina”, Ramirez Bonilla (Ed.) *Transiciones Coreanas. Permanencia y cambio en Corea del Sur en el inicio del SXXI*, México: El Colegio de México, ISBN 978-607-462-008-5.

<sup>9</sup> Discussed in Mera (2010) “The 1.5 generation of the Korean Diaspora in South America: Rethinking transnational interactions,” in *Comparative Korean Studies* Vol. 18 No. 3 (18.3).

Spanish/Portuguese—offers the conditions for insertion into economic niches that ensure a certain degree of success. These characteristics facilitate and promote mobilities, leading in turn to greater efficiency when initiating activities in another city. Migration is only one step in this larger process that brings together the identity-space-time triad, of subjects from “here” and “there”, of micro urban spaces and macro networks of transnational circulation. These social models present bicultural and pluricultural social patterns for managing differences that challenge the paradigms of the Nation State.

## Conclusions

The experience of the Korean diaspora invites us to reflect critically on migrant diversities in today’s cities from the perspective of the Mobility Paradigm. This enables us to go beyond the pretense of an assimilationist/homogenous/hegemonic analysis in order to account for more mobile/plural/complex realities which still present transgressions of different dimension to the national and international system.

It is on the basis of the flexibility in the identities at play that the members of a diaspora can become integrated into the host society but not become assimilated. Latin America’s Korean communities, even with their local specificities, promote and maintain a model of cultural insertion that conserves certain particular characteristics related to Korea: a historical and cultural awareness that both transcends and is traversed by time, geographies, borders, political regimes, religions and languages.

While the reality of each Latin American country is different, it is safe to say that the Korean diaspora in the region is the result of family migration that has settled in urban areas and has experienced rapid economic integration in garment production and trade, favoring ethnic concentration, the transmission of certain cultural traditions and transnational circulation. These migrants may lead lives in different countries, and even move among the different communities established in our continent. This is why young Koreans from Latin America in the US largely tend to gather with other people in the same situation; they prefer them as friends and as spouses.

If we accept the classic experiences of acculturation/assimilation, we would expect the “cultural identity” that unites migrant groups in the early stages of the migration process to weaken along with the progressive advance of the host culture. However, we have seen that in the case of the Korean diaspora in Latin America, there is no progressive acculturation, but rather quite the opposite. With only rare exceptions, mostly in those communities that did not receive new migrants, such as Cuba, the level of intracommunity organization generally becomes enhanced and more complex as the communities become more stable and settled into their local settings.

Diasporic communities transgress the essence of the Nation State and its sedentary nature, they challenge the idea of national identity being related to a place, to a territory that identifies us and builds history and memory. As Taurius describes (2000:39): “they destroy the quiet certainties established over centuries based on local hierarchies of legitimacies, of ties to the native land that appear more authentic, in short, of the instituted order of identities.”

Thus, the idea of territorial “rootedness” and “uprootedness” becomes blurry, giving way to communities that can move in a third dimension, that of symbolic rootedness which is made objective in local mixtures, in which they can feel comfortable even when transgressing the boundaries of instituted national identities.

Further research is required to reflect upon some conflicts I have mentioned in passing. Namely, while on one hand communities gain access to the relative benefits of mobility, in their local situation, marked by alterity, these communities produce uncertainty and unease among the member of the local society thus leading to discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes.

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