

Nobody remembers the losers: what happened to the agricultural emigration to South America?

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Introduction

Koreans in Brazil are reaching a huge milestone in 2013 as they celebrate half a century of the official Korean immigration in the country.¹ The beginning of this vibrant overseas Korean community was humble. On a wintery day of December 1962, a small contingent of 17 families left Pusan to a country best known for its vast size and immeasurable natural resources. This first group of people aimed to work in agriculture, and more Koreans with similar intentions followed suit to Brazil and other South American countries. It was well known that not all emigrants had previous farming experience. Yet many tested their luck, only to realise that farming in South America was significantly different to what they had imagined before boarding the ship.

Contrary to popular belief, early Korean agricultural emigration to South America was mainly organised and executed by interested individuals, amateur emigration agents, private emigration agencies and even the Catholic Church. The intervention of the Korean government at this stage was minimal. Then in mid-1970s, the Korean government too threw its hat in the ring of overseas agricultural migration. The government's participation lasted only a decade though. During this time five rural smallholdings were established in Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Chile. This paper is about the Korean agricultural emigration to South America under the auspices of the Korean government. In this work I will explore the agricultural emigration cases during the government of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan drawing on information from official documents and the experiences of immigrants.

Background

The earliest indication of the Korean government's intentions to take part of the overseas agricultural migration dates back to 1972. In a meeting held with then President Park Chung-hee, the Korean ambassador to Brazil No Sök -ch'ansuggested organising a group agricultural emigration entirely planned by the Korean government.² Most of all previous experiences in Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia had been organised by individuals or emigration companies, with heartbreaking results for immigrants more than anyone else.³ The government had very limited participation in these ventures, mostly through the Ministry of Health and Welfare (hereafter MOHW) or the Korean Overseas Development Cooperation (hereafter KODCO) during the recruitment process.

The initial interest of the Korean government in agricultural emigration is better described as lukewarm. Nonetheless, the government sent a taskforce to South America in late 1975 to collect information for a tentative agricultural emigration policy. The taskforce regarded South America as an

¹Please note that there already were a small number of Koreans living in Brazil and Argentina who had arrived as Japanese citizens during the colonial period.

² Kyöngje 1, *Chu pŭrajildaesaui kõnŭisahang kõmt'ogyölgwa bogo* (Seoul: Taet'ongryöng pogosö, 10 April 1972), 42082.

³One exception was San Pedro in Paraguay. This farm had been purchased in 1968 by the MOHW as a preamble to a possible Immigration Agreement between Korea and Paraguay which never took place. The management of San Pedro had been given to KODCO since the beginning.

ideal site for an offshore Korean based on the abundance of natural resources, low population density and lack of racial discrimination.⁴ They envisaged agricultural emigration as a long term national investment. Indeed, in the face of an increasing population and limited territory, the taskforce saw any overseas base of livelihood belonging to Korean people as a “peaceful territorial expansion”.⁵ They believed that through the bond of agricultural emigration, the Korean government would gain a stable supply of food and raw materials from South America, reinforcing diplomatic ties with the region by actively participating in local agricultural development programs, while “demonstrating superb Korean agricultural skills,” securing an overseas base for Korean exports and industries, and finally continuing skilled and family reunion types of emigration using established farms as a base.⁶ More taskforces travelled to South America to find the perfect spot for the first agricultural emigration project led by the Korean government. There had also been talks that the success at home of *Saemaul Undong* could also be transposed into South America through the scheme. Then came trouble.

Between 1962 and 1977, around 30,000 Koreans had officially emigrated to South American countries. Even when publicity about emigration had heavily focused on Brazil and Argentina, Paraguay was the country which had received the most Korean immigrants in the region. To the point that over 10,000 Koreans emigrated to Paraguay between 1975 and 1976, as opposed to 242 to Brazil. The country profile of Paraguay had not changed much during that time. What had changed was the Brazilian immigration policy, shifting from “free immigration” to “planned immigration” favouring skilled immigrants and investment types.⁷ The shift in policy represented an unwelcome obstacle for Korean migrants. Then some brokers and emigration agents turned their attention to Paraguay and Bolivia. Paraguay offered unique appeal for immigration brokers: its eastern border is separated from Brazil and Argentina by the Paraná River and the north border of the eastern region adjoins to Brazil. In addition to Paraguay’s distinctive geographic location, the entry permission to the country was said to be significantly less complicated than Brazil. For immigration brokers, who were also Koreans, Paraguay offered an ultimate opportunity for people smuggling.

With an apparent upturn in luck in Brazil, there was an upsurge in the commerce of so called “invitation letters (*ch’ochǒngjang*),” ordinarily called as “note (*ttakchi*)” or “paper (*chongi*)” trade. This covert industry consisted of the merchandising of “invitation letters” from an immigrant in South America to alleged relatives in Korea so that the “relatives” could obtain entry permission through the family reunion scheme. The business also came from Koreans in Paraguay who wished to relocate to Brazil. Analysis from Korea International Economic Institute indicates that people trafficking was such that the actual number of Korean residents in Paraguay was believed to be in only two thirds of registered immigrants, while Brazil and Argentina respectively counted 5,000 and 1,500 Korean immigrants over and above those registered.⁸

I first migrated to Paraguay and worked as a *vendedor*.⁹ The competition was high because there were lots of Korean *vendedores* like myself travelling and selling goods around Asunción and surrounding areas. I decided to move to Brazil, because Brazil is larger than Paraguay and I assumed life would be easier. Two years later, my family and I crossed the border and arrived in São Paulo. However, police were everywhere checking people’s identification. Because we were illegal [immigrants] and did not have proper documentation, I was afraid to leave home during the daytime. It seemed though that policemen were not checking women for their identification, so my wife became the breadwinner. I used to send my young children to buy

⁴ Namminongbiminjosadan, *Namminongbiminŭi hyǒnhwanggwa chǒnmang – urugwai, aljent’in, p’aragwai, purajil* (Seoul: Namminongbiminjosadan, March 1976), 57.

⁵ Kyǒngje 1, *Chungnammi nongbiminmunje kǒmt’o* (Seoul: Taet’ongryǒng pogosǒ, March 1977), 5151.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Korea International Economic Institute, *Han’gugŭi taejungnammiimin hyǒnhwanggwa chǒnmang*. Special Analysis Series No. 18 (Seoul: Korea International Economic Institute, 1977), 21.

⁸ Korea International Economic Institute, *Han’gugŭi taejungnammiimin hyǒnhwanggwa chǒnmang*, 30.

⁹ *Vendedor*: travelling salesman in Spanish.

tobacco for me from the newsagency across the road. And I would go out for a fresh air only after the dusk. Life was miserable...¹⁰

As the demand from Korean hopefuls in Paraguay increased, so did the brokers' fee. It goes without saying that clandestine border crossing was a very dangerous exercise. However, the practice became dire when an organised crime gang of Koreans meddled in the business. Their actions eventually ended in a murder case. In 1977, a Brazilian police dog discovered the bodies of dumped Korean nationals, presumably illegal immigrants, in a heavily treed location on the Brazilian side of the Paraná River.¹¹ In an official tour to several African and Latin American countries, then Prime Minister Kim Jong-p'il (1926–) became aware of the "paper trade" and border crossing.¹² It was said that the Paraguayan and Brazilian governments had recently lodged complaints to Korean embassies regarding the illegal traffic of Korean immigrants.¹³ Kim saw the issue as a diplomatic disaster and suggested to halt the issuing of passports to all potential emigrants heading to South America and to monitor activities from the immigration department of the MOHW.¹⁴ The outcome of Kim's recommendation was the Measure of 4 May 1977 (*5.4 choch'i*). On that date, the MOHW declared that the emigration to South America was restricted to direct family members of immigrants only and stated that "until a long term [emigration] policy is adapted, emigration to the four countries [referring to Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia] is... provisionally suspended". With this self-imposed restriction, the Korean government sought to put some order in Korean immigration in South America while considering a plan that could save face.

Agricultural emigration during the Park Chung-hee period

1. Santa Cruz Semaul, Brazil

Many recommendations followed the *5.4 choch'i*. Meanwhile, the government appointed former General Ch'ae Myōng-shin (1926–) as the new Korean ambassador to Brazil. With the homeland eager to improve the image of Koreans, the embassy in Brazil came up with a plan to establish a model farm. Under the plan, which the Korean government was to partly subsidise, 100 undocumented Korean households residing in Brazil were to cultivate a smallholding of 2,500 hectares.¹⁵ The original concept behind the plan was that once the farm was successfully operating and had set a precedent of goodwill towards undocumented Korean immigrants settling in rural Brazil, then the Korean government would have enough justification to persuade the Brazilian government to grant legal status to the immigrants.¹⁶ Korean churches in Brazil too were engaged in a campaign to help illegal Korean immigrants gain legal residency in Brazil, including many of its own parishioners. When the embassy's plan was brought to the notice of the Korean community, a number of churches and local Korean entrepreneurs drafted and submitted to the embassy blueprints for a model farm. Eventually, a project from the Korean Holiness Church (*Daehan Sōng'gyōl Kyohoe*) caught the attention of the organisers and the church was granted permission to recruit undocumented immigrants to settle in the new model farm.¹⁷

¹⁰Woo, interview by the author, São Paulo (Brazil), 8 June 2007.

¹¹Oh Ŭng-sō, *Amajonŭi kkum* (São Paulo: Nammi Tonga Ilbosa, 2004), 268.

¹²Chosōn Ilbo 8 February, p. and 12 April 1977, p.3

¹³Chun Kyung-soo, "Pūrajilŭi han'gukimin'gwa kŭ chōn'gyegwajōng," *Overseas Korean Studies* 1, no. 1 (1990): 207-208.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 206-207.

¹⁵Kyōngje 1, *Namminongōp imin'gwangye bogo* (Seoul: Taet'ongryōng pogosō, 2 October 1979), 6881.

¹⁶Kyōngje 1, *Pūrajilsipchase Maulnongjangsaōpkwehoekch'ujinhyōnhwang bogo* (Seoul: Taet'ongryōng pogosō, 25 March 1978), 5585.

¹⁷Oh, *Amajonŭi kkum*, 265-266 and 297 and Samch'a Namminongōpchosadan, *Hyōnjijosabogo*. As it turned out this movement appears to have encouraged more Koreans in Paraguay to cross the border to Brazil (Oh, *Amajonŭi kkum*, 265-266).

The Ambassador returned to Korea to discuss the construction of the farm, bypassed the authorities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter MOFA) who had not approved his temporary return to Seoul and went straight to the Blue House to talk over the issue.¹⁸ The reception from the Blue House was much more encouraging. It was estimated that the running cost of the project would be USD 2.8 million, but the approval came in no time. On 10 November 1977, the government decided to fund almost 80% of the project, half of the amount as a grant and the other half as a loan. Only two weeks later, a staggering USD 892,000 was sent to the Korean embassy in Brazil.¹⁹ Furthermore, President Park announced the government's intention to support a similar project in Argentina if this was prepared and tendered for under the responsibility of the Ambassador.²⁰ Subsequently the government dispatched another South American agricultural emigration taskforce (hereafter the third taskforce) to review the model farm projects.²¹

Ambassador Ch'ae believed that Korea should not expect stronger economic and political ties with Brazil without showing a genuine interest in finding a solution for illegal immigration. He was of the view that a successful agricultural resettlement program was the key to resolving illegal immigration issues. Notwithstanding the benefits that a successful project could bring to improving the image of Koreans in Brazil, the third taskforce doubted the likelihood of success of the project underway.²² In the report to the President dated March 1978, the entire model farm project in Brazil was described as being set up without sound background research, and its progress disorganised and unproductive. The report also indicated that the Brazilian government had not given any indications regarding the future of undocumented settlers in the model farm, thus the value of the agricultural resettlement project as a solution to illegal immigration was debatable. Furthermore, the recruitment process which had focused on one church parish had led to a chorus of disapproval and criticism from the rest of the Korean community in Brazil. The third taskforce recommended a full review by the Bureau of Economic Planning of the model farm project and to hold back any decisions regarding other agricultural settlement until the project in Brazil showed some signs of progress.²³ In fact, the taskforce was of the opinion that "only a long term diplomatic approach, while keeping unplanned emigration cases under control, will provide a realistic solution to illegal immigration".²⁴

Eventually a property sized 2,170 hectares and located 80 kilometres from Brasília in the town of Formosa (State of Goiás) was purchased in July 1978 under the name of Hong Sun-do, a naturalised Brazilian citizen who "paid" USD 420,000 for the land.²⁵ The property previously called "Fazenda Santa Cruz" was reborn as "Fazenda Santa Cruz Semaul", followed by the establishment of the cooperative "Santa Cruz Semaul" and an application for authorisation to the Brazilian National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (hereafter INCRA).²⁶ On 26 July 1979, Ambassador Ch'ae reported to Seoul about an alleged approval from the Brazilian Ministry of Justice to go ahead with the construction of Fazenda Santa Cruz Semaul, a claim which was later discovered to be fabricated.²⁷ In Seoul, officers found the Ambassador's management style highly frustrating, especially in his lack of planning and progress reports at the time of the funding request. Their

¹⁸No Chin-Hwan, *Oegyogaui saramdul* (Seoul: Seoul Media, 1993), 257-258. MOFA was very careful about the farm project in Brazil, especially in case any mishandling might harm diplomatic relations between the two countries.

¹⁹Kyongje 1, *Purajilsipchase Maulnongjangsaopkyehoekch'ujinhyonhwang bogo*, 5586.

²⁰Samch'a Namminongpochosadan, *Hyonjijosabogo*.

²¹Yet the journey of this taskforce faced problems from the very start. An official document shows that the Brazilian consular had initially denied their visa application after the Korean media released news on upcoming official surveys to Brazil. According to the reports, the origin of the problem was that Korean officials were to carry out such assessments without any consultation with the Brazilian government. Against this background, members of the committee arrived in Brazil holding tourist visas, and the study was completed under high level of discretion (Samch'a Namminongpochosadan, *Hyonjijosabogo*)

²²Samch'a Namminongpochosadan, *Hyonjijosabogo*.

²³Kyongje 1, *Purajil sipcha semaulnongjang saopkyehoekch'ujinhyonhwang bogo*, 5589.

²⁴Kyongje 1, *Purajil han'gugimine kwanhan ch'aemyongsindaesa bogo*, 5975-5976.

²⁵*Ibid*, 5969.

²⁶Oh, *Amajonui kkum*, 298.

²⁷No, *Oegyogaui saramdul*, 261.

frustration grew further when the MOFA could not verify the *status quo* of the project in Brazil. In spite of these negative views the “Economy 1” recommended, solely based on the Ambassador’s claim, to allocate USD 1 million to the *Fazenda* from the budget allocated to the settlement project in Argentina.²⁸

It seems as the response from the immigrant community was below the organisers’ expectation. Yet 25 applicants for the project joined their efforts in clearing the land for cultivation and housing for settlers. A granary of 120 metres by 80 metres was successfully built and further constructions were under plan. Farming machinery was also purchased.²⁹ Under the guidance of Wŏn Hyŏn-kuk, a deacon from the Korea Holiness Church, the settlers worked on rice farming and succeeded in harvesting 240,000 kilograms in 1980 and 360,000 kilograms in the following year.³⁰ However, when Wŏn submitted an application to INCRA for the establishment of a cooperative in February 1981 the submission was unexpectedly rejected.³¹ Soon after a police inquiry on the source of funding commenced, and the investigation revealed that the financial support, which had not been properly declared to Brazilian authorities, came from the Korean government and that the money had been exchanged on the black market.³²

Clearly the Korean government had not built a kingdom in Brazil, yet the issue was somehow seen as an invasion of sovereignty.³³ As for its demise, Chun notes that the Korean government presented an official apology through diplomatic channels and “donated” the Santa Cruz Semaul to the Brazilian government.³⁴ In relation to the “donation”, Masiero observes that the Korean and Brazilian Ministers of Foreign Affairs met in New York during the 37th United Nations General Assembly and discussed the possibility of the donation of two rural properties to INCRA.³⁵ In effect, the understanding between the two countries in reference to the donation verifies that negotiations were held and discussed in 1982 and 1983, and the transfer of properties was completed on 10 January 1984.³⁶ Ambassador Ch’ae was recalled to Seoul in 1981 and soon after retired from the diplomatic service. The embassy eventually ousted the settlers from Santa Cruz Semaul with some financial compensation.³⁷ Farm tools and machinery was sold, and the proceeds were remitted to Seoul.³⁸ As for the illegal Korean migrants, in January 1982 the Brazilian government delivered a second amnesty for illegal foreign residents in the country, including thousands of illegal Korean immigrants.³⁹ The amnesty was not by any means influenced by the Santa Cruz Semaul project.

²⁸ Kyŏngje 1. *Namminongŏp imin’gwangye bogo*, 6883.

²⁹ Choi Kong-P’il, “Bŭrajil han’gugin sogo,” Associação Beneficente Diaspora, accessed 21 May 2007. http://www.diaspora.org.br/bbs/zboard.php?id=infocenter&page=4&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=22 and Oh, *Amajonŭi kkum*, 298.

³⁰ Chung Ha-Won, interview by the author, São Paulo (Brazil), 8 June 2007 and Oh, *Amajonŭi kkum*, 298.

³¹ No, *Oegyogaŭi saramdŭl*, 264.

³² A recent book published by the Korean community in Brazil notes that the funding from the Korean government was deposited in a bank in the US and controlled by the Ambassador himself. When needed, parts of the funding were withdrawn in cheques and then exchanged to local currency through a Korean resident owner of a travel agency who later sold the cheques in black market (Chung Ha-won et al., *Pŭrajil haninimin 50nyŏnsa, 1962-2011* [Seoul: Kyoŭmsa, 2011], 206).

³³ Chun, “Pŭrajilŭi han’gukimin,” 213.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 214.

³⁵ Gilmar Masiero, “Relações políticas e econômicas entre o Brasil e a Coréia do Sul,” *Publicación Carta Asiática, Asia y Argentina*, 2000, accessed 20 April 2006. <http://www.asiayargentina.com/usp-04htm>. The two estates are “Poções” e “Santa Cruz Semaul”. “Poções” refers to the “Maranhão Semaul horticultural farm” ran by a Korean immigrants who had received the funding from the Korean Embassy.

³⁶ Ministério das Relações Exteriores, “Acordo, por troca de notas, referente à doação ao Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA) das propriedades rurais ‘Poções’ e ‘Santa Cruz’,” Divisão de Atos Internacionais, Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 10 January 1984, accessed 10 February 2009. http://www2.mre.gov.br/dai/b_cors_03_1647.htm

³⁷ “Bŭrajil han’gugin sogo.”

³⁸ Chun, “Pŭrajilŭi han’gukimin,” 215.

³⁹ Oh, *Amajonŭi kkum*, 331 and Chung Ha-won.

2. Llajta Mauca, Argentina

...only few months after we arrived in Isca Yacú, we heard that the Korean government had purchased a very large property in Llajta Mauca, not too far from the *Colonia Coreana*. We were all very excited about our government's intentions in investing in an area of close proximity, but we wondered why the government had decided to acquire land in such a remote and arid area. We thought we would surely be part of the project and that one day the organisers of Llajta Mauca would visit us seeking advice on local conditions. The truth was that no one asked us anything about farming in the area. We were simply left out in the cold...⁴⁰

The Llajta Mauca project was a younger sibling of the Santa Cruz Semaúl, and just like its relative in Brazil, this also was spoiled by a confusing series of events. When the first and second taskforce travelled to South America in 1976, they found in Argentina ideal conditions for hosting the Korean agricultural emigration and appointed the town of Villalonga (Province of Buenos Aires) as the ideal site for the project. Whereas the *5.4 choch'icut* off what in other circumstances could have been a steady development, in the minds of the relevant officials the project itself was never abandoned. Then when the Korean Ambassador in Brazil came up with the plan of a model farm, Park Chung-hee announced that the government would support a similar project in Argentina. However, Nam Ch'öl, Korea's Ambassador to Argentina, was against the very *raison d'être* of the project. Nam did not regard the issues of illegal Korean immigrants in Argentina to be as critical as in Brazil and he thought establishing a farm with immigrants devoid of previous farming experience to be counterproductive.⁴¹

The third taskforce's visit to Argentina occurred only months after Yi Ik-hwan and three others had established a Korean farm in Isca Yacú. When the taskforce and Ambassador Nam went to inspect the farm, they found that Yi and others had planted 200 hectares of soy bean in their first year of farming. The visitors were not only impressed by Isca Yacú's rapid progress, but they also saw there the right combinations that they were searching for: a feasible business model, leadership, technical capability and potential for further expansion. They believed that under the direction of Yi, Isca Yacú could open up for new immigrants and take in some of the illegal Korean immigrants in Argentina. The third taskforce later reported that Isca Yacú, located inland and in sub-tropical region, was better positioned for multi-purpose farming than Villalonga.⁴² Everything seemed to indicate that the agricultural emigration organised by the Korean government would have Isca Yacú as the core of the project. Then in April 1978, the fourth taskforce travelled to Argentina to inspect a property in the vicinity of Isca Yacú.⁴³ The idea was that at some stage Isca Yacú and this new property would merge to establish a large Korean colony in the region, and they proposed 11,500 hectares area of rural land in Suncho Pujos as the site for the agricultural emigration.⁴⁴ However, when the fifth taskforce led by Kim Söng-hoof the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery visited Argentina in July 1978, they learned that the property was not for sale. Eventually a Korean resident in Argentina introduced to Kim a property in Llajta Mauca in the Province of Santiago del Estero, and Kim suggested to the Korean government to purchase this land instead.

Llajta Mauca is located in the district of Mataras, 986 kilometres northwest of Buenos Aires. Sized 20,894 hectares – or, as the Korean media often describe it, “nearly 70 times the size of Yöüido” – the estate is found in a region known for low annual precipitation and the high salinity of its soil. In fact, already at the time of the purchase it was known that about 20% of the property contained salinized

⁴⁰Yoo Hong-Jun, interview by the author, Santiago del Estero (Argentina), 18 April 2007.

⁴¹Samch'a Namminongöpchosadan, *Hyönjijosabogo*.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Kyöngje 1, *Chungnammi imindaech'aegül wihan hyönjich'ulchang kyehoek* (Seoul: Taet'ongryöng pogosö, 14 April 1978), 5618.

⁴⁴*Pöryojin namminongjang 6ch'ön3baengmanp'yöng: yattamaukkanün marhanda* (video recording), 1996, television program (Seoul: KBS).

soil and it had been previously used for livestock farming, not for cultivation. Intriguingly, Kim agreed to purchase the land for agricultural emigration well before the Korean government's approval. The total price of the land reached an astonishing USD 2.11 million, and was registered under Kim's name on 31 August 1978 which was later amended to KODCO. The Korean government eventually approved the acquisition. However, the controversy behind the purchase never ceased, especially in regard to the fertility of the soil and the extremely high price of the land.

Llajta Mauca's five-year development plan consisted of investing USD 2.6 million to settle 300 Korean households. In order to achieve this, MOFA reached a five year agreement with the Agricultural Development Corporation (hereafter ADC) whose staff travelled to Argentina in December 1978 to develop the estate. A number of Korean residents – but not those in Isca Yacú – and local researchers also took part in the development of the early stages of the project. In Llajta Mauca, the staff from ADC established a draft development plan followed by a land survey and experimental cultivation of soybean, cotton, corn, sorghum, garlic and pasture in 30 hectares. They concluded that the poor quality and the high salinity in the soil, low annual precipitation and prohibitive cost in development ruled out Llajta Mauca as a suitable site for long term agricultural emigration.⁴⁵ If discouraging results divided the ADC team in Argentina over how to best develop the estate, an even bigger hurdle was the lack of understanding between the Korean Embassy in Argentina, the attaché of Agricultural Affairs and ADC over the budget. As tension and differences of opinion escalated, the Blue House became aware of the situation and sent Pak Yöng-ch'öl, an officer from the MOFA, to Argentina to assess the situation of Llajta Mauca.

Park left Seoul on 25 October 1979, only a day before Park Chung-hee's assassination. Despite the unexpected passing of the person who had assigned the task, he nonetheless carried out the survey in Argentina. Yet when he returned to the Blue House with a report compiling a month of fieldwork, "there was no one to report to... Llajta Mauca was a lost cause".⁴⁶ Park's conclusion too was in line with the assessment from the ADC. MOFA followed Park's recommendations and decided to put the property on the market. This could also have been the first time MOFA was confronted with the correct land value of Llajta Mauca, a property where the "Korean government had spent USD 2 million for what could have been bought for USD 200,000".⁴⁷ It is worth noting that Llajta Mauca was never on sale: a dramatic drop in the value of Argentinean Peso between late 1970s and early 1980s meant that if the sale had gone ahead, it would have only incurred a heavy financial loss on MOFA. Llajta Mauca had become a real case of a white elephant for the bureaucrats. Later MOFA granted its ownership to a reluctant MOHW, which assigned the land to KODCO for its care in 1980.

Llajta Mauca was left largely idle from the date of its purchase. In an interview given to KBS in 1996, a KOICA staffer responsible for South American farms recognised that KOICA "has not dug the ground even once" in Llajta Mauca. In Argentina though, a local consultancy company carried out a feasibility study which showed a number of possibilities in development and exploitation of the land.⁴⁸ Several Korean residents in Argentina too approached the embassy with projects to utilise the property.⁴⁹ I was told that the Korean Llajta Mauca project has unfortunately blocked a number of regional development plans, including the construction of a water channel which would have greatly benefited the entire district.⁵⁰ A local resident who was involved in the water channel project said that in spite of multiple efforts to inform the Korean Embassy about the importance of the project such as this to the region, "no Korean authority listened" to his concerns.⁵¹ The consultancy company who did the feasibility study of Llajta Mauca mentioned a similar experience: the interviewee recalled five to

⁴⁵ Kim Sön-ho, 26 April 2004 in reply to Kang Myöng-hun's enquiry "1979nyön-83nyön arühent'ina nongöbimin sibömnongjange kwanhan chilüi," *Korea Rural Community Corporation*, 20 April 2004. https://www.ekr.or.kr/Kkrpub/cms/boardView.krc?ARTC_ID=308753&MENU_MST_ID=10964

⁴⁶ *Pöryojin namminongjang 6ch'ön3baengmanp'yöng.*

⁴⁷ Yoo Sang-Bong, interview by the author, Paraná (Entre Rios, Argentina), 20 April 2007.

⁴⁸ *Pöryojin namminongjang 6ch'ön3baengmanp'yöng.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* and Yoon Woo-sang, interview by the author, La Rioja (La Rioja, Argentina), 17 April 2007.

⁵⁰ Yoo Sang-bong.

⁵¹ *Pöryojin namminongjang 6ch'ön3baengmanp'yöng.*

six meetings with Korean authorities, but they failed to “reach any decision” despite the potential to revive the property.⁵²

I was told that feasibility studies are done each time a new Korean Ambassador in Argentina assumes the role, yet no one “touches” the case because “it would hurt everyone”. As I understood, a major hurdle in the past in the development of Llajta Mauca was that the estate was under the administration of KOICA, an agency affiliated with MOFA. As the Ministry is not in charge of agricultural affairs, there was no real possibility for its reactivation or development. Back in 1992 a portion of the property’s ownership was granted to local occupants who had been there long enough to claim the land as theirs. The Korean government annually spends an exorbitant amount of tax payers’ money for maintenance and land tax, and Llajta Mauca used to make headlines in media and in the National Assembly for wrong reasons. However, the estate was transferred to the Korea Rural Community Corporation (*Han’guk nongŏch’on kongsa*) in December 2007 in an attempt to turn Llajta Mauca into an overseas food base. It was announced that experimental farming would commence in 2009 after a preliminary survey. No major result has been reported yet.

Agricultural emigration during the Chun Doo-hwan period

Interestingly, the government of Chun Doo-hwan sought to continue the agricultural emigration project. Eventually KODCO was – once again – designated as the agency in charge of the project. They established five main objectives for agricultural emigration to South America: first, establish a base for overseas expansion; second, recover the trust of host countries; third, foster international cooperation; fourth, secure overseas farming lands; and fifth, import crops produced by Korean emigrants.⁵³ KODCO initially sought to revive Llajta Mauca and Luján in Argentina and San Pedro in Paraguay, and purchase a new establishment near Isca Yacú in Argentina. In the end, KODCO decided to keep San Pedro and purchased two other estates, San Javier in Argentina (2,714 hectares) and Tenó in Chile (185 hectares). These three estates were to host 30 Korean households from mid-1981 onwards for the new agricultural emigration project organised by the Korean government.

There was only one advertisement for agricultural emigration to South America, printed in a small corner of *Hankook Ilbo* on 11 January 1981. The national call came along with a demanding set of selection criteria, especially financial capabilities: suitable candidate must have been able to provide USD 15,000 towards an allotment plus airfare and some reserve funds.⁵⁴ KODCO distributed 469 application forms between 13 and 28 January, but received only 58 applications by the closing date of 30 January. Among them, almost 75% of applicants nominated Argentina as their country of choice. Nine applications hoped to travel to Chile and only six to Paraguay.⁵⁵ Despite the lukewarm response and after a month of close scrutiny, 34 successful candidates were contacted on 2 March 1981 and told to prepare for the next stage of intense training and preparation before departure to their new homes in South America.

According to a census of the 34 successful candidates, 12 households were allocated to San Javier in Argentina, six to San Pedro in Paraguay and 16 to Tenó in Chile.⁵⁶ Over 80% of successful candidates were in their 30s and 40s, almost all of them were married with children. More than half of the successful candidates had high school education, and a total of seven candidates held university degrees related to agricultural studies. They received an intensive eight week training course before

⁵² *Pöryojin namminongjang 6ch’ön3baengmanp’yöng*.

⁵³ *Ijebu iju gyehoek kwa, Nongjang hyönhwang* (Seoul, August 1989), 5.

⁵⁴ KODCO, *Nammi nongöbimin ch’ujingyehoek* (Seoul, February 1980), 2.

⁵⁵ KODCO, *Untitled: table of all applicants to agricultural emigration to South America: number of inscription, name, age, schooling, accompanying family, speciality, location of farm, experience in farming, second country of choice, points, observation* (Seoul, June 1981).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

leaving to South America.⁵⁷ KODCO's initial plan was that the immigrants would leave Seoul by mid June 1981 so as to acclimatise to the new environment in time for the year's sowing period. Yet numerous difficulties arose, most of them related to visas, delaying their departure until late 1981.⁵⁸ Before they left Korea though the emigrants were received at the Blue House by then President Chun Doo-hwan (1931–) on 24 November 1981:

At the reception President Chun said to go to South America, work as a team and establish a wonderful Korean colony. What is more, the government promised support to make [the agricultural emigration] successful. Because we had personally met the President, we were determined to turn the project into a success, not imagining what sort of reality was awaiting us ahead.⁵⁹

1. Teno, Chile

The emigrants to Chile had not been invited to the reception at the Blue House as KODCO was facing troubles in securing their visas. Tenó had been acquired in December 1980 after a suggestion from Yoon Kyoung-do, the then Korean Ambassador to Chile, following the alleged support from the Chilean Ministry of Interior to establish a Korean farm in Chile. On 5 January 1981 though, KODCO in Chile communicated upcoming amendments in Chilean immigration law, with possible restrictions on the intake of Asian immigration. Later that month, the branch office reported that the Chilean MOFA had promised to grant visas to a limited number of Korean immigrants as indentured workers. The condition was that the invitation had to come from the local owner of the estate, not from KODCO. This caused concern within the MOHW as the project had been planned as a group agricultural migration, and they feared another diplomatic fiasco if the Ministry was to proceed as initially intended. Eventually KODCO opted to send the candidates as indentured workers under the sponsorship of the former proprietor of Tenó. By June 1981, a large amount of money was transferred to the branch office for housing construction and other improvements, and President Chun was informed that the emigrants would depart Korea by July.

The fact was though that there was nothing concrete regarding the immigrants' visas; the branch office continued to state that it was in negotiations with the Chilean MOFA. The following months were tantalising for all involved, organisers and immigrants alike. It was said that a small number of powerful military men from the Chilean Cabinet presented their objection to Korean immigration, even after the supposed authorisation from the Chilean MOFA and verbal endorsement from the President himself. By then, Ambassador Yoon Kyoung-do had resigned from his position and was replaced by Cho Kwang-jae, who was actively involved in another round of negotiations with the Chilean MOFA, influential Cabinet members and military men to seek their cooperation. Eventually on 24 November 1981 the Embassy presented a formal request to the Chilean MOFA to grant visas to the "indentured" Korean workers. However, the request was officially rejected on 11 December 1981 on the grounds of the characteristics of the settlement area, overpopulation and the high unemployment that Chile was experiencing. In a desperate move, KODCO headquarters ordered the branch office to continue the negotiations with the Chilean MOFA for entry permission. In the interim, KODCO communicated to the candidate families the details of ongoing situation and promised to disburse a monthly allowance of KRW 46,000 per person starting from January 1982.

⁵⁷ The training covered the following courses: 52 hours of Saemaul education: provided by the Canaan Farmers School; 133 hours of agricultural education: provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry, RDA, and ADC. This included farming theory and practice; 40 hours of practical agriculture: provided by the Agricultural Machinery Training Centre in Suwon. Here the candidates were taught to operate agricultural machinery; 40 hours of basic Spanish: provided by KODCO; and 15 hours of information on the current South American local situation, travel tips and others, also provided by KODCO (KODCO, *Nammi nongöbija saöp ch'ujin kyehoek – an* [Seoul, June 1981]).

⁵⁸ MOHW, *Nammi siböm nongöbimin saöpch'ujin bogo* (Seoul: Taet'ongryöng pogosö, November 1981).

⁵⁹ Yoon Woo-sang.

Unfortunately, the branch office communicated in February 1982 that there had been no change in the decision from the Chilean MOFA.⁶⁰ All that was left to KODCO was to renegotiate with the candidates.

2. San Pedro, Paraguay

The narrative of San Pedro is very close to my heart as this is the place where I spent part of my childhood. As stated earlier, the situation in Chile forced the candidates for Tenó to make a final decision. KODCO came up with two options: either the candidates withdraw from the project or they emigrate to Paraguay or Argentina.⁶¹ Frustrated by endless waiting, my father and one other man requested for relocation to Paraguay. Later, two other candidates – one with a very young family and another one by himself because his wife refused to move overseas with their children – joined us on the journey to Paraguay. The final relocation of candidates happened promptly, and we left Kimpo International Airport on October 1982 to join five other families already settled in San Pedro.

San Pedro was purchased back in 1968 by the MOHW. After an unfortunate event which cost the lives of three young Korean immigrants, the farm had been practically abandoned until Chun Doo-hwan's government decided to reopen the farm in 1980. As with the rest of farms that appear in this paper, San Pedro had been named after its location. Sized 1,500 hectares area, it was situated on the district of Panambi (Department of San Pedro). There were two short rivers within the land and its rolling hills were still largely covered in rainforest when the project resumed in 1980. The farm was described as suitable for livestock farming and general crops. At the time of receiving the immigrants, only 22 hectares had been used for cultivation of peas, sesame seeds and chillies. The master plan though was to clear all 1,500 hectares and allocate 500 for agriculture, 800 for livestock farming and the rest use as communal and idle lands. There was no electricity, running water or any form of sewage system installed within the precinct, just like the rest of the district.

KODCO's initial idea was that under the administration of the KODCO branch manager, the farm would run as a cooperative – in other words, communal farming for the first three to five years. Afterwards, each household would work independently on a designated parcel of land and would officially own the land once they had fully repaid the government's loan. The first four households arrived in Asunción on 29 November 1981. In less than 24 hours of arrival the immigrants realised that conditions in San Pedro were very different to what they had thought and heard of in Korea, "all plans fell flat and crumbled to dust", and they decided to call for a meeting with the KODCO branch manager.⁶² At the meeting the immigrants raised all sort of issues, ranging from drinking water and sewage to children's education.⁶³ Even when KODCO promised to provide necessary farm machinery and a monthly allowance of USD 300 commencing from December, growing disillusionment was evident. The immigrants complained of increasing troubles with communal labour, the overall lack of a guiding framework for the project and the need to re-establish a plan which matched the reality of their situation. As for the dilemma regarding communal labour, the immigrants knew exactly where the problem lay: in their words, "differences in generation and skills, and a sense of superiority – it is frustrating to do group farming after having previously done individual farming".⁶⁴ Visiting neighbouring farms only increased their anxiety, and they were concerned that the arable land in San Pedro might not be ready for sowing.⁶⁵ Their brand new water tank already had some leaks and everything looked gloomy:

⁶⁰KODCO, *Ch'ille t'enonongjang nongōbiju ch'ujinsanghwang* (Seoul, 1982) and KODCO, *Nammi nongjang hyōnhwang – puch'ongjae ch'amgojaryoyong* (Seoul, November 1993).

⁶¹Park Young-soon, interview by the author, Asunción (Paraguay), 12 March 2007.

⁶²*Chagōp ilgi*, 5 December 1981.

⁶³*Ibid*, 6 December 1981.

⁶⁴*Ibid*, 8 December 1981.

⁶⁵*Ibid*, 9 and 12 December 1981.

Everything is at amiss, including a collaborative spirit [among immigrants]. KODCO and the Korean government are both responsible for the fact that [some immigrants] plan to return to Korea once they have reimbursed the agricultural expenses. Land clearing is still ongoing, and repayment of the loan could differ [from what initially the immigrants were told]. The most important thing of all is to regain stability in daily lives.

Despite the anxiety, the immigrants attempted to find some sense in everyday life: three families who were Christians gathered together to celebrate Sunday services; one family began to construct a hen house for poultry farming and others planted soy bean, wheat, corn and sesame seeds as experiments. Even when the immigrants did not hold high expectations, the outcome of the first year farming was highly disappointing due to a combination of factors such as heavy rain during the harvest period that ultimately ruined the crop, little interest in communal farming, as well as lack of experience in farming in a tropical region and in handling farming machinery.⁶⁶ In order to increase productivity, the immigrants requested to abandon communal farming in favour of the more familiar individual farming. Instead, KODCO divided the immigrants into agriculture, horticulture and livestock farming teams as a provisional measure, and promised the farmers that it would start with land surveying.⁶⁷

Then the second batch of immigrants – the ones who had hoped to travel to Chile – arrived in Asunción on 27 October 1982. Land clearing was still underway when the immigrants arrived at the farm. They found that “USD 25,000 worth of” red brick house had whitewashed walls, Styrofoam ceiling and a fireplace, and just plain red soil had been used as mortar to hold the bricks together. The newly arrived families were told to do the communal farming until they gained enough experience for the next sowing season. Once the honeymoon period was over, the second batch of immigrants joined the first in their quest to improve the situation. Nothing looked quite right:

I would spend the day worrying and start the next day worrying. Men would spend the day planning, but there seemed to be no answer. We were told that Korean government had invested USD 800,000 for us, but none of us asked where the money had been spent. Every night men would meet to exchange ideas but only shouts were exchanged... Finally it was decided in favour of communal farming and that the local representative of KODCO should look after the profit. But they were just words. Clever people would smartly rest, making all sort of excuses, and only the diligent would work day and night. It looked as if some people thought “seeing that this is a coop, the return will be the same whether I work or not”.⁶⁸

A report from KODCO’s branch office in Paraguay dated November 1982 recognised that San Pedro lacked acceptable living and farming conditions for the immigrants to settle into. In that report KODCO also provided an assessment of the first year of settlement, revealing two major problems with the project: Paraguay and San Pedro. Although agriculture was Paraguay’s principal industry, local demand and supply – thus the pricing – were strongly determined by the neighbouring countries. Having to clear thick woodland was also cited as a hindrance, because the process involved time and money. Political, economic and social conditions were below anyone’s expectations, and the supply of services such as electricity, water and road were restricted to urban areas. Then there were six concerns regarding San Pedro, the most worrying being difficulties of communal farming. According to the report, lack of experience in communal farming was the major source of conflict among farmers. Differences in specialties only triggered personal interests to prevail over cooperative interests, and understanding was minimal due to disparities in the labour force. Depriving people of their autonomy only caused distrust among farmers.⁶⁹

⁶⁶KODCO (P’aragwai chisa), *Sanp’edüro kaebaryõnhwang mit hyanghudaech’æk* (Asunción, February 1984).

⁶⁷KODCO (P’aragwai chisa), *Kongdong chagõbedaehan kyuyak* (Asunción, March 1982) and KODCO (P’aragwai chisa), *Õmmu hwaltong bogo* (Asunción, November 1982)

⁶⁸Kim In-soon, interview by the author, Asunción (Paraguay), 15 March 2007.

⁶⁹KODCO (P’aragwai chisa), *Õmmu hwaltong bogo*. Other issues included children’s education, substandard social conditions in rural Paraguay, little expertise in the handling of agricultural machinery, differences of opinion over farming methods and increasing angst about the debt repayment.

The KODCO branch office suggested major changes to the initial settlement plan, importantly a switch to individual farming. The shift to individual farming unfortunately exposed other problems such as extreme self-interest by some. The main issue was the use of farm machines, as often the immigrants needed them at the same time. Then there was the topic of profitable farming. One idea the farmers came up with was to export the produce to Korea, just like the Japanese immigrants exported their crop to their homeland. The response the immigrants received from local KODCO manager was that the option was not possible.⁷⁰ Individual farming also meant that each household was responsible for their own parcel of land. San Pedro constantly required more investment, and the farmers found themselves depending on the deposit they had made to KODCO towards the agricultural fund before they left Korea. In a desperate move to survive, people started to leave the farm. It is important to note though that many families tried to stay in San Pedro as long as they could, perhaps not on a full time basis. Whereas economic reasons were the prevailing impetus to leave San Pedro, children's education heavily influenced the decision to move on. In coming years they would all depart, leaving only three families on the farm.

How did Seoul see all of these developments? By late 1983 there were indications that the agricultural emigration to South America project was going nowhere. The initial plan of communal farming was a clear failure. Immigrants did not seem to have settled in within two years despite what the organisers called powerful settlement support, including monthly allowances. Seoul was unhappy with the immigrants' request for individual farming. In addition, the farmers were claiming back the money they had deposited towards the agricultural fund before they left Korea. Then there were the constant reports of the increasing number of families leaving the farm. The organisers of the project held a meeting in September 1983 with Korean Ambassadors to Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay to discuss agricultural emigration. Then in March 1984 a task force was established and sent to South America. One of their jobs was to assess and decide whether to continue or bring the project to a close. As far as San Pedro was concerned, the team advised returning the remaining agricultural fund deposit to those who had left the farm and terminating all relationship between them and the project. For the remaining farmers, the team urged establishing the terms and conditions of the loan repayment. Remarkably, the Overseas Cooperation Commission (*Haeoe Hyömyöök Wiwonhoe*) recognises in a report mistakes made by the organisers of the agricultural emigration. Accordingly, the absence of consultation and cooperation with receiving countries, lack of awareness of their immigration policy, the absence of a previous exchange of an immigration treaty, inadequate background research, poor care for the immigrants in South America and neglecting to use a transparent channel through which to transfer funds from Korea all caused unnecessary waste of time and resources.⁷¹ Six months after the report KODCO withdrew from South America and the Korean Embassies took over responsibility for the farms.

Life did not improve much in San Pedro after Seoul's resolution – if anything, things turned even grimmer as the political, economic and security situation in Paraguay worsened year after year. In the first few years, the immigrants exchanged US Dollars to fund their annual farming. Unfortunately, they were completely unaware of the extreme fluctuations in Paraguay's exchange market, and in spite of magnificent harvests, the immigrants would often end up broke. A small market with a large number of primary producers toiling in what they all considered to be profitable crops did not help the situation much either. Then tropical rains at the time of harvest and bushfires would add to their misery on more than one occasion. There was interest from a Korean silk company in investing in San Pedro but the company went bankrupt after it commenced operating in Paraguay. The immigrants sold whatever they could sell in order to survive and, in rare good years, repaid however much of loan they could afford to. By March 1990 the immigrants had only repaid one tenth of the loan. Seoul was not pleased with their performance. A report from KOICA dated September 1991 mentioned adding 19% of annual interest to the loan if the immigrants failed to make the repayment by the specified date, and taking possession of the land after three consecutive overdue payments.⁷² The immigrants did not

⁷⁰Park Young-soon.

⁷¹Haeoe Hyömyöök Wiwonhoe, *Nammi nongöbimin nongjangdaech'aek* (Seoul, June 1984), 7-10.

⁷²KOICA, *Nammi yugwannongjang kwallisilt'ae hyönhwang* (Seoul, November 1991), 13-14.

make the repayment schedule set by the authorities in Seoul, but they all managed to repay the loan. The glory was short lived as adherents of a national movement called *Campesinos sin tierra* – or, farmers without land, invaded San Pedro. The Campesinos often targeted small to mid-sized estates belonging to foreign residents and in this instance the immigrants were forced to surrender the land to Paraguayan authorities. The farm now belongs to two Brazilian residents in Paraguay, who constantly report being invaded by adherents of the same movement.

3. More images in sepia – from San Javier in Argentina

Why Argentina? Of course I chose Argentina because I really wanted to practise agriculture! You cannot compare the conditions that Argentina offers for agriculture with those of Paraguay or Chile. If anything, Argentina has 100 times more possibility for [agricultural] success than Chile or Paraguay...⁷³

As seen earlier, when KODCO made the national call for agricultural emigration Argentina was the undisputable favourite: it was one of the first South American countries to receive Korean immigrants since the 1960s and there was already an established Korean community. Also, Argentina was still considered the “Switzerland of South America” and the strong image of the Pampas and its fertile soil invited anyone to dare to dream of successful large scale farming.

San Javier was located in the Province of Santa Fé, approximately 650 kilometres northwest of the capital Buenos Aires. It was 2,714 hectares in size, and had been purchased in April 1981 at a cost of nearly USD 2 million. At the time, 1,300 hectares were reported as being cleared and ready for farming, 300 hectares were yet to be cleared and there was over 100 hectares of forest. An interesting aspect about San Javier was that almost 1,000 hectares was known to be wetland, therefore unsuitable for farming.⁷⁴ The idea though was to combine rice cultivation and livestock farming. Initially KODCO hoped to send 15 families to San Javier, but ultimately only 11 families travelled to the farm. Mathematically, over 100 hectares of land was to be allocated to each family and that was precisely what the immigrants were told.⁷⁵ The terms and conditions of the emigration were that in the first two years the immigrants would dedicate themselves to communal farming, receive a monthly stipend of USD 300 and repay the government loan over ten years. Koreans in San Javier were, in the words of my interviewee, “good and competent people who came to Argentina with a dream, eager to give it a go”.⁷⁶

Upon their arrival, and even when they attended the training program provided by KODCO, the farmers soon realised that agriculture in Argentina was significantly different to Korea, especially in terms of the size of the land and farming style. Indeed, it took no time for the immigrants to realise that the profitability and marketability of their dream 100 hectares were far lower than what they could get in return in Korea. In order to achieve some profit, they needed much more land and the capacity to work efficiently with modern tractors, harvesters, driers and silos. Unfortunately, San Javier did not have the resources they needed. Moreover, unfamiliarity in the management of such a large proportion of land caused confusion at all levels, KODCO and farmers alike, on what chores to do and what to delegate to labourers. The immigrants also found that the amounts of cleared land, as well as the promised amount of land per family were different to what they were told in Korea. From what my interviewees had to say, it seems as if the KODCO branch in Argentina had a very paternalistic style of management. Often questions were deflected and suggestions snubbed.

Things were very different to what I had imagined. I thought that [for the operation of the farm] our ideas would be listened to and acted on. Instead, everything was established under the

⁷³Yoo Sang-bong.

⁷⁴MOHW, *Nammi sibŏm nongŏbimin saŏpch'ujin kyehoek* (Seoul: Taet'ongryŏng pogosŏ, November 1981).

⁷⁵Yoon Woo-sang.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

auspices of the government, where KODCO was the manager and controller. Our ideas and opinions were plainly ignored... when we realised 100 hectares per household was unprofitable, we started to research the Argentinean reality, because it concerned our survival. Believe it or not, KODCO restricted our initiative...⁷⁷

Nonetheless, in the first two years the immigrants stuck to communal farming as directed by KODCO. From the early stages the immigrants indicated that they would much prefer individual farming, a suggestion that was turned down by KODCO. And just like in San Pedro in Paraguay, communal farming brought out the worst in terms of a cooperative spirit among the farmers:

We spent endless hours in meetings which would go until late at night. Communal farming was like a pirates' war, there was no cooperation. When a joint effort was required, some people would send local labourers to the field instead and they would go to have a siesta...⁷⁸

In spite of all the glitches the farmers did some rice farming in the first years with mixed success. However, the weight of repayment fell heavy on their shoulders. They wanted to pay off the debt but they were convinced it was nearly impossible through the methodology preached by KODCO. So at the end of the second year, they called a meeting in which they discussed all sort of issues related to the future of San Javier. In the end, three households decided to stay in San Javier to become the "farming team". The rest opted to combine commerce and livestock farming and became the "livestock team". The idea was to work and earn money in urban centres and come back to San Javier regularly to control the animals grazing in the meadows of San Javier. Accordingly, "everything was done under agreement" but "KODCO was not happy with the decision we made".⁷⁹

Soon trouble started for the "livestock team". The immigrants eventually discovered the real estate agency that the local KODCO office had used to purchase the farm and learned that the actual price of San Javier was USD 300,000 and not USD 2 million. So in the third year (1984), the immigrants proposed changing the conditions of the repayment based on the real value of the land and not the advised. KODCO rejected the suggestion.⁸⁰ Soon after the "livestock team" found out that they were branded as deserters who had abandoned the farm because they did not want to work. Apparently, they never received any communications about any activities regarding San Javier, and each time any officials visited the farm their image as deserters grew stronger. The "livestock team" tried to make their case to the authorities whenever they could, including sending a number of pleas to the Korean government without much success. The "livestock team" eventually received an unsigned notice from the Ambassador to vacate the farm.⁸¹ The notice came though as an order from the *Haeoe Hyömmnyök Wiwonhoe*, based on the report from the task force who travelled to South America between March and April 1984 to assess the situation of the agricultural emigration project. Just as in San Pedro in Paraguay, the task force recommended ending all ties with those who had left the land and denying them the right to reside on the farm, including keeping the animals in the precinct. In its place, they advised directing all efforts towards those who currently worked on the farm, and establishing the final amount and period of loan repayment. Finally, the task force suggested the possibility of another agricultural emigration in San Javier to replace the "deserters".⁸²

Expressing that "agricultural migration is not a desk project", my interviewees regret the lack of a long term vision for Korean agricultural emigration to South America. They were particularly disappointed about the way KODCO managed the whole project, especially the absence of background research and clear guidance, as well as the denial of autonomy in the first two years. They declared that the

⁷⁷Yoon Woo-sang.

⁷⁸Yoo Sang-bong.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰*Ibid.* Following the incident one immigrant wrote to the Korean government requesting an audit in relation to the correct land price of San Javier. He has never got any response back from Korea or the Korean embassy.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²KODCO, *Chöngbu daenammi nongöbimin nongjangdaech'aegae daehan choch'igyehoeksidal*, facsimile to KODCO manager in Argentina, 31 August 1984.

immigrants were best placed to make decisions as success had an immediate effect on the quality of their lives. Instead, one interviewee felt the experience was a waste of tax payers' money and people's lives. I found it particularly heart breaking when the same interviewee said that "the [Korean] government gave us a dream, but also destroyed that dream". It is clear that the immigrants were interested in settling in rural Argentina; after being forced out from the project, some of the "livestock team" worked hard to raise funds to purchase their own land and make their dream actually materialise. From that example, I find it hard to accept the claim from KODCO and some scholars that the majority of the farmers were people who used the project just to leave Korea and settle in cities. My interviewees said that Argentina is still a land of opportunities and felt sorry that Korean authorities had failed to work with Argentinean institutions specialising in agriculture in the making and developing of early stages of San Javier. As far as my interviewees were concerned, the organisers of the South American agricultural emigration should have thought more about the possibility of failure rather than taking a gamble that everything would succeed.

For my interviewees agricultural emigration to South America under the auspices of the Korean government was a failure. When I quizzed them about the reason, one interviewee expressed that the main setback occurred because the emigration was based on land development rather than a planned agricultural emigration. He felt as if the whole idea was to send people abroad, so once on the farm there was evidently people management but not agricultural development. His final words as I wrapped up the interview probably capture the feelings of many migrants who left Korea with the great hope of fulfilling their South American dream:

[On a personal level] I was very disappointed, because I dreamed of large scale farming, but all I found was an emigration business. Look, we are not deserters – everything was done under agreement. Yet we were treated as rubbish and all we want is our honour back...⁸³

San Javier now is the private property of the last Korean farmer who remained on the farm till the end. It is a successful rice farm, providing tonnes of *japonica* type of short grain per annum to Argentinean consumers.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented the cases of agricultural emigration to South America under the auspices of the Korean government. From the sources I have consulted to write this paper I consider there has been very little agriculture in the agricultural emigration. Instead, the project has been born and used to uplift the image of Korean government and of Koreans in South America. Certainly the project failed to deliver what the organisers were looking for: the creation of successful Korean settlements in South America with hard working Korean immigrants living in them. Unlike what the media and some scholars may insist, I believe the fault does not reside with the immigrants who lived the project but the organisers. If anything, the immigrants have been victims of misleading information and maladministration of the scheme from start to end. They were probably the ones genuinely interested in agricultural emigration, unlike the organisers.

⁸³Yoo Sang-bong.