

# Global Korean Community: How Is It Launched?

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## Introduction

As is the case of overseas Chinese, launching the concept, “Global Korean Community” is beneficial for both overseas Koreans and those living in South Korea, particularly in terms of economic links. Therefore, South Koreans are aggressively implementing various projects in order to prevail this concept among ethnic Koreans worldwide. South Korea has a will to be the leader of them, and it is quite likely to be achieved because its rival, North Korea, is relatively losing its influence to overseas Koreans as it declines its economic and diplomatic capability.

However, many of overseas Koreans wonder if South Korea has a right to be the leader of Global Korean Community merely because it is obtaining enough economic capability to take care of overseas Koreans. Historically, South Korean government has shown indifference attitudes toward overseas Koreans. For example, an South Korean ex-Foreign minister told the Japanese counterpart that he would not like to discuss over the legal status of Korean nationals in Japan because he thought they are not Koreans any more. This enraged many Korean nationals in Japan because of his irresponsible attitude. Discrepancies of cultural background between overseas Koreans and South Koreans (those born and raised in South Korea) are getting to be more and more larger.

In this paper, I will, first, describe characteristics of overseas Koreans. The meaning of 5.7 million overseas populations will be referred to. Then, I will review what can be obstacles for launching Global Korean Community. These include mental barriers as well as political ones. Finally, I will suggest what South Korean government should do to facilitate to launch Global Korean Community. By doing so, I will attempt to analyze this issue from perspectives of overseas Koreans.

## Characteristics of Overseas Korean

The number of overseas Korean has reached approximately 5.7 million. This number is the fourth largest in the world, next to Chinese, Israeli and Italian. Koreans’ migrations have



little communication with South Korea and among themselves. In this situation, their cultural gap between overseas Koreans and South Koreans has become larger and larger.

The history of Korean migration to overseas is no more than 150 years. It began in the 1860s because of continuous famine in the Korean Peninsula at that time. Several hundreds of Korean peasants mostly in Hamgyeongdo province moved to live in Russian Far East. Initially, most of them had worked as tenant peasants; however, those who could obtain Russian nationality became owner-peasants. They were relatively well off because their rights to own lands were legally guaranteed by Russian government instead of paying tax. In 1908, the number of Korean residents in Russian Far East reached more than 520,000.

Migration of Korean peasants to Northeast China began in the 1960s. As the immigrants to Russian Far East, initial immigrants to Northeast China occurred because of continuous famine, then. Due to geographical vicinity, a huge number of Korean peasants crossed the border, and the number reached 220,000 in 1904. However, the Korean immigrants drastically increased after Japan triggered the September Eighteenth Incident in 1932. Japan intended to own this area in order to make Northeast China its food-supplying base. Because of the Government General's compulsory migration policy in order to supply labor force in this area, the number of Korean residents in Northeast China rapidly increased to more than 1.6 million in 1945.

In 1945, the number of Koreans in Japan was approximately 2.1 million. Among them, 700,000 remained in Japan and constituted their own community. However, linkage among Koreans is quite weak because of historical discrimination against Koreans as well as the authorities' passive attitude to guarantee the ethnic cultural education in school. Furthermore, the number of Koreans in Japan shows a drastic decrease since Japanese government has recently loosened its naturalization standard. By this change, 8,000 Korean descendents are naturalizing to Japan every year.

The newest but the largest migration has been done to the US. Due to the Hart-Celler Act in 1952, people from Asian countries gained opportunities to migrate to the US. Since then, Korea was assigned a quota of 20,000 new immigrants every year. Thirty-five years later, the number of Korean immigrants in the US increased to 2,123,167, sharing more than one thirds of total overseas Korean population. A distinct characteristic of these immigrants is that they are relatively well off and educated before departing from Korea.

Although overwhelming majority of overseas Koreans live in the US, China, Japan and the former-Soviet Union (CIS), they diffuse to live in more than 150 nations. This tendency is quite similar to the migrations of Chinese and Israeli populations. Although they diffuse throughout the world, Chinese population densely reside in Southeast Asia, and Israel population in the US's East Coast.

### **Obstacles for Global Korean Community**

As seen above, characteristics and histories of overseas Koreans are extremely diverse. Depending on where s/he lives in and what s/he was educated, her/his cultural values or business practices become different from each other in spite of the same ethnicity. In order to constitute Global Korean Community, this situation imposes many obstacles for

constituting global Korean community. In this chapter, I will describe what can be the obstacles.

### *1) Identity Crisis*

In many nations, the majority of overseas Koreans have already become second, third or even fourth generation. Since most of them have been educated under respective nations' educational system, it is hard for them to preserve Korean identity. Furthermore, many overseas Koreans are passive to educate their children Korean or their culture. This is because some of them were afraid of revealing their ethnicity to their neighbors, or because some parents had apathy to educate Korean identity to their children. In this situation, it is hard for children of overseas Koreans to think that they are alienated by both Korea and their living nations.

### *2) South Koreans' Perspective toward Overseas Koreans*

Many of South Korean people have negative images against overseas Koreans. Because of strong Confucian influence, Korean people regard leaving from one's place of origin as sin or betray of their nation; therefore, their images against overseas Koreans naturally tend to be negative. At the same time, this logic justifies South Koreans' thinking that they are the only group being able to reasonably represent Korean ethnicity. In addition, South Korea's rapid economic growth as well as their relative economic superiority to North Korea, reinforces this idea. Therefore, South Koreans tend to think that they are superior to the rest of Korean people living in the world.

### *3) Overseas Koreans' Perspective toward South Koreans*

Some overseas Koreans in developed nations tend to identify Korea as inferior to their living nations. This is particularly true to those living in the US and Japan. Similarly, people in South Korea are receiving strong capitalism influence. These perspectives cause to form a hierarchy, based on respective nation's economic level. Although this does not directly decide each person's qualification, one cannot deny a fact that an invisible psychological barrier among Koreans living in different nations is formed.

### *4) Mutual Distrust among Koreans*

Mutual distrusts between South Korean people and overseas Koreans or among overseas Koreans themselves are raised in this circumstance. Because of the Cold War and different political systems among nations where overseas Koreans live, the history of communication among South Koreans and overseas Koreans is relatively a short. Due to global economic integration, however, opportunities for South Korean businesspersons working with overseas Korean as business partner or employee are more and more increasing. Because of the same ethnicity and language, South Korean businesspersons initially tend to rely on overseas Koreans when starting business abroad. In case of China, South Korean subsidiaries in China initially employed many ethnic Koreans in China; however, many South Korean businesspersons are complaining of their attitude and performance, mainly because of their cultural gap. Since ethnic Korean employees are educated in Chinese educational system, they have Chinese cultural background as well as Korean one. However, Korean businesspersons tend to expect that they can share

exactly the same value as that of South Koreans. Meanwhile, ethnic Korean employees also complain of their discriminated treatment from that of South Korean employees although the former share the same Korean ethnicity as the latter does.

*5) Growing Conflicts between Old and New Korean Immigrants*

Lacks of understanding of customs or tradition of living nations, new immigrants tend to cause troubles, and this is also true to overseas Koreans. It is certain that social adjustment needs time. This can be a cause of conflicts between overseas Koreans living abroad for several generation and those migrating relatively recently. Since new Korean residents have closer ties with South Korean culture, they tend to regard old Korean residents inferior to them. Old Koreans residents, particularly living in developed nations, meanwhile, think that they are superior to new immigrants because their living nations' cultural level is higher than that of South Korea. In Japan, recent increase of new Korean immigrants has made several new Korean towns, and their roles are critically contributing to facilitate understanding of Korean culture in Japan. However, some new immigrants cause troubles in Japanese society, such as dumping garbage in the street. Old Korean residents regard themselves as victim because they are afraid of being damaged their images in Japanese society.

*6) Lack of South Korea' s Overseas Korean Policy*

Legal framework and social understanding of overseas Korean in South Korea still remain in premature level. Due to South Korea' s economic growth, many overseas Koreans are returning to South Korea. In order to protect legal status and implementation of property rights of returning overseas Koreans, legal framework and its implementation in South Korean society should be pursued. In spite of recent government' s effort, however, the rate of its implementation remains quite low. Furthermore, the treatment of returning overseas Koreans in South Korea has shown some contradictions. For example, South Korean government has issued a law giving foreign residents voting rights in district level elections. However, overseas Koreans living in South Korea has been excluded from this law. These problems happen because of South Korea' s lack of experiences. The reasons of lack of experiences can be explained by the legacy of the Cold War framework, disturbing South Koreans to gain opportunities to live with overseas Koreans, and it is difficult for South Korean government to incorporate overseas Koreans in legal framework because of its complicated international relations with neighboring nations. In addition, conflicts among bureaucrats over who should administrate overseas Koreans frustrates to set the overseas Korean policies, particularly attempts of the establishment of Ministry of Overseas Korean Affairs.

*7) Possible Influx of Overseas Koreans into South Korea*

A number of North Korean people are currently running into foreign embassies in China seek asylum to

**Table 2 Number of North Korean Asylums Entering South Korea (As of October, 2000)**

Year	Number	Year	Number
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Before 1989	607	1995	41
1990	9	1996	56
1991	9	1997	85
1992	8	1998	71
1993	8	1999	149
1994	52	2000.10	212

*Source: 2000 Dong' il Baekseo (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2000) p 131.*

South Korea. Similarly, the number of illegal ethnic Korean workers is more and more increasing in South Korea. Since South Korean labor market faces a shortage of manual labor, it is easy for them to find occupations in South Korea. South Korean government, however, has not been able to implement an effective remedy. In the case of Japan, the government has opened its immigration to Japanese descendents living in Latin American nations in order to settle serious labor shortage in factories. However, South Korea is not likely to be able to take the same policy to ethnic Chinese or other overseas Koreans because doing so will cause influx of overseas Koreans in China, Russia or possibly North Korea, and South Korea will make its international relations difficult.

#### *8) Complicated International Relations*

Northeast Asia is the area in which there still firmly remain the Cold War structure. North Korea and China have different political system from South Korean one, and the former Soviet Union was collapsed no more than ten years ago. Existence of ethnic Korean populations in Northeast China and Russian Far East as well as those in North Korea can be a cause of aggravating South Korea' s international relations with those adjacent nations. Since people living in these areas are scarce, both Chinese and Russian governments regard these Korean populations as important working force. South Koreans have not being able to present an aggressive overseas Korean policy because its implementation will lead the populations to influx to South Korea. Since those ethnic Korean populations have Chinese or Russian nationality, it is careful for South Korean government to approach these people because these governments would think that South Korean government' s interventions to their Korean population hurt their authorities.

#### **For Launching Global Korean Community**

In spite of many difficulties, everyone perceives the benefits of global Korean community. Along with its rapid economic growth, South Korea is now obtaining capability to coordinate this new community. Utilization of this large number of overseas residents will enhance South Korea' s competency. Global Korean Community will help increasing the amount of business transaction give South Koreans and give larger opportunities to do business abroad than before. Having close communicational ties between South Koreans and overseas Koreans would contribute to forge South Korea' s security.

The concept of Global Korean Community must be beneficial for both South Koreans and overseas Koreans. Therefore, South Korean government needs to show a concrete design to launch this concept; at the same time, it needs to make efforts to overcome overseas Koreans' distrusts. For example, the Committee for Counseling Overseas Korean Policy (*jaewoekukmin chongch' aek shimui wuiwonhoe*) in 1985 worked in order to discuss 1) support for Korean immigrants' settlement in their immigrating nations, 2) improvement of overseas Koreans' legal and social status, 3) pursuing overseas Koreans' close connection with South Korea, 4) support for overseas Koreans' economic activities inside and outside South Korea and 5) other supports for protecting and improving overseas Koreans' rights inside and outside Korea. Historically, discussions over overseas Korean policies have been done under this concept.

Although South Korean government has had intentions to set administrative management of overseas Koreans since the 1960s, it repeatedly frustrated because of the obstacles from internal and external reasons mentioned as above. However, drastic changes of South Korea's international relations and its rapid economic growth increase the necessity of managing overseas Korean affairs. Particularly, South Korea's economic growth attracts overseas Koreans to return their place of origin. Similarly, their descendents are getting to possess positive image to their ethnicity.

In this circumstance, Overseas Korean Foundation (*jaewoe kukmin jaedan*) was found in 1997. This is not established in the government in order to avoid diplomatic problems between South Korean and its neighboring nations. In spite of its status, however, it virtually represents the governmental administration of overseas Korean affairs. It is certain that the establishment of this foundation itself is a great progress; however, overseas Koreans are not satisfied with its limited role. Inconvenience of overseas Koreans' civil petitions has not been solved in spite of the existence of this organization. Due to increasing number of overseas Koreans visiting and living to South Korea, it is necessary to settle this inconvenience. This is particularly important because many overseas Koreans lack of knowledge of South Korean society as well as its language. Overseas Korean Foundation should play a role of facilitator to settle their civil petitions.

Legal framework and social understanding of overseas Koreans should be pursued, as well. Although aggressive involvement in overseas Korean affairs can cause diplomatic difficulties, South Korean government still have many things to do as far as International law and living nations' law allow. In this sense, policies relating to the improvement of overseas Koreans status in South Korea are good to start from.

At the same time, South Korean people should share knowledge of status of overseas Koreans as well as that of foreigners. Lack of this knowledge among South Korean people imposes a lot of difficulties to overseas Koreans and foreigners in doing social activities, such as opening bank transactions or buying and selling real estates. This problem is particularly serious these transactions have no legal and administrative hazard.

Traditional views toward overseas Koreans should be changed. People in Korea have a tendency to value overseas Koreans based on their proficiency in Korean. However, this attitude is quite unfair because overseas Koreans have to make extensive efforts as well as some investments to learn Korean whereas people in South Korea have no difficulty in doing so. This way of thinking derives from lack of international understanding. In order to improve this situation, some educational reforms should be pursued. Among these, world

history should be assigned more time to help international understanding. Korean educational curriculums are strongly influenced by that of 1970s. One of the characteristics of this old curriculum is that it drastically cut the amount of time of world history. Because of this influence, current curriculums in middle school and high school levels assign extremely short amount of time. They prevent children gaining opportunities for understanding international society and culture. At the same time, the curriculums deprive children of opportunities for understanding the history and circumstance of overseas Koreans. .

Another educational implementation should be done to children of overseas Koreans. This is to teach them merits of bilingual. Minority children facing identity crisis change their negative and passive attitudes when receiving merits of biculture and bilingual. Furthermore, this contributes to improve their qualification in society, allowing them to gain better opportunities than before. This change is also beneficial for South Korean people because overseas Koreans with biculture can be good partners to work with South Koreans, at the same time, they can play a role of bridge between South Korea and their living nations. There exists a difficulty in bicultural education for overseas Koreans because South Korea's attempts to educate Korean ethnicity to overseas Koreans can make its international relations difficult. However, cultural and language programs in and outside South Korea should be done continuously. What should be noted is that it is necessary to increase the number of instructors for these programs outside Korea because they play a critical role of ethnic education.

## **Conclusion**

It is not likely that South Korea will lose a capability to lead overseas Korean affairs. Despite Northeast Asia's complicated international relations, South Korea is more and more increasing its influence to overseas Korean communities worldwide. However, South Koreans should remind a fact that overseas Koreans are neither contract labors nor servants. Unless abandoning their hierarchical thinking based on economic capability, South Koreans will not be able to obtain trust from overseas Koreans. In order to remove mutual distrust, both South Koreans and overseas Koreans should make continuous efforts.

The success of 2002 FIFA Korea-Japan World Cup as a co-host gave Korean people precious experiences to unite each other regardless of age, gender, education, and place of living. Through this experience, many South Korean people began understanding merits of international community as well as confidence in themselves. It is likely that their impervious attitude toward overseas Koreans and foreigners will also change. What I would like to note is a fact that this will contribute to establish better South Korean society than before and that people in South Korea are the beneficiaries of it.