

*Alternative Views: Korean Identity*

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Spring 2020

## Introduction

Identity plays a significant role in everyone's life. It shapes our values and leads us to discover our authentic selves. These values then dictate our choices and ultimately reflect who we are as individuals. Similarly, ethnic identity plays a crucial role in defining our personal identity. In fact, the sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group is often multidimensional and complex at the individual level. South Korea is a nation with approximately 7 million people living in diaspora and yet still struggles to remain welcoming or inclusive of their international ethnic community. The main issue for this separation is South Korea's refusal to view the Korean Diaspora as Korean. South Koreans rely heavily on a historical, traditional and cultural premise to define Korean identity but is this the only perspective that matters when defining Korean identity? How is Korean Identity defined differently and/or similarly by other ethnic Korean (diaspora) groups and Why is it important that South Koreans integrate and consider these alternative views into their definition and conception of Korean identity?

In this paper, I argue that although there are non-negotiables and necessary foundations in defining Korean Identity, such as having the Korean bloodline, there are also conflicting and opposing perspectives between South Koreans and Korean diaspora groups when defining Korean identity. For instance, "living in Korea for most of one's life" or "maintaining Korean nationality" may be impossible tasks for multiple ethnic Koreans who were born in another country and never visited Korea. In addition, there are also conflicting perspectives among the Korean diaspora individuals themselves. While Korean Japanese, Ryu Esen relies on ethnic inheritance and practical methods for reaffirming her Korean Identity, Korean-Uzbekistan, Yu

Sasha, depends on obtaining his Korean Nationality to confirm his Korean Identity. In essence, there is no singular definition of Korean identity for the Korean Diaspora.

Moreso, it is important that South Koreans are aware and take these alternative perspectives into consideration because without them, their understanding of Korean identity as a whole is incomplete. Alternate perspectives from the Korean Diaspora allow for greater understanding and knowledge about Korean identity. Ultimately bringing about the possibility of finding a common ground or solution to existing conflicts between South Koreans and the Korean diaspora.

I begin my exploration of this topic with a literature review highlighting existing research about Korean diasporas and Korean identity. I will then position my research among these works and reveal the different approach of my investigation. Following the literature review, I will delve into the history and origins of Korean identity to determine where the notion of identity traces back to and how that affects the conception of contemporary Korean identity today. Furthermore, I will analyze the South Korean definition of Korean identity through the use of public surveys and journals while focusing on the main factors that influence and shape this perspective. Eventually, I will present and analyze several varied perspectives on Korean identity utilizing video interviews of a select group of interviewees part of the Korean Diaspora. This chapter will entail the observation and review of their personal experience and opinion on what defines Korean Identity. Throughout this section I will carefully analyze the responses of each interviewee by comparing findings, including the South Korean perspective. Lastly, to conclude this paper I will synthesize my findings and readdress the question: Why is it important that

South Koreans integrate and consider these alternative views into their definition and conception of Korean identity?

### **Literature Review**

The nature of the relationship between South Korean citizens and the Korean diaspora is a popular topic among scholars of both the old and new generation. Similarly, the exploration of Korean national and cultural identity is another interesting area of study among historians and other experts who investigate its origins. This is not surprising, considering that the Korean diaspora began its formation in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Tsuda, 2019).

There is a lot of research regarding the interaction between the diaspora and Korea. More specifically, a trend in past studies consists of Korea's engagement efforts through policy work with the Korean Diaspora. A great example is the book *"Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland"* by Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song. A study funded by the Korean Government that mainly touches base on the causes of diasporic return, engagement policies, and showcasing the experiences of returning diasporas in South Korean Society. The findings suggest that despite there being little to no effort in the past, throughout the years South Korea has improved their engagement with the Diaspora in a more direct way by providing organized activities and experiences for visiting ethnic Koreans (Tsuda, 2019). This study does a great job in submerging itself into the Diasporic community to understand their perspective and issues with the Korean Society they encounter everyday. In my research, I not only hope to capture a new understanding of the Korean Diaspora as Tsuda and Song's work does but also address a more specific question and scope regarding what the diaspora's perspective is on Korean identity. Instead of evaluating

how the diasporic identity interacts with Korean society after a period of separation, my research is a direct analysis on what it means to be ethnic-Korean for this group, how they define the ethnic-identity they are born with.

Furthmore, another overarching trend in this area of study is a theme of exclusionism and discrimination of ethnic Korean groups. This type of study is even more common than the prior due to the recurring negative interactions and experiences the Diaspora group has encountered. On one side are studies focused on the discrimination and exclusionism happening in thier home countries and the other is happening in Korean society. For example, a study by David Chapman suggests that several Zainichi Korean living in Japan ( approximately 824,000 today )<sup>1</sup> encounter significant discrimination that affects their daily life descisions. Chapman also found that when Zainichi Korean attempted to find closure and/or acceptance by returning to their ‘homeland’, they were treated in the same unfavorable manner (Chapman, 2009). Although my research may highlight these conditions as well, I will investigate the Korean Japanese population who have pursued their ethnic-Korean heritage and have had a clear interpretation of their Korean Identity.

In contrast there has also been studies that provide a different, more positive sentiment towards living in Korea as part of the Diaspora. In her study of *Demographic Changes and their Political Impact(2015)*, Katharine Moon discusses multiculturalism and it’s growing presence in South Korea. She mentions Private Jae-min Lebatard, aged 21 who was born in Cheongju to a Korean mother and a French father. Moon highlights that “he became the first mixed-ethnic member of the ROK military to serve as a border guard at the DMZ in Paju in February, 2015. As a dual citizen, he could have given up his Korean citizenship to avoid military service, but he

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<sup>1</sup>Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018

chose to be conscripted because he wanted to live as a ‘true’ Korean” (Moon, 2015). Moon’s study provides us with an insight on the Diaspora’s perspective on how ethnicity identity plays a main role in decision making for the future.

The final similar area of study for Korean identity is analyzing the changes and effects that external/surrounding circumstances have on the personal identity of diaspora Koreans. These studies have less to do with the interaction with South Koreans directly and more to do with exploring the circumstances that help shape their ethnic identity. The Korea Social Science Data Archive continuously updates its website with collected data for varying studies. As an example, Hanyang University conducted a survey in 2007 called “the Korean media use and identity among Korean-American teenagers in the U.S”. This survey was used to understand the effects that exposure to Korean Media had on ethnic Korean teenagers abroad. In other words, in what ways does South Korea still have an effect on the diaspora group when developing their identity.

Considering all the previously mentioned studies, in this paper I engage with South Korean conducted surveys, peer reviewed journals and books that address Korean identity and define its nature in a native South Korean perspective. Nonetheless, I also engage with the perspectives and opinions of individuals part of the Korean Diaspora through the study and research of video interviews. Despite the number of studies conducted around Korean Diaspora groups there are none that solely focus on defining Korean identity through direct accounts from a young generation that has fully experienced the dramatic political and social shifts of contemporary South Korea. This study’s goal is not only to challenge the definition of Korean identity but also to offer more insight in the field of Korean Identity. Through the personal

accounts of ethnic Koreans from different parts of the world (America, China, Japan, etc) I hope that this study would further expand the notion of ethnic identity.

As a Latin-American with family origin in Honduras, I have also encountered this sense of belonging to my ethnic-homeland. Although I was born and raised in the United States my cultural background forces me to engage in the conversation of Honduran identity. My definition of Honduran identity, although different from that of a native Honduran, does not undermine my sense of belonging to this ethnic group nor does it prevent me from identifying as Honduran. Through this study I strive to let ethnic Koreans be heard and open a space to voice their perspective on Korean identity that may or may not conflict with that of the South Korean public.

### **The Origins of South Korean Identity**

South Korean Identity is an evolving notion that adapts to its highly globalized environment, nonetheless it is in constant conflict with historical and traditional values. A strong bond to historical legitimacy and thousands of years of tradition often outweighs modern conceptions of South Korean Identity. It is evident that the past plays a significant role in present South Korean society. Without history and tradition, South Korea struggles to form an identity because it is unable to exercise the “politics of difference and exclusion”. (Bhaba, 1994; Hall, 1993, 1996; Butler, 1993). Meaning, Korea is unable to construct its identity with historical content that allows it to distinguish itself from “what it is not and exclude the other” (So, 2012). Thus, it is impossible to separate Korean history from identity to understand the origin of South Korean Identity. Instead we must first understand the major historical events that took part in

shaping Korean identity narratives in the past, which will then help us to better understand modern conceptions of South Korean Identity today.

To begin, Korean identity was formed through extreme changes to its society form and character. These changes have also been described as, “complex relationships with modernity, colonialism and nationalism” (Yong-Hwa, 2006). Essentially, these were the main historical events that directed the constant transformation of Korean Identity. However, before modernity the earliest notion of self-identity was based on the Tan’gun legend. It emphasized a ‘pure Korean race’ ideal that stemmed from the belief that Tan’gun, the founder of Ancient Korea’s first kingdom, was the first descendant of the Korean People that came from the heavens. The Tan’gun legend therefore reaffirmed a pure Korean race ideal that helped distinguish Korea from neighboring nations. Correspondingly, during this period Ancient Korea began to develop a “national consciousness” or “spirit of independence” as they fought back a series of “foreign invasions” from China and Japan in effort to preserve Korean identity (Pai, 2000). These battles against Chinese dynasties of the Sui (612) and Tang (645), Japanese warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi(1592-97), the Mongols(1231-73) and persistent western nations created a national heroes rhetoric that further fueled Ancient Korea’s consciousness and independence spirit as a homogenous race (Pai, 2000).

However, forced to adapt to changing power dynamics, in the 1860s, Ancient Korea moved towards modernity while applying the “confucian notion of civilization” which would later be replaced by the “western notion of civilization”. East Asia first defined civilizations as “countries that practiced Confucian morals and ethics”, while Western countries defined civilizations as “centrality and universality” through “European concepts of progress”

(Yong-Hwa, 2006). Although Korea's modernization began with following eastern ideals they were quickly clouded by western influence that overpowered them. Eventually, the establishment of the Gabo Reforms in 1894, would abolish the traditional education system based heavily on confucian standards. By the end of the 19th century, the education system would be completely westernized in effort to produce "modern citizens that would contribute to national development" (So, 2012). Nonetheless, these uncompromising changes failed to convince conservative powers that "clung to Confucian traditions" as the dominant norm in Korean society. As a result, Korea began to form a distorted sense of identity through co-existing eastern and western ideals of modernity.

Unfortunately, Choson Korea's effort to modernize was drastically interrupted by Imperial Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910. In a rapid change of events, Korea was unwillingly stripped from their sovereignty and under Japan's rule for 35 years, until 1945 (So, 2012). During the colonial period, Korean people were deprived of their culture, language, independence and to an extent, their humanity. Beginning with a heavy military policy (*budan seiji*) utilized by Imperial Japan to exercise extreme authority over Korean society. Then progressing towards the Comfort women issue, which forced Korean women into sexual slavery (Cummings, 2005). Despite early Korean activists' efforts against oppression, Imperial Japan continued to enforce their supremacist authority on Korean society by replacing all Korean education and culture practices with those of Japanese society. In other words, Korean people were required to speak the Japanese language, adopt Japanese names and worship at Shinto Shrines<sup>2</sup>(Cummings, 2005). The colonial period unquestionably transformed Korea's notion of

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<sup>2</sup> Shinto Shrines were strictly used in Japan to worship as part of a religious practice. (Cummings, 2005)

self-identity and ability to fight for independence. In addition, the colonial period brought about the formation of the Korean diaspora in Japan, which further complicated the meaning of Korean identity for Koreans living outside of their own country and culture. By the end of the colonial period, there was no clear direction for Koreans to turn to besides the aiding forces. At this time, Korea struggled to build itself up and exercise any type of authority in the hands of the United States and the Soviet Union.

The division of the 38th parallel, a rash decision by the United States to settle Korea's state after the war, began a political division between the North and the South. This in fact, is better defined as a political war between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States supported a democratic government in opposition to the Soviet's communist ideals. This political battle encouraged the U.S. to maintain an active military government on Korean soil from 1945 to 1948 in order to prevent opposing political views from arising (Cummings, 2005). Shortly after the distribution of the North and the South of Korea, the Korean War of 1950 that would officially break the nation apart was initiated.

The Korean War brought about a wave of self-criticism and urgency to escape poverty for Korean citizens. As a result, soon after, the military coup in 1961 was formed and South Korea was under authoritarian regime by President Park Chung Hee. The regime proved successful in financial terms as rapid economic growth and modernization demonstrated recovery from the past hardships of the Korean War. Unfortunately, this also entailed a rejection of traditional culture through the New Community Movement (Kyung-Koo, 2003). Fast forwarding a bit to the late 1990s, there were writers who further experimented with the notion of Koreanness in effort to achieve economic prosperity. For instance, Yi Meon-u, a professor of industrial engineering,

promoted a *sinbaram*(wind of God) “distinctive quality of Koreans that needed to be enlivened to regain the spectacular performance for which the Korean economy was renowned” (Kyung-Koo, 2003). Furthermore, Korean identity was challenged during the democratization period. It resulted in adapting and leaning towards a western ideal while also leaving behind confucian values. The South Korean public battled to define Korean Identity solely based on democratic national rhetoric and therefore it was reinforced by traditional and historical premises. In modern times in South Korea, Korean identity continues to be a battle between both past factors and present changing conditions and opinions.

### **South Korean Perspective on Korean Identity**

The subject of Korean identity for South Koreans relies on a strong reference to Korean national identity. In general, national identity is a term loosely defined as “a person’s belief or emotion towards a country or a nation to which she or he belongs” (Wiggins et. al., 1994). However, Kyung Koo suggests that national culture is the true driving factor in establishing a collective identity in Korea. The notion of national culture “ presupposes the homogeneity and integration of people” and ignores the “interaction and mutual influence among cultures” (Kyung-Koo, 2003).

Moreover, national culture is a product of cultural nationalism which is an “effort to revitalize the national community through creating, maintaining and strengthening the nation-state’s cultural identity” through its “unique history and culture and collective solidarity”(Kyung-Koo, 2003). In essence, by utilizing national culture as a foundation for Korean identity, there is a peculiar separation between Koreans and other people. In other words,

“all Koreans are alike” and “they are different from other people” (Kyung-Koo, 2003). As a result of national culture, Koreans have relied on historical, traditional, and cultural norms to define their identity but more recent cases have demonstrated a change in attitude towards defining “Koreanness”.

British historical sociologist, Anthony Smith, breaks national identity down into two sections, the ethnic component and civic component (Kim, 2014). Adhering to Smith's two-section format regarding national identity, the East Asia Institute surveyed the Korean public in 2005 and 2010. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

*“A Korean is someone who:*

- (1) is born in Korea*
- (2) has the Korean bloodline*
- (3) lives in Korea for most of one's life.*

*A Korean is someone who:*

- (4) possesses Korean nationality*
- (5) is able to speak and write the Korean language*
- (6) abides by the Korean political and legal system*
- (7) understands the Korean traditions” - Kang and Lee, 2011*

In 2013, the Asan Daily Poll posed the same questions to the South Korean public. In order to observe the transformation and changes from the results of 2005 and 2010 to the ones of 2013, researcher Jiyeon Kim formulated *Table 1*, where the survey statements are rated by importance. If the statement is considered high in importance the respondent would mark it *important*,

whereas if the statement is less important or low in rating the respondent would mark it *not important*. The 2013 results surprisingly showed that the factors with the most changes were an increased importance for , “abiding by the Korean political and legal system” in contrast to the decrease in importance for “having the Korean bloodline”. That is to say, there was a dramatic drop of support towards the Tan’gun myth or single lineage ideal.

Table 1. Preconditions for Koreanness			
	Year	Important	Not important
<b>ETHNIC COMPONENT</b>			
Being born in Korea	2005	81.9	17.7
	2010	87.7	12.2
	2013	69.0	27.9
Having the Korean bloodline	2005	80.9	18.3
	2010	84.1	15.4
	2013	65.8	30.4
Living in Korea for most of one's life	2005	64.6	34.7
	2010	78.2	21.5
	2013	66.1	30.2
<b>CIVIC COMPONENT</b>			
Maintaining Korean nationality	2005	88.2	11.1
	2010	89.4	10.5
	2013	88.4	9.1
Being able to speak and write in Korean	2005	87.0	12.6
	2010	87.8	12.2
	2013	91.7	6.7
Abiding by the Korean political and legal system	2005	77.5	20.6
	2010	87.3	12.4
	2013	93.4	4.2
Understanding Korean traditions	2005	80.9	18.3
	2010	85.9	14
	2013	91.5	6.1

At the same time, this seemed to be an “impossible” rejection of historical lineage. The rejection of the Tan’gun legend by the South Korean public may also be considered an attempt to

separate South Korean citizens from North Korean citizens. This can be seen in the results similar to “having korean bloodline”, the “being born in korea” component decreased in importance dramatically from 81.9 percent in 2005 to 69.0 percent in 2013. “Living in Korea for most of one’s life” was also low in percentage at 66.1 percent for 2013. Few changes occurred in civic identity, if not increased in importance from past years. “Approximately 88 percent of respondents answered that keeping Korean nationality was important, which is only a 1 percent drop from the 10 percent result. The ability to use the Korean language remained important as well, with 91.7 percent of respondents in agreement” (Kim, 2014).

Table 2. Preconditions for Koreanness: by Age Groups						
		20s	30s	40s	50s	60s or over
<b>ETHNIC COMPONENT</b>						
Being born in Korea	Important	56.5	64.3	68.5	80.3	88.1
	Not Important	43.5	35.7	31.5	19.7	11.9
Having the Korean bloodline	Important	56.9	63.8	59.3	75.0	87.2
	Not Important	43.1	36.2	40.7	25.0	12.8
Living in Korea for most of one’s life	Important	61.0	61.4	67.8	75.1	78.5
	Not Important	39.0	38.6	32.2	24.9	21.5
<b>CIVIC COMPONENT</b>						
Maintaining Korean nationality	Important	90.1	86.8	89.4	93.3	96.6
	Not Important	9.9	13.2	10.6	6.7	3.5
Being able to speak and write in Korean	Important	92.0	93.8	90.9	94.2	95.5
	Not Important	8.0	6.2	9.1	5.8	4.5
Abiding by the Korean political and legal system	Important	94.5	94.4	97.1	95.8	96.9
	Not Important	5.5	5.6	2.9	4.2	3.1
Understanding Korean traditions	Important	91.2	95.1	89.8	95.9	98.5
	Not Important	8.8	4.9	10.2	4.1	1.5

In addition, *Table 2* also created by Jiyeon Kim to trace responses by age groups, revealed an interesting correlation between the younger generations in their 20s and the elderly

in their 60s or over. It's apparent that there is less interest in maintaining ethnic components at high stakes for defining Korean identity by the younger generation compared to the older generations. However, the civic components undoubtedly demonstrated a high level of importance for every age group, suggesting that Korean identity should be characterized by practical methods. It's important to note that two of the four practical methods can be practiced or adapted outside of South Korea by the Korean diaspora ("Being able to speak and write in Korean" and Understanding Korean traditions" ) while the other two("Maintaining Korean Nationality"and "Abiding by the Korean political and legal system") are strictly in reference to conditions living in South Korean Society that diasporas may not be able to fulfill.

### **Korean Diaspora Perspectives on Korean Identity**

Despite having the Korean bloodline and the dominant presence of Korean culture that actively participates in the formation of an individual's identity, the Korean diaspora is a group whose voice is often silenced in conversations of Korean Identity. The Korean diaspora has varied experiences and opinions towards South Korean citizens and society but more so towards the notion of Korean Identity in their personal lives. Considering the diverse backgrounds that this group entails, I tried to include responses from ethnic-Koreans in several countries. The responses included in this paper are from video interviews conducted through collaborative and individual efforts. In this chapter, I explore Korean identity through the eyes of the 'outsider'<sup>3</sup>.

Beginning with popular youtube channel *Asian Boss*, a South Korea-based media startup whose vision is to "bring young people's voices together and create a movement to tackle the

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<sup>3</sup> In several interviews, the interviewee (ethnic korean) expressed feeling like an outsider. Meaning unable to fully fit into their Korean heritage.

biggest social and cultural challenges of our time”. In the youtube channel, there are two episodes dealing with the Korean Diaspora. The first titled, *Being A Korean American Adoptee | THE VOICELESS #2* and the second titled, *We Visited a Chosun (Ethnic Korean) School in Japan | ASIAN BOSS*. In the first episode, Korean American adoptee, Danielle explains her experience as a Korean American adoptee in the United States and returning to South Korea to meet her biological parents. In the interview, Danielle is asked about her identity:

Q: “Do you consider yourself Korean or American?”

A: “If you would’ve asked me before I came to Korea, I would have said American first. What’s interesting though is after coming here, after meeting my birth parents, after just living here, experiencing it for myself, I’m proud to be Korean. Like I feel way more Korean than I ever have. There’s so much I never knew I was missing, within me. A part of me is complete that I never entirely knew I was missing and I now feel at peace”. (Han, 18:05-18:39)

Danielle expresses her Korean identity as a connection to the Korean bloodline, experience living in Korea and fulfilling an unknown gap that was missing to ‘feel at peace’. In a similar manner, Teacher Ryu Esun (Korean-Japanese) describes the purpose behind the creation of the Choson School in Japan. She explains that there are individuals who wish to maintain their Korean Identity without taking sides of rival countries, South Korea and Japan. The Choson school promotes confidence in students and teaches the traditional ways of Korea to the next generation (Esun, 00:51-01:14). In the interview Ryu is asked to explain her understanding of Chosen-seki(ethnic Korean) and then expand on her own interpretation of Korean Identity.

Q: “So who are these Chosen-seki<sup>4</sup> (ethnic Korean)?

A: “ Choson-seki are ethnic Koreans who do not identify themselves as either South or North Koreans. We are basically descendants of the Korean peninsula living in Japan. We are almost like a lost group of people seeking an identity.”

Q: “So you consider yourself an ethnic Korean and neither North nor South Korean. And despite the fact that you were born in Japan, a foreign country, you’re trying to protect and preserve the culture of your ethnic homeland?”

A: “ I guess you could say I was supposed to be born in the Korea Peninsula and perhaps I was supposed to grow up there as well. And I guess we would call that normal. But that’s not the case for me. I was born and raised in a foreign country as a ethnic Korean. But even though I was raised in Japan, I still consider myself an ethnic Korean because I inherited the Korean ethnicity. So that’s why I chose Chosen-seki (ethnic Korean) as my rightful nationality.

Q: Then does that make you partially Japanese?”

A: “Although people can’t distinguish whether I’m Japanese or not, I’m proud to be ethnic Korean. And I like the Korean language, culture, traditional dance as well as traditional music. And as a Korean, I wish to treasure my ethnic background as well as my root and ancestry.” (Esun, 02:53- 04:05)

In contrast to Danielle’s experience, it is evident that Ryu did not necessarily identify with the physical Korean Peninsula itself (South or North Korea). Instead, Ryu’s relationship with Korean Identity highlights an ‘inheritance’ of the Korean ethnicity and a passion for traditional and

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<sup>4</sup> Chosen-Seki is the term utilized in Japanese to reference an ethnic Korean person.

cultural Korean practices. Korean Identity is therefore defined through a combination of both inheritance and practical methods that are taught to the ethnic-Korean children in the Choson School in Japan.

Nonetheless, there are also ethnic-Koreans who place a larger emphasis on obtaining Korean nationality to fulfill their Korean Identity. For instance, Student Yu Sasha (Korean-Uzbekistan), a fourth generation ethnic Korean questions the current Overseas Korean Act that considers the fourth generation a foreigner to South Korea.<sup>5</sup>

“I thought many times: ‘Why don’t they give [residency] to fourth generation Koryo Saram<sup>6</sup>? We are also Koryo Saram so it feels like discrimination’. After I go to university I’m going to think about it more but probably change my nationality [to South Korean]. I believe my heart belongs to Korea. I wish Koreans could change their attitude towards Koryo Saram. I wish they could see us simply as overseas-born Koreans”.

(Sasha, 02:19-02:53)

“I’m not sure if I’m a foreigner or Koryo Saram or Korean, I guess it’s okay to call myself Korean.”

(Sasha, 03:18-03:30)

Yu expresses concerns towards the way South Koreans perceive and welcome the diaspora group to their homeland. Korean Identity in this case is similarly defined through emotional heartfelt connection with Korea, as interviewee Danielle pointed out. However, the gap missing for Yu is more than just a feeling or practice of Korean culture, it is obtaining Korean nationality to reaffirm his Korean Identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Sasha, 01:50-01:57.

<sup>6</sup> Koryo Saram is the term used in Russian to reference an ethnic Korean person.

Other ways of characterizing Korean Identity for diaspora groups is through appearance and Korean language fluency. For filmmaker Cedric Stout, (Korean Black American), these are the ruling factors that sway him away with doubt about his Korean Identity. “At least from my perspective, I think a lot of what [we] experience has to do with, in part how [we] look and also how fluent [we] are in Korean”. Through the challenges of not physically appearing Korean and the language barrier, Cedric struggles to fully accept his Korean Identity. In an interview with Asian Boss he states:

“When it comes to my identity, it’s a reminder that I am different or I’m not necessarily perceived as one of them....there are times when I’m like, man this is the reality, I’ll never be a Korean....When I first moved to Korea, to be honest, I felt like, ‘you know what, I’m a Korean going back to my home country’. And then as soon as I got here I’m like, I am not Korean”.

(Stout, 17:24-17:58)

Cedric’s experience with Korean Identity takes a more forward and visible approach. Unlike previous interviewees who are less concerned about appearance or language capability, it is a primary challenge for Cedric in order to fully define himself as Korean. Meaning that despite his knowledge and practice of Korean culture and history, and despite his passion for Korea by moving to live there, Korean Identity for him is weighed heavily on appearance. A very common complication for many who are part of the Korean Diaspora with different colored skin or facial appearance other than Asian.

Lastly, in a more casual way of approaching Korean identity, graduate student Jin Kwon Kim (Korean-American) states that his reassurance to his Koreanness is that he can “draw the

beautiful, the best aspects of [it], but also take the best aspects of [his] Westernness and bring the two together and create something from the best of both worlds” (Kwon, 20:48-20:55). Therefore, the importance and meaning of Korean Identity is not defined by the practice of Korean traditions and culture but rather is defined by the way you utilize Korean Identity to build upon your personal self-identity. It is through the acceptance of his multi-cultural background that he is able to make a connection with his Korean Identity.

All in all, it is clear that the Korean Diaspora groups have experienced Korean Identity in a range of complex ways. Although Korean Identity is defined differently for each individual, there is a binding force and tie to Korean Identity that legitimizes their voice and opinion and surpasses any historical, cultural, or legal authority against it.

### **Conclusion**

The notion of Korean Identity became a symbol of pride and uniqueness for a historically homogeneous nation that fought treacherous battles to establish it. However, Korean identity is not merely defined by a set of historical battles or standards that have been adjusted to fit the status quo. Alternative perspectives on Korean Identity reveal that the fundamentals of Korean identity are not just based on a pure bloodline or being born in the homeland, rather it is more based on Korean lineage and a sense of belonging to their Korean heritage. Therefore, it is evident that defining Korean Identity is not dependent only on South Koreans, it includes the opinion and perspective of other Korean diaspora groups.

In other words, this extension provides varied perspectives and opinions that not only broaden our knowledge but results in a fuller and more complete understanding of Korean

identity. By highlighting the condition of different diaspora groups there is a more personal level that is reached in this conversation. Beyond the natural urge to find one “correct” definition for Korean Identity this paper explored the possibility of having several. From a more strictly regulated chart of components constructed by the South Korean public to a casual utilization of Korean values to construct a multicultural self-identity. Through this research you not only had the opportunity to hear different voices on Korean identity, you also learned about the personal experience of a highschool fourth generation ethnic-Korean living in Uzbekistan or a Korean Japanese born and raised in Japan but still identifies more with her Korean ethnicity. This was all made to create a conversation that is more intimate and relatable. It is through this research that we have set a deeper and more feasible conversation between Korean diaspora groups and South Koreans.

Truthfully, way above siding with one group over the other, this paper at its core is written to shed light on both sides’ understanding of Korean Identity. Ultimately, in hopes of reaching a better understanding of each other. That is to say that by considering alternative perspectives, future South Korean generations will have more welcoming doors and a common ground with diaspora groups. Rather than placing a huge emphasis on tradition, appearance or amount of cultural knowledge and practice, diaspora groups will be able to share and claim their Korean Identity without doubt and judgement. To end this paper, I share the same sentiment as Principal Kim from the Choson School in Japan, “From now on, I hope that people acknowledge the differences and have a more global mindset and accept people for who they are. And I hope we can build a society where people can live peacefully together ”.

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