

## Making Ethnicity for Immigrant Children: Focusing on a case of a Korean school in Paris

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### ABSTRACT

*The existence of Korean schools is one of the salient characteristics of Overseas Koreans. How do such schools for Korean immigrants' children try to construct Korean ethnic identity? Also, how is immigrant children's ethnic identity developed and reinforced by the education at those schools? This paper explores these questions based on an ethnographic research at a Korean school in Paris from September 2005 to December 2007. The cultural education for immigrant children at the Korean school has a tendency to emphasize the most exotic traits of Korean culture. And this emphasis on the unfamiliar elements of Korean culture doesn't seem to help to form the ethnic identity of Korean immigrants' children. Instead, the students appear to get the sense of being a member of Koreans more from the education outside of classroom such as scholastic events than in a classroom of a Korean school. That's because scholastic events allow them to play out some of the Korean culture in more inter-ethnic settings. Therefore, it can be concluded that ethnicity of immigrant children is rather developed in inter-ethnic social contexts than born with or taught in class.*

**Keywords:** ethnicity, ethnic identity, Korean school, immigrant children, cultural education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to an estimation, there are approximately 6,700,000 Overseas Koreans<sup>1</sup> which represent 10% of 70 millions of Korean population living in both South and North Korea.[1] Overseas Koreans are dispersed in over 170 nations of the world. The history of their immigration started 140 years ago. Although it is difficult to find a common religion, political affiliation, or economic network in the communities of Overseas Koreans, it is relatively easy to notice that there are pressures and efforts to preserve Overseas Koreans' ethnic identity from both the inside and outside of Korea. As one of these attempts to maintain Korean identity, 2,947 Korean schools were founded in 96 countries of the world.[2] Thus, it can be inferred that the existence of Korean schools is one of the salient characteristics of Overseas Koreans. Then, how can we understand teaching of culture and maternal language at these schools to Overseas Koreans' children?

The education of Korean culture and language at Korean schools outside the country has an official goal of producing pride in being a member of Korean. This pride is essential for an immigrants' child to form an ethnic identity. Given the context of immigration, however, we cannot assume that this aim of maintaining ethnic identity through generations is realized by transmitting maternal culture to immigrants' children without any complications and limitations. Then, we

need to closely look at the ethnic education at overseas Korean schools in order to understand its functions and constraints in the construction of ethnic identity.

This paper tries to answer the following questions: how does a space for teaching immigrant children, notably overseas Korean schools, try to make an ethnic identity through the education of maternal culture and which elements of maternal culture are taught there? Finally, how is immigrant children's ethnic identity developed and reinforced through the education at those schools?

In this paper, some theoretical discussion about ethnicity and culture will be addressed in order to help to clarify the education methods of culture functions in forming ethnic identity. Then, the detailed methods and processes of the fieldwork will be provided. Next, the history and structure of a Korean school where the participant-observation for this paper was taken place will be described and followed by the analysis of the education at this school. Through this research, we can understand better the education of maternal culture at overseas Korean schools and the mechanism of constructing an ethnic identity of immigrant children.

<sup>1</sup>The term "Overseas Koreans(해외한인)" refers to Korean descendants who live outside of the Korean Peninsula, including immigrants in foreign countries. Compared with "overseas compatriots(해외동포)," the other term commonly used in Korea, this term is politically neutral. In this paper, Overseas Koreans is used to designate any population who has a Korean ancestry and resides in a foreign country.

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## 2. ETHNICITY AND THE CULTURE

What Korean immigrants' children learn at Korean schools is above all Korean culture. However, which elements of the culture does this education lean on? In order to explain how ethnic identity can be constructed by teaching the culture in the context of immigration, it is helpful to review the arguments on the relationship between ethnicity and the culture.

What role does the culture play in constructing the ethnicity of a given ethnic group? According to Max Weber, ethnicity is a product of the relations and interactions between the individuals of the same group and the individuals of a different group, above all through "the politically common activities" rather than "the great differences in the customs." [3] Everett C. Huges also raises a question about the definition of an "ethnic group" as cultural traits, emphasizing on the "mutual relations" between ethnic groups. [4] In a similar vein, Fredrik Barth refuses to treat the culture as a primordial base of an ethnic group. [5] Moreover, he claims that there isn't any univocal relation between the ethnicity and the culture of an ethnic group. This instrumental point of view on ethnicity emphasizes the social construction of ethnicity; the ethnic identification results not from the essential differences of cultures but from the interactions between ethnic groups. This perspective on ethnicity and culture will be discussed in more detail in the following.

If we closely look at this relation between ethnic boundaries and culture, we can easily find that sharing a common culture among individuals of a group of people has central importance in the characteristics of an ethnic group. However, Fredrik Barth proposes to consider this cultural trait as a result, rather than a primary characteristic of the organization of an ethnic group as it is proposed by the primordialist view of ethnicity. [5] To consider ethnic groups primarily as culture-bearing units leads to identify and distinguish these ethnic groups according to the morphological characteristics of their cultures. This, again, entails two logical problems: how can we explain the continuity of an ethnic group when the cultural changes of a group happen along with time and the continuity of an ethnic unit when institutional forms of an ethnic group varies along with ecological effects? [5] In fact, the linkage between ethnic groups and the culture is not clear. Therefore, it is necessary to consider cultural aspects of an ethnic group as a result rather than a cause of the constitution of the ethnic group. This approach puts forwards the view that ethnicity is a social construction and the shared culture of an ethnic group is not the cause of engendering the ethnic group but the product of the processes of maintaining ethnic boundaries. Then, the elements of the culture are the components in which ethnicity is produced and reproduced.

Considering cultural aspects of an ethnic group as contents in the making of ethnic identity, we can logically inquire which elements of culture the construction of ethnic identity is relied on. This question will be explored in this paper while paying attention to socially constructing ethnicity.

## 3. STEPS OF FIELDWORK

In this section, I will retrace methodology and techniques of collecting data which were employed in this research. Then, I will explain the reasons of choosing a particular field and describe the details of the field.

### 3.1 Methodology

In order to understand how the sense of membership to an ethnic group is reinforced in immigrants' children through the cultural education at Korean schools, it is useful to experience and be acquainted with the everyday life of the location of this reinforcement. Thus, such research demands on applying ethnographic methods, that is to say, participant observation. To assist some quantitative research, semi-constructed surveys are also carried out.

### 3.2 Choosing a Field

According to the documents published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Korea, the number of Korean immigrants in Europe is about 6,076,783 in 2003, with the increase of 28.65% from 2001 and there are 10,900 Korean immigrants in France in 2003. [6] In Europe, there are 87 schools for the children of immigrants which have 604 teachers and 4,360 students. [7] All of these schools open once a week to teach Korean materials. In France, there are 10 Korean schools: 2 in Paris and 8 in provinces like Aix-en-Provence, Grenoble, Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Montpellier, Strasbourg, and Toulouse. The Korean School of Paris<sup>2</sup> has the largest number of students and the longest history among Korean schools in France. It has about 100 students<sup>3</sup> while the average number of students of Korean schools in Europe is 50.

This paper is constituted by an ethnographic research conducted at the Korean School of Paris, which has a significant number of students and the characteristics sufficiently representing an educational institution for Korean immigrants' children.

### 3.3 Working in the Field

The fieldwork for this paper was first conducted every Wednesday afternoon from September 2005 to December 2007. Under permission of the principal of the Korean School of Paris, I could do participant observation at the school as one of the teachers. I was responsible for a class of 12 year old students in the first year, then 11 year old students in the next year, and 10 year old students in the last year of my research because teaching the same class over one school year was not preferred by the principal for educational purposes.

Every Wednesday except during school vacations, I attended teachers' meeting from 1:00 to 1:30 pm, taught in a class from 1:30 to 5:00 pm, and attended teachers' meeting again from 5:00 to 6:00 pm, as other teachers did. I tried to observe students' reactions and interactions as much as possible in class, while taking notes. Especially in the beginning of the research, however, I dedicated most of my energy and time to

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms of the school and of the persons concerned are used to protect the identity and private lives of the members of the school.

<sup>3</sup> This number was calculated in 2006.

accomplish my role as a teacher and to establish rapport with students and other teachers. Thanks to this rapport, I could later do interviews with the teachers, students and their parents about the issues more directly pertaining to this research.

Communication in Korean with students of the Korean School of Paris didn't impose considerable obstacles upon me although their first language was French and their Korean was far from fluent. When they had difficulty in expressing and exchanging abstract thoughts with their rudimentary Korean, we used French expressions and words. Nevertheless, I was sometimes obliged to interrupt the interactions between students, who spoke exclusively in French during break time, in order to ask them for translation in Korean.

Working as a teacher at Korean School of Paris proved to be favorable for this research. As being a participant-observer, not only could I have access to the information which was not available to the outsiders of the school but also I could profit from the occasions for getting acquainted with diverse social actors of the school; observing the everyday life of the school; and having reciprocal actions with other teachers, students and their parents in a natural way. Despite these advantages of participant observation, there is a risk of blurred boundaries between a research and observer. This danger of researcher's becoming himself/herself an actor in the field of social interaction can be avoided by keeping the formality of participant observation. In a similar vein, Gardner ascertains that the relative formality of process in a research has a moral advantage because informers are always conscious of the fact that a research is being conducted.[8] Thus, I tried to keep certain level of formality as a researcher in the process of participant observation for this paper without depriving of data and reflection gained through less official discussion with the actors in the field.

#### 4. HISTORY AND STRUCTURE OF THE KOREAN SCHOOL OF PARIS

The history and structure of the Korean School of Paris, the field of this research, will be described in this section.

##### 4.1 Foundation

The Korean School of Paris was founded in 1971 when the priest Woo met with some Korean immigrants in order to discuss the education of maternal language to their children. As the number of students increased, the school was approved as an educational association by the Ministry of Education of France on May 6, 1974 and the opening ceremony of the school took place on May 24 in the same year. The ambassador of Korea in France attended this ceremony, which seemed to have had significance to the eyes of Korean immigrants in Paris. Ms. Jeon, the former teacher and principal of the school, remembers the day as following:

It was sunny that day. It was a day for a very important event to our Kyopo(교포)<sup>4</sup> community. Not only the students' parents but also many people without

<sup>4</sup> It's a synonym of compatriots.

their children came to celebrate the opening of our school. Although it was a little school composed of about 20 student, 2 teachers and a principal, all the people cooperated and became one with the affection toward the school. I remember that people sang all together the national anthem of Korea and "Spring of my hometown" aloud.

##### 4.2 Finances

The funds for running the Korean School of Paris are provided by tuition fees, aids of council members, and supports from Korean government and Korean immigrants. Also, when economically or politically important personages visit Paris, they give donation to the school. Korean companies and self-employers sometimes offer equipments such as televisions and CD players. The tuition fee had been 90F in a year at first and it was raised to 250€ in 2006. The school council members pay 500€ in a year. These two resources are the largest revenue and the rest of financial supports are relatively small and irregular.

The Korean School of Paris has taken several classrooms on lease from a French school. The school has had to move 5 times so far. And looking for a new school for rent has been a difficult problem because of high rent. Majority of this school's revenue is spent for paying the rent. Renting class rooms from a French school poses many inconveniences and possible conflicts between the two schools. So, a teacher says "We pay much for the rent but we cannot use this school building as a proprietor. We are just tenants." Consequently, it has been a long dream to buy a building for the school among Korean immigrant in Paris. For this aim, many kinds of charity events have been organized by the parents of the students and Korean artists in Paris.

##### 4.3 Social actors of Korean School of Paris

Agents who compose the structure of the Korean School of Paris are council members, principal, teachers, students and their parents. Some of the demographic characteristics of these agents will be explored in the following in order to better understand the context of immigration of the Korean School of Paris. This part of the paper is based on the data collected in March 2006.

**4.3.1 Council members:** The council of the school is composed of 35 members. Most of them are immigrant entrepreneurs. Also, there are 4 religious personages, including 2 pastors, 1 priest, and 1 Buddhist monk. The principal function of the council is to meet the needs of the school. However, it started to make a decision on the appointments and dismissals of the principal and teachers from the end of 2004. The council members are often the members of other associations of Korean immigrants in Paris. That can be interpreted as a reality that the Korean school is in fact under the jurisdiction of the influential personages in the community of Korean immigrants.

**4.3.2 Principal:** The principal of the Korean school takes care of administrative matters and publicity of the school. During the first 20 years since the opening of the school (1974-1993), 14 Catholic priests had worked as principals. Since 1994, two immigrant women have been appointed as principals.

**4.3.3 Teachers:** The number of the teachers of the school depends essentially on the number of classes and students. At first, 2 teachers taught 30 students and in the end of 1990's there were 13 to 14 teachers for about 200 students. The current number of the teachers is 11 for 90 students. 10 of them take charge of 10 classes, teaching for 3 hours every Wednesday. Also, there has been one Taekwondo master since 1975, teaching one hour class every other week.

Until the first half of 2004, the majority of the teachers were Korean immigrants. At present, 7 out of 10 teachers are staying in France for studying and 3 are immigrants. Two immigrated teachers are married to Frenchmen. This mixed composition of teachers' background proved to have positive and complimentary effects on the education of the students. That's because they exchange the local experiences of immigrants and up-to-date information on the original country.

**4.3.4 Students:** There are 10 classes for 90 students at this Korean school. The students are arranged into different classes according to their ages and their levels of Korean. The youngest students are 4 years old and the oldest students are 13 years old. As for the place of birth, 67.9% of the students were born in France, 25% in Korea, and 7.1% in third countries. As for the familial composition, there are 54 children of Korean-Korean families, which constitute 60% of the total students. And there are 36 children of Korean-French families, which constitute 40% of the total students.

**4.3.5 Parents:** According to the data based on the survey of 57 households of the students, the average age of students' fathers is 40.65 years old and that of the mothers is 38.58 years old. Approximately 40% of the households are Korean-French families: 21 families have Korean wives and French husbands while 2 families consist of French wives and Korean husbands. About 53% of these 58 households live inside of Paris and 47% in banlieue, which is the outskirts of Paris. As for the professions of the households, 22.2% of the students' fathers are businessmen and 15.9% engineers. Artists/architects, entrepreneurs, and professors/researchers take up 11.1% each. About the half (46%) of the students' mothers are housewives. 14.3% of the mothers work as artists/architects and 11.1% as office workers.

Two matters are especially worth mentioning among the factual information provided in this section of the paper. Firstly, this Korean school's renting classrooms from a French school provides a setting where interactions between two ethnic groups can often take place. For example, Korean teachers and students as tenants are always careful not to disrupt French teachers and students. If Korean students make much noise, French teachers complain about it. Secondly, because most of the students were born in France, their understanding of Korean language and culture are very poor. Limited class hours don't seem to be enough to correct this problem.

## 5. TEACHING OF ETHNIC CULTURE

How does a Korean school for teaching Korean immigrants'

children try to make an ethnic identity, the sense of ethnic membership? Which elements of the culture are applied to this process? And what are the characteristics of this mechanism to reinforce ethnic identity of the immigrants' children? In order to explore these questions in this section of the paper, we will first examine the elements of Korean culture taught in the everyday life of the school.

### 5.1 Language

Language is irrefutably one of the cultural elements retained for evoking ethnic identity. According to Weber, it is clear that the linguistic community is above all a factor extraordinarily active in making ethnic identity.[3] This is especially because the significant intelligibility of others' behaviors is the most rudimentary condition for communalization. Probably for this reason, the parents and teachers of the students want them to learn Korean "just because they are Koreans." Ms. Gil, one of the teachers, said:

I am satisfied when my little students learn Korean little by little. They are Koreans. It's "our" language... or it's the language of their mothers. A few days ago, a mother of a Korean-French family thanked me very much because her little girl finally started to speak a few Korean words.

The main goal of the Korean school is in fact to teach the maternal language to immigrant children. So as to achieve this goal, there are 3 hour classes every Wednesday at the school. In spite of the insufficient time for learning the language, the expectation of students' parents about their children's level of Korean is very high.

The textbooks for teaching Korean at the school are the same as textbooks used at the elementary schools in Korea. They are provided by the Korean government for free. The textbooks for speaking, listening, reading, and writing are supposed to be covered in one semester just as they are in Korea. It is an almost impossible task for the teachers and students to follow this curriculum. In consequence, the teachers develop some strategies for overcoming the shortage of class time: skimming and selecting some parts of the texts. The students in my class showed more interest in certain parts of the textbooks than others, such as the passages about unfamiliar customs of Korea like Jangseong(장승). Because they ask many questions about this kind of subjects, I allotted much more time to explain and discuss the "strange" components of Korean culture.

Although I couldn't see clearly the proof that learning Korean language inculcates Korean ethnicity upon the students, they feel definitely pressure from their parents and teachers to have certain degree of Korean identity. In practice, the unfamiliar parts of Korean culture found in the textbooks are more fascinating to the students. However, these peculiar facts on Korea don't seem to help to evoke the sense of ethnic membership to Koreans. Furthermore, the limitation of class time and contents of textbooks of Korean classes appear to estrange the students from forming Korean ethnic identity.

### 5.2 History

There are Korean history classes once or twice a month

according to the discretion of teachers. Ms. Yoon, one of the teachers who teach history in their classes, said:

I start my history class with the myth of Dangun(단군) in the beginning of each academic year. I am pretty well acquainted with this story. But after that, I have difficulty in teaching our history. I didn't major in history. There aren't many people who majored in 2 subjects! Aren't there? And there is very little time for the history class. In fact, such problem has existed for a long time. The students know very well the myth of Dangun because they learn about it in the beginning of each academic year. But that's virtually all that they know.

In fact, what the students learn in the history classes is the myth of Dangun and some of the national heroes of Korea. The myth of Dangun especially represents the ideology that every Korean is the descent of the same ancestor. However, when it is taught in class, it is interpreted rather as another unfamiliar aspect of Korean culture by the students. To make matters worse, the limitation of time in history classes and qualification of history teachers leads the students to perceive the history of Dangun practically as the history of Korea itself rather than as one event in the myriads of other events in Korean history.

### 5.3 National symbols

Because the textbooks used in the school are the same books that the elementary students in Korea use, they often contain passages about the national symbols of Korea. The teachers have a tendency to emphasize such passages as Ms. Hong explains:

Today (March 16, 2006), I'm going to teach the significations of our national flag in class. I spent much time to prepare for this class. Because that's one of the most important parts in the textbook.

One day Ms. Jin in charge of the class of the youngest students taught her little students how to make the national flag of Korea. After finishing all the classes of that day, they ran toward their mothers with waving the flags that they made in class. Ms. Jin added:

We have to make our students know about our country. They have to know about it. That's important for them. Because that's about "who am I," about their identity.

However, given the context of immigration where the children of Korean immigrants in Paris have been brought up and officially accepted as members of French society, it is not sure that this type of State-nationalist teaching would produce the expected effects on making Korean ethnic or national identity for the students of the Korean School of Paris.

### 5.4 Traditional value

Ye(예) is considered as the concept which characterizes the traditional moral of Koreans. Ye is a moral of human relations: each individual has a social place which is different from those

of others; consequently, he or she has to respect others. A lot of the teachers, who were brought up with this moral, tend to put the accent on Ye and often complain about their students' lack of Ye. For example, the students are supposed to take a bow to the teachers. If they do not keep the manners like this, the teachers will correct and reprimand them. Despite such efforts of the teachers, it appears to be difficult to inculcate Korean sense of morals to the students who have already acquired French manners and way of thinking.

### 5.5 Elements of culture which are taught outside of class

Teaching of Korean culture takes place not only in classrooms but also in the annual events of Korean School of Paris such as ceremonies for the beginning and the close of school, Christmas festival, and spring picnic.

The ceremonies for the beginning and the close of school is started by singing the national anthem of Korea. The older students seem to be accustomed to this form of ceremony and they sing the anthem with enthusiasm although a lot of students need to look at the lyrics of the song while singing.

Christmas festival is the biggest event of the school. For this, the students perform spectacles such as a chorus, traditional dance, Taekwondo demonstration, and play. While preparing for these spectacles, the students learn some of Korean culture in more concrete level.

The spring picnic of the school takes place at the one of the parks in Paris every May. On the picnic, the students play some collective games such as finding treasure and they have lunch together just as students in Korea do on school picnics. On the picnic of May 2006, the scene of the students, teachers, and parents playing, singing and eating together directly contrasted the individualistic way of French people who came for picnic at the same park that day. At the moment, the agents of the community of the Korean school became the main actors in a collective game while other French people turned to be spectators of this social event. Although it will be more interesting if interactions between the two groups of people take place more directly and vividly, this picnic provides a social setting where immigrant students can feel the sense of unity with Korean people and distinguish themselves from the rest of French people.

The school ceremonies and festivals have great potential for the students to feel the sense of ethnic identity by experiencing a feeling of a loss of individually fragmented ethnicity and a feeling of unity as Korean people. They are no longer half Korean and half French at these events. They are actors who are feeling inside and playing out the Korean ethnicity on stage in front of French spectators. This feeling of a loss of individuality and unity with the group can be compared to a weaker form of collective effervescence.[9]

Through the above analysis of classes and events of the Korean school, we could discern some of the cultural contents which are used to reinforce the sense of ethnic membership in immigrant children. They are language, history, national symbols, traditional value and customs. Considering the context of immigration, however, it is doubtful if teaching of these cultural elements in class would produce the intended goal of forming Korean identity among the children of Korean

immigrants. Moreover, the context of immigration makes the actors of this school put the accent on the most different and exotic characteristics of Korean culture in order to define "us" and distinguish from "them". Instead, the students appear to get the sense of being a member of Koreans more inter-ethnic settings such as scholastic events than in a classroom of a Korean school.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The existence of Korean schools is one of the prominent characteristics of Overseas Koreans. How do such schools for Korean immigrants' children try to construct Korean ethnic identity and how is immigrant children's ethnic identity developed at those schools? An ethnographic research was carried out to explore these questions. This paper is based on participant-observation at a Korean school in Paris from September 2005 to December 2007.

Teaching of Korean culture takes place inside and outside of classroom of the school. The cultural contents which are taught to reinforce the sense of ethnic membership at the Korean school are the language, history, national symbols and traditional moral values of the given ethnic group. These elements of culture are highly selective because of the limitation of class time and textbooks used in class, along with the inherent constraints existing in the context of immigration. To put it concretely, the cultural education for immigrant children in the Korean school has a tendency to emphasize the most different or exotic traits of culture in order to define "us" and differentiate ourselves from "others." This emphasis on the unfamiliar elements of Korean culture doesn't seem to be conducive to forming the ethnic identity of Korean immigrants' children. Instead, the students appear to get the sense of belonging to Koreans more from the education outside of classroom such as scholastic events because they play out some of the Korean culture in more inter-ethnic settings than in a classroom of a Korean school.

It can be concluded that ethnicity of immigrants' children is rather developed in inter-ethnic social contexts than born with or taught in class. Therefore, it will be necessary to further study the interactions between immigrants' children and the people in the receiving country in order to understand the social construction of ethnic identity.

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