

# Paradigm Shift of Native Koreans Towards Overseas Koreans

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Received: November 9, 2023, revised: December 6, 2023, Accepted:

February 27, 2024

## Abstract

The article aims to study the origin of Gyopo or overseas Koreans, the perspective of native Koreans towards overseas Koreans, the adaptation of overseas Koreans and job opportunities of overseas Koreans in South Korea. As is well known, Koreans hold a strong belief in national identity. South Korean nationalism and identity have traditionally been perceived as exclusive and closed. In recent times, however, Koreans have adjusted their attitudes and become more open to overseas Koreans compared to the past. Pictures of overseas Koreans showcases their exceptional language skills. These remarkable abilities play significant roles as a language bridge, fostering mutual understanding between two

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worlds or two languages. For this reason, the article discusses the concept of Gyopo, which refers to individuals of Korean heritage born or raised outside of South Korea. These gyopos often grapple with questions of cultural identity, language proficiency, and belonging. The perspective of native Koreans towards overseas Koreans varies, with many South Koreans showing curiosity, appreciation for their contributions to diversity, and recognition of their language skills and international experiences. Job opportunities for overseas Koreans in South Korea are abundant, facilitated by visas, language proficiency, and a global perspective that can be applied in various industries. Korean universities also actively engage with overseas Koreans, recognizing their value in creating diverse and dynamic learning environments. The South Korean government supports initiatives aimed at attracting overseas talent and helping them settle in the country. Overall, the article aims to explore the origin of Gyopo, the perspectives of native Koreans towards overseas Koreans, adaptation of overseas Koreans, and the job opportunities available to overseas Koreans in South Korea.

**Keywords:** Paradigm shift, Perspective, Gyopo, Overseas Koreans, Korean diaspora

## Introduction

There are groups of Korean people who are deprived of a sense of belonging due to various reasons. They are known as overseas Koreans

or Gyopo. The term “Korean diaspora” encompasses individuals of Korean descent living outside of South Korea. These communities, composed of Koreans and their descendants, can be found in various countries worldwide, and they often maintain strong cultural and emotional ties to their Korean heritage. Currently, there are approximately 7.3 million overseas Koreans, including descendants of early emigrants from the Korean Peninsula and more recent emigrants from Korea. About 84.5% reside in five countries: the United States of America, China, Japan, Canada, and Uzbekistan (South Korea: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). To some observers, they may seem privileged compared to native Koreans due to their proficiency in both the Korean language and the languages of their host countries, making them more attractive to South Korean companies. This hypothesis may hold true in specific circumstances. However, overseas Koreans also face challenging situations. For instance, Sagisawa Megumu (1968-2004), a Japanese Korean author of *Kaeremu Hitobito* (Those with Nowhere to Return), vividly depicted the pathos experienced by those without a place to call their own. They are uprooted from the families they lived with, the comfortable homes they once knew, the work that formed a significant part of their identity, and their entire way of life and livelihood. Sagisawa discovered her Korean heritage through her father’s side and began studying the Korean language. She introduced “Zainichi” characters into her fiction. Although she continued to explore a new fictional world based on the theme of questioning one’s

identity, the “Zainichi” characteristics of her characters were largely kept at a distance under the theme of place and were not the primary focus of her work. Overseas Koreans search for self-identification to find a place they truly belong. As Sagisawa put it, “I don’t think I’m a Gyopo after all. Maybe I am to that taxi driver and all those other Koreans, but when I’m around other Gyopos, I’m not a Gyopo; I’m just that kind of person. When I’m around other Zainichi Gyopos, it’s clear that I’m different from everyone else. No matter how much I blend in or adapt, I’m ultimately frozen out, separated by a thin wall of ice. I grew up in a typical Japanese household, so I don’t think I can be a Gyopo.” (Sagisawa Megumu, 1992: 46-47). Another example of a popular novel reflecting the feelings and thoughts of overseas Koreans is “Crying in H Mart.” The author, Michelle Zauner, a Korean American author, and singer, wrote about her grief and sadness after losing her mother to cancer. She found solace in H Mart, a large chain of Korean supermarkets in the U.S., as she shopped for Korean food and ingredients to remember her mother. Considering her identity and multiracial background, she wrote, “I had spent my adolescence trying to blend in with my peers in suburban America and had come of age feeling like my belonging was something to prove, something that was always in the hands of other people to give, not my own to take. I could never fully belong to both worlds, only half in and half out, waiting to be ejected at will by someone with a greater claim than me, someone whole.” (Michelle Zauner, 2021). It is possible to assert that the genealogy

of blood forms the basis of direct participation and the archetype formation of a national community. The nation-state exists as a fantastical realm where individuals can directly connect to the whole, “beyond class, gender, region, occupation, status and other intermediary criteria.” This is referred to as the principle of direct participation (Sakai, 1998: 45-46). Some of the stories of overseas Koreans resemble long journeys in search of a place where they truly belong.

This article aims to explore the origin of Gyopo, the perspectives of native Koreans towards overseas Koreans, adaptation of overseas Koreans, and the opportunities available to overseas Koreans in South Korea. This article’s purpose is to determine the optimal position for those who find themselves in-between or of multiracial backgrounds.

### **The Origin of Gyopo**

The term “Gyopo” is a term employed in South Korea and by Koreans in the diaspora to describe individuals of Korean heritage who were born or raised outside of South Korea. Historically, the term “Gyopo”, also spelled “Kyopo” meaning "nationals", has come to have negative connotations as referring to people who, because of living as sojourners outside the "home country", have lost touch with their Korean roots. As a result, others prefer to use the term “Dongpo” meaning "brethren" or "people of the same ancestry". Dongpo has a more transnational implication emphasizing links among various overseas

Korean groups, while Gyopo has more of a purely national connotation referring to the Korean state (Min Hyoung Song, 2005: 221; Kwang-Chung Kim, 1999: 227). It emphasizes the concept of Koreans who have been educated or raised in foreign lands. Several key points about the term Gyopo are noteworthy.

The timeline of the dispersal of Korean ethnic groups can be categorized into four distinct eras. The first period spans from the 1860s to 1910 when Chosun farmers and laborers sought refuge from famine, poverty, and the oppression of the ruling class by emigrating to destinations such as China, Russia, and Hawaii (Lee, 1994). The second period, which lasted from 1910 to 1945), was marked by Japanese colonial governance. During this period, farmers and laborers, who had been stripped of their land and resources, relocated to Manchuria and Japan in search of opportunities. Political refugees and activists moved to China, Russia, and the United States to lead the independence movement against the Japanese colonial regime. The third period, from 1945 to 1962, marked a significant period in Korean migration history. South Korea introduced early migration policies, allowing students to study abroad, facilitating the adoption of orphans, and reuniting interracial families with their relative in the US or Canada (Yuh, 2002). Notably, around 6,000 Korean women immigrated to the US as spouses of US soldiers between 1950 and 1964, while about 5,000 children, including orphans and mixed-raced individuals, also moved to America during this period. Between 1945

to 1965, around 6,000 Korean students pursued higher education in the US, with many opting for permanent settlement. These early immigrants, including women who married American soldiers, played a crucial role in paving the way for future waves of Korean immigration. In 1965, more inclusive American immigration policies allowed these early immigrants to sponsor the entry of their family members, marking a significant development in Korean immigration history (Yu, 1983: 23-24). The fourth period, from 1962 to the present, involves both permanent settlement and temporary labor migration. In 1962, South Korea initiated group and contract migrations to regions such as Latin America, Western Europe, and the Middle East to relieve population pressures and secure foreign currency through remittances (Kim, 1981). This period also saw a significant trend towards more permanent migration, especially to the United States, as US immigration policies evolved and eliminated discriminatory quotas. This migration wave primarily comprised educated middle-class individuals, many of whom had held white-collar jobs in Korea (Yoon, 1997).

Obviously, overseas Koreans generally share Korean ethnicity and heritage. They may have Korean parents or ancestors, establishing cultural and, in some cases, legal connections to South Korea. Furthermore, their international background often means they are bicultural or multilingual, having grown up in foreign countries where they typically become proficient in the local language alongside their Korean. The term “Gyopo”

is also used to describe the distinctive identity and experiences of individuals straddling the line between their Korean heritage and their host country's culture, leading them to grapple with questions of cultural identity, language proficiency, and belonging. Gyopos represent a diverse group with varying experiences, stemming from their origins in different countries, cultural backgrounds, and family situations. Some may have spent most of their lives abroad, while others have returned to South Korea or maintain strong connections to their Korean roots. Notably, Gyopos form part of the global Korean diaspora, which comprises Koreans and people of Korean descent living across the world. This diaspora plays a significant role in preserving and disseminating Korean culture and fostering connections with South Korea. Importantly, Gyopos wield a growing influence across various facets of Korean society, including politics, entertainment, business, and cultural exchange. They often act as cultural ambassadors, contributing to the global reach of Korean culture. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the term Gyopo is not universally accepted by all overseas Koreans. Some may identify more closely with their host country or employ other terms to describe their background. The use of the term "Gyopo" can also vary in different regions and contexts, but generally, it refers to Koreans who have spent a significant portion of their lives outside of South Korea, offering them a unique perspective on their cultural heritage.



## The Perspective of Native Koreans towards Overseas Koreans

Regarding international migration and the growth of racial or ethnic minorities, South Korean society has been transitioning into a multicultural society. Multicultural values, including the acknowledgment and respect of cultural diversity and minority groups' rights, are crucial prerequisites for a multicultural society. The current policies of the South Korean government actively support racial or ethnic and cultural minorities, aiming to strengthen the nation's economy and inspire foreign investment (Seungwoo, Han, 2022). Notably, to compete with global talent, South Korea aims to attract interest from overseas Koreans to work for Korean companies or establish startups in the country. However, for this strategy to succeed, the nation must embrace a multicultural environment both in the workplace and in society. Ultimately, the inclusion of overseas Koreans can contribute significantly to fortifying the nation's economy and education. As is well known, Koreans hold a strong belief in national identity. South Korean nationalism and identity have traditionally been perceived as exclusive and closed. In recent times, however, Koreans have adjusted their attitudes and become more open to overseas Koreans compared to the past.

The perspective of Koreans residing in South Korea towards Gyopo or overseas Koreans varies widely, depending on individual experiences and attitudes. This study, which aims to capture the evolving perspectives of different generations towards overseas Koreans, is valuable in exploring

their views on acknowledging and accepting overseas Koreans, as well as their perceptions of those who belong to the in-between category.

Firstly, the paradigm shift of Korean Generation X towards overseas Koreans represents an evolving perspective within an older demographic. This generation witnessed the country's transformation into a prosperous nation. They may have a stronger sense of national identity rooted in the idea of a unified Korean people, which can influence their perception of overseas Koreans. Additionally, many individuals within Korean Generation X have relatives or friends who have emigrated and become overseas Koreans. These personal connections can significantly impact their attitudes and perceptions. Such connections may foster a sense of empathy and interest in the experiences of overseas Koreans, as well as a greater appreciation for the challenges they face in adjusting to life in a foreign country. (Sook Jong Lee, 2021)

The paradigm shift of Korean millennials represents a significant evolution in the way younger generations in South Korea perceive and interact with the Korean diaspora. This shift is driven by various factors, including globalization, advancements in technology, and changing attitudes towards cultural identity. Although, the Korean millennial generation has grown up in an era of unprecedented globalization, they are more connected to the world than any previous generation. They are active on social media platforms, which enables them to engage with overseas Koreans more easily. Also, they have a more open and inclusive

attitude towards cultural identity. They are less rigid in their definitions of what it means to be Korean. This shift reflects a broader trend in which the concept of nationality and identity is becoming more fluid and inclusive. Overseas Koreans often contribute to the spread of Korean culture, known as the “Korean Wave” or Hallyu. Korean millennials recognize the influence of overseas Koreans in promoting K-pop, Korean cuisine, and Korean fashion on the global stage. (Sook Jong Lee, 2021)

The paradigm shift of Korean Generation Z signifies a significant change in perspective within the youngest demographic group in South Korea. Generation Z, born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is growing up in a world vastly different from that of previous generations, characterized by globalization, digital connectivity, and a more inclusive outlook. In other words, generation Z recognizes the value of networking and collaboration with overseas Koreans. They see the potential in working together on global projects, business ventures, and cultural exchanges. This generation is likely to be more open to partnerships and friendships with overseas Koreans, understanding the benefits of a global network. (Sook Jong Lee, 2021)

Various common viewpoints and factors influence how South Koreans may perceive Gyopos. Firstly, many South Koreans exhibit curiosity regarding Gyopo individuals. They are often keen to learn about their experiences living abroad, their proficiency in foreign languages, and their insights into other cultures. Gyopos are regarded as a source of

unique perspectives on the world beyond South Korea. Additionally, South Koreans typically appreciate Gyopos' efforts to maintain their Korean cultural identity, including language, traditions, and customs, seeing it as a positive endeavor to preserve and promote Korean culture. Moreover, South Koreans recognize that Gyopos contribute to diversity within their society. The presence of individuals with various backgrounds and experiences enriches the cultural landscape and fosters a more cosmopolitan and open-minded society. Gyopos' strong command of both the Korean language and the language of their host country is often regarded as an asset, particularly in industries requiring international communication and diplomacy. Depending on the circumstances and duration of their stay abroad, Gyopos may face challenges when reintegrating into South Korean society, leading South Koreans to empathize with the difficulties some Gyopos encounter in adjusting to life in South Korea. Misunderstandings or cultural gaps may sometimes emerge between Gyopos and South Koreans due to differences in cultural norms and expectations. Fostering open communication is all-important in addressing these issues.

Gyopos often have a significant impact on introducing South Koreans to aspects of foreign culture, whether it is through food, fashion, or entertainment, a contribution generally appreciated for making South Korean society more diverse and open. Furthermore, many Gyopos return to South Korea to work, invest, or engage in business activities. Their

contributions to the economy and society are generally seen as positive, and those who get involved in South Korean politics or social issues are viewed as contributing to the improvement of the country by bringing international perspectives to local debates. However, it is important to acknowledge that while positive perspectives towards overseas Koreans are increasing, there are still controversial issues within Korean society. These issues encompass topics like cultural identity, mandatory military service, voting rights, discrimination, cultural appropriation, and employment and education opportunities. These debates reflect the diversity of experiences and viewpoints within the overseas Korean community and their evolving relationship with South Korean society. (Hye-Kyung Lee, 2005)

### **The Adaptation of Overseas Koreans**

Adapting to a new country and job can be tough, especially for overseas Koreans coming back to work in South Korea. South Korea has a strong economy, modern facilities, and a lively culture, but its work environment and social norms are distinct. Returning to a home country after living abroad can be both a chance and a challenge. To fit in while working in South Korea, overseas Koreans need to make various changes in how they understand and do things, involving their culture, work skills, and personal life.

When overseas Koreans return to work in South Korea, they face several key challenges. Firstly, they need to adapt culturally, which includes improving their Korean language skills, understanding social hierarchies, and respecting seniority in the workplace, and grasping the unique corporate cultures and work practices of Korean companies. Secondly, they must adapt professionally by learning about the local job market, networking effectively, possibly updating their qualifications to match local standards, and adapting to South Korea's strong work ethic that often involves long hours. Thirdly, taking care of their well-being is crucial, and they can do this by joining expat groups, participating in cultural activities, and seeking support for mental health. Additionally, overseas Koreans may experience reverse culture shock upon their return, which involves accepting and adapting to changes in South Korea since their absence. Lastly, employers can play a main role in helping overseas Koreans adapt by offering orientation programs, cultural sensitivity training, language classes, and mentorship opportunities to help them settle into the work environment. (Hye-Kyung Lee, 2005; Mylonas, H. 2013)

### **The Job Opportunities of Overseas Koreans in South Korea**

Overseas Koreans can be categorized into three groups: immigrants, descendants, and students and professionals. Among these, the latter category has assembled significant interest from Korean universities. Many overseas Koreans initially travel abroad for education or work opportunities and subsequently return to South Korea. These

individuals often play a vital role in spreading Korean culture and businesses on a global scale. In recent years, Korean universities have exhibited a growing interest in attracting and accommodating overseas Koreans. This is driven by several factors. Firstly, Korean universities acknowledge the value of diversity and a global perspective in their student body. Overseas Koreans bring a wealth of unique experiences, language skills, and cultural insights that contribute to a more diverse and dynamic learning environment. Moreover, many Korean universities recognize the role of overseas Koreans in preserving and strengthening cultural ties with the Korean diaspora. Consequently, they offer specialized programs and support services to assist overseas Koreans in reconnecting with their heritage and language. The language proficiency of overseas Koreans is often a noteworthy advantage, as they may already be fluent in both Korean and the language of their host country. This linguistic proficiency is highly valuable in programs that require bilingual or multilingual skills. To remain competitive in the global education landscape, Korean universities are increasingly focusing on recruiting international students, with overseas Koreans representing a targeted demographic. These universities provide support services tailored to meet the unique needs of overseas Koreans, contributing to their attraction and retention. Additionally, Korean universities recognize the potential of overseas Koreans to become part of their alumni network, thereby enhancing the university's reputation, influence, and resources both

within South Korea and on an international scale. These institutions are increasingly adopting strategies centered around internationalization and globalization. These strategies frequently entail partnerships with universities and organization worldwide, and overseas Koreans can play an all-important role in facilitating such connections due to their global backgrounds. The South Korean government has also actively engaged with the Korean diaspora, including overseas Koreans, by providing support for universities and organizations to establish programs and initiatives catering to the specific needs of overseas Koreans (Lim, T. C. & Seol, D.H., 2018). First and foremost, overseas Koreans can apply for an F4 visa, specially designed for individuals of Korean descent (Yonhap News, 2013). This visa permits them to live and work in South Korea with relatively few restrictions. Their proficiency in both the Korean language and the language of their host country equips them to explore job opportunities as translators, interpreters, language instructors, or in international business roles. Their familiarity with both Korean culture and the culture of their host country serves as a unique advantage, particularly in roles related to international business, marketing, or cultural exchange. Additionally, those who have acquired international experience or education abroad can bring a global perspective to South Korean companies, a highly valued attribute in an increasingly interconnected world. In terms of specialized skills, they may find opportunities in advanced industries like technology, finance, and entertainment. What's



more, building a professional network is imperative in any job search, and overseas Koreans can leverage their existing connections in both their host country and South Korea. Many South Korean companies have a global presence, making it more convenient for overseas Koreans to identify opportunities. The government also play a significant role in launching various initiatives aimed at attracting overseas talent, including programs designed to provide support, mentorship, and resources to help overseas Koreans find jobs and settle in the country (Mylonas, H., 2013). An essential aspect of a successful transition involves understanding the cultural and professional norms in South Korea. Notably, there are numerous well-known overseas Koreans who have made substantial contributions in various fields, spanning entertainment, politics, sports, and business.

Daniel Dae Kim is a well-known actor appearing in popular TV shows such as “Lost” and “Hawaii Five-O”. I.M (Changkyun) is a member of the K-pop group called MONSTA-X. He is a prominent figure in the global K-pop industry. John Y. Lee is a filmmaker and director. He is known for his work on films such as “The Man Who Invented Christmas” and “Remember the Daze.” Moon Jae-in was the President of South Korea. He contributes to his global perspective on politics. David Chang is a renowned chef and founder of the Momofuku restaurant group. He has made a significant impact on the culinary world. Michelle Wie is a professional golfer. She became a golf sensation at a young age and has

competed on the LPGA Tour. Eric Nam is a Korean American singer, songwriter, and television host. Michelle Zauner is a well-known author of a novel called “Crying in H Mart”. She is also a screenwriter for her own novel. The novel is in the process of filming. Daniel Henny is a Korean American actor and model. He has appeared in both South Korean and American films and television series, gaining recognition for his diverse roles. Steven Yeun is a Korean American actor. He earned critical acclaim for starring in the drama called Minari. These individuals represent a diverse range of industries and exemplify the global impact of overseas Koreans. They play a crucial role in bridging cultures and creating connections between South Korea and the rest of the world.

During South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol’s visit to Washington, D.C. in April 2023, both countries declared a Washington Agreement, establishing a solid foundation for a broad alliance covering security, economic, and technology matters (Chung Min Lee, 2023). Global demographic data on overseas Koreans indicates that the United States is home to the largest community, with 2,633,777 living there (South Korea: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). California, in particular, boasts the largest group, tracing its roots back a century. This significant Korean presence in California positions the state as a crucial link for fostering increased collaboration between the two nations. Apparently, Overseas Koreans are no longer solely groups of Korean people living in other countries; instead, they can play a role in maximizing the economy of South Korea.

Apart from economic advantages, English language teaching by Gyopo teachers make a contribution to Korea. Gyopo teachers represent a distinct perspective among a specific group of English educators in South Korea. Despite their significance in the field, they have not received sufficient attention. The term "Gyopo" refers to ethnic Koreans holding foreign citizenship, such as Korean Americans, Korean Australians, and Korean Canadians. According to Jang (2017), the recruitment of foreign professors, including Gyopo teachers, has increased at Korean universities seeking to internationalize in response to globalization. The Overseas Korean Act (OKA) in 1999 led to a rise in Gyopos returning to South Korea, particularly to teach English (Cho, 2012). This influx can be partly attributed to the Korean government's consistent policy of promoting English as a language of social and economic influence for economic growth and national prosperity. Jung Won Lee and Myonghee Kim (2021) noted that Gyopo teachers who moved to an English-speaking country later in life and learned English over time can be great role models for students learning the language. Policymakers can create plans to bring more Gyopo teachers to South Korea for English programs, using their experiences as valuable resources for language education. Additionally, schools with Gyopo English teachers can find ways to appreciate and utilize their bilingual and bicultural skills when needed. With their unique strengths, Gyopo teachers can positively contribute to their institutions and confidently see themselves as insiders rather than outsiders.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, this article aims to explore the evolving perspectives of native Koreans towards overseas Koreans, focusing on different generational attitudes. It highlights how Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z in South Korea view overseas Koreans, emphasizing increasing cooperation and understanding. Additionally, it discusses common viewpoints, including curiosity, appreciation for cultural preservation, and the recognition of diversity within South Korean society. The article also touches upon the challenges faced by overseas Koreans when adapting to South Korea and the abundant job opportunities they find in the country. Finally, it introduces several well-known overseas Koreans who have made significant contributions across various fields.

Suggestions for further study could include in-depth research on the factors influencing generational perspectives towards overseas Koreans, as well as the impact of overseas Koreans in shaping South Korean society and international relations. Further investigation into the challenges faced by overseas Koreans when returning to work in South Korea and the effectiveness of employer support programs would also be valuable. Additionally, examining the evolving role of Korean universities in attracting and accommodating overseas Koreans and the South Korean government's initiatives in this regard could provide insights into the

changing landscape of education and employment opportunities for overseas Koreans in South Korea.

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