

Ideas, Discourse, and the Microfoundations of South Korea's Diasporic Engagement: Explaining the Institutional Embrace of Ethnic Koreans Since the 1990s*

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Introduction

Long before the establishment of the Republic of Korea (hereafter, South Korea) in 1948, there were substantial communities, both temporary and permanent, of ethnic Koreans living outside the Korean peninsula. Korean scholars have pointed to the mid-1800s (or the latter part of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910)) as the primary starting point,¹ when tens

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1 Some Chinese scholars view the initial stage of large-scale Korean migration to China to have taken place in the early 17th century (the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty), when tens of thousands of Koreans were taken to Manchuria by the Qing invaders. See Hai-yu Yan, "Research on the Nationality and Demographic Situation of Koreans in China," *Korea Law Review* 92 (2019). Korean scholars, however, generally consider the mid-19th century as the beginning of modern Ko-

of thousands of Koreans began voluntarily crossing into Manchuria and the Russian Far East² to escape famine and other dire conditions including rampant corruption and political turmoil.³ By 1910, an estimated 274,000 had settled in those areas.⁴ In addition, the early 1900s saw more than 7,000 Korean men emigrate to Hawaii as agricultural workers,⁵ followed by around 1,100 Korean women who went to join them as “picture brides.”⁶ The period between 1910, the beginning of Japan’s annexation of Korea, and the end of World War II witnessed a much larger outflow of Koreans: in Manchuria, the Korean population grew to 1.7 million, while in Japan the number of Koreans increased from a scant 790 in 1909 to more than 2.2 million by the end of the war.⁷ Beginning in 1945, how-

rean migration. See Gyu-hwan Hyeon, *Hanguk Yuiminsa Vol. 1 [a History of Korean Wanderers and Migrants]* (Seoul: Eomungak, 1967); Yong-jae Lee, “The Process and Mission of South Korea’s Policy toward Overseas Koreans,” *Minjok Yŏn’gu* 61 (2015).

- 2 The Russian Far East was established in 1860; before then, that area was Manchu (Qing) territory.
- 3 National Institute of Korean History to Uri yŏksa [Our History], n.d., http://contents.history.go.kr/front/ta/view.do?levelId=ta_h71_0060_0050_0010_0030
- 4 Y. Wook Lee, “The Politics of Foreign Labor Policy in Korea and Japan,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 35, no. 2 (2005).
- 5 Wayne Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896-1910* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).
- 6 One of the authors of this paper has a personal connection to the Korean women who emigrated to Hawaii—i.e., both of his grandmothers were picture brides; in addition, both of his grandfathers were among the first group of Korean men to emigrate to Hawaii as agricultural workers. The total number of picture brides was about 1,115. The latter figure comes from In-jin Yoon, *The Korean Diaspora: Migration, Adaptation, and Identity of Overseas Koreans* (Seoul: Korea University Press, 2004). For additional discussion of picture brides in Hawaii, see Younho Oh, “Korean Picture Brides in Hawaii: Historical and Literary Narratives,” *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 7, no. 12 (2017).
- 7 Figure cited in Toshiyuki Tamura, “The Status and Role of Ethnic Koreans in the Japanese Economy,” in *The Korean Diaspora in the World Economy*, ed. C. Fred

ever, the vast majority of Koreans in Japan (about 1.5 million) returned to their divided homeland (almost all to the southern part of Korea), while for Koreans in China, about half returned to one or the other of the two nascent Koreas.⁸ Korean immigrants in Russia, by contrast, were largely prevented from returning to either the north or the south, as Stalin's regime had, beginning in the late-1930s, forced most to relocate to Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.⁹ All told, then, in the few years following the end of World War II, about 1.3 million Koreans remained outside of the Korean peninsula.

For several decades, the situation did not significantly change. The first notable shift came in the early-1960s when the Korean government, under Park Chung-hee (Pak Chŏnghŭi), instituted a policy of temporary or contract labor migration by sending Korean miners, nurses, technicians, seafarers, and construction workers to different parts of the world to earn (and then remit) much needed foreign currency and to ease unemployment pressures in the domestic economy.¹⁰ During this same period, it is

Bergsten and Inbom Choi (Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 2003).

- 8 Formally, the division of Korea into two separate states did not occur until 1948; however, the peninsula was effectively divided into two parts following the end of the war in 1945 when Soviet troops occupied parts of Korea to the north of the 38th parallel, while US and allied troops occupied the area to the south.
- 9 Lee, "The Politics of Foreign Labor Policy in Korea and Japan." Some Koreans returned to North Korea with Soviet troops between 1945 and 1949 to help in the nation-building effort. They were later purged by Kim Il Sung following the end of the Korean War. See Chong-Sik Lee and Ki-Wan Oh, "The Russian Faction in North Korea," *Asian Survey* 8, no. 4 (1968).
- 10 By the end of 1974, there were about 90,000 Koreans working in 54 countries around the world and on 340 large foreign ships; a construction boom beginning in 1975 led to a rapid increase, especially in the Middle East, where the number of Korean construction workers increased to 160,000 (by 1982) in that region alone. All figures cited in Ui-Sup Shim, "South Korean Workers and the Middle East Construction Boom in the 1970s," *Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015). Over the course of the entire "labor-exporting" period (roughly between

worth noting, Park's government also promoted a "resettlement" policy, namely, an effort to encourage Koreans to emigrate to and settle in Latin America as farmers. This was a fairly significant program as an average of 1,554 Koreans emigrated to Latin America per year for the 20-year period between 1962 and 1981.¹¹ In terms of long-term or permanent emigration, however, a far more important shift took place when the United States amended long-standing discriminatory immigration policies that largely prevented immigration from Asian countries (other western countries followed suit).¹² This led to a rapid and dramatic increase in Korean emigration over the next two decades: between 1962 and 1987, approximately 800,000 Koreans resettled in western countries outside of South Korea, mostly in the United States. This meant that the "Korean

the early-1960s and the early-1990s), the cumulative total of South Koreans who worked abroad reached 2 million. See Young-Bum Park, "Korea," *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 12, no. 2 (1995).

- 11 This figure is based on authors' calculations from figures cited in Kim Chong-Sup and Lee Eunsuk, "Growth and Migration to a Third Country: The Case of Korean Migrants in Latin America," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 23, no. 2 (2016). Kim and Lee also note that, while Korean emigrants were supposed to settle in Latin America as farmers, most were unable to succeed since not only they generally lacked agricultural background, but also the agricultural conditions in Latin America were significantly different from those of South Korea. As result, many moved to cities and opened small family-based businesses.
- 12 In the US, the specific change was due to the passage of 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which amended the existing Immigration and Nationality Act (the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act; this latter act limited immigration from the so-called Asia-Pacific Triangle to 2,000 persons in total, although spouses and children of US citizens were not counted in this total). At the same time, the McCarran-Walter Act did not include any limits on immigrants with roots in the Western Hemisphere. The Hart-Celler Act abolished country quotas based on the national origins formula, which opened the door to significantly greater immigration from Asian countries. For further discussion, see Timothy J. Hatton, "United States Immigration Policy: The 1965 Act and Its Consequences," *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 117, no. 2 (2014).

diaspora”¹³ had grown to over two million direct emigrants with even more second, third, and fourth generation descendants. Citing figures from the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Choi notes that the size of the Korean diaspora in 1991 was 4.8 million, which was equal to 11 percent of South Korea’s population that same year (in 1991, South Korea’s population was 43.3 million).¹⁴

Obvious Questions and Obvious Answers

Except for the contract workers dispatched (whether directly or indirectly) by the South Korean government, as well as intense diplomatic discussions over the treatment of Koreans in Japan (i.e., *Zainichi* Koreans), for a long time South Korean society did not pay much, if any, attention to its increasingly sizable diaspora. But, beginning in the early 1990s, the Korean diaspora began to be discussed far more frequently in academia and by the mainstream Korean media.¹⁵ In particular, in the early

13 We enclose “Korean diaspora” in scare quotes to emphasize that the term is subject to some dispute. However, among diaspora scholars, according to Kim Butler, there is general agreement on three basic features of diaspora: (1) there must be a minimum of two destinations outside the homeland; (2) there must be a relationship to an actual or imagined homeland; and (3) there must be self-awareness of the group’s identity. Butler adds a fourth feature: there must be at least two generations of the ethnic group outside the original homeland. Based on these four features or criteria, it is fairly clear that there has long been a Korean diaspora. See Kim D. Butler, “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” *Diaspora* 10, no. 2 (2001).

14 Inbom Choi, “Korean Diaspora in the Making: Its Current Status and Impact on the Korean Economy,” in *The Korean Diaspora in the World Economy*, ed. C. Fred Bergsten and Inbom Choi (Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 2003).

15 Changzoo Song, “Joseonjok and Goryeo Saram Ethnic Return Migrants in South Korea: Hierarchy among Co-Ethnics and Ethnonational Identity,” in *Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland: The Korean Diaspora in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan,

1990s South Korean news media began to publish positive stories about the diaspora and focused strongly on ethnic Koreans in the People's Republic of China (*Chosŏnjok*) and the Soviet Union (*Koryŏ saram*).¹⁶ Academic articles and books on the Korean diaspora also began to appear; indeed, the Korean diaspora went from being barely acknowledged to a significant area of scholarly research and inquiry in just a few years. More significantly, the Korean government also started to pay closer attention to the Korean diaspora and, for the first time, began to regularly publish official statistics on overseas Koreans. (Prior to 1995, statistics were published on an irregular basis; moreover, Koreans in China and the former Soviet Union were not included at all until 1992.) It also began to consider, and then ultimately institutionalize, new ways of engaging with overseas Korean communities in a formal and strategic manner.¹⁷ This seemingly out-of-the-blue shift leads to an obvious question: Why, after decades of neglect and disinterest did South Koreans finally start to pay serious attention to ethnic Koreans living in other parts of the world?¹⁸ Even more importantly, why were ethnic Koreans—a large proportion of whom had never even stepped foot in South Korea and, in many cases, were multiple generations removed from their putative homeland—encouraged to connect to and, in some cases, integrate into South Korean society at an *institutional* (as opposed to purely personal) level?

There are a few equally obvious answers to the questions just posed.

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16 Changzoo Song, "Brothers Only in Name: The Alienation and Identity Transformation of Korean Chinese Return Migrants in South Korea," in *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective* ed. Takeyuki Tsuda (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

17 Han Suk Lee, "The Reality of Multicultural Policies of Korea," in *Migration Und Integration Als Transnationale Herausforderung.*, ed. Klaus Stüwe and Eveline Hermannseder (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015).

18 We recognize, as we alluded to earlier, that *Zainichi* Koreans have not been neglected, at least for a period in the 1960s. Please refer to note no. 30 below for further discussion.

For now, suffice it to say that one of the obvious answers can be found in the ending of the Cold War, which made it possible for South Koreans to interact with the two million ethnic Koreans living in China and the half million Soviet Koreans. Of course, the Cold War barrier only accounts for that part of the Korean diaspora living behind the Cold War's so-called Iron and Bamboo Curtains. But what about ethnic Koreans living in the United States and other western countries where no such barriers existed? Here, too, there are a couple of obvious answers. The first is primarily economic: by the early-1990s and clearly reflecting global trends in diaspora engagement,¹⁹ the Korean diaspora in the West was increasingly viewed as a valuable source of human and financial capital, which could be harnessed or "tapped" to help South Korea fulfil its developmental goals.²⁰ This view was further reinforced when South Korea experienced a serious economic crisis in the late-1990s. This diaspora-as-a-resource view, it is important to add, reflects the aptly named "tapping perspective" in the literature on state-diaspora relations. In the tapping perspective, "diaspora institutions emerge and grow in importance as auxiliaries to other diplomatic and consular initiatives engaging diasporas so that they may 'tap' these valuable resources more effectively."²¹ The second answer is primarily political: In the early 1990s, the Korean American

19 See Alan Gamlen, "Diaspora Institutions and Diaspora Governance," *The International Migration Review* 48, no. S1 (2014); Alan Gamlen et al., "Explaining the Rise of Diaspora Institutions," *The IMI (International Migration Institute) Working Papers Series*, no. 78 (2013).

20 Choi, "Korean Diaspora in the Making: Its Current Status and Impact on the Korean Economy."

21 Cited in Gamlen et al. The authors also point to two other and widely used perspectives on diaspora emergence. One is the "embracing perspective," which highlights how interests are shaped by constitutive ideas and identities, including nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, and even sexuality. The second is the "governing perspective," which focuses on how the global diffusion of certain organizational forms, norms, and practices lead to a high degree of organizational conformity or convergence. See Gamlen et al., "Explaining the Rise of Diaspora Institutions."

community, for the first time, began openly advocating for greater recognition by the South Korean government and specifically called for South Korea's Nationality Act to be amended to allow for dual nationality.²²

Beyond the Obvious

There is good reason that the obvious answers are obvious. To wit, at a general level, they are correct. However, they also obscure the complexities or specificities of the process that leads to the substantive recognition of diasporic communities and to the construction of diaspora engagement institutions. To this point, Alonso and Mylonas, in their discussion of diaspora politics broadly, write: "While advances in the field [diaspora studies] are significant, there is a clear need to open the 'black box' of the state and study the *various actors* driving diaspora policies" (emphasis added).²³ The authors are particularly interested in "unveiling the microfoundations of diaspora politics," which refers to the "mechanisms that link different levels of analysis and various actors that are *constitutive* of state-diaspora relations" (emphasis in original).²⁴ In an analysis of South Korea's diasporic turn, we believe a focus on the microfoundations of diaspora politics is well-placed and even necessary. We particularly believe that a focus on the agency of various actors and especially non-state or societal ones—both individuals and groups—is crucial to not only explaining how diaspora engagement institutions emerge, but also how they are shaped and often fundamentally reshaped through an ongoing and not always predictable process. A focus on actors and agency, however, can

22 Chulwoo Lee, "'Us' and 'Them' in Korean Law: The Creation, Accommodation and Exclusion of Outsiders in South Korea," in *East Asian Law: Universal Norms and Local Cultures*, ed. Arthur Rosett, Lucie Cheng, and Margaret Y.K. Woo. (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon., 2003).

23 Alexandra Délano Alonso and Harris Mylonas, "The Microfoundations of Diaspora Politics: Unpacking the State and Disaggregating the Diaspora," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 4 (2019): 476.

24 *Ibid.*, 477.

easily become a simple, and perhaps simplistic, variant of the tapping perspective with individual interests replacing the interests of the (supposedly unitary) state. To be sure, individual (and state) interests matter a great deal in any examination of diaspora politics, but we argue that interests—particularly when strictly premised on material conditions—do not and cannot provide an adequate explanation by themselves.

This leads to our central purpose. In this paper, we intend to reveal, at least partly, the microfoundations of South Korea's seemingly sudden turn toward diasporic engagement. Doing so requires an examination not merely of actors and agency in general, but also of the *intersection* of material factors with the various ideas and discourses used by “sentient agents” (i.e., real, thinking and speaking people whose ideas and discourse directly shape, reproduce, or reshape institutions).²⁵ In our framework, ideas and discourse play a central and causal role. Thus, while we acknowledge that the choices and actions of sentient agents are often motivated by (material) interests—usually economic in character—interests are not exogenously given. Instead, they are formed, reinforced, changed, or abandoned, as the case may be, through an endogenous process. This “endogenous process” is, at base, nothing more than what goes on inside people's heads, which may reflect long-term and strongly “institutional thinking”²⁶ or the interplay of ideas—whether firmly established as foun-

25 Our analysis here draws heavily from what Vivien Schmidt has labelled, “discursive institutionalism.” Schmidt refers to discursive institutionalism as the fourth “new institutionalism,” because it goes beyond the limits of traditional institutional approaches (rational choice, historical, and sociological) in part by adopting a dynamic definition of institutions “as structures and constructs of meaning *internal* to agents whose ‘background ideational abilities’ enable them to create (and maintain) institutions while their ‘foreground discursive abilities’ enable them to communicate critically about those institutions, to change (or maintain) them” (emphasis added; p. 1). See Vivien A. Schmidt, “Taking Ideas and Discourse Seriously: Explaining Change through Discursive Institutionalism as the Fourth ‘New Institutionalism,’” *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (2010).

26 Institutional thinking refers to the norms, priorities, rules, duties, and obligations

dational ideas (i.e., part of a society's *zeitgeist*²⁷) or brand new, whether already accepted or not-yet accepted, whether pre-held (inside an actor's head) or recently learned, and so on.

While what goes on “inside people’s heads” is vital, there is also an inescapable external element of thinking, namely, discourse.²⁸ For ideas to have a wider social and institutional impact, they have to be communicated, debated, interpreted, negotiated, clarified (or obscured). This is all part of a larger discursive process—which sometimes involves a struggle—that necessarily involves discursive agency. Discursive agency, another key point of our analysis, refers to the capacity of actors, again to put it very simply, to think *and* speak for themselves, which means having the capacity to accept or reject ideas and to persuade others to do the same (and vice versa). In this respect, it is discursive agents who create, sustain, or change institutions and society more broadly. (In the context of our argument, the key change, or dependent variable, is the *institutional* incorporation of the ethnic Korean diaspora by the South Korean state.) Position and power also matter here. Some actors are in a better position to exercise discursive agency by virtue of the positions they occupy in society. State actors, in particular, are often able to play the most decisive roles, in part, because of their direct control of the policymaking appa-

that are embedded within specific organizations (e.g., a government bureaucracy), a profession (e.g., journalism, law enforcement, or university teaching), or an epistemic community such as climate scientists.

27 Mehta identifies three levels of ideas, of which *zeitgeist*—which he also labels “public philosophies”—is the deepest. The others are levels of policy solutions and problem definitions. In Mehta’s view, any discussion of the role of ideas in the political process must recognize the different levels as well as the interaction among the levels of ideas. See Jal Mehta, “From ‘Whether’ to ‘How’: The Varied Roles of Ideas in Politic,” in *How Ideas Matter: Reframing Political Research*, ed. Bob Cox and Daniel Beland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

28 The discussion in this section draws from a book published by one of the authors. See Timothy C. Lim, *The Road to Multiculturalism in South Korea: Ideas, Discourse, and Institutional Change in a Homogenous Nation-State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

ratus and their control over material resources. At the same time, societal actors, especially those with privileged positions in the economy, also can exercise outsized influence on the policy process by directly interacting with state actors. But even societal actors without privileged access can have an important impact by shaping or reshaping the collective understanding of certain issues, such as the prevailing views on diasporic communities. In this regard, seemingly powerless actors can, albeit under the right conditions, also have a significant impact on core institutions within society. With all this in mind, we will now turn to a more focused discussion of the microfoundations of South Korea's institutional turn toward diasporic engagement.

The “Emergence” of the Korean Diaspora

In objective terms, the Korean diaspora has existed for well over a century. For a long time and from the perspective of South Koreans, however, it might as well not have existed at all. As we pointed out above, since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, there have been millions of ethnic Koreans living outside the Korean peninsula generally and outside of South Korea's borders more specifically. For at least four decades, however, there was no meaningful and institutionalized effort to connect these diasporic Korean communities to their putative homeland (again, with the notable exception of *Zainichi* Koreans, whose experiences will not be covered in this paper²⁹). We have already pointed to several basic

29 This paper does not include a discussion of *Zainichi* Koreans, which can be viewed as a major omission since they constitute a relatively large portion of the Korean diaspora. We have two reasons for this lack of coverage. The first stems primarily from the fact that the focus of this paper on the institutional incorporation of that part of the Korean diaspora that had long been excluded from official institutional recognition, especially access to permanent residency and South Korean citizenship. Koreans who decided to remain in Japan after the end of colonialism, however, were given the option of becoming South Korean citizens after the signing of

reasons for this lack of connection. For ethnic Koreans in China and the Soviet Union, to repeat, the lack of diplomatic relations made it all-but-impossible to physically interact with each other across borders; even communicating via phone or mail was extremely difficult, at least for ordinary people.³⁰ Likely much more important, though, was the ideological (viz., ideational and discursive) enmity between the two socialist regimes and the staunchly anti-communist,³¹ pro-US South Korea. As

the Treaty on Basic Relations between the governments of Japan and South Korea. Some Koreans chose not to become citizens of South Korea, instead choosing North Korean citizenship or refusing to acknowledge the division of the country by remaining Chōsen-seki (朝鮮籍, “Korean domicile”), the latter of which made them (voluntarily) “stateless.” The second reason is integrally connected to the first, namely, the process of institutional incorporation for *Zainichi* Koreans took place within a very different context, both domestically (i.e., under a non-democratic regime) and internationally. In addition, there is a large literature that focuses intently on the *Zainichi* Korean populations. For a few representative examples, see John Lie, *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan): Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity* (Berkeley: Global, Area, and International Archive and University of California Press, 2008); Sonia Ryang, “Japan’s Ethnic Minority: Koreans,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, ed. Jennifer Robertson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005); David Chapman, *Zainichi Korean Ethnicity and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2007).

30 Communication was not entirely absent. Beginning in 1972, in particular, KBS *Hanminjok* Radio, also known as KBS Social Education Radio, began a propaganda broadcast to ethnic Koreans in China and the USSR. Originally, though, the station was set up (in 1948) to target only Koreans in North Korea. See “Renamed KBS Social Education Broadcasting to ‘Korean National Broadcasting,’” *DailyNK*, July 25 2007, <https://www.dailynk.com/kbs-사회교육방송-한민족방송으로-명/>.

31 Anti-communism was a conscious ideological strategy adopted by the regime of Park Chung-hee to establish the foundations of military rule and suppress political opposition. For further discussion, see Natalia Matveeva, “Anticommunism as Regime Legitimation Strategy in South Korea in the 1960s,” *Twentieth Century Communism*, no. 19 (2020); Kwang-Yeong Shin, “The Trajectory of Anti-Communism in South Korea,” *Asian Journal of German and European Studies* 2, no. 1 (2017).

Jaeun Kim asserts, this enmity led the South Korean state to purposefully and essentially erase the *Chosŏnjok* (and *Koryŏ saram*) from “its rhetorical practices, bureaucratic routines, and organizational structures for nearly half a century.”³² This is reflected in the fact that, until 1991, as we noted above, the South Korean government did not compile statistics on ethnic Koreans in China and the Soviet Union. The entire communities of ethnic Koreans in China and the Soviet Union, in short, were rendered (figuratively) invisible by Cold War dynamics. Importantly, this happened despite the fact that ethnic Koreans in those areas were, at the time, generally understood to be both victims of Japan’s colonial rule and national heroes or patriots who bravely struggled against Japanese occupation. In other words, they were considered to be “real Koreans.”

In the West, as we also already made clear, there were no comparable diplomatic and ideological barriers; yet there still was no concerted (or institutional) effort to connect with the Korean diaspora in the United States and other parts of the western world. We do recognize, though, that a small group of Koreans³³—i.e., those who initially went abroad to earn advanced degrees (especially in science and engineering)—did receive a lot of careful attention, especially by the South Korean government. Specifically, beginning in the Park Chung-hee administration, a state-led “reverse brain drain” program, perhaps the first of its kind in the world, was created to entice western-educated Ph.D.-holders back to South Korea.³⁴

32 Jaeun Kim, “The Making and Unmaking of a ‘Transborder Nation’: South Korea During and after the Cold War,” *Renewal and Critique in Social Theory* 38, no. 2 (2009): 147.

33 In 1965, for instance, there were a total of 869 Koreans with a Ph.D. in science or engineering in the United States; at that time, only a small percentage—about 13 percent—typically returned to South Korea after earning their degrees. See Harriet Ann Hentges, “The Repatriation and Utilization of High-Level Manpower: A Case Study of the Korea Institute of Science and Technology” (Ph.D. thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 1975).

34 For further discussion, see B. L. Yoon, “Reverse Brain Drain in South Korea: State-Led Model,” *Stud Comp Int Dev* 27, no. 1 (1992). According to Yoon, a cen-

These individuals were portrayed as national heroes (as well as celebrities³⁵), too, but *only* insofar as they brought their knowledge and skills back to South Korea, preferably sooner than later, to contribute to the country's technological and economic advancement. In this regard, and despite the fact that many had started the process of settling outside of South Korea, they were akin to temporary overseas contract laborers (e.g., miners, nurses, and technicians), albeit highly educated ones, than as members of a diasporic community.

For long-term members of the Korean diaspora in western countries, including their descendants, the situation was very different. Indeed, prior to the 1990s, Korean emigration to western countries was frequently, although certainly not always, portrayed as an act of betrayal to the Korean nation. This view, for instance, is reflected in an interview that Han Myōngsuk, a former prime minister (2006-07), gave to *Jaeoe Dongpo News* in 2005 about Koreans who had emigrated to western countries. As she succinctly and blandly put it, "... our perceptions of overseas Koreans [before the 1990s] was quite negative."³⁶ In addition, as with *Chosōnjok* and *Koryō saram*, the South Korean government did not keep official statistics on ethnic Koreans in western countries; although they were not "invisible," they were perhaps translucent. Even as late as 1996, in re-

tral part of this program was the establishment of the Korea Institute of Science and Technology (KIST), which began with the recruitment of 18 senior level scientists/engineers from the United States and West Germany. Those who returned to South Korea were given free or subsidized housing, educational expenses for their children, cars, and other material perks. Their salaries, moreover, while extremely low by western standards, were exceptionally high by Korean standards; in fact, according to Yoon, the KIST salary scale, in the 1960s, was higher than that of members of the cabinet and the National Assembly, who were seen as occupying the most prestigious positions in society at the time.

35 Yoon provides a nice description of how returning scientists and engineers were covered by South Korean media. *Ibid.*

36 Cited in Tongil An, "Chodaesök: Han Myōng-Suk-Ŭiwön" [Interview Invitation: MP Han Myōng-Suk] *Chaeoe Tongp'o Sinmun [Dongpo News]* February 28 2005, <http://www.dongponews.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=4779>.

response to the demands by Korean Americans for dual citizenship, President Kim Yŏngsam firmly rejected their claims and asserted that Korean Americans specifically, and overseas Koreans more generally, should focus on becoming “decent and respectable citizens of their host states.”³⁷ At the same time, President Kim did approve the establishment of the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF), under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The OKF was designed to “support overseas Koreans and their activities” and, in this view, can be pointed to as the first official step toward the institutional recognition of the Korean diaspora. (We will have more to say about the OKF below.) Significantly, it was only a year later, in 1997, that serious discussions about creating an institutional path for ethnic Koreans to connect with South Korea began. Not coincidentally, this coincided with the Asian Financial Crisis, which had a devastating impact on multiple countries in Asia, including South Korea. At the height of the crisis, South Korea faced the very real prospect of defaulting on its foreign debt and “tapping” into the Korean diaspora was seen as one way to alleviate the economic crunch.³⁸

The upshot is clear: Through the 1980s, ethnic Koreans who had settled outside the Korean peninsula were largely separate and separated from South Korea. To be sure, there were affective and familial bonds that remained intact across borders and across time (primarily with ethnic Koreans in western countries and among a portion of the Koreans in Japan or *Zainichi* Koreans), but it was largely a one-sided and “unrequited” relationship from an institutional and policy perspective. This leads us back to a key question: Why did things suddenly change?

37 Cited in Lee, “‘Us’ and ‘Them’ in Korean Law: The Creation, Accommodation and Exclusion of Outsiders in South Korea.”

38 For discussion of debt issue, see O. Yul Kwon, “The Korean Financial Crisis: Diagnosis, Remedies and Prospects,” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 3, no. 3 (1998).

Embracing the Diaspora: A Long-Delayed “Welcome”

It is virtually undeniable that the restoration of diplomatic relations between South Korea and its former socialist enemies had a major impact on how South Korea viewed the once largely ignored Korean diaspora, not just in China and the former Soviet Union, but also in the West as well. At the same time, there is little to no dispute that a defining characteristic of South Korean society has long been the valorization and even sanctification of ethnic and racial purity.³⁹ Thus, it is not at all surprising how South Koreans *currently* (i.e., for the past several decades or so) depict diasporic Koreans. Specifically, they have been embraced as *tongp'o* (동포; 同胞), which can be simply translated as “brethren,” but which also (more literally) means “siblings from the same mother.” However, the widespread use of *tongp'o* was not, by any means, automatic. In fact, prior to the mid-1990s, it was far more common to refer to co-ethnics in the diaspora, especially those in western countries, as *kyop'o* (교포; 僑胞),⁴⁰ which can be translated as “our countrymen.” The two terms, while superficially similar, at least according to some analysts, have significantly different connotations. As Min Song explains it, *kyop'o* is “tinged with the secondary meaning of Koreans who in traveling away from their home country have lost touch with their roots and have in some way become inferior replicas of an original self.”⁴¹ *Tongp'o*, by contrast, “has a transcendental quality, which embraces the broad category of the Korean diaspora ...”⁴²

39 See Gi-Wook Shin and Paul Yunsik Chang, “The Politics of Nationalism in US-Korean Relations,” *Asian Perspective* 28, no. 4 (2004).

40 The *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture* notes that term *kyop'o* was generally used in South Korea at least until the mid-1990s. Indeed, the encyclopedia itself heavily used *kyop'o*, rather than *tongp'o* when it was first published in 1991.

41 Min Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 221.

42 Kwang Chung Kim, *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African Americans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 227.

Historically, it is important to emphasize, *tongp'o* was essentially the default term for ethnic Koreans living abroad, as *kyop'o* was rarely used prior to 1945. This suggests that there was a conscious (or perhaps unconscious) choice to abandon the former term after 1945, just as there was a purposeful choice to revive it in the 1990s. Indeed, much of the impetus for the change in terminology came from ethnic Koreans themselves and specifically from the Korean Chinese community exercising discursive agency, as well as their South Korean allies in the religious and NGO communities (e.g., Rev. Kim Haesŏng), who wanted to underscore the “unbreakable” blood-based ties between them and South Korean society.⁴³ It is worth noting, too, that the Korean name for the Overseas Koreans Foundation—*Chaeoe Tongp'o Chaedan*—specifically includes the word *tongp'o*. In addition, the Overseas Koreans Foundation was created through the Overseas Koreans Foundation Act of 1995, which defined *chaeoe tongp'o* as “persons of Korean descent who live abroad regardless of citizenship.”⁴⁴

The labeling of members of the diaspora as brothers and the passage of the Overseas Koreans Foundation Act, which was followed by a more important bill a few years later (discussed below), suggests that South Korea's sudden turn toward diasporic engagement was, in an important sense, predestined. All that was needed, some might argue, was an appropriate trigger, such as the ending of the Cold War or a near-catastrophic economic crisis, the latter of which ostensibly *forced* South Korean policymakers to finally recognize the (economic) value of their Korean brethren in wealthier parts of the world. We do not discount the importance of these exogenous or material events as (causal) *triggers*. But triggers are

43 Hyejin Kim, “International Ethnic Networks and Intra-Ethnic Conflict: Ethnic Trust and Its Demise among Koreans in China.” Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2006.

44 Overseas Koreans Foundation Act, “Overseas Koreans Foundation Act (Article 2),” (1995), <https://www.global-regulation.com/law/korea/644497/overseas-koreans-foundation-act.html>.

proximate causes; that is, they are events that are closest to or immediately responsible for an outcome. But, by themselves, they generally do not provide a full or adequate explanation. To stretch the metaphor, pulling a trigger only leads to an outcome after the gun is manufactured and then loaded with the right ammunition (every step of which requires human agency). In this perspective, the valorization and sanctification of ethnic and racial purity itself should also be understood as another explanatory factor; unlike a trigger, however, it operates as an underlying, deep, or distal cause.⁴⁵ *Consider, on this point, that the “embrace” by homelands of diasporic communities and vice versa only makes sense if individuals agree and believe that there is a genuine connection or ethnonational bond in the first place.* If there is no such connection or bond, and from a strictly instrumental (or material interest-based) view, it would make just as much sense for the South Korean state and society to engage with Chinese, or Mexican, or Hungarian communities abroad, or any ethnic, racial, or national community. Of course, the fact that ethnic Koreans in China typically speak Korean fluently is a relevant factor, but the same could not be said for ethnic Koreans from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), who often do not speak the language of their ancestors.

Still, ethnocultural connections or bonds are easy to take for granted as blood-based ties seem to be entirely natural and even impervious to change. However, this is clearly not the case, especially once a diasporic community moves beyond the first generation. For example, among the *current* generation of Korean Chinese (circa 2000~20), the connection with their motherland seems to be fading away. As one Korean scholar notes, the number of Chinese Korean schools in Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture (Jilin Province, China) has declined precipitously since 1990, from 1,186 to just 71 in 2009.⁴⁶ While this decline reflects a number of

45 Jeremy Freese and J. Alex Kevern, “Types of Causes,” in *Handbook of Causal Analysis for Social Research*, ed. Stephen L. Morgan (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013).

46 Gilnam Lee, “The Yanbian Joseonjok Population Decline and the Crisis of Ethnic

factors, according to Denny and Green, an important one is the desire by ethnic Koreans in China to more fully assimilate as Chinese, which conversely means rejecting or at least not embracing their Korean identity. This trend is reflected in their conversations with Korean Chinese. “When asked to reflect on their Korean identity,” according to the authors, “a common response is borderline incredulity: ‘Why?’ We are Chinese.”⁴⁷

A Different Kind of Welcome: Diaspora as a National Asset

Of course, saying that ethnocultural or ethnonational bonds are not natural or organic but are instead (socially) constructed is nothing new.⁴⁸ Still, it is easy to forget that, as socially constructed bonds, they are ultimately and firmly based on ideas and discourse. In this view, as a historically embedded idea and discourse, *tongp’o* was used to connect South Korea with its far-flung diaspora; its importance should not be minimized. At the same time, the exaltation of blood-based kinship was not the only ideational and discursive or instrumental factor at play. Beginning in the 1980s, some South Korean business leaders began to construct the Korean diaspora as a *national asset*. A good example is Hyundai’s chairman Chŏng Chu-yŏng (also, Chung Ju Yung). Needless to say, Chŏng and other corporate actors were primarily if not solely motivated by material interests. This is certainly evident in Chŏng’s actions. In the 1980s, Hyundai—one of South Korea’s largest and most influential business conglomerates known as *chaebŏl*—increasingly needed access to natural resources or raw materials, including oil, gas and timber (at the time,

Education” (paper presented at the Korean Society of Sociology Conference, Seoul, 2010).

47 Steven Denny and Christopher Green, “How Beijing Turned Koreans into Chinese,” *The Diplomat*, June 9 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/how-beijing-turned-koreans-into-chinese/>.

48 See, for example, Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” *Social Problems* 41, no. 1 (1994).

Hyundai's business was heavily focused on heavy industry, including shipbuilding and large-scale construction, as well as auto manufacturing). At that point, though, the most important sources of raw materials were dominated by US, European, and Japanese companies. It is largely for this reason that Chŏng decided to forge ties with leaders in the Soviet Union and China,⁴⁹ whose resource markets were still mostly untapped by western and Japanese firms. In fact, he was the first South Korean business leader to visit the Soviet Union.⁵⁰

Significantly, Chŏng did not limit his attention to direct contact with political leaders. He also explicitly stressed the importance of the ethnic Koreans in China and Russia, while employing nationalist rhetoric vis-à-vis Hyundai's Japanese rivals. Both elements were evident in the following statement by Chŏng:

Although Japan began developing the Siberian resources much earlier than we did, the Japanese have not achieved much because of the unresolved territorial disputes between Japan and Russia. We can outdo the Japanese because we have many advantages compared to them. One of our advantages is that there are many Koreans on Sakhalin and in Siberia, and they speak Korean. Secondly, we can utilize those Korean Chinese in Manchuria for our projects in Siberia.... Working with the people who share the same language with us is much easier than working with the people whose languages are different from ours. These are the reasons why we Koreans can outdo the Japanese in developing Siberian resources [translation by authors].⁵¹

49 Richard M. Steers, *Made in Korea: Chung Ju Yung and the Rise of Hyundai* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

50 Peggy Falkenheim Meyer, "Gorbachev and Post-Gorbachev Policy toward the Korean Peninsula: The Impact of Changing Russian Perceptions," *Asian survey* 32, no. 8 (1992).

51 Chu-yŏng Chŏng, *Saeroun Shijak E Ŭi Yŏlmang (Longing for a New Start)* (Ulsan: Ulsan University Press, 1997), 141-42.

While the foregoing statement is admittedly retrospective, it is clear that Chŏng did, in fact, hire ethnic Koreans to work on the company's first project in Siberia. Specifically, in 1990, Hyundai Group launched the Siberian Forest Development Project, a \$50 million joint venture between Hyundai and the Soviet Union, to import timber from Svetlaya (located in the then-Soviet Far East); Chŏng announced that his company would employ 200 *Chosŏnjok* living in Jilin Province, with plans to hire 3,000 more.⁵²

To return to the main point, while the material and instrumental motivation behind Chŏng's efforts is obvious, he nonetheless likely had a hand—albeit in a nascent and likely unintentional one—in reshaping the dominant understanding of a major part of the Korean diaspora. Keep in mind, during the Cold War, economic interests took a back seat to security/ideological interests: co-ethnics in China and the Soviet Union were mostly unacknowledged—i.e., made “invisible”—because they were part of enemy and ideologically hostile states. Emphasizing the economic and instrumental utility of co-ethnics, therefore, provided a potentially powerful counter-narrative or discourse that had, until that point, hardly existed or had at least not been openly expressed by extremely prominent and influential South Koreans such as Chŏng (although there were other business leaders who viewed overseas Koreans as potential “resources”). In this regard, Chŏng had a hand in helping to remove—or at least, poke holes in—the (ideology-made) blindfold that had kept South Koreans from “seeing” their co-ethnics in the socialist world.

A more important, and far more intentional, sentient agent (in terms of shaping the discourse on the Korean diaspora) was an anthropologist at Seoul National University, Yi Kwang-gyu. Yi played perhaps *the* key role

52 Hankyung News, “Taeu Chunggongŏp, Chigech’a Saengsan 7-Mandae... 22-Nyŏn Mane (Daewoo Heavy Industry, Produced 70,000 Forklifts... in 22 Years),” *Hankyung News*, October 18 1990, <https://www.hankyung.com/news/article/1990101800811>. Note. We realize the title of the article does not correspond to the data provided, but the citation is correct.

in promoting the study of the Korean diaspora, which he helped to do through a research group he organized in 1988. This research group later became the *Chaeoe Hanin Hakhoe* (the Academic Group for the Study of Koreans Overseas). In 1992, Yi published *Segyesog ūi Hangugin Sōntaek Padūn Hangugin: 21-segi kukchehwa sidae Hanminjog ūi chillo* (in English, “Koreans in the World, Koreans the Chosen: The Road for the Korean Nation in the 21st Century, the Era of Globalization”). In this seminal book, Yi asserted that co-ethnics in the Korean diaspora should be seen as “civilian diplomats” for South Korea, “salesmen” for Korean products, and “public relations personnel” for Korean culture in the global arena.⁵³ Yi also urged state leaders to take the Korean diaspora seriously and to recognize the value of the co-ethnic population as a hitherto ignored national asset or, as he put it, “invaluable assets.”⁵⁴ Yi subsequently published 15 additional books on overseas Koreans, which suggests that his views reached a wide and enthusiastic audience.

Given his strong (ideational and discursive) promotion of overseas Koreans, it is no surprise that Yi later served as the president of the Overseas Koreans Foundation from 2003 to 2006. His appointment to this position (as the first civilian appointee and third overall) indirectly reflected the government’s acceptance of his ideas and discourse about the Korean diaspora. He certainly brought the same ideas to the Foundation as president. In a 2003 interview after accepting the position, with *Yonhap News* (reprinted in *Dongpo News*), Yi emphasized the importance of using the “assets of compatriots [*tongp’o*]...for national development.”⁵⁵ He summed up his views this way:

53 Changzoo Song, “Business Elite and the Construction of National Identity in Korea,” *Acta Koreana* 6, no. 2 (2003).

54 Cited in Munjae Yi, “Overseas Koreans Are Precious Asset,” *Sisa Jōnōl* January 20 1994, <https://www.sisajournal.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=108526>.

55 Jin Yu, “Int’ōbyu: Yi Kwang-Gyu Chaeoe Tongp’o Chaedan Isajang Naejōngja” (Interview: New Okf President Nominee, Lee Kwang-Gyu),” *Yōnhap News*, October 28 (Reprinted in *Dongpo News*), 2003.

When their ethnic homeland was in trouble, Koreans in Japan supported it with money, Koreans in the United States did so with their brains [i.e., “professional knowledge”], and Koreans in China and the Soviet Union did so with their labor. We will let our overseas brethren feel the pride that have contributed to the development of their motherland. For South Korean citizens, we will let them know the preciousness of our brethren overseas [translation by authors].

Pan-Korean Nationalism and the Deterritorialized Nation-State

At the start of the 1990s, few South Koreans saw the Korean diaspora as a significant national asset. By the middle of that decade, however, the understanding of the “diaspora as a national asset” had become a widely shared and accepted discourse, not just among academics and few business leaders, but also among journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens.⁵⁶ This discourse, moreover, was seamlessly merged with the *tongp'o* discourse to create a powerful (discursive) combination. Writing in 1995, a researcher at the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SE-RI)—one of the most influential think tanks in South Korea—encapsulated this merged view quite nicely, albeit hyperbolically:

There are two million Koreans in China, 800,000 in Japan, and 1.2 million in the United States The fact that overseas Koreans are concentrated in the four superpowers is greatly advantageous for our global policy. Cooperating with those overseas brothers, we must form a ‘Pan-Korean Economic and Cultural Community’ and let our overseas brothers act as intermediaries in developing bilateral relationships between their host countries and their mother country. Let them, principally, be loyal to their host countries and, secondarily, let them work to develop a friendly relationship

56 Song, “Business Elite and the Construction of National Identity in Korea.”

between their host countries and Korea....The developmental goals for the Korean nation are first to gain membership in the OECD,^[57] and by the end of the twentieth century we will gain membership in the Group of Seven. After the twenty-first century, our country will become an ultra-superpower [*ch'o kangdaeguk*], and our power will expand all over the world just as the power of the Great Britain of the nineteenth century or that of the U.S. of the twentieth century [translation by authors].⁵⁸

It is worth adding that, while the idea of emigrants as national assets can be traced back to the late 19th century, Yi Kwang-gyu was among the first to advance the idea of the Korean diaspora acting as a pan-Korean nationalist force for the benefit of South Korea in the post-colonial era; he even argued that the South Korean government should encourage more emigration by South Korean nationals, since, as he put it, in an interview with the *Donga Daily* on November 8, 2000, “Overseas migration is a kind of territorial expansion.”⁵⁹ In this view, Yi was presenting emigration as a patriotic act, which was a sharp contrast with earlier views. Even more significantly, nearly all of the academic research and journalistic reporting on the Korean diaspora in the 1990s reflected the

57 South Korea joined the OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development) in 1996. While there is no evidence that the Korean diaspora played in any role in the South Korea's accession, membership in the OECD was seen as a major part of President Kim Yöngsam's globalization or *Segyehwa* policy. See Peter Carroll and William Hynes, “Korea's Accession to the OECD: A History,” *OECD* (2017).

58 Chong-sö Ku, “Pomhan Minjokchu'ui Ka 21segi Hankuk'ui Sontaek [Pan-Korean Nationalism Is the Choice of Korea in the 21st Century],” *Win*, August 1995, 178-79.

59 Cited in Jonghwan Cha, “Haeoe Tongp'oüi Ponguk Konghön Kwa Miraesang [Contributions of Overseas Koreans to Korea and Their Future],” in *Kyop'o Chöngch'aek Charyo: Haeoe Tongp'o Pöpchök Chiwiwa Kyop'o Sahoëü Miraesang*, ed. Overseas Koreans Institute (Seoul: 1999).

theme of pan-Korean nationalism. As a sentient or discursive agent, Yi's ideas apparently not only had a broad social impact, but more importantly for the purposes of our argument, found their way into government activities and policy. The Overseas Koreans Foundation, for example, was premised on the hitherto marginalized idea (in the post-colonial institutional context) that anyone with Korean ancestry, regardless of citizenship, could be an object of the state's nascent diaspora engagement policy. On this point recall that until the 1990s, ethnic Koreans living outside the borders of South Korea were all but ignored in public policy. In effect, the OKF had expanded the boundary of the Korean nation to virtually anywhere in the world, which reflects the concept of the deterritorialized nation-state (another way to express pan-Korean nationalism).⁶⁰

The idea of a "deterritorialized nation-state"⁶¹ was not new, but it was definitely a novel concept in South Korean policymaking circles in the 1990s. Yet, it took the OKF little time to fully incorporate it into its public views. In its quarterly magazine, *Chaeoe Tongpo Sosik*, deterritorialization or pan-Korean nationalism was a constant theme and one that took on greater urgency during the Asian Financial Crisis. Consider the following passage from a 1998 article written by the first president of the Overseas Koreans Foundation:

60 See Changzoo Song, "Engaging the Diaspora in an Era of Transnationalism," *IZA World of Labor* 64 (2014).

61 Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc define the deterritorialized nation-state as one that includes citizens "who live physically dispersed within the boundaries of many other states, but who remain socially, politically, culturally, and often economically part of the nation-state of their ancestors ...". See Linda G. Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). For additional discussion of the deterritorialized nation-state, see Nina Glick Schiller and Georges E. Fournon, "Terrains of Blood and Nation: Haitian Transnational Social Fields," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999).

Needless to say, there are overseas Jews behind Israel's influence in global politics and economy. Israel is not the only example. The remarkable economic development of China would not have been possible without the support of the 50 million overseas Chinese. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the rise of the Vietnamese economy after the Vietnamese War was possible only thanks to the annual remittance of the one and half billion dollars from the overseas Vietnamese. Though they had fled from their motherland as 'boat people,' they are now fulfilling their filial duty to their motherland. Now is the time when our country needs the patriotism both from the domestic Koreans and overseas brothers. No country will willingly suffer the pains [of financial crisis] in place of us, and no country will pay our debt [to the IMF] for us. We should overcome this economic crisis and repay the debt only with our own resources and national wisdom. There cannot be any difference between domestic Koreans and overseas Koreans since any crisis of our country will be the crisis of our nation [translation by authors].⁶²

The last sentence in the passage is important to highlight. In 1998, there was still a huge (institutional) difference or separation between "domestic Koreans and overseas Koreans." But, in 1999, that difference effectively began to fade away, albeit partly and unevenly, with the promulgation of the Act on Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans (hereafter, the Overseas Koreans Act or OKA). We say "partly and unevenly" because, in its original form, not all members of the Korean diaspora were included. Despite its uneven application, the OKA was a groundbreaking institutional development as it endowed some members

62 Pong-gyu Kim, "Chaeoe Tongp'oe Taehan Insik Pyönhwa Wa Chaeoe Tongp'ö Chaedanüi Yökhal [Perception Changes on Overseas Koreans and the Role of the Overseas Koreans Foundation]," *Kyomin Nonch'ong [Journal of Koreans Overseas]* 2 (1998): 3.

of the Korean diaspora—including those who were not born in South Korea or who had never even stepped foot in the country—with “de facto dual citizenship.”⁶³ More specifically, the OKA created a new visa category—the F-4 Overseas Koreans visa—that granted *eligible* overseas Koreans a two-year renewable visitor permit and, very importantly, a citizen’s registration card that qualified those individuals for national health insurance, the right to property ownership, and the freedom to work and change jobs—except for non-professional or manual labor jobs—of their own volition. The F-4 visa also opened the door to permanent residency and to *de jure* citizenship (originally naturalization required the renunciation of one’s existing citizenship, but this was changed in 2010 with the passage of a law allowing for dual citizenship). As we suggested, there was a gigantic catch. To wit, ethnic Koreans who emigrated to another country before 1948 were excluded. Practically speaking, this meant that all *Chosŏnjok* and *Koryŏ saram* were precluded from benefiting from the OKA. Crucially, though, the original version of the OKA did not stand: It was immediately challenged by the very people it excluded, namely, *Chosŏnjok* who became, as we briefly discuss below,⁶⁴ effective discursive agents in their own right.

63 Hyun Ok Park, *The Capitalist Unconscious - from Korean Unification to Transnational Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

64 In this paper, as one reviewer correctly pointed out, we do *not* focus on the (discursive) agency of individual members of the diasporic community or of the diasporic community as a whole, which risks treating the various communities purely as objects of policy. We agree that this is a valid concern; however, our analysis does point to a significant exercise of (discursive) agency on the part of the diasporic community in several areas, including the revision of the OKA and in construction of overseas Koreans as *tongp’o*. Admittedly, this was done at a very general level and in a cursory manner. This is partly the case because the article by Kim and Chien in this special issue focuses strongly on the subjectivity of Korean Chinese immigrants and, in this regard, provides a nice complement to our argument. More importantly, though, the intent of this paper is to trace the emergence of counter-narratives that emerged primarily as a result of discursive agency exercised within and by mainstream South Korean society.

Challenging the OKA with Ideas and "Talk"

Our main point can be stated simply: Despite an explicit and concerted effort by the South Korean state to limit its diaspora engagement policy to overseas Koreans in wealthier countries,⁶⁵ a public campaign and a series of legal challenges ultimately led to a significant revision of the OKA. Specifically, the state was ordered (by the Constitutional Court) to rewrite the "definition clause" in the Act such that the vast majority of overseas Koreans, including, most saliently, *Chosŏnjok* and *Koryŏ saram*, were included. Although this was not, by any means, the end of the story, it nonetheless points to another way in which state-diaspora relations in South Korea were significantly reshaped by a variety of actors (viz., discursive agents), both inside and outside the state.

Since the OKA has been the subject of a lot of analysis and since space is limited,⁶⁶ our discussion of how the OKA was successfully challenged will be brief. This said, the direct challenges to the original version of the OKA were carried out by a range of discursive agents, including ethnic Korean activists (primarily *Chosŏnjok*), South Korean church leaders (especially Seo Kyung-seok, Kim Haesŏng and Im Gwang-bin), and individuals representing a network of about 60 non-governmental organizations

65 It is important to note that the South Korean state was not monolithic; as Lim and Seol document, the development of the 1999 version of the OKA was subject to a significant intra-state "in-fighting" involving negotiations and debates (i.e., a discursive struggle) among several ministries, most prominently, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Employment and Labor, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. See Timothy C. Lim and Dong-Hoon Seol, "Explaining South Korea's Diaspora Engagement Policies," *Development and Society* 47, no. 4 (2018).

66 For example, see Jung-Sun Park and Paul Y. Chang, "Contention in the Construction of a Global Korean Community: The Case of the Overseas Korean Act," *Journal of Korean Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005); Ijin Hong, "Overseas Koreans and Dedicated Diaspora and Emigration Policies," in *Emigration and Diaspora Policies in the Age of Mobility*, ed. Agnieszka Weinár (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

(NGOs). Less direct but no less important challenges were carried out by journalists and judges. We say, “less direct,” because they were largely acting in their institutional roles—i.e., they were “doing their jobs.” Still, in doing their jobs, journalists and judges were fundamentally motivated by ideals and ideas, including those embedded in their professions; they also were key discursive agents as, in the course of their duties, they disseminated, explained, and justified their views in the public sphere. To return to the key point: the direct challenge to the OKA was premised on a basic claim, namely, the ethnic, racial, and historical bonds of Korean identity obliged the South Korean state to recognize that *all* ethnic Koreans regardless of nationality or living conditions are entitled to equal treatment.

Initially, the foregoing claim was accepted by many of the state (bureaucratic) actors responsible for developing the original version of the OKA; it was even readily accepted by the South Korean president at the time, Kim Dae Jung. Diplomatic and economic concerns, however, pushed those bureaucratic actors to exclude *Chosŏnjok* and *Koryŏ saram* from the OKA. Diplomatically, they feared that extending de facto South Korean citizenship to *Chosŏnjok* specifically would risk still-tenuous relations with China; in fact, Chinese leaders directly warned the South Korean government not to do so.⁶⁷ Economically, bureaucratic actors feared that inclusion of relatively poor co-ethnics in China and the former Soviet Union would overwhelm the domestic labor market and cause economic instability. By contrast, co-ethnics from wealthier countries were viewed as important new sources of human and financial capital whose inclusion would contribute greatly to the South Korean economy. While this can be interpreted as the triumph of interests over ideas, keep in mind that the unwavering focus on co-ethnics, in the first place, reflected the deeper impact of ethnocultural ties. In addition, the burgeoning discourse on the “Korean diaspora as national assets” cannot be ignored. Keep in mind, too,

67 Seung-II. Goh, “China’s Opposition to ‘Overseas Koreans Act’.” *Yonhap News*, September 21 1998.

that the original primacy of diplomatic-security and economic interests was effectively contested and undermined. Journalists played an important role here. That is, while activists and their NGO supporters directly countered the diplomatic-political logic, their position was generally supported by the mainstream and progressive news media; this, in turn, led to support by the general public.⁶⁸ Perhaps most importantly, the courts also unequivocally accepted the logic (and “talk”) that all ethnic Koreans regardless of nationality or living conditions were entitled to equal treatment. In short, outside of the narrow confines of bureaucratic policymaking, the idea of ethnocultural (and historical) ties seemed to trump state-based diplomatic and economic interests.

To repeat, the revision of the OKA was directly prompted by a ruling from the Constitutional Court (announced in December 2001), which is composed of nine justice or nine sentient agents who listened to arguments, interpreted laws (i.e., written words and ideas), and rendered a judgement that had a direct impact on the development of South Korea's nascent diaspora engagement institutions. Importantly, the government delayed implementing the Court's ruling (it took about 27 months, which exceeded, by a few months, the two-year deadline set by the Court), and also sought to minimize the practical effect of the ruling through other policy decisions. The government, for example, amended a related immigration law that required individuals from foreign countries with a high number of undocumented migrants applying for Overseas Koreans (F-4) status to submit documents evidencing that they would not work in “low-skilled” positions. This was meant to reinforce a much earlier amendment

68 Based on a 2003 survey, Park and Chang point out that very few South Korean citizens were aware of the contents of the OKA (less than 3 percent), but they nonetheless supported the idea that *Chosŏnjok* and *Koryŏ saram* should be included as beneficiaries (77.4 percent). Based on their analysis of the survey, the authors concluded, “inclusive and fraternal attitudes toward fellow Koreans, epitomized by the term *tongp'o*, are manifest here [in the survey results]” (p. 11). See Park and Chang, “Contention in the Construction of a Global Korean Community: The Case of the Overseas Korean Act.”

to the Enforcement Decree of the Immigration Control Act, made when the OKA was first enacted in 1999, that explicitly prohibited F-4 visa holders from engaging in low-skilled labor. In tandem, these two laws effectively prevented *Chosŏnjok* and *Koryŏ saram* from emigrating to South Korea under the OKA. Instead, they were relegated to a more restrictive program, the “Visit and Employment” (H-2) visa. In important ways, the H-2 program was very successful, but activists continued to pressure the government. Ultimately, the government was compelled to make another major change.

Specifically, in 2010, the South Korean government allowed H-2 visa holders to change their visa status to F-4 after fulfilling a number of conditions. The main condition was that, prior to applying for the F-4, the H-2 visa holder was required to work continuously for just one year (later changed to two years) in a specified industry (initially, the approved industries included agriculture, livestock, fisheries, and local manufacturing). These were all areas designated for non-professional labor; apparently, though, one-year of work experience as a non-professional worker magically transformed that individual into a highly skilled one. The upshot was a massive increase in F-4 visas issued to *Chosŏnjok*: From 2011 to 2018, the cumulative number of F-4 visas issued to *Chosŏnjok* was 215,156. Since 2010, moreover, *Chosŏnjok* have accounted for the majority of all F-4 visas issued, from a low of 56.8 percent to a high of 78.7 percent.⁶⁹ That same year (in 2010), as noted above, the South Korean National Assembly legalized dual citizenship for naturalized citizens. This was still another momentous institutional change, if only because it reversed a core provision in the 1948 Nationality Law that had remained untouched for more than 60 years. Significantly, the change applied not just to co-ethnics, but to all naturalized immigrants regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality. The latter point is important to emphasize as,

69 Cited in Lim, *The Road to Multiculturalism in South Korea: Ideas, Discourse, and Institutional Change in a Homogenous Nation-State*. See Table 4.2, p. 104. Original source of data is KOSIS (<https://kosis.kr/eng/>).

originally, South Korean policymakers intended to limit dual citizenship to “global talent” (i.e., highly skilled professionals, the vast majority of whom were likely to be ethnically Korean from western countries) and to overseas adoptees. However, nearly immediately, “civic activists and migrant advocacy groups [stepped in and] persistently pressured policymakers to include marriage migrants as an eligible group because of the legal vulnerabilities they face[d] as migrants seeking naturalization.”⁷⁰ Needless to say, they were successful.

Concluding Remarks: The Microfoundations of South Korea's Diasporic Engagement

The foregoing discussion gives a sense of how key discursive agents, acting within but especially outside the state, helped to constitute state-diaspora relations. Understandably, the assertion that material factors and instrumental motivations always or invariably overcome ideas and “talk” (or discourse) is hard to discount. We have addressed this issue throughout the paper, but it is important to restate a basic point: Material factors do not necessitate a specific (instrumental) understanding of an issue, nor do they determine what actions individual or collective actors will take to address the issue. Instead, ideas and discourse directly shape the interests and actions of millions of individuals. In this view, the ideational and discursive efforts by key discursive agents—state actors, business leaders, academics, journalists, judges, religious leaders, and members of the diasporic communities—in South Korea during the late-1980s and 1990s helped to build the framework for the emergence of diaspora engagement institutions. To be sure, material interests were significant and even pow-

70 Erin Aeran Chung and Daisy Y. Kim, “Transnational Marriage: Citizenship and Marriage in a Globalizing World: Multicultural Families and Monocultural Nationality Laws in Korea and Japan,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 19 (2012).

erful factors too. But they are not all-powerful, nor are they necessarily the primary forces in determining social and institutional change. Instead, they necessarily intersect and combine with subjective factors and processes, including, ideas and discourse. If material interests were all that mattered, the institutional landscape (for diasporic communities) in South Korea would likely look very different than it does now. For example, *Chosŏnjok* and *Koryŏ saram* would still be excluded from the benefits of the OKA and they would not have had their own “Visit and Employment” visa, which gave them privileged status vis-à-vis immigrant workers from other countries. For many years, in fact, there was no institutional distinction between ethnic Korean immigrant workers and other immigrants in low-skilled jobs. Dual citizenship, too, would have only applied to ethnic Koreans from the wealthiest countries and would have entirely excluded “poor cousin” Koreans from China and the former Soviet Union (although the issue is largely moot since the home countries of these Koreans—i.e., China, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan—do not permit dual nationality for their citizens).

The current institutional landscape, in sum, reflects the interaction of a range of actors or discursive agents who, in pursuit of their own goals, have shaped an understanding of how to incorporate the Korean diaspora into South Korea through their efforts to communicate certain ideas and to persuade, explain, justify, negotiate with others both within and outside the state. In so doing, they have helped to constitute state-diaspora relations in a manner that was not predictable before 1990.

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<Abstract>

Ideas, Discourse, and the Microfoundations of South Korea's Diasporic Engagement: Explaining the Institutional Embrace of Ethnic Koreans Since the 1990s

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This article endeavors to explain South Korea's institutional turn to "diaspora engagement," which began in earnest in the late 1990s. This shift can easily be attributed to instrumentalist calculations on the part of the South Korean state, i.e., as an effort to "tap into" or exploit the human and capital resources of ethnic Koreans living outside of the country. But instrumental calculations and interests, while significant and clearly proximate, were not the only nor necessarily the most important (causal) factors at play. Using a discursive institutional and microfoundational approach, we argue that underlying the institutional shift to diaspora engagement, was both an intentional and unintentional reframing of the Korean diaspora as "brethren" and "national assets," a powerful discursive combination. This reframing did not come about automatically but was instead pushed forward by sentient or discursive agents, including Chōng Chu-yōng (the founder of Hyundai) and Yi Kwang-gyu, who was a Seoul National University professor and later the third president of the Overseas Koreans Foundation. Journalists, religious leaders and other activists within South Korea's NGO community, as well as ethnic Koreans themselves, also played key roles as discursive agents in this reframing process. Central to our discursive institutional and microfoundational approach is the assertion that ideas and discourse were key causal factors in the insti-

tutional shift to South Korea's engagement with the Korean diaspora.

Keywords: South Korea, Korean diaspora; diasporic engagement policy; discursive institutionalism, microfoundations of diaspora politics

〈국문초록〉

한국의 디아스포라 포용 아이디어, 담론, 그리고 마이크로 파운데이션: 1990년대 이후 한국의 디아스포라 포용정책 설명하기

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이 글은 한국사회가 1990년대에 들어 해외 한인들에 대한 그때까지의 상대적 무관심 대신 “디아스포라 포용정책”을 채택하게 된 배경을 설명하고자 한다. 언뜻 보면 이런 정책적 변화는 한국 정부가 도구주의적 계산에서 - 즉, 해외에 거주하는 한인들의 인적, 물적 자원을 “이용”하겠다는 계산 - 비롯된 것처럼 보인다. 그러나 도구주의적 계산이나 관심은, 비록 중요하기도 하고, 또 실제요인이라고 할 수도 있지만, 이런 정책상의 변화에 절대적으로 필요하거나 또는 가장 중요한 요소는 아니다. 저자들은 담론으로 시작되는 제도화와 마이크로 파운데이션 접근에 의거하여, 1990년대 들어와 한국 사회가 디아스포라 포용정책을 채택한 배경에는 의도적인 요인도 있었고, 동시에 또 해외의 한인들을 “동포”와 “민족 자산”으로 재규정하는 (이는 아주 강력한 담론적 결합이다) 우연한 상황도 있었다는 것을 주장한다. 해외의 한인들을 이런 방식으로 재규정하는 것은 저절로 생겨난 것이 아니고, 그 배경에는 정주영 (현대그룹 전회장) 같은 비즈니스맨이나 서울대 교수로서 후에 재외동포재단의 제3대 단장을 역임한 이광규 교수같은 의식적 행위자나 담론적 행위자가 있었다. 그리고 그 후에는 언론인, 시민 사회의 운동가들, 종교 지도자들, 그리고 해외 한인 자신들이라는 행위자들이 나와, 이들도 해외 한인들을 담론적으로 “재규정”하는 과정에서 일정한 역할을 했다. 우리는 담론적 제도화와 마이크로 파운데이션 접근방식에 의거하여 아이디어와 담론이 결국은 실제 제도를 변경시키는데 중심적 역할을 한다는 것을 주장한다. 그리고 이것이 1990년대에 들어 한국 사회가 해외 한인들에 대해 그 때까지의 상대적 무관심을 버리고 “디아스포라 포용정책”으로 변화하게 된 배경이라고 생각한다.

주제어: 남한, 한국의 디아스포라, 디아스포라 포용 정책, 담론의 제도화, 마이크로 파운데이션