THE KOREAN COMMUNITY IN BRAZIL: CHALLENGES, ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROSPECTS

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by
Lytton L. Guimaraes, Ph.D.*

Introduction

Brazil and the Republic of Korea (ROK) established diplomatic relations in 1959. In 1962 the ROK opened its embassy in Rio de Janeiro, and three years later Brazil also opened its embassy in Seoul. The Korean Embassy moved later on to Brasilia, the new capital of Brazil inaugurated in 1960. In the 1990s political, diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries began to intensify, with new bilateral agreements, the creation of joint committees, mutual presidential visits—Kim Young-Sam (1996), Fernando Henrique Cardoso (2001), Roh Moo-Hyun (2004), and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2005). The commercial exchange between the two countries also showed gradual increase: from about US$630 million in 1990 to over US$4 billion in 2005. A similar trend was observed with respect to investment in Brazil by Korean companies, such as Hyundai Motors, POSCO, Asia Motors, Samsung, LG, and others. Recent estimates indicate that Korean investment in Brazil adds to more than US$5.5 billion.

During the 1960s, 1970s and part of 1980s a relatively large number of Koreans emigrated to Brazil in search of better living conditions. Most of them remained in the state of Sao Paulo and soon started small commercial and industrial activities, particularly in the production and sales of garments. Information available at this time indicates the Korean immigrants in the city of Sao Paulo alone form a community of over 40,000 people, who own more than 2,500 small and medium size firms that employ around 70,000 people.

* Senior Research Associate and Coordinator, Asian Studies Center, University of Brasilia. The author would like to thank his colleague Prof. Dr. Gilmar Masiero, for his time and suggestions which made possible contacts with members of the Korean Community in São Paulo; Dr. Yun Jung Im, who teaches Korean language and culture in São Paulo, for her time, helpful suggestions and contribution; Ms Woo Young Sun, his former graduate student at the University of Brasilia, from whom he learned a lot about Korea and Koreans.
Korean Community also owns more than 100 trading companies that promote commercial exchange between Brazil and Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and other Asian countries.

Some studies have been made both in Korea and in Brazil focusing on the importance and potential of economic and political relations between the two countries.¹ Yet no systematic studies have been identified that focus specifically on the Korean Community in Brazil, its challenges, achievements and prospects. In 1996 SEBRAE (Brazil) and SMIPC (Korea) signed an agreement of cooperation to promote the development of medium and small size enterprises in the two countries. One expectation was that projects implemented in Brazil, as part of the agreement, might benefit also some segments of the Korean Community. However, apparently nothing has been done to implement the agreement. The Korean crisis of 1997/1998 and the Brazilian crisis of 1999 are sometimes mentioned as constraints to new Korean investments and economic cooperation with Brazil.

The main objective of the present paper is to characterize the Korean Community in Brazil, and more specifically in the city of São Paulo, and examine its challenges, achievements and prospects. The study is based mainly on secondary data and on non-published reports obtained through Dr. Yun Jung Im, a member of the Korean Community, who teaches Korean language and culture in São Paulo. The original intention was to conduct some interviews with selected members of the Korean Community, but due to limitation of time and lack of funds those contacts were not possible. We were informed that some studies about the Korean Community in São Paulo were made in the past, but they are not academic type of studies and were published in past issues of a Korean language newspaper, not readily available. Despite these limitations, it is expected that the present study will motivate further and more complete investigations that might contribute to shed more light upon the Korean Community in Brazil.²

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The Role of Migration in Today’s World

Migration of people and other population movements from one region to another have been going on since the beginning of human history. For centuries, people have moved across borders in search of better living conditions. On many occasions people have been forced to leave their country or place of residence due to wars, conflicts, or political reasons, such as the forced transfer of large populations during the Stalinist regime in the former Soviet Union. In recent times migrants from developing countries that go to Europe, the USA or Japan are often treated as second class citizens, relegated to what has been identified as 3D (dirty, dangerous, difficult) jobs, although many migrant workers are professionals who are obliged to take on jobs that do not utilize their full skills and potential. As a result of the increasing integration of the world economies migration movements have been increasing. In October 2005 the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) released its last report “Migration in an international world: New directions for action” in which the Commission calls attention to the following: “the international community has failed to realize the full potential of international migration and has not risen the many opportunities and challenges it presents”.

According to a recent report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)—“The State of the World Population” (2006), in the last 50 years the number of migrants almost doubled. In 2005 a total of 191 million persons lived in countries other than those in which they were born. The great majority of people migrate in search of better living conditions and frequently also in search of freedom. The number of young migrants and of women (alone or with their husbands) from developing countries has been steadily increasing in the last several years. The majority of migrants, especially those from developing countries, play a fundamental role in the economies of their own countries of origin as well as of those countries were they are working. This phenomenon has been compared to a “silent river” that moves quietly and leaves plenty of benefits. According to the report by the UNFPA in 2005 migrants sent around US$232 billion to their countries of origin. This type of money represents a major source of revenue for many poor countries.

A Brief History of Korean Migration

Up to the end of the 19th century Korean migration occurred mainly in periods of dynastic transitions, invasions by foreign countries and wars. This type of migration was especially to neighboring countries: China, Japan and Russia. Around the end of the 19th century both China and Russia received thousands of Korean immigrants. Most of them settled in the regions of Manchuria or near the frontier that separates Russia and Korea. These types of migration were mainly spontaneous or voluntary. The Korean population

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3 Migration in the present paper refers to any human population movement from one locality to another, or from one country to another. Those who migrate are called migrants, emigrants (those who leave their country of birth) or immigrants (those who move to a new country). In modern times population movements include the following types: voluntary migration, involuntary or forced migration, which includes forced population movements, slave trade, trafficking in human beings and ethnic cleansing.
and its descendents settled in China today amounts to more than 2.2 million people. The Korean Communities and their descendents who settled in Russia/Soviet Union are today mostly in countries of the Community of Independent States, in Central Asia, and are estimated at 557,7 thousand. Around 194,5 thousand Koreans have emigrated to other Asian Countries, in different periods.

By the end of the 19th century China, Japan and Russia maintained a type of rivalry with respect to the Korean Peninsula. At the beginning of the 20th century Japan, an emerging power, having recently defeated both Russia and China, imposed several economic and military conditions upon the Korean government and finally in 1910 annexed Korea to the Japanese empire. The Japanese occupation lasted until the end of World War II. During those 35 years of Japanese occupation, more than two million Koreans were taken to Japan, as forced laborers. With the defeat of Japan in 1945 and the independence of Korea in 1948, most Koreans that were taken to Japan and their descendents returned to their home country, except for about 600 thousands who chose to remain in Japan. Today the Korean population settled in Japan is estimated at around 640 thousand.

After World War II the Korean Peninsula was divided along the 38th Parallel; the USSR occupied the Northern part and the USA occupied the Southern part. Negotiations to unify the Korean Peninsula under one government did not succeed. Thus, in 1948 two states emerged: the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South, also known as South Korea, and the Popular Democratic Republic of Korea (PDRK) in the North, or North Korea. Soon afterwards a war broke out between the two Koreas (1950-1953), supported by their respective allies, and as we know, no peace treaty has ever been signed; therefore, the Korean Nation remains divided into the two states.

With the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948 Syngman Rhee was chosen its first president. But after several years in power his government, accused of corruption and an incompetent administration, faced several difficulties, such as economic instability, unemployment, lack of basic products; as a result of this almost chaotic situation, general social unrest erupted. In 1960 there were students and popular demonstrations against the announced re-election of president Syngman Rhee, who was forced to renounce. Yun Po-Son was chosen as the new president by the National Assembly, but in 1961, through a coup d’État, general Park Chng-Hee took over the government and installed the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction. In 1963 he was elected president and remained in power until his assassination in 1979. In that same year General Chun Do-Hwan, also through a coup d’État, took over the government and remained in power until 1987, when a transition from military to democratic governments was initiated.

During the 1960’s thousands of Koreans migrated to other countries in search of better living conditions or freedom, due the oppressive governments controlled by the military. Under the Emigration Law of 1962, the government of the ROK encouraged emigration to South America (especially Brazil, who was experiencing an industrial boom), and to other countries. The purpose of the Korean government was to stimulate the settlement of Korean families and workers in selected countries, where they would be expected to find better living conditions and eventually contribute to the development of the national economy by sending part of their earnings to their home country.
After the Korean War (1950-1953) many Korean women who had married USA military men emigrated to the United States. By the middle of 1960’s, taking advantage of new legislation, thousands of Koreans entered the USA as immigrants. The total number of Koreans living in the United States today is estimated at around 2.2 million persons. In the decade of 1960 large numbers of Koreans went to Canada, and today the Korean population in that country is estimated at approximately 171 thousand.4.

In the 1960’s many Korean mining workers and nurses went to work in Germany as guest workers, but most of them remained in that country after the end of their contract. There are also large numbers of Koreans who went as students to Germany, France and Great Britain and remained in those countries after concluding their studies. In addition, many Korean orphans were adopted by families in France, Belgium, Holland and Sweden. So, the total number of Koreans in European countries are estimated at 94,4 thousand.

Latin American countries were the destine of more 105,6 thousand Koreans during the 1960’s and 1970’s; about half of them went to Brazil, and form today a community of approximately 50 thousands persons. Beginning in 1973, with new local legislation, the Korean migration to Australia and New Zealand increased significantly and today the Korean population there exceeds 100 thousand persons.

In summary, the Korean population and their descendents settled in other countries, or the Korean Diaspora, is today estimated at almost 6,3 million people, distributed as indicated in Table 1. :

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4 These and other data mentioned previously are taken mainly from two unpublished papers presented at a Meeting of the Korean Association in São Paulo, in April 2003, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the arrival in Brazil of the first Korean immigrants. One of the papers is authored by Dr. Wha Hyun Jung; then Consul General of Korea in São Paulo; the other one has no author and is apparently a summary of discussions during the meeting.
Table 1. Korean Communities (immigrants and their descendents) living in different countries of the world (in round numbers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRIES</th>
<th>POPULATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>640,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIC (Central Asia)</td>
<td>557,700</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Asian Countries</td>
<td>194,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cana</td>
<td>171,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>European Countries</td>
<td>94,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austrália &amp; N. Zeland</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other L.American Countries</td>
<td>55,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6,263,200</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Challenges Facing Most Korean Communities in the World

Although Korean Communities settled in different parts of the world face different challenges, depending on various factors, such as their own characteristics and those of their host countries, in general the first generation of immigrants have to work very hard not only to fulfill their job obligations to support themselves and their families, but also because of the need to adapt to a new cultural environment, diverse customs and traditions, and to integrate to the new society. The language barrier is particularly difficult and at the same time very important since it is necessary for the processes of adaptation, integration and eventually acculturation.

Another difficult facing Koreans in other countries is their extreme attachment to their home country, society and culture; Korea has a rich and traditional history dating back to more than 5,000 years. Also, Koreans have one of the most homogeneous societies in the world, from the ethnic point of view, as opposed to societies and cultures of many of their adopted countries, such as the United States and Brazil, where people of several different ethnic and cultural backgrounds live together, in a “melting pot”. A reaction of Koreans that settle in a foreign country which exhibits a more pluralistic ethnic and cultural
composition is to remain somewhat isolated. As a result, they tend to face more difficulties of adaptation, integration and acculturation.

New Attitudes and Policies Adopted by the Korean Government

As a guest speaker in a meeting on April 2003 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the arrival in Brazil of the first Korean immigrants, Dr. Wha Hyun Jung, then Consul General of Korea in São Paulo, pointed out several recent initiatives taken by the Korean Government with respect to Korean Communities established overseas. According to Dr. Wha, at the beginning of the Korean emigration movement, during the 1960’s and 1970’s, the Korean Government used to impose complicated procedures and restrictions on those who wanted to leave the country, for example, with respect to the amount of money they were allowed to take with them. Due to such a policy, many citizens looked down upon those persons who intended to emigrate. However, by the beginning of the 1980’s and especially in the following years, the concept and perception about emigration of Korean citizens was gradually modified, in a positive way. This new attitude was attributed mainly to a more prominent role played by Korea in the international scene, as it reached higher stages of development and expanded international political contacts. Today, the Government considers members of the Korean Communities in other countries as true representatives of the Korean people; persons who are valuable economic partners that contribute to a better knowledge of Korea and of the Korean culture and tradition in the world.

Since the 1990’s the Korean government has adopted more flexible policies which intend to facilitate commercial and other transaction in Korea by migrants and their descendents who have lived abroad for several years. The new rules apply to exchange controls and to the transfer of money to other countries. Also, Koreans who have status as permanent residents in other countries and own properties in Korea, such as real estate, are now allowed to sell such properties and transfer the money to their country of residence.

The Government of President Roh Moo-hyun studies the possibility of granting dual nationality to Koreans and their descendents living abroad; this would be an important measure, as it would result in a number of personal and collective benefits, and would certainly stimulate more frequent visits to Korea and would also encourage further integration of Koreans into the society and country of residence, since individuals and their families who hold Korean citizenship might feel encouraged to acquire a second nationality. Another important initiative by the Korean Government was the creation at the end of 1990’s of the Korean Overseas Foundation, linked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, designed to deal mainly with questions related to the Korean Communities in other countries.
Dr. Wha mentioned other initiatives by the Government of Korea as well as existing programs that support the construction of Korean schools, visits to Korea by young people descendants of Korean immigrants, and other measures that help to promote integration of Korean Communities into local societies.

The Korean Community in São Paulo: Economic Challenges

The Korean immigration to Brazil began officially in February 1963 when the first group of 103 Koreans arrived by ship at the city of Santos, state of São Paulo. Previously small groups of former prisoners of the Korean War had settled in Brazil. During the following years several other groups arrived and settled in the states of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Paraná. By the middle of 1970’s the Brazilian government imposed some restriction on the acceptance of new Korean immigrants, under the allegation that the majority of them had abandoned their agricultural activities and moved to urban areas, such as the city of São Paulo, contrary to understanding between Brazilian and Korean authorities. This attitude was understandable since most Korean immigrants were not farmers, but journalists, retired military, and small merchants. Also the Brazilian rural areas where they had been settled did not offer adequate conditions as they lacked schools for their children, health services and other basic facilities.

As a result of restrictions imposed by the Brazilian government, many Koreans entered Brazil via Paraguay and Bolivia as illegal immigrants. The Brazilian Association of Koreans lobbied for legalization of these immigrants and in 1969 an amnesty granted legal residency to 1,000 Koreans. However, in the 1970’s more that 70% of Koreans in Brazil were undocumented, as reported by Veja (May 12, 1998) a Brazilian magazine. So, in 1980 and 1988 approximately 6,000 illegal immigrants of Korean origin were benefited by two other amnesties and obtained legal resident status. According to the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by the end of the 1990’s there were 50,000 legal Korean residents in Brazil, and at least 90% of those live in the city of São Paulo. The Korean Community is concentrated mainly in the area called “Bom Retiro” which was until the 1970’s occupied mainly by the Jewish Community. More than 2/3 of the garment industry and business are controlled by members of the Korean Community.

“To break into the garment industry, which had been dominated by Jews and Arabs, and to “help” new arrivals in Brazil, they contracted labor among their own compatriots” and later hired Bolivian undocumented immigrants. “Many undocumented Koreans

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worked long hours sewing garments, eating as they worked and suffering health problems as a result of the sedentary nature and difficulty of their work. …” The undocumented workers were paid miserably and threatened to be put in jail if they left the workshops. Large families were reported to live in one single room; the parents were afraid to send their children to schools, and feared to go out, avoided people in uniform and did everything they could not to be deported … “However, they did not protest that they were being exploited but reported that they were working hard to be able to accumulate capital and open their own businesses as soon as they became legal residents”. Due to the process of liberalization of imports, especially from China, many Koreans have gone into other activities (tourist agencies, grocery stores, restaurants, etc.), and others have left for Los Angeles, where they started small garment factories hiring Mexican workers.⁶

According to the Brazilian Association of Koreans the number of small business establishments, stores specialized in Korean products and food stuff, as well as Korean restaurants have increased about 30% in the last five years. There are also several tea houses, exchange establishments, kindergarten for Korean children, beauty shops, etc. One finds also all sorts of imported stuff such as computers, cameras, and other types of up-to-date cell phones and other electronics imported from Korean.⁷

**Difficulties of Adaptation and Integration**

Many of the problems faced by Korean Communities in other parts of the world were also encountered by members of the Korean Community in São Paulo. Brazil and Korea are two different countries in many respects, such as geography, population composition, history and culture, and especially language. Brazilian society is ethnically heterogeneous while Korea is quite homogeneous. Brazil has been traditionally a country of immigrants, and its population is basically of European, Indian and African extraction. In a way the city of São Paulo represents well most of the rest of Brazil: it is a cosmopolitan and modern city, inhabited by people from all over the world, with diverse cultural backgrounds but relatively open to acculturation. It is a dynamic and at the same time an “old” city by Brazilian standards, although not as old and traditional as Seoul, for example.

Under these circumstances, the first Koreans who came to Brazil as immigrants and settled mainly in São Paulo must have had an inevitable cultural shock, and their process of adaptation certainly involved plenty of difficulties, with lasting consequences that might have affected all family members as well new generations. Difficulties of integration into local society plus economic hardship led the Community to keep itself pretty much isolated from the local society and the rich cultural life offered by the city of São Paulo. Thus, the image of the Koreans for the outside world, to a large extent remains that of a reserved and inner-directed people, with little interest in social and cultural mingling with “outsiders”.

⁷ YURI, 2005, *op. cit.*, note 5.
Achievements and Prospects

Many Koreans who came to Brazil have had the support of both the Protestant (most members of the Community belong to Protestants denominations) and Catholic Churches. Both Churches have helped in the organization of business and financial networks that have been crucial for the development of economic and social projects, individually or in groups, such as consortia and credit unions that provide loans with low interest rates. Many Korean immigrants have also received support and help from members of the Community that arrived earlier. Several of them maintain contacts and close links with relatives and friends that live in Korea. In fact many of them seem to expect to return to Korea when they retire. And those who can afford send their sons and daughters to study in Korea in the hope that they might find wedding partners there.

In her article on Korean immigrants in São Paulo Debora YURI (op. cit., 2005), shows that many members of the Community have moved out of Bom Retiro, a lower middle class neighborhood, and live now in Morumbi, Higienópolis, and Aclimação, middle and upper-middle class boroughs. This is a clear indication of success and upper mobility by second and third generations of Koreans. Many of them are lawyers, medical doctors, businessmen, university professors. And this seems also to confirm arguments presented by Dr. Wha Hyun Jung, at the time Consul General of Korea in São Paulo, in his speech at the meeting of the Brazilian Association of Koreans in April 2003. Dr. Wha pointed out that all Korean Communities in the world are regarded as “well succeeded minorities, principally due to their capacity to work and overcome difficulties. We can also mention the well-established” Korean Community in Brazil. Dr. Wha continues with his remarks: “Despite its short history of 40 years, the Korean Community built something very difficult to imagine in other places.” He adds that he believes there are explanations for this type of achievement: (1) the large territory and natural resources that give the Brazilians an open mind and generosity to receive those who come from other countries and cultures; (2) the capacity and dedication to work that characterize the Korean people. The Consul declares as his wish and hope that the Koreans become effective members of the Brazilian society and continue to contribute to the development of the country they adopted.

Yet in the course of the same meeting there were expressions of concern over the continued isolation of the Korean Community as well as suggestions of initiatives that might contribute to overcome existing barriers. Some of those suggestions are: (1) the need to promote more intense and frequent exchanges between members of the Korean Community and the local society, aiming at a more active participation and a more relevant contribution to Brazilian society as a whole; (2) the need to search for solutions of existing family conflicts between parents who insist that their children marry only Koreans and the young people who do not mind getting married to Brazilians; (3) the need to find solution to frequent disagreement within the Community, due mainly to differences of interest, formal education, and place of origin.
Summary and Conclusion

The original objective of this paper was to examine the challenges, achievement and prospects faced by the Korean Community in Brazil. In view of difficulties to obtain reliable data and other limitations, such as time and lack of financial resources, the study focused on the city of São Paulo, where 90% of the Korean Community in Brazil is settled. Besides, São Paulo represents a kind of microcosm of Brazilian society, in economic, social and cultural terms. In a trip to São Paulo contacts were made with Dr. Yun Jung Im, an important member of the Korean Community, who provided basic information and two unpublished reports that were presented in a meeting held by the Brazilian Association of Koreans in April 2003, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Korean immigration to Brazil. Other secondary data completed the information obtained with Dr. Yun’s help.

To provide a better understanding of the questions under investigation, the paper was divided into a few sub themes. A brief analysis of each of those sub themes lead to the following conclusions: (1) in 2005 a total of 191 million persons lived in countries other those where they were born—the great majority of people emigrate in search of better living conditions and frequently in search of freedom; (2) the phenomenon of migration has been compared to a silent river that moves quietly and leaves plenty of benefits—in 2005 migrants sent approximately US$232 billion to their countries of origin, and this type money represents a major sources of revenue for many poor countries; (3) the Korean emigration movements had two major phases: up to the beginning the II World War, when Koreans migrated mainly to neighboring countries (China, Russia and Japan), and after the 1960’s when receiving countries were mainly the USA, Canada, Germany and some other European countries, Australia and New Zealand, and Latin American countries, especially Brazil, Mexico and Argentina—today there are close to 6,3 million Koreans settled in other countries; (4) Korean Communities settled in different parts of the world have faced economic hardship, challenges, difficulties of adaptation, integration and acculturation—as a consequence they tend to isolate themselves and remain extremely attached to Korean society and culture; (5) the Korean government has adopted more favorable attitudes toward the Korean Communities settled overseas and have introduced new measures that tend to facilitate their commercial transactions in Korea and eventually help their integration into the societies of their adopted countries; (6) as in other parts of the world, most members of the Korean Community in São Paulo have faced hardship and problems of adaptation, integration and acculturation; but they have been able to overcome most of these barriers and several of them have succeeded professionally as doctors, lawyers, professors and in business; (7) although the Korean Community in São Paulo is today relatively integrated into the local society, there are expressions of concern, especially among young people, who feel the need to promote a deeper approximation between the Korean Community and Brazilians in general.

The present study has some limitations but may contribute to a better understanding of the Korean Community in São Paulo. Further studies that focus on specific aspects of the Community—such as its demographic composition, social and economic characteristics, achievement motivation of young people, and other variables—will contribute to a better knowledge of the Community in São Paulo and in Brazil.