

Nostalgic for the Unfamiliar:  
US-Raised Koreans and the Complexities of 'Return'

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## **Dedication**

엄마에게

To my mother

## Abstract

Described by scholars as the relocation of diasporic descendants to an ancestral homeland from which they have resided away for most if not all of their formative lives, ethnic return migration has increasingly served as the foundation for the scholarly expansion of research on diaspora, transnationalism, nationhood, and ethnicity. I situate this dissertation within this growing body of literature by focusing on the life histories and migratory narratives of US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants (or ‘returnees’). The ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans serves as a compelling case study for a few reasons. For one, US-raised Koreans represent a substantial portion of the returnee population in South Korea, trailing only Korean Chinese (or *joseonjeok*) in sheer numbers. What differentiates the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans from other diasporic Koreans, however, is that they relocate largely as highly educated, middle-class professionals, thus arriving in South Korea with relatively elevated levels of human capital and socioeconomic privilege. Furthermore, their decisions to relocate to an unfamiliar ancestral homeland stand at odds with social scientific research documenting the economic and cultural assimilation of later-generation Asian Americans.

Drawing on data collected from ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth qualitative interviews with Korean American ‘returnees’ living in South Korea, this dissertation addresses the following questions: 1) what factors contribute to the ethnic return migration of diasporic descendants, especially among US-raised Koreans? And 2) given the weak ties that ethnic return migrants typically have with their ancestral homelands, how do these ‘returnees’ fare in their new environments? In examining these larger questions, each chapter of this dissertation endeavors to explain how the practice of ethnic return migration is intricately connected to and influenced by social factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, identity, globalization, and Empire. Taken as a whole, this project provides a nuanced and intersectional take on the practice of ethnic return migration—illustrating how a seemingly personal practice is deeply informed by and informant of larger social forces that span across multiple geographic and temporal contexts.

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# Notes on Transliteration and Terminology

## Romanization

This thesis utilizes the McCune-Reischauer system for the Romanization of Korean words. Exceptions are made for names of places (e.g., Itaewon-ro) and people (e.g., Park Chung-Hee) with recognized English transliterations, or Anglicized colloquialisms (e.g., “kyopos”).

## Terminology and Abbreviations

US-raised Korean	Person of Korean ethnicity raised in the US from birth or beginning from prior to adolescence
Returnee	Return migrant
‘Returnee’	Ethnic return migrant
<i>Joseonjeok</i>	Korean Chinese, or ethnic Korean individual from China
<i>Kyop’o</i>	Diasporic Korean, or ethnic Korean individual who resides outside of the Korean peninsula
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
ROK	Republic of Korea, a.k.a. South Korea
DPRK	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, a.k.a. North Korea
MOFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (South Korea)
MOHW	Ministry of Health and Welfare (South Korea)
DoS	Department of State (USA)
EPIK	English Program in Korea
KAEC	Korean-American Educational Commission

## **(Introduction) Nostalgic for the Unfamiliar: US-raised Koreans and the complexities of ‘return’**

Between August 2009 and July 2010, I spent approximately four-months (scattered across four separate trips) in South Korea. I was primarily there to visit my mother, who had moved back to her natal homeland at the beginning of this period to undergo intensive chemotherapy. It was my mother’s first trip back to South Korea since her previous visit in 2001, and only the second time she had returned to the country since migrating to the US with my father in 1981. As children, my mother had occasionally recited to my sister and me about relocating to South Korea at some point in the distant future, likely after she and my father retired. She often reminisced with us about growing up with her family in the rural northern Jeolla province of South Korea, and occasionally spoke about wanting to move back to the countryside in her later years. Unfortunately, it was my mother’s deteriorating health that afforded her that opportunity under undesirable circumstances.

Given the context of her relocation, I could tell that my mother viewed her return as a bittersweet experience. On the one hand, this was her long awaited homecoming. Despite the ill effects of her cancer treatment, she showed genuine enthusiasm about being back in the company of her family and childhood friends, many of whom she had not seen in years, if not decades. She chatted excitedly and endlessly with every familiar face she encountered, looking back fondly at the memories that they shared. During these moments, it was as if my mother’s return to South Korea had transported her back to her youth; to a time before she had moved to the US and experienced the many successes and

hardships associated with living as a migrant in a foreign land. Even seeing snowflakes falling from the sky, the first time in over twenty years she would add, was cause for celebration.

This honeymoon phase would not last, however. After a few months of living in Seoul, she protested consistently about the numerous elements of contemporary South Korea that dissatisfied her. Her list of grievances was long, ranging from complaints about living in claustrophobic apartment homes, noise and air pollution, and crowded sidewalks and roadways. “This was not Korea as I left it,” she often remarked in her native tongue, followed by, “this country no longer feels like home.” These sentiments always caught me off guard. For all of my life, I had considered my mother to be unequivocally Korean. Yes, by this point in her life she had resided in the US as long as she had in South Korea. But she had also been the person to teach my sister and me the Korean language. To feed us Korean food. And to introduce us to Korean soap operas. Perhaps most revealingly, my mother had never even renounced her South Korean citizenship.

My mother’s attitudes toward contemporary South Korea proved even more perplexing upon my reconnecting with a few 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean American peers who had in previous years relocated to South Korea from the US (I would formally interview a number of them for this project). These individuals, though also of Korean ethnicity, shared “return” trajectories that were quite different from that of my mother’s. Of the five I interacted with during this period, four were born and raised in the US by their Korean immigrant parents, with the lone Korean-born individual having moved to the US as an infant. In fact, for two of these individuals, their current residencies in South

Korea marked their very first times even setting foot in the country. Given these circumstances, I was curious as to how these individuals were adjusting to life in South Korea. I presumed, incorrectly, that as US-raised Koreans with passing or barely adequate knowledge of the Korean language and customs, they would have experienced significant difficulties adjusting to life in South Korea that were on par with or greater than my mother's. In spite of their largely fleeting ties to the country and its local populace, however, most of my peers expressed getting by reasonably well in the country, and in some cases, even thriving. Two of my peers even admitted to entertaining the thought of settling in the country long term. Though there were certainly aspects of the US that they all missed, with family, friends, and food often topping their lists, the economic opportunities available to them in South Korea, as well as the relationships and experiences that they had fostered during their stays, appeared to compensate for many, if not most, of the hardships that they had encountered.

'How could this be?' I wondered. How was it that my US-raised Korean peers, all of whom had relatively weak ties to South Korea prior to relocating, seemed to fare better in the country than my mother, a woman who was born and raised in South Korea until her mid-twenties, and in many ways embodied what I had long viewed to be a Korean culture and ethos? This and other questions regarding the "homeland" sojourns of Korean Americans greatly piqued my interest, especially after my mother, upon battling her cancer for a year and a half in South Korea, elected to move her treatment back to Southern California against her physician's and family's wishes. Less than half a year later, my mother would pass in the United States, the country that, unbeknownst to me, she had long ago adopted as her home.

## Contextual Overview and Research Goals

In its 2014 annual report, the South Korean Immigration Service reported that there were over 45,000 Korean Americans (ethnic Koreans with US citizenship) residing in South Korea under the F-4 “Overseas Koreans” visa, a figure that had increased nearly every year since the country first implemented the visa in 1998 (Korea Immigration Service Annual Report 2014). In fact, over 4,000 Korean Americans relocated to South Korea in 2014 alone, a rate that was second only to that of ethnic Koreans returning from China (Korean Statistical Information Service, International Migration Statistics).<sup>1</sup> What marks this process as significant is not simply its high rate of incidence, but the demographics of Korean Americans who participate in it. Specifically, this growing number of Korean American migrants is comprised of two key demographic sub-groups: return migrants, or those who move back to their original country of citizenship after having emigrated to the US as adolescents or adults, and ethnic return migrants, individuals who relocate to South Korea as adults after having resided most if not all of their formative (pre-adult) lives in the US. Though together these two groups make up the ever-expanding US-origin “Overseas Korean” population in South Korea, there are considerable divergences in the “return” narratives of both groups, particularly the manner in which the “homeland” is remembered, or in the case of ethnic return migrants, imagined.

The purpose of beginning this manuscript with the above anecdote, then, is not only to draw attention to the ways in which yearning or nostalgia for a homeland

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<sup>1</sup> This number only includes Korean Americans who relocated to South Korea through an F4 visa, which is a visa available to all diasporic Koreans residing abroad, including the children of emigrants and adoptees. Korean Americans who were residing in South Korea through work visas, teaching visas, or as US government affiliates (e.g., US Embassy, US military, Fulbright, etc.) are not factored into this figure. Thus the number has a potential to be considerably larger.

(whether imagined or remembered—ancestral or natal) can remain a meaningful presence in the psyches of diasporic Koreans in the US (regardless of the years or generations they are removed from it), but also to highlight the complex and at times contradictory ways that feelings of home and belonging manifest. In the case of my mother (and potentially other return migrants), her return to South Korea marked the realization of her long-held desire to retire in the country which she had lived the first quarter century of her life—an opportunity that allowed her to be in the company of her siblings and mother, to commiserate with her childhood friends, to re-experience the sights, tastes, and smells of her youth. To my mother, the idea of returning to live in South Korea was desirable because, as her natal homeland, it was so utterly familiar. However, upon actually relocating it was evident that this sense of familiarity never fully materialized for her. My mother had essentially experienced what migration scholar Peggy Levitt (2009) refers to as the “Ossification Effect,” or the cultural and political disconnect that occurs as a country undergoes social and political change while an emigrant’s memories of the country do not. While she still recognized some aspects of South Korean society, the country (and my mother) had changed enough for her to feel as though she was a distant stranger in a place that she had once deemed as home.

The ‘return’ experiences of my Korean American peers were noticeably different from that of my mother’s. For one, they viewed their stays in South Korea more as opportunities for exploration and discovery than reminiscence and recollection. Furthermore, to these individuals, South Korea was far more an imagined space than a remembered one, with most of their knowledge about the country having been obtained secondhand through their parents or the media. Though some may have visited or even

lived in South Korea for brief periods in their lives, it was the US that had served as their unequivocal homes as youths. Thus, whatever yearning, affinity, or even nostalgia that they could claim for South Korea prior to their ‘return’ was for a country and culture with which they were largely unfamiliar. In effect, these individuals were fostering new transnational ties to their ancestral homelands, a process that Louisa Schein (1998) dubs “forged transnationality,” via their ethnic return migration. Yet, in spite of this general cultural unfamiliarity, these individuals appeared to flourish in South Korea. If anything, the qualities that branded them as foreign—namely their US citizenship, their fluency in English, and “Western” cultural practices—seemed to stimulate their adaptation in South Korea more than it hindered it.

These complexities and contradictions intrinsic to the practice of diasporic return migration are precisely what this study aims to unravel. Specifically, this project elaborates on the “homeland” journeys, or ethnic return migration, of Korean Americans who have few if any prior lived experiences in South Korea. Referred to in this manuscript as “US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants” (or US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ for short), this project explores several aspects of their transnational movement, including but not limited to the factors that motivate their ‘return,’ the constructs and practices they utilize to adapt to life in South Korea, and their long term prospects within the country. US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants serve as a compelling population of study for a few reasons. First, their documentable patterns of diasporic return migration fly against conventional sociological wisdom concerning the socioeconomic assimilation of Korean Americans and Asian Americans writ large. Second, US-raised Koreans relocate to their ancestral homelands not only as diasporic



descendants, but also as citizens of the US—a country that has shared (and arguably continues to share) an uneven neoimperial bond with the Korean peninsula. Lastly, as a population with relatively high levels of “human capital,” the ‘return’ of US-raised Koreans represents a rather novel take on contemporary human migration—one in which the global movement of skilled migrants is as much influenced by ethnic and diasporic affinity as it is economics.

Keeping these above points in mind, this dissertation addresses the following broad questions: 1) what factors (both in the US and South Korea) contribute to the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans? And 2) given the weak cultural ties that ethnic return migrants typically share with their ancestral homelands, how do US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ fare in their new environments? Drawing on data collected from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in South Korea, each chapter of this dissertation endeavors to explain how the practice of ‘return’ is intricately connected to and influenced by social factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, identity, globalization, and Empire. In doing so, this project provides a holistic and intersectional take on the practice of ethnic return migration, illustrating how a seemingly personal practice is deeply informed by and informative of larger social forces and processes.

### Contextualizing the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans

The transnational practice of ethnic return migration has become an increasingly studied phenomenon in recent years, serving as a canvas for new scholarly research on transnationalism, diaspora, human mobility, immigration policy, and migrant

incorporation, among other topics. The connotation of ethnic return migration (as opposed to return migration) is itself an important one, as it denotes the ‘return’ of individuals to a country with which they share a common ethnicity or ancestry, but otherwise have few if any lived experiences or direct ties (Joppke 2005; Tsuda 2009a). Unlike traditional return migrants who move to natal homelands with presumably multiple degrees of cultural familiarity, ethnic return migrants relocate to their ancestral homelands largely as cultural foreigners (Tsuda 2009a). For many ethnic return migrants, in fact, their ‘returns’ may mark their very first time setting foot in their ancestral homelands. As such, scholars argue that the practice of ethnic return migration helps to highlight the fluidity of “homeland” and “nationhood” as both theoretical and material constructs, and where a sense of national and/or ethnic affiliation, nostalgia, and belonging can be as much imagined as it is remembered. Indeed, the practice of ethnic return migration has engendered rising scholarly interest because of the very manner in which it both expands upon and challenges existing interpretations of human movement. Whereas much of the contemporary migration studies literature has focused in on the ever-increasing mobility of humans and flexibility of citizenship, as well as the apparent waning influence of nation-states and their borders, research on ethnic return migration has illustrated the degree to which ethnicity (in numerous capacities) continues to remain a pivotal vector through which contemporary global migration is structured and practiced. As anthropologist Takeyuki Tsuda (2009b) posits, ethnic return migration is one of a few types of population movement that is ethnically motivated at both micro- and macro-levels—a meaningful departure from the primarily economics-driven migration patterns

of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, as well as the turn to more democratic, inclusive, and non-discriminatory immigration policies in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

None of this is to say that ethnicity is the only factor motivating the global practice of ethnic return migration, but rather that ethnicity informs the process of diasporic return migration in ways unobserved in previous variants of human mobility. Congruent with other pathways of migration, economics still plays an active role in the proliferation of diasporic return migration, a fact evidenced in a large body of academic research. Several scholars, for example, describe diasporic return migration as a symptom of global capitalism, incorporating neoclassical perspectives to describe how economic trends and motives help to initiate the ‘return’ of diasporic individuals and descendants (Wadhwa et al. 2007; 2011; Jain 2012). Though research exploring the economic foundations of ethnic return migration spans the globe—such as in the Caribbean (Potter 2005, Reynolds 2008), Turkey (King and Kilinc 2013), and Cyprus (Teerling 2011), the bulk of this research has examined the growth of ethnic return migration to a handful of Asian nations. Such a scholarly trend is unsurprising given the fact that many South, Southeast Asian, and East Asian nations have experienced both mass emigration and rapid economic growth in the past half century, creating a scenario ideal for the ‘return’ of overseas co-ethnics. For instance, diasporic return migration to countries such as India (Jain 2011), South Korea (Song 2009; E. Kim 2012; H. K. Lee 2013), Japan (Tsuda 2003), Vietnam (Nguyen-Akbar 2014), and China (Louie 2004) has factored prominently in the recent growth in scholarship on ethnic return migration, with all of these examples showcasing how economic opportunity has served as a chief motivation for ‘return’ for members of the larger Asian diaspora. Along similar lines, scholars posit that the types of

job opportunities available to ethnic return migrants are largely reflective of the global economic standing of the countries from which they migrate, as well as the human capital that this affords them in an international setting (Jain 2011; E. Kim 2012, Wadhwa 2011).

But while economics helps to explain why diasporic individuals feel compelled to depart their countries of origin/residence, it alone is insufficient to elucidate how and why these individuals decide to relocate to their ancestral homelands in large numbers as opposed to other nation-states. This is precisely where scholars argue that the influence of ethnicity comes into play. Where economic factors can be interpreted as initiating the movement of diasporic peoples, scholars argue that it is their ethnic and cultural ties that “channel” this flow to their ancestral homelands (Tsuda 2009b, 21). The salience of ethnicity is visible in numerous capacities throughout the diasporic return migration process. From above, or at the macro-level, researchers have exemplified how rates of ethnic return migration have increased most dramatically to countries with laws in place to encourage the ‘return’ and prolonged residence of diasporic individuals and descendants living abroad (Joppke 2005; Yeol & Skrentny 2009; Skrentny et al 2009; Yamashiro 2011). These policies have passed primarily in Europe and Asia, where a number of countries on both continents have implemented legislation designed to privilege the immigration of “overseas” co-ethnics relative to other foreigners (Joppke 2005, Tsuda 2009b, Skrentny et al. 2009). These policies have utilized essentialized conceptions of ethnicity, holding the belief that diasporic descendants, despite being raised abroad, are likely to be culturally similar to the native-born population because of their shared ethnicity. Though the centrality of ethnicity is observed across the board among nations with such ethnic return migration policies, there are marked differences in

the way that these countries have put these laws into practice (Skrentny et al. 2009). Countries in Europe, for example, have generally established policies that stress the cultural and historical connections that diasporic peoples share with their ancestral homelands. This has been practiced primarily using two techniques. The first, implemented by countries such as Spain, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Russia, have relied principally on ideals of “ethnic affinity,” or the belief of a shared culture or bloodline that extends to members of its diaspora. The second, implemented in Germany (and Israel) have centered on the notion of “ethnic protection,” established to protect diasporic peoples from persecution at the hands of foreign actors.

Asian nations have applied a noticeably different rationale in promoting the diasporic return migration of their foreign co-ethnics (Skrentny et al. 2009; Yamashiro 2012). Rather than relying solely on ideals of ethnic affinity, Asian nations in South (India), Southeast (Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos), and East Asia (Japan, South Korean, and China) have largely framed ethnic return migration as an economic process, in some cases even likening ‘returnees’ to temporary laborers (Tsuda 2009b). This shift in discourse regarding the statuses of ethnic return migrants is mostly explained by the economic trajectories that these Asian states have covered in recent decades, many of which have experienced tremendous economic growth, as well as decelerating rates of fertility. The preferential immigration pathways provided to diasporic descendants can thus be interpreted as a strategy to address issues stemming from this economic growth under the assumption that ethnic return migrants will more smoothly culturally assimilate into the host society than other foreign migrants. This logic helps to illustrate why even the laws concerned with the social integration of ethnic

return migrants are different by continent. For example, while most European nations have made access to naturalization or dual citizenship readily available for ‘returnees,’ the majority of Asian nations have only set aside preferential renewable visas for diasporic co-ethnics, again highlighting the temporary, and largely economic motivations underscoring of these policies (Tsuda 2009b).

From below, or at the micro-level, a number of scholars have elaborated on the manner in which personal claims to ethnicity and ethnic affinity can motivate ethnic return migration. In most cases, ethnicity has been described as a strong supplemental impetus for ‘return,’ working in conjunction with personal aspirations for economic betterment to guide potential ethnic return migrants to their ancestral homelands. Such has been established as the general foundation for large-scale ethnic return migration between numerous countries, such as from Brazil to Japan (Tsuda 2003), from China to South Korea (Song 2009), and the US to India (Jain 2012), among many others. Though in these cases the principal factor motivating ethnic return migration is economic opportunity, scholars argue that the affective desires that stem from a diasporic individual’s imagined transnational ties to the “homeland” help to solidify these migratory pathways.

Scholars have also provided examples of affect and nostalgia serving as the chief motivation for ethnic return migration. For example, in Russell King and Anastasia Christou’s research on Greek-American and Greek-German ethnic return migrants, of the six rationales most often provided by their participants for ‘returning,’ economic opportunity or betterment was found to be the least prevalent. Instead, desires related to ethnic and cultural immersion (such as “returning to one’s roots” and experiencing the

“Greek way of life”) most often topped interviewees’ lists. Similar sentiments about the importance of ethnic exploration and cultural affect have been determined in other studies, such as in the case of Asian Americans ‘returning’ to their ethnic homelands in the Philippines (Manalansan 2013), China (Louie 2004), Vietnam (Nguyen-Akbar 2014), and South Korea (N. Kim 2009). It is worth noting, however, that ethnicity has appeared to serve as a more salient variable when ‘returnees’ originate from wealthy nations, thereby significantly decreasing the economic incentives to move to their ancestral homelands (Tsuda 2009b).

Researchers of ethnic return migration have also written about the limitations of economics and ethnicity-based explanations for the proliferation of ethnic return migration. This has particularly been the case upon taking into account the adaptation narratives of ‘returnees’ upon their relocation. Despite the positive sentiments and nostalgic identification that guide diasporic descendants to their ancestral homelands, research has shown that many of these affective expectations go unfulfilled upon ‘returning,’ and are instead replaced by feelings of alienation and resentment as they encounter social and legal barriers to their adaptation and incorporation. These sentiments are typically strongest among ‘returnees’ originating from poorer nations, as most tend to ‘return’ as low-wage laborers and occupy the lower socioeconomic rungs of their new home societies. This has been documented primarily in Asian states, such as in the case of Brazilian-Japanese ‘returnees’ (Tsuda 2003) and Korean-Chinese (*joseonjeok*) ‘returnees’ (Seol & Skrentny 2009; Song 2009) both of which are groups that have experienced significant discrimination at both the interpersonal and structural levels in their ethnic homelands because of their countries of origin and class status. Irrespective

of a group's country of origin, social marginalization has proven to be a significant barrier to societal incorporation for nearly all ethnic return migrant populations throughout the globe. Even those with higher levels of human capital, such as those migrating from wealthy Western nations, report eventually facing impediments to their adaptation because of their foreign or hyphenated statuses (Teerling 2014; N. Kim 2009). Many studies report that the difficulties of adjusting to life in their ancestral homelands force ethnic return migrants to "return" again, but this time to their countries of origin. Because of the transient state that 'returnees' appear to occupy, some researchers have even endeavored to look at ethnic return migration as more of a cycle than a unidirectional pattern, describing it as a type of "mobility" instead of migration (King and Christou 2014).

As indicated by the above review, South Korea has served as a compelling site for the study of ethnic return migration. This has occurred for a few reasons. To begin, the country's well-documented "miraculous" economic turnaround—from one of the world's most impoverished nations in the 1950s to its current standing as the 14<sup>th</sup> wealthiest nation in the world<sup>2</sup>—has undoubtedly incentivized the 'return' of its sizable and diverse diasporic population.<sup>3</sup> Most of the social scientific research on ethnic return migration to South Korea, however, has been situated at the state-policy level. Here, South Korea has been one of a growing number of Asian and European nations to develop special statutes and visas to promote what legal scholar Chulwoo Lee (2012) dubs 'ethnizenship' (or

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank, "Gross domestic product 2013."

<sup>3</sup> Much of this out-migration was tied to South Korea state's war- and poverty-stricken early history, as well as the Korean peninsula's broader history of colonization in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, South Korea's diasporic presence has most noticeably grown in country's with which South Korea or the Korean peninsula previously shared military or imperial ties, such as the US, Japan, China, and Russia. (I Choi 2003)



non-citizen ethno-national membership), enacting a series of immigration policies starting from the early 1990s and into the 2000s targeted at the ‘return’ of diasporic Koreans (see also Seol & Skrentny 2009; Skrentny et al. 2009; Brubaker & JE Kim 2011; Yamashiro 2012). In effect, these laws have allowed for the unique practice of biopolitical governmentality in South Korea through the use of revised understandings of ‘nationhood’ or ‘national community’ that include (at varying degrees) individuals with common ancestry (Seol & Skrentny 2009; C. Lee 2012; JE Kim 2014). These changes have provided preferential immigration pathways for diasporic Koreans relative to non-Korean ethnics, tremendously impacting the rate of return migration to South Korea. In its 2013 annual report, for instance, the South Korean Bureau of Immigration reported that there were 602,226 ethnic return migrants residing in the country—a considerable increase from the 477,028 cases reported in 2010—with the majority arriving from China, the US, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (Korean Immigration Service Annual Report 2010; 2013).

While the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans has enjoyed a growing presence within this larger body of literature, the extent of their inclusion has been somewhat limited. What I mean by this is that much of the research on Korean diasporic return has incorporated US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ primarily as a means to highlight the disparities in South Korea’s ethnic return migration policy. Conversely, this body of research has done little to expound upon the actual lives and experiences of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ themselves outside of the framework immigration law. A few scholars, however, have endeavored to apply a more nuanced examination of this phenomenon, providing qualitative accounts of the meaning-making and identity

formation processes that US-raised Koreans ‘returnees’ undergo while working and residing in their ancestral homeland (N. Y. Kim 2009; E. Kim 2012; H. K. Lee 2013). This emerging body of qualitative research is precisely where I situate this project. But whereas these studies have explored small slices of the larger US-raised Korean ‘return’ experience, this project endeavors to provide a much fuller account by imagining the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans as a process that involves far more than, and begins well prior to, the physical act of relocation.

## Overview of Chapters

### *Chapter one: Assimilation and its discontents*

Despite the growing body of research on ethnic return migration, few if any scholars have examined this practice within a framework of race relations, or explored the ways in which this transnational process complicates contemporary sociological understandings of immigrant assimilation. While earlier research on ethnic return migration has largely relied on policy oriented or rational-economic justifications of this practice, this chapter demonstrates the manner in which individual desires to ‘return’ are as much a response to experiences of ethnicity- and race-based marginalization, as well as the formation of an ethnic and/or racial consciousness. In particular, this chapter finds that the emergence of an “affirmative ethnic identity” plays a central role in initiating participants’ interests in South Korea and introducing ethnic return migration as a potentiality. In stating these findings, this chapter stresses the importance of extending the temporality of ‘return’ narratives prior to the physical act of migration, as well as the limitations inherent in examining US-raised Koreans (and Asian Americans writ large) within traditional

frameworks of cultural assimilation that view domestic incorporation as a foregone conclusion.

*Chapter two: Gendering 'return'*

Similar to other works on ethnic return migration, studies focusing on Korean diasporic return have elaborated on the economic, political, and affective motivations of this movement, as well as documenting the adaptation narratives of the thousands of later-generation “overseas Koreans” who ‘return’ yearly. Largely absent from this research on Korean diasporic return, as well as the research on ethnic return migration as a whole, has been an analysis of the impact of gender on this increasingly recognized migratory practice. This chapter endeavors to fill this scholarly void by examining how US-raised Koreans negotiate understandings and practices of gender as they ‘return’ to their ancestral homeland of South Korea.

This chapter finds that interviewees’ expectations for and experiences of “return” are highly gendered. ‘Returnee’ men, for instance, initially configure South Korea as a site where they may redeem their marginalized masculine identities by taking advantage of the surplus human capital afforded to them by their American status. Conversely, ‘returnee’ women are often apprehensive about their ability to transition into a South Korean society which they believe is antiquated with patriarchal and sexist norms. Upon residing in South Korea, however, both ‘returnee’ men and women experience firsthand the complex and relational ways in which gender functions transnationally. Forced to sift through competing gender identities, ideals, and practices as they navigate through

different sectors and institutions within South Korean society, ‘returnees’ come to reevaluate the gendered expectations with which they migrated.

### *Chapter three: Becoming American in South Korea*

In this chapter I find that upon moving to a globalized South Korea, ethnic return migrants’ capacities to thrive are as much influenced by their knowledge of Korean sociocultural norms and practices as they are by their ability and willingness to affirm their connections to the US. Despite often moving to South Korea as a means to (re)connect with their Korean families and cultural heritage, ‘returnees’ occupy social identities/networks, spaces, and jobs that highlight their ties to an American upbringing, not diminish them. This remains true even for ‘returnees’ with stronger command of the Korean language and culture, as well as individuals with long-term aspirations in the country. The experiences of US-raised Korean returnees are thus marked with the seemingly paradoxical reality where their claims to an American-ness, rather than being consistently contested (as was the case in the US), become the focal point of their new migrant identities in South Korea. I argue that these examples highlight the transnational, globalized, and neoimperial foundations of ethnic return migration to South Korea that extend beyond the cultural and political significance of co-ethnic ties.

### *Chapter four: Diasporic reconciliation*

While chapter three elaborates upon the central role that interviewees’ ties to the US play in the South Korean livelihoods, this chapter investigates the alternative effects that this foreign-ness has on the long-term wellbeing and prospects of ‘returnees.’ Specifically, this chapter explores how ‘returnees’ come to terms with their socio-legal standing as

“Overseas Koreans” in South Korea, and the manner in which this designation impacts their process of societal adaptation and incorporation. Previous works on Korean diasporic return have expanded upon the socio-legal exclusion and marginalization of different diasporic Korean groups in the South Korea, namely ethnic Korean migrants from neighboring Asian and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) nations. Comparable arguments have been made regarding ‘returnees’ from the US as well, but mostly with an emphasis on the social exclusion that they experience. This chapter expands upon these previous studies by providing an in-depth and nuanced look into the formal and informal barriers that US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ come up against as they attempt to forego the influences of their US citizenship and upbringing in favor of “going native,” or attempting to assimilate to South Korean sociocultural norms. In endeavoring to assimilate, however, ‘returnees’ come to realize that they, as “Overseas Koreans,” occupy a liminal and largely “double edged” position within South Korean society—one in which their ability to be accepted as “Korean” is inconsistent and highly circumstantial. This is especially true of ‘returnees’ who are already marginalized even within a Korean American context, such as Korean American adoptees and multiracial Korean Americans. In recounting the ways in which ‘returnees’ both challenge and reconcile the liminality of their South Korean statuses, this chapter elaborates on the contradictions inherent to being an “Overseas Korean” in South Korea.

*Chapter five (Conclusion): The Semi-permanence of ‘return’*

I conclude my dissertation thesis by elaborating on the future plans and long term prospects of the US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants in my study. In this chapter

interviewees share both their reasons for wanting to continue residing in South Korea and the factors that make committing to settle in the country long-term difficult. Interviewees also provide estimates for the lengths of their remaining stays in the country, with responses ranging from those who have definitive plans to move back to the US in the timeframe of a few months, to those who desire to settle in South Korea permanently. Most interviewees' plans, however, stand somewhere in between these two positions—possessing desires to move back to the US at some future point but without any foreseeable plans to leave South Korea. I argue that this general indecision among the 'returnees' in my study helps to signify the "semi-permanence" of their positions in South Korea—not yet ready to label South Korea as their permanent homes, but unable to completely disavow it, either. In one way, the semi-permanence of US-raised Korean 'returnees' works to underscore ethnic return migration's connections to transnational migration writ large, a practice which is itself rooted in the potentiality of human mobility and the belief that national borders are mere geographic suggestions, not strict barriers. Seen in another way, the semi-permanence of US-raised Korean 'returnees' instead foregrounds the continued salience of ethnicity and the relatively newfound importance of diaspora in meaning making and identity formation. Taken together, this chapter (as well as this dissertation in general) highlights the competing social forces that converge to make ethnic return migration a possibility, and the manner in which 'returnees' themselves negotiate these complexities.

Table 1

*List of Interviewees*

Name	Gender	Age at time of interview	Diasporic status (age arrived in US)	Years in Korea	Origin in US	Education	Marital status
Abraham	Male	26	2KA	2	CA	BA	Single
Amelie	Female	24	2MKA	1	CA	BA	Single
Dan	Male	27	2MKA	4	GA	BA	Single
David	Male	27	2KA	1	HI	SC	Single
Dee	Female	28	KAA (1)	6	OH	BA	Single
Dorothy	Female	24	2KA	2	IL	BA	Single
Elizabeth	Female	24	2KA	1	CA	BA	Single
Eugene	Male	38	2MKA	11	OH	BA	Partnered
Eunji	Female	39	1.5KA (5)	2	NY	BA	Single
Glen	Male	25	2KA	2	CA	BA	Single
Grace	Female	24	2MKA	1	CA	BA	Single
Helen	Female	28	2KA	7	VA	BA	Single
Jamie	Female	23	2KA*	1	CA	BA	Single
Jane	Female	32	KAA (1)	3	MN	JD	Partnered
Jason	Male	30	2KA*	2	HI	MA	Single
Jiho	Male	28	1.5KA (8)	3	CA	BA	Single
Jin Soo	Male	35	1.5KA (8)	6	CA	JD	Married
John	Male	25	2KA	2	CA	BA	Single
Joyce	Female	29	1.5KA (4)	3	CA	BA	Single
Kenneth	Male	45	1.5KA (12)	15	NJ	BA	Married
Lee	Female	28	1.5KA (5)	4	IL	BA	Single
Michael	Male	25	1.5KA (1)	2	CA	BA	Single
Monica	Female	32	1.5KA (5)	8	KY	BA	Single
Nancy	Female	38	KAA (2)	1	MN/NY	BA	Single
Nicholas	Male	35	KAA (7)	8	NY	BA	Engaged
Olivia	Female	23	2KA	1	HI/NY	SC	Single
Patrick	Male	28	2MKA	4	CA	MBA	Single
Phillip	Male	27	2KA	3	NJ	BA	Single
Rebecca	Female	31	2MKA	6	NC	BA	Partnered
Robert	Male	29	2KA	2	CA	BA	Engaged
Ryan	Male	31	2KA	6	CA	SC	Single

Sam	Male	28	2KA	5	CA, CO	BA	Single
Sarah	Female	34	2KA	1	MD	MD, PhD	Married
Teresa	Female	34	2KA	9	CA	BA	Married
William	Male	25	1.5KA (4)	2	NC	BA	Single
<i>n</i> = 35	F = 17 M = 18	Med = 28 $\bar{x}$ = 29.4	2KA = 16 1.5KA = 9 2MKA = 6 KAA = 4	M = 3 $\bar{x}$ = 3.8			

2KA = Second-generation Korean American

1.5KA = 1.5-generation Korean American

2MKA = Mixed-race second-generation Korean American

KAA = Korean American adoptee

\* Born in the US but lived some of their childhood in South Korea

## Methodology

### *Data Collection*

Data collection occurred primarily during a fieldwork period in South Korea from January to August of 2013. In addition to the data collected through in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews and participatory observation during this time, four pilot interviews were conducted in 2010 and one skype interview was conducted in 2014. I thus conducted thirty-five in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews in total. Initial research participants were either prior contacts or identified through mutual networks. Subsequent interviews were respondent driven, with interviewees connecting me to US-raised Korean friends and colleagues who were also residing in South Korea. Our discussions focused on interviewees' formative lives in the United States, reasons for departing the United States, and the manner in which certain factors (such as their citizenship status, cultural/linguistic fluency, gender, and/or race/ethnicity) impacted their ability to adapt to South Korean society. In-person interviews occurred at a mutually



disclosed location, typically a coffee shop or restaurant. In rare instances, interviews were conducted in the participant's office or workplace. All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and averaged roughly 1.5 hours. To differentiate migrants from those were temporarily visiting the country without the need for an extended stay visa, I only included US-raised Korean adults who had resided in South Korea for more than half a year with the intention to stay for a year. The median length of residence in South Korea among participants was three years, although this figure ranged from as few as one year to as many as fifteen years. Interviewees were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five, with a median age of twenty-eight years. Of the thirty-five interviewed, nine were engaged, married, or in a long-term partnership. Only one participant had children. A more detailed breakdown of the interviewees is available in Table 1 in the Appendix.

Only US-raised Koreans were interviewed for this project, meaning that one or more of their biological parents were of South Korean origin, and that they were born in the US or moved to the US prior to adolescence and raised in the country into adulthood. I utilized the term "US-raised Koreans" as opposed to the most oft-used "Korean Americans" for a few reasons. Above all, it served to incorporate all ethnic Koreans who were raised in the US into one measurable demographic group, whether they were the children of one or more Korean immigrant parent(s), or international adoptees. This was done not to diminish the undoubtedly different biographies and identities of the interviewees in this study, but rather as a means to draw attention to their analogous connections to the US, especially in regards to their racialization as Asian Americans, as well as their comparably weak connections to South Korea relative to first generation Korean Americans (or Korean immigrants). As I further address in chapter one, until now

the respective bodies of scholarship on both ethnic return migration and Korean Americans have partitioned research on the children of Korean American immigrants and Korean American adoptees into parallel but largely non-intersecting camps, neglecting to call to attention the ways in which their experiences overlap both in the US and South Korea. Utilizing the term US-raised Koreans, then, served as an intervention of sorts, providing an analytic that allowed for the expansion of the term ‘ethnic return migrant’ to include those who occupied relatively similar positions within the larger diaspora (as do 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans and Korean American adoptees) and not simply those who were “diasporic descendants” (e.g., children of immigrants).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the data collected from interviews, I recorded over 100 pages of ethnographic field notes during my eight-month stay in 2013. These field notes included, 1) detailed descriptions and reflections of the formal interviews I conducted with participants, and 2) jottings, photos, and surface-level analyses of my experiences and observations during my time as a resident of South Korea. These field notes were taken primarily to provide additional data regarding the South Korean societal context in which US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ reside. Furthermore, they offered a basis for which I could decide whether or not to pursue a particular discussion point with the ‘returnees’ whom I interviewed. For example, if an interviewee commented on a social phenomenon that I had documented in my own field notes, I prompted the interviewee to further elaborate on his/her point, sometimes providing my own experiences or observations as fodder for

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, all participants identified as Korean American, although not always solely. In spite of these variations in the salience of a Korean American identity, all participants stated have affective/cultural motivations that supplemented their economic desires to relocate to South Korea. For instance, language acquisition and cultural immersion were two of the most commonly recited reasons for relocating among interviewees.

discussion or thought. In this way, my field notes served not only as an important tool for later data analysis, but also as something that aided in my on-the-ground data collection.

While this dissertation primarily drew upon the data collected through the interviews themselves, there were also occasions when I brought in my own insights to either elaborate upon or provide a counterpoint to the perspectives provided by my research participants. Though there are instances in this manuscript where my own observations appear in the main passages, the vast majority of them are situated as endnotes.

### *Sampling and its limitations*

There are also a few key points to address in regards to this study's generalizability and representativeness. I begin by elaborating on my study's sample size. I firmly believe that, short of purposefully oversampling specific demographics of US-raised Korean 'returnees' in order to reach a level of equilibrium across the board, the data collected from the thirty-five in-depth interviews proved more than adequate in serving as the basis of my analyses of this particular social phenomenon. Admittedly, I initially set out to recruit a much more ambitious number of research participants—somewhere in the range of 50-60 individuals. This number was initially floated because of my earlier interests in organizing this project the type of work that US-raised Korean 'returnees' performed in South Korea, with my initial hypothesis being that they were split among three sectors, or "states," that were in large part developed by or connected to US neo-imperial interests: the military/political state, the cultural state, and the neoliberal state. Upon arriving in South Korea for fieldwork in 2013, however, it was clear that my initial presumptions

were largely incorrect, and that most if not all ‘returnees’ were situated in the English language job market, a somewhat vague amalgamation of the cultural and neoliberal states mentioned above. Comparatively few were located in the “military/political state,” and many of those who were declined to be interviewed for this project for fear of possible future reprimanding. Even with some purposive oversampling of underrepresented ‘returnee’ demographic groups, such as Korean American adoptees, mixed-race or mixed-ethnicity Korean Americans, and ‘returnees’ employed outside of the English language job market, it became quickly apparent that it would be monumentally difficult to achieve any sort of demographic parity across the types of occupations held by ‘returnees’ or in regards to their diasporic statuses.

The generalizability of this study is thus limited by the size and demographic specificity of the subject pool. In other words, the findings in this study are generalizable to the extent that they portray the social environments in which US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ reside both in the US and South Korea. While I cannot make the claim that this study’s findings speak for all ethnic return migrants, I can maintain that social factors and constructs previously under-studied by scholars of return migration—such as race/ethnicity, gender, identity, as well as their interplay—are unequivocally central to understanding the ‘return’ motivations and experiences of US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants and potentially other Asian American ‘returnees.’ Moreover, the strength of this qualitative study (and also of qualitative research in general) is in its ability to showcase the narratives and discourses that participants recite in order to substantiate and make sense of their experience as ‘returnees.’ Thus, rather than claim that the qualitative data collected for this project informs us about the subjective experiences of all ‘returnees,’ I

argue that they help to provide a glimpse into the ways in which these individuals (and potentially other ‘returnees’) make meaning of their location within much larger and complex social systems.

There are also limitations to the representativeness of this project. The relatively young median age of the sample is explained in a few ways. First, the Korea diasporic population in the United States is a relatively young one, with most voluntary migration to the US occurring from South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, and most adoptive migration occurring in the 1980s and 1990s (Noland 2003). As such, the majority of US-raised Koreans (1.5/2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans and Korean American adoptees) were born in the 1970s or after. The age range of the ‘returnees’ in this study is in many ways reflective of this trend, which most being born in the 1980s. Second, and has been suggested by Jain (2013), Asian Americans, especially those with professional aspirations, may view their “homeland” sojourns as a transitional life course stage prior to their settling down in the United States. In these cases, potential ‘returnees’ migrate to their ancestral homelands as young adults potentially to move back to the United States within a few years. Such an endeavor undoubtedly requires that the participant have a significant level of economic and temporal flexibility, a luxury that older Asian Americans with families and firmly-established career may not have. Though the ethnic return migration context in South Korea is undoubtedly different from Jain’s case of India, her approach would help to explain the concentration of emerging adult ‘returnees’ in my sample.

As mentioned previously, the purpose of locating all respondents within this blanket demographic category was two-fold: to highlight the manner in which

race/ethnicity works to foreignize members of this population in the US, and to emphasize the way in which diasporic status/citizenship works to foreignize them in South Korea. Again, the intention was never to minimize the important points of distinction between the recognizable sub-demographics within this larger group. And there are numerous points in this manuscript where I do attempt to negotiate this difference by exhibiting examples where interviewees' perspectives do not all fall into a neatly organized category or outcome, or where interviewees were explicitly divided along lines of diasporic status. That said, I am steadfast in my belief that the designation of "US-raised Koreans" is an important one, not only because it draws attention to the ongoing significance of ethnicity (and race) in contemporary identity formation and meaning making, but also because it foregoes the problematic identity politics of the term "Korean American," a descriptor that is almost entirely limited in its popular and academic literature usage to refer to the children of Korean immigrants (a.k.a. 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans). Not only that, the term "Korean American," with its references to ethnicity (Korean) and nationality (American) emphasizes a kind of geographic bounded-ness that stands at odds with the transnational scope of ethnic/diasporic return migration. It is thus my hope that the term "US-raised Koreans" can be used as an umbrella term in which to locate the diverse subjectivities of ethnic/diasporic Koreans who are raised (and in some cases born in the US), while still providing an avenue for an alternative identity formation that is not limited to the geographic confines of the US.

### *Positionality*

Given my reliance on personal observations in assisting in my data collection, it is appropriate that I address my own positionality, particularly in its relation to this project. I begin with a brief personal biography. As I alluded to in the opening passage, I am the son of Korean immigrants, both of whom immigrated to the US in the early 1980s after residing nearly all or all of their prior lives in South Korea (my mother briefly resided in Germany prior to marrying my father and moving to the US). Having settled in Los Angeles, and later Los Angeles County, my parents were able to raise me and my younger sister in a social setting where Korean cultural practices and artifacts were relatively abundant. Not only did my sister and I partake in Korean cultural practices at home (such as eating Korean foods, speaking in Korean, watching Korean soaps), we often accompanied my mother as she ventured into Koreatown to run errands or to meet up with her other Korean immigrant peers. Though my connections to Koreatown and the Korean immigrant community faded as I became older and my family moved further away from the urban core, elements of Korean (American) culture continued to dominate much of my childhood and adolescence. This was even as I attempted to distance myself from them as a way of assimilating and navigating my way through an American sociocultural landscape that was predominantly white and in many cases anti-immigrant.

It wasn't until I began enrolling in Ethnic Studies courses as a freshman at UC San Diego that I began to develop an appreciation and curiosity about my Korean American identity. I recall being engrossed while reading about Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and their 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean American children.<sup>5</sup> For the first time in my life I was able to read an academic textbook that clearly put into perspective the

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<sup>5</sup> See L. S. Park 2005

events and experiences that had comprised my youth. My trips to Koreatown, my social network of 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian Americans, my parents' entrepreneurial practices, my encounters with race-based exclusion, even the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising—all of these seemingly isolated events were framed in such a way that their intersections were at last plainly visible. If I had previously been lost, by delving into the academic literature in Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies, and Sociology, I was finally found.

My personal biography, especially my foray into Asian American Studies, is relevant to this current research for a few reasons. First, my interest in the phenomenon of ethnic return migration, especially in its relation to the Korean Americans and the larger Korean diaspora, has undeniably been guided by my position as a second generation Korean American. As I briefly elaborated upon in the opening passage, my interest in this project was really born out of my interactions with diasporic Koreans who had participated in the transitional practice of (ethnic) return migration. Without these initial experiences, it is unlikely that this project would have been developed in the manner it is today.

Second, my positionality as a US-raised Korean undoubtedly impacted my experience in South Korea as a researcher. In some ways, I had become a member of the population I was intent on studying—US-raised Koreans living and working in South Korea. As such, I approached the data collection for this project not as an objective 'outsider' as is often the norm for social scientific research, nor as an 'insider' given that I had no prior experience living in South Korea for an extended period on my own, but as someone who stood in-between those two statuses. By donning this approach, I was able to make note of my own experiences in South Korea, and if need be, cross-reference to



those provided by my research participants. Thus, though I label qualitative interviews as my primary data collection methodology, I believe it appropriate to state that (auto)ethnographic field work also played an important role in situating my larger claims and analysis.

Finally, as a second generation Korean American male, I was required to reflect upon and to come to terms with the position of privilege I held within the larger US-raised Korean community. The US-raised Korean community, despite its demographic diversity, is overwhelmingly represented within the popular culture by the narratives of college educated, middle class, straight 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans. Lost within this larger narrative are the perspectives of numerous sub-demographic groups, most noticeably Korean American adoptees, mixed-race or mixed-ethnicity Korean Americans (in some cases referred to as HAPA or “Amerasian”), working class Korean Americans, and gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender Korean Americans. Given my social standing as a member of the US-raised Korean mainstream, I proceeded with sensitivity in interviewing and interacting with US-raised Korean ‘returnees,’ in particular not to presume that the life-course trajectories and the South Korean experiences of all my interviewees were alike. Moreover, I made sure to be explicit about my positionality throughout the interview by providing a brief biography at the beginning of each interview, and also providing opportunities for interviewees to inquire about my history and perspectives throughout our meeting.

## **(Chapter one) Assimilation and its Discontents: The identity politics of ‘return’**

Until now, most if not all of the research on the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans (and ethnic return migration writ large) has focused on this phenomenon in relation to migrants and their country of ‘return.’ Put another way, scholarship on US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ has predominantly examined the narratives of ethnic return migrants starting from and following their physical relocation to South Korea.

Comparatively little research has been conducted to explore the life histories of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in their country of departure prior to migrating, or how their upbringing in the US may have influenced their eventual desires to ‘return.’

Taking these scholarly omissions into account, this chapter elaborates upon the circumstances specific to interviewees’ upbringings in the US that make possible and even contribute to their eventual participation in ethnic return migration. In doing so, this chapter places the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans into dialogue with sociological perspectives on US race relations and immigrant incorporation, moving beyond the neoclassical, politico-legal, and cultural frameworks typically utilized in expounding upon this practice. Drawing from these largely intersecting, yet previously unincorporated bodies of literature in studying the phenomenon of US-raised Korean ethnic return migration proves worthwhile for a few reasons. First, it situates the narratives of ‘returnees’ in multiple geographic and temporal contexts (in this case both the US and South Korea), thereby expanding or elongating the ethnic return migration process to something that begins well prior to the physical act of relocation. By taking

into account interviewees' positions in the US as racialized subjects in concert with their status as diasporic individuals, I argue that it is possible to envision their ethnic return migration as an endeavor that does not occur independently of their assimilation/acculturation in the US, but as something that is informed by and even born of it.

Second, drawing from the literature on US race relations and immigrant incorporation in examining the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans runs the residual effect of broadening the scope of scholarship on Korean/Asian American assimilation beyond the geographic confines of the US. Evidenced by their relatively high levels of group educational attainment and rapid economic upward mobility, many sociologists assert that Asian Americans have succeeded or will soon succeed at assimilating into US society, ostensibly cementing their position as the nation's "(honorary) whites" (Gans 1999, Yancey 2003, Hochschild 2005 Bonilla-Silva 2013). I argue in this chapter that the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans provides a compelling counterpoint to this larger discourse on Korean/Asian American assimilation. After all, why would a significant portion of a population that is supposedly successfully assimilating into the US socioeconomic and cultural fabric willingly decide to depart the country? As of yet, there is no academic research that grapples with this particular question, or seriously engages with the practice of ethnic return migration within a framework of US race relations. This chapter thus adds to existing critiques of the sociological assimilation paradigm articulated in contemporary research on Asian Americans by situating US-raised Koreans' interest and participation in ethnic return migration as an organic response to the broader systems of racialization and identity

politics that they encounter while growing up as ethnic/racial minorities in the US. Of particular interest, I find, is the manner in which the development of what I call an “affirmative ethnic identity” proves central in combating harmful race-based discrimination and stigma elsewhere in their lives. However, while most scholarship on US-raised Koreans has elaborated on the role of ethnic identity as a factor helping to moderate their adaptation into a discriminatory US society, this study instead examines the role of ethnic identity in invigorating US-raised Koreans’ explorations of the Korean diaspora and an imagined Korean “homeland”—and in the case of the interviewees in this study, even contributing to their eventual ‘return’ to South Korea.

In addition to the rational-economic motivations well-documented in the broader literature on return migration, this chapter finds that interviewees’ desires to move to South Korea are, 1) closely informed by their upbringings as ethnic/racial minorities in the US, and, 2) are largely an extension of their aspirations for Korean cultural exploration and fluency. Rather than being a phenomenon simply driven by rational economic or politico-legal processes, I contend that economic opportunity and flexible immigration policies help to actualize and later channel the ‘return’ desires of the US-raised Koreans in this study. These findings, I conclude, not only highlight the importance of situating returnees’ lives in their countries of departure prior to migration, but also the need to re-conceptualize Korean/Asian American assimilation (and immigrant assimilation in general) beyond a linear and geographically confined model.

The Korean diaspora in the United States

Since the 1970s, diasporic Koreans in the United States (also referred to as Korean Americans) have been the subjects of a significant body of social scientific research on immigrants and immigrant incorporation. A relatively small ethnic minority group in the US for much of the country's history, the diasporic Korean population in the United States exploded in number following the enactment of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, jumping from approximately 10,000 residents in 1960 to over 69,000 in 1970, and to nearly 355,000 by 1980 (KoreanAmericanStory.Org).<sup>6</sup> Because of their comparatively brief history in the US, earlier studies of Korean Americans tended to focus on their distinctly foreign cultural characteristics, with emphasis placed on the way that these specific group attributes influenced their assimilation into the dominant society. While initial popular portrayals of post-1965 Korean immigrants (and Asian immigrants writ large) often described them as culturally deficient and inassimilable, social scientific research tended to do the opposite, instead valorizing their propensity for economic self-sufficiency and upward mobility (Abelmann & Lie 1995, 165-170). Indeed, much of this praise closely resembled that of the "model minority" archetype previously reserved for Japanese Americans in explaining their socioeconomic success both before and after their internment during World War II (Abelmann & Lie 1995; R. G. Lee 1999, 145-179). Like Japanese Americans, Korean immigrants were referenced as possessing the cultural attributes necessary to assimilate economically in the US, evidenced by their high rates of employment as professionals and small business owners (HC Kim 1977; Patterson & HC Kim 1977; Mangiafico 1988; Harrison 1992). Though understandably important in

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<sup>6</sup> Exact figures for the number of US residents of Korean descent were unavailable during the 1960 and 1950 US Census Reports. In 1940, aggregated figures from the US and Hawaiian Census Reports indicated that there were 8,570 ethnic Koreans residing in the US and its territories. (Korean American Story)

illuminating the new immigrant narratives of diasporic Koreans residing in the US, these studies often disregarded the numerous ways in which supposed Korean American group practices were in large part a response to the interpersonal and institutional discrimination that they experienced in their lives. These claims were also made during a period when race relations in the US was for the most part deemed a black-white issue, with the socioeconomic success of Korean Americans (and other Asian American groups) masking the underlying impacts of structural racism (Abelmann & Lie 1995, 162-165).

More contemporary research on Korean Americans attempted to frame the group's practices as less a response to supposed cultural differences and group pathologies and instead a product of ethnicity-, race-, and class-based social inequities inherent within numerous aspects of US society. For instance, studies on Korean American entrepreneurialism conducted in the late 1970s up to the early 2000s (by the likes of Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich (1987), Nancy Abelmann and John Lie (1995), and In-Jin Yoon (1997), among others,) provided more nuanced representations of Korean American self-employment that illustrated: 1) the exclusionary social forces that pushed Korean Americans away from mainstream employment opportunities and into small business ownership, 2) the significant barriers to successful self-employment that Korean Americans encountered, and 3) the important role that social capital/networks played in helping to create economic niches for immigrants and ethnic minorities (also referred to as "ethnic economies"<sup>7</sup>). Central to this newer wave of research was the

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<sup>7</sup> Edna Bonacich and Ivan Light were among the first to write about this topic, detailing the high rates of entrepreneurship that occurred among Korean immigrants in Los Angeles in the 1970s and 80s, as well as the numerous structural inequities that this group encountered (Bonacich, Light, & Wong 1977; Light 1984; Light, Kwuon, & Zhong 1990; Light & Bonacich 1991). Bonacich and Light's research, which served as part of the empirical backbone for their larger claims about "ethnic economies," explained how

inclusion of Korean Americans (and Asian Americans in general) within larger sociological debates on race, racism, and racialization in the US. These attempts to broaden the discussions of US race relations beyond a black-white binary proved instrumental in advancing research on Korean/Asian Americans, and in many ways marked the sociological turn to studying the societal incorporation of Korean American (and other Asian American ethnic groups) as a function and byproduct of US race relations and not merely an isolated phenomenon.

These works also marked the turning point for research on the Korean diasporic community in the US from that which primarily examined the adaptation of first generation Korean Americans (or Korean immigrants) to that which began to explore the acculturation narratives of “US-raised Koreans.” Since then, research on Korean Americans has given significant scholarly attention to the experiences and narratives of two US-raised Korean demographic sub-groups: the children of Korean immigrants (or 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans), and internationally adopted Korean Americans (also referred to as Korean American adoptees). Most of this research has endeavored to locate the lived experiences of both 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans and Korean

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Korean immigrants relied on closely-knit social networks (or, “*kye*”) that helped guide newcomers into certain entrepreneurial niches (Light, Kwuon, & Zhong 1990). Rather than relying strictly on cultural explanations, they argued that this preponderance was largely a product of the limited employment opportunities available for new Korean immigrants because of their lack of social/cultural capital as well as institutionalized discrimination against non-whites. Their research on Korean immigrant entrepreneurs in Los Angeles served as the basis for numerous other studies on Korean Americans. Koreatown in Los Angeles, for instance, became a popular sociological case study in the late 1980s and early 1990s; initially, as an example of what scholars referred to as an “ethnic enclave economy” (Portes & Jansen 1989; Zhou 2004), and later, as a response to the apparent racial strife between predominantly black and Latino rioters and Korean store owners during the 1992 Uprising (Abelmann & Lie 1995). In fact, the latter topic helped spawn numerous investigations into how the assimilation of Korean Americans complicated traditional understanding of race relations in the US as largely black and white binary. Newer studies on Korean immigrant entrepreneurs by the likes of In-Jin Yoon (1997), Kyeyoung Park (1997), Claire Jean Kim (2000), and Lisa Sun-Hee Park (2005) have expanded on this perspective while also broadening this line of research into other US cities with sizable Korean immigrant populations such as Chicago and New York.

American adoptees within the larger US racial and ethnic framework by elaborating on their statuses as Asian Americans and racial/ethnic minorities, as well as the practices and strategies that they have utilized in navigating through the unequal social terrain of the US.

Much of the contemporary research on 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans, for instance, has expounded upon the challenges experienced by the members of this population in their attempts to acculturate into a predominantly white middle-class US society. Indeed, a significant portion of this research has relied on framings of 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans as “marginal” subjects struggling to balance between the largely oppositional cultural norms and expectations provided by their immigrant parents and mainstream America (Chiu et al. 1992; EY Kim 1993; Patterson 2000; Yeh et al. 2005). With this lens, the acculturative struggles experienced by 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans have been interpreted as a clash of cultures—a battle between traditional “Confucian” values of the East and the liberal democratic values of the West. Rather than viewing both parental and host society cultures as opposing forces, however, other recent scholarship on 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans has tended to the ways in which members of this population share a dialectical relationship to both sides (see Kibria 2003; Danico 2004; L. Park 2005, A. Chung 2007). Moreover, these scholars have highlighted the ways in which systemic racism has impeded the societal incorporation of 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans (as well as the children of other children of Asian immigrants), in effect providing a counter-narrative to the aforementioned culturally derived explanations. Adopting such a perspective has allowed researchers to frame the



continued salience of culture and ethnicity among 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans in a different light—not as pathology or conflict but as the basis for identity and agency.

Research on Korean American adoptees, though in some ways comparable to that of 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans, have mostly elaborated on a different kind of marginality—that which has been caused by the dissonance in their social and racial identities. Though Korean American adoptees are comparatively only a small segment of the larger Korean American population, they have garnered considerable scholarly attention because of, 1) the relatively high rate of international adoption between the US and South Korea,<sup>8</sup> and, 2) the transracial nature of their upbringing in the US (Tuan & Shiao 2011, Hübinette 2012). The high rate of international adoption from South Korea to the US, for example, has contributed to a wealth of research linking the international adoption of South Korean orphans to the geopolitical processes of war, Empire, and globalization. Scholars such as Tobias Hübinette (2006), Eleana Kim (2010) and SooJin Pate (2014) have argued that in the context of a postcolonial and postwar South Korea, the fledgling nation’s global export of its orphaned children was in many ways symbolic of the desperation with which it wished to sever ties to its colonized, war-torn, and poverty-stricken recent past. Conversely, the willingness of the US to “rescue” and provide homes for these orphaned children, while in many circles read as a global gesture of goodwill, largely ignored the deeper militaristic and imperial causes of their vagrancy. Domestically speaking, given that most Korean American adoptees have been raised by white parents in majority white communities, research has illuminated how many adoptees grow up struggling with complex and often contradictory notions of self and

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<sup>8</sup> Between 1953 and 2008, 109,242 Korean children were adopted into the US. (MOHW 2009)

identity (R. Lee 2003; R. M. Lee, H. Yoo, & S. Roberts 2004; Hübinette 2012). Research in psychology has illustrated the ways in which Korean American adoptee adolescents and young adults may feel estranged from both their racial identities and their adoptive families and larger communities because of repeated experiences with overt racism and racial microaggressions (R. M. Lee et al. 2010). These feelings are further heightened in cases where adoptive parents neglect to have open and supportive discussions about race and ethnicity with their children.

Despite having noticeably different experiences in regards to their societal adaptation and incorporation, the narratives of 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans and Korean American adoptees are linked in a few important ways. Central to the adaptation narratives of US-raised Koreans in general has been the emergence or claiming of ethnic identity as an important source of affective wellbeing that has helped to buffer or combat race- and ethnicity-based hostility experienced in numerous aspects of their lives (R. M. Lee, H. Yoo, & S. Roberts 2004; R. M. Lee 2005; J. P. Lee et al. 2015)—or what I describe in this chapter as an “affirmative ethnic identity.” While family has undoubtedly served as an important foundation in fostering an affirmative ethnic identity among 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans, researchers have also elaborated on the importance of spaces and activities outside the home, such as political, religious, and/or social activist groups (R. Y. Kim 2006; A. Chung 2007), churches (K. Chong 1998; PG Min and DY Kim 2005), co-ethnic peer networks (Kibria 2003; Danico 2004), urban ethnic enclaves (Suh, forthcoming), and even internet cafes (Danico & Trinh Vo 2004). For US-raised Koreans who grow up without access to a large local Korean community, culture camps (M. A. Kang 2004; D. Lee & Quintana 2005), “homeland” visits (Bergquist 1999;

Meier 1999; JE Kim and Stodolska 2013), and colleges or universities (Abelmann 2009) can instead serve as central sites for the emergence of an affirmative ethnic identity.

Research specific to Korean American adoptees has also shown how ethnic identity can operate in conjunction with an adoptee identity to develop a “third space” that integrates both, such as in the form of adoptee peer networks. (Hübinette 2004)

In spite of the importance of this body of research, nearly all of it has explored the effects of ethnic identity as a variable in the eventual incorporation or acculturation of US-raised Koreans. That is to say that the above studies have posited that the emergence and continued salience of ethnic identity among US-raised Koreans has been invaluable in their fostering of social and cultural capital within a milieu where such benefits have typically been absent. Even in critiquing previous straightline theorizations of cultural assimilation, these newer works have advanced a framework where domestic inclusion, though undeniably impacted by race-based structural inequities, is seen as a possibility if not an eventuality. This chapter departs from such a framing, incorporating the narratives of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ as evidence that their domestic incorporation need not be considered a foregone conclusion.

### Nostalgic for the Unfamiliar

Michael: So in college I took classes about Korean politics and history, and it helped me to see that my view of Korea was always based on being in this position of privilege. An example would be when I visited Korea during the “IMF period”<sup>9</sup> when the American currency was super strong and, basically, my money was better than theirs. Or how I played the role of the visitor, where only the best things of Korea were shown to me. That was my only understanding of what it was like to be in Korea—a tourist. And my parents, despite living through times

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<sup>9</sup> The “IMF period” refers to the severe economic recession period in South Korea between 1997-1999 that occurred alongside the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (JY Koo & Kiser 2001).

in Korean history that were really fascinating, never wanted to talk about it. ... It was very hard for me to come to terms with the fact that all this existed in Korea and that I had no idea—no idea that any of that was there. And I couldn't understand how something that was so important in shaping who I am could have eluded me for twenty-plus years. So that really made me want to live in Korea.

If there was a takeaway point regarding interviewees' participation in ethnic return migration, it was that their moves to South Korea were very rarely a random or unforeseeable occurrence. While there were certainly instances where participants revealed moving to South Korea somewhat unexpectedly, the majority of cases resembled that of Michael's above, with interviewees' budding interests in Korea and Korean culture in some ways foreshadowing their actual 'return' by several months, if not years or even decades. To be sure, Michael's case was slightly unique given that few individuals in this study were as well versed in South Korea's contemporary history prior to their 'return.' Unlike Michael, most interviewees were largely unaware of South Korea's relatively recent encounters with colonization, foreign occupation, and military dictatorship, or even of the country's severe economic recession period of the late 1990s (of which Michael described colloquially as the "IMF period"). Furthermore, few were fluent in the Korean language or its cultural norms and practices. For nearly all 'returnees,' even those like Michael, South Korea was a site that was at once familiar *and* unfamiliar. Indeed, most had grown up with bits and pieces of Korean culture and tradition passed onto them by individuals such as their parents or relatives, or institutions such as church, Korean school, Korean culture camp, or even popular media. But as much as their ethnic, diasporic, and ancestral ties to the Korean peninsula helped to guide interviewees' early understandings of self and identity, more often than not it was their

lack of familiarity with Korean society and culture that served to spur their interest in, exploration of, and eventual ‘return’ to their ancestral homeland.

The remaining empirical portion of this chapter thus explores the manner in which the biographies of the US-raised Koreans in this study were central to understanding their decisions to relocate to South Korea as adults. Whereas most studies of ethnic return migration have taken the moment of relocation as the starting point of their analyses, this chapter ventures further into the life histories of ‘returnees.’ In particular, I pay close attention to interviewees’ positions as both racialized subjects and diasporic Koreans in the US, and how the ethnic and racial consciousness that manifested from these dual identities served as the foundations for their explorations of the Korean diaspora and “homeland.” In elaborating on these trends, I showcase not only how economic opportunity and cultural affect guide the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans, but also the manner in which interviewees’ positionalities as racial/ethnic minorities in the US played an integral role in instigating their broader diasporic interests and transnational travels.

### *Growing up as foreigners*

Though none of the participants in this study relocated to South Korea until they were adults, most revealed having desires to live in Korea that preceded their actual moves by a few if not several years. In fact, for most respondents the seeds for their transnational sojourns appeared to be sowed as far back as their early childhoods. It was at this stage of their lives that many started to become conscious of ethnicity and race in the US, as well as the manner with which these constructs impacted their own material lives. More

specifically, interviewees' formations of an ethnic/racial consciousness as children and adolescents usually corresponded with an awareness of the ways in which their perceived ethnicity/race seemingly placed them at odds with an "American" (read: white) subjectivity.

Interviewees stated becoming aware of their apparent non-normativity through repeated encounters with race- or ethnicity-based marginalization. Nearly all participants recalled multiple instances during their childhoods when they felt socially marginalized or alienated because of their ethnicity and/or race. Examples of marginalization took on a variety of forms, from schoolyard teasing, to offensive representations observed in the media, and even acts of brazen violence. Eugene, for instance, was a 38-year old male 'returnee' who had faced the gamut of discriminatory experiences while growing up as one of the few children of color in a northern Ohio suburb in the 1980s and 90s. He vividly recounted the violent acts of discrimination that he encountered during his childhood and adolescence from children and adults alike, and the emotional trauma that this triggered:

Eugene: The neighborhood I grew up in, there were no people of color. So when they encountered me at first, they used to call me "nigger" because they didn't know the proper racial slur for Asian people. From the beginning, it was just taunts of racism, violence—constant threats of violence. Not just from the kids, but also their older siblings, their parents. For example, I was part of an amazingly racist wrestling team and I would get into fights with the entire team. Some kid actually started calling me a "gook" one time and started pushing me around saying, 'Hey, you fucking gook!' And I tried walking out and my coach wouldn't let me leave the room. So I retaliated and then got attacked by the team. Not just one person. I got fucking mobbed by fifteen people at least. I ended up running out with them chasing me and me throwing benches in the way so they couldn't follow me. And I ran outside in the snow and it was winter in Ohio. It was cold as hell. So I'm in my shorts and my coach threw my bag out and said, "You should probably just go home." So you know, I just have a real encyclopedia of bad experiences from my childhood. From my high school

English teacher calling me Ho Chi Minh, to the kid who sat behind me [in class saying], “ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching.” It was just a really, really miserable time growing up. And there was just no support for me, you know what I’m saying? All the adults, teachers, coaches, other kid’s friends, principals, they were all just like, “You’re wrong. What’s wrong with you? You need to get with the program. You need to quit stirring stuff up.” Just because I wouldn’t put up with the racist bullshit, you know? So yeah, it was a really tough, lonely time.

Eugene’s recollection of his traumatic childhood and adolescent experiences revealed the manner in which overt and violent discrimination continued to remain symptoms of racism even in the contemporary US. According to Eugene, his repeated encounters with racist bullying resulted in him having a “really, really miserable time growing up,” leaving him with little alternative but to put up with the repeated transgressions that he faced. The discrimination that Eugene encountered placed him in a precarious position where he felt increasingly alienated from the predominantly white community in which he and his family resided. As he noted in this passage and elsewhere, there were precious few avenues for him to escape or to receive support as a child, his Asian-ness—and his refusal to put up with the racial violence that he was dealt—perpetually marking him as a target.

Though Eugene was certainly not the only respondent to suffer through such racist bullying and violence in their youth, cases such as his were less prevalent and in general limited to those who grew up in communities with little to no ethnic or racial diversity (or approximately a fifth of the sample). Interviewees who grew up in these social environments were far more likely to not only be explicitly reminded of their racial/ethnic non-normativity by those around them, but also had fewer resources available at their disposal to combat or challenge the hostility that they experienced

(more on this later). Beyond these more viscerally discriminatory experiences, which, again, occurred comparatively less frequently, respondents revealed experiencing race- and ethnicity-based marginalization in subtler, less-confrontational ways. These experiences typically came in the form of what researchers describe as racial microaggressions, or “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al. 2007a, 1). For Asian Americans, scholars ascertain that racial microaggressions work to highlight their apparent foreignness, exoticism, and uniformity, essentially reaffirming their position as the nation’s “model minority” (Sue et. al. 2007b). In this regard, though the racial microaggressions that interviewees faced at times appeared playful and even complimentary on the surface, their focus on interviewees’ perceived foreignness forced them to reevaluate their own claims to an American identity starting from a young age. US-raised Koreans who lived in predominantly white neighborhoods, such as Monica below, had little choice but to reconcile their apparent racial, ethnic, and cultural differences by either ignoring or playing along with the microaggressive teasing that they endured:

Monica: I remember my first or second day at a new school in Kentucky some boy was like, “Hey everybody! It’s Chun Li<sup>10</sup>!” And for weeks, he and the other kids would ask me to do Kung Fu moves and stuff. To be honest, at that time it felt good because they were actually noticing me in a positive way. But thinking back on it, it was obviously an act of racial discrimination. I wasn’t Chinese, and I didn’t know Kung Fu. But I didn’t really have a choice other than to play along.

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<sup>10</sup> Chun Li is a fictional female Chinese martial artist from the fighting video game series, *Street Fighter*



For Monica, her ethnicity and race were so often associated with tokenization as a child growing up in Kentucky that any kind of stereotyping that appeared remotely redeeming was seen as a cause for celebration. Such was the case even when the referent was an exoticized female Chinese video game character with whom she shared few similarities; a comparison that indicated, 1) the lack of multi-dimensional representations of Korean/Asian Americans in the larger society (see R. G. Lee 1999), and 2) the ubiquity of the “forever foreigner” and Orientalist discourses that located all Asian ethnics beyond the scope of an imagined American populace (see Tuan 1998; C. Kim 1999; H. Yu 2001).

Elements of Rachelle’s childhood experiences were present in the biographies of a number of other interviewees, even those who grew up in communities with a larger ethnic Korean or Asian American presence. Specifically, interviewees revealed being linked to and sometimes even drawing upon similarly foreignizing references. In a social environment where precious few Asian American (let alone Korean American) celebrity role models existed, referencing one’s Asian-ness via familiar archetypes (such as through various martial arts stars, or even the “model minority” characterization) became one of the primary ways to counter the racial and ethnic marginalization that they encountered. The Asian American “model minority” archetype, for example, was a portrayal that many interviewees reluctantly admitted adopting as children, in large part because there were so few flattering depictions of Asian Americans in US popular culture. In a cultural and political landscape dominated by those who were white or black, the upholding of the Asian American “model minority” figure among the interviewees thus appeared to serve as an early form of identity politics, albeit a problematic one. While most would come to understand the limitations of such a discourse later on in their

lives, as children the Asian American “model minority” figure was instead often viewed as empowering. Akin to Monica’s embrace of her apparent likeness to a fictional female Chinese martial artist, interviewees’ general acceptance of the “model minority” stereotype acted in part as a way of achieving social recognition and even redemption in an environment where both were sorely lacking.

In addition to the racialized discourses and imagery encountered during interactions with the outside world, participants also stated receiving affirmation of their racial and ethnic differences in their more immediate environments. This was especially the case for a number of the 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans interviewed. These participants explained that they were raised by their parents in a “traditionally” Korean manner that included a mix of speaking in Korean with elders, eating Korean food on a regular basis, consuming South Korean media, and recognizing major Korean holidays. As a respondent named Dorothy noted, “My parents raised me very, very Korean. I always used [honorifics] with my parents. Also, when we had dinner, we wouldn’t touch the table until my dad had the first bite to eat. Little things like that.” Despite how “little” or inconsequential these practices may have seemed to interviewees such as Dorothy, they undoubtedly had a profound effect on their ethnic and racial consciousness as children, especially when compounded with the foreignization that they experienced because of their perceived race outside of their homes. Even 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean American interviewees who insisted that their parent(s) had not strictly enforced “Korean” norms within the household, such as Glen, Rebecca, and Grace, among others, recognized that their Korean ethnicity had significantly influenced their childhood family experiences. While they may not have been required to speak Korean in the household or

to follow traditional Confucian guidelines in interacting with elders, things like “having *kimchi* in the fridge” (according to Glen) or taking family vacations to South Korea helped to solidify the sense that their Korean ethnicity was both distinctive and important.

This sense of ethnic consciousness was almost always less salient for the Korean American adoptees in this study given that they were raised by non-Korean parents who were largely unfamiliar with Korean cultural practices and norms. That said, three of the four adoptees interviewed acknowledged that their adoptive parents had at least attempted to have them maintain ties to their Korean heritage, however immaterial these attempts may have seemed at the time. For example, participating in Korean culture camps or local gatherings with other adoptive families were childhood staples for all but one of the adoptees interviewed. Though adoptees’ connections to a Korean ethnicity may not have been as firmly entrenched by their parents as was the case with their 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean American counterparts, it appeared that those who encountered Korean culture and other Korean adoptees from a young age were better able to grapple with the dissonance of their transracial upbringing, thus echoing research findings established elsewhere in the literature (R. M. Lee, H. Yoo, & S. Roberts 2004).

#### *Developing an affirmative ethnic identity*

None of this was to say that, as children and/or adolescents, interviewees were completely cognizant of the manner in which racialization functioned in the US, or how this social process impacted their own lives. Still, nearly all of the US-raised Koreans interviewed revealed being (made) conscious of their ethnicity and race, and, by extension, their marked foreign-ness or marginality in the US starting from an early age.

Taken as a whole, it was evident that the repeated emphasis that interviewees received about their ethnic and racial distinctiveness both inside and outside of the home served to complicate their early perceptions of self and belonging.

This was most observable during interviewees' recollections of the ways in which ethnicity and race had factored into their own childhood and adolescent identity formation. Lee, a 28-year old female 'returnee' who grew up in both the urban core and northern suburbs of Chicago, explained how being consistently marked as a "foreigner" during her childhood and adolescence impacted both her ability to identify as an "American" and the ethnic/racial makeup of her peer networks.

Lee: Until I started college, I hadn't really considered myself an American because the outside world insisted that I was a foreigner. So as a child I thought that the US wasn't really my home and that my real home was back in Korea. I think that's why I always hung out with other Korean Americans. There was this sense of identity, of belonging, that I wasn't getting elsewhere.

Lee confessed that the alienation that she experienced as a child was so prevalent and consistent that, even as a US citizen, she grew up thinking that Korea was her rightful "home." Furthermore, Lee admitted that the constant ethnic/racial othering that she encountered as a child pushed her to seek out co-ethnics with whom she could share a sense of "identity" and "belonging." In other parts of the interview, Lee explained that during the periods in her life when such communities were unavailable to her, such as when her family lived in the urban core of Chicago, she found herself interacting primarily with other children of immigrants. In doing so, Lee claimed that she was able to bolster an ethnic (and at times racial) sense of self that repudiated the damaging effects of social alienation encountered elsewhere.

Such experiences were relatively common among the interviewees in my study, with many gravitating toward specific spaces and activities that had higher representations of US-raised Koreans, assuming such spaces were readily available. This process generally occurred in a two-tiered manner. In many occasions it was often interviewees' parents who searched for these spaces and organizations—such as churches, after school programs, Saturday schools, and culture camps—that catered to US-raised Koreans. It was in these spaces that most interviewees befriended other US-raised Koreans. Local Korean American Christian churches, for example, served as particularly important spaces of gathering for approximately a fifth of the 'returnees' in this study. For many of these individuals, the community churches that they attended stood as distinctly ethnic Korean institutions, and one of the few spaces in their lives where they were not an ethnic or racial minority. Jin Soo, a 1.5-generation Korean American who grew up in Riverside County, CA, recalled the integral role that his local church played in his and his family's adaptation into the US upon migrating from South Korea:

Jin Soo: In our area, the only place to meet other Koreans was at church. And our church was pretty big; it was like the biggest Korean church in Riverside. My parents got their first job [in the US] painting apartment walls through someone in that church. Whenever my parents needed tax advice, they got it through someone at church. Whenever we needed anything.... when we first bought our house, the real estate agent was someone from church. Everything was through church members. Nearly all of my childhood Korean American friends I made through the church. Especially in my area, if we didn't have that church, I think we would've had a much more difficult time transitioning, adapting to life in the US.

Positive sentiments regarding the role of local Korean churches, such as Jin Soo's above, were common among those who were interviewed for this study. A number of participants, such as Abraham, Grace, and Patrick, among others, shared heartfelt

accounts about the positive impact that their local churches had on their emotional wellbeing as children. Their stories largely corroborated with research by the likes of Kelly Chong (1998) and Pyong Gap Min (2005), both of whom have elaborated on the important role that Christian churches serve as spaces of worship and acculturation for Korean immigrants and their children. Their research has furthermore documented how churches can serve as spaces where Korean immigrant families interact with co-ethnics in ways that reinforce a sense of collective identity and provide them with the tools and resources necessary to adapt to life in the US. In her research on Korean American campus ministry groups, Rebecca Y. Kim (2006) has also detailed how the juxtaposition of religion and ethnicity can remain important for US-raised Koreans even outside of the specific confines of family and church, in some cases even spilling over into their social and political lives. These findings applied overwhelmingly to the experiences of the US-raised Korean church-goers in this study. Rather than being a strictly assimilative force, local Korean American Christian churches and ministry groups allowed for respondents to bond with other US-raised Koreans of a similar age to share experiences and to participate in activities that, while not always actively centered in their ethnicity, helped to establish a supportive group identity in which this construct remained a constant.

Participating in these co-ethnic spaces, whether they were churches, after school programs, or even SAT-prep courses, provided US-raised Koreans the venue to acknowledge and claim ownership in their identities as hyphenated Americans. Robert, a 29-year old 'returnee' born and raised in the Greater Los Angeles Area, recalled experiences that were compellingly similar to those of Lee's earlier in this section,

explaining how encounters with racism during his childhood pushed him toward people and spaces where his Korean-ness was not a cause for stigmatization:

Robert: I've always been Asian American or Korean American. I mean, a long time ago I might've considered myself simply American. But in America there's still a little bit of that [pauses] racism. I mean, you see it around when you're young, so you feel different. So you feel like you have to identify with some other race or ethnicity, such as Korean. But you can only really do that if there are others around you with the same background, you know? And luckily I had that through family, through school, through church.

For Robert, his “family,” “school,” and “church” served as the foundation for his development of an affirmative ethnic identity, an identity that helped to contest the racism that he encountered outside of those spaces. As Robert himself mentioned, however, there were a few caveats when it came to embracing an ethnic/racial identity. For respondents who grew up in communities with few Korean or Asian Americans, the claiming of an ethnic or racial identity was not necessarily an act that occurred organically. With few Korean/Asian American peers or role models, respondents such as Eugene and Rachelle who were raised in predominantly white neighborhoods often felt the intense burden to “assimilate or else,” as Eugene put it. While all respondents revealed feeling pressured to assimilate to dominant American norms and practices, those who had the opportunity to engage with other Korean/Asian Americans on a regular basis were also provided the viewpoint that there was value in their ethnic/racial difference. However, in cases where respondents did not have such resources available to them, the acknowledgement of one's difference often only acted as another hurdle to being recognized and accepted by their non-Korean American peers and authority figures.

This was overwhelmingly the case for the adoptees I interviewed. Though some adoptees spoke fondly of their white adoptive parents and their efforts to constructively

and at times proactively engage with issues regarding ethnicity and race, all admitted to encountering instances of intense social alienation as children and young adults in their attempts to make sense of their own ethnic and racial identities. For some, such as Nancy and Dee, this cognitive dissonance had at times been too much to bear, causing them to disassociate with their ethnic/racial identities and the painful experiences that were attached to them. Even this more ‘color-blind’ approach did not prevent them from experiencing racial transgressions and microaggressions, however.

For these individuals, it was typically their ascent into emerging adulthood and their exposure to more diverse environments, particularly college, that aided in their development of an affirmative ethnic identity that helped to combat previous experiences of ethnic/racial alienation. Nancy, an adoptee who had grown up in the Twin Cities region of Minnesota, recounted how her exposure to Asian American studies in college transformed her own sense of self:

Nancy: Of course when I was younger I wanted the big brown eyes and pale skin. But I think it almost made me feel stronger to be different and have that different background. Even though it was hurtful at times, when I was young I still took a lot of pride in that. Which is why when I was in college I was excited to enroll in Asian American studies classes and I was really involved in the Asian American student cultural center. It was my way of showing [the white people I grew up with] that my [race and ethnicity weren't] a disadvantage. I could be stronger; I could be smarter. I could use their negative stereotypes and their way of thinking to my own advantage.

According to Nancy, being in an environment where she could celebrate her overlapping identities as an Asian American and Korean American adoptee allowed her the confidence to embrace her ethnicity/race in a manner with which she was previously unable. Nancy was not alone in this regard. A majority of respondents, regardless of their prior connections to their ethnicity/race, stated having transformative experiences with



relation to their ethnic/racial identity as emerging adults. For many, this evolution occurred in college, where they were provided the opportunity to participate in courses and student groups that foregrounded their race and ethnicity in empowering ways. These groups not only allowed for interviewees to expand their co-ethnic social networks, but also to participate in activities that strengthened their own ethnic/racial identities, such as social justice activism concerning Korean Americans and other members of the Korean diaspora.

The affirmation of an ethnic and racial identity among participants served as an important step in initiating curiosity in the Korean peninsula and their own connections to it. For nearly all respondents, it was this identity formation that not only helped them acculturate into American society, but also often served to jumpstart their interests in and explorations of an abstracted Korea and Korean culture. It was perhaps for this reason that the US-raised Koreans in this study who grew up with weak ties to co-ethnics and Korean culture typically did not develop interests in residing in Korea until later on in their adult lives, with most relocating to South Korea at a later age than their 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean American counterparts. In either case, however, it was this strengthening of an affirmative ethnic identity that allowed for respondents to start thinking of their futures outside the confines of the US.

#### *From ethnic consciousness to cultural exploration*

The affirmation of an identity that centered on interviewees' connections to Korea and/or the Korean diaspora did not immediately lead to their relocation to South Korea. Rather, in most cases it helped to pique their interests in the Korean peninsula and culture beyond

what they had been introduced to as children. In essence, interviewees' ethnic identity formation provided them a foundation on which they could lead their own explorations concerning Korean culture, history, and society.

This cultural exploration occurred through a variety of practices. For many it came in the form of simple cultural consumption, such as listening to South Korean popular music (referred to as K-Pop) and viewing South Korean television dramas and variety shows. Others, such as the aforementioned Michael and Nancy, adopted more academic approaches to their cultural exploration, enrolling in courses in Korean studies and Asian American studies as college students, as well as conducting their own impromptu reviews of the scholarly literature on the Korean peninsula and diaspora. Interviewees who partook in this type of cultural exploration often remarked that it helped to put their own experiences—whether as international adoptees or the children of Korean immigrants—into historical and sociological perspective. In numerous other occasions, interviewees' interests in Korea contributed to their participation in what scholars have described as 'diaspora tourism'—or short trips to a diasporic homeland to (re)connect with one's family and heritage (Meier 1999; JE Kim & Stodolska 2013). Tourism scholar Jung-Eun Kim (2013) has written extensively on the diaspora travel of 1.5-generation Korean American young adults, finding that these trips can have a significant impact in affirming or reaffirming their claims to an ethnic identity. This was certainly a narrative shared by interviewees who had participated in diaspora tourism and travel as adolescents and emerging adults, either on vacation or via study abroad programs hosted by major South Korean universities. For these individuals, their visits acted somewhat as precursors to their eventual long-term residence in South Korea, often

helping to introduce or reinvigorate their desires to live in their ancestral homelands. Ryan, for instance, was a 31-year old second-generation Korean American who ended up moving to South Korea seemingly on a whim upon visiting the country for the first time at the age of twenty-three. Though the only person he knew in South Korea was his sister (who was temporarily residing in the country for work), Ryan admitted to feeling an “immense sense of belonging” during his short visit that he claimed had been mostly absent from his life in the US. This sense of belonging was so strong that, upon returning to the US, Ryan immediately began devising plans to find his way back to South Korea, but this time with more long-term aspirations.

Several other interviewees stated having similarly transformative experiences during their earlier visits to South Korea. This was noticeably the case with the Korean American adoptees in my sample, many of who participated in what they described as “homeland visits” as adolescents and young adults. Though sentiments of “belonging” were often less pronounced among the adoptees I interviewed, their stays in South Korea with either their adoptive families or other adoptees often triggered their desires to further explore their country of birth on their own accord. Nicholas, a 34-year returnee who had been adopted by a white American family in Rochester, NY at the age of seven, explained having an intense desire to ‘return’ after completing a month-long summer abroad program in Busan, South Korea shortly after completing college. Though he did not relocate to South Korea until several years after his first homeland visit, he credited his participation in the study abroad program for opening him up to the possibility of residing in the country.

It was in such a manner that the affirmation of an ethnic identity, as well as the cultural exploration that typically ensued, helped to serve as a gateway into interviewees' future desires and plans to 'return.' As Ryan himself admitted, it was the thought of getting "in touch" with Korean culture that served as a particularly enticing motivation to migrate.

Ryan: Korean Americans like me move here to get in touch with their culture—to improve their Korean. If you're in your 20s, you're not really tied to anything. It's your opportunity to reconnect and explore your heritage. A lot of Korean Americans learn about Korea through their parents. But coming to Korea, you learn about a different Korea, a newer Korea that your parents never really experienced. It's really exciting.

For Ryan and others, it was this prospect of connecting with the "culture" of one's parents and ancestors that made the idea of 'return' so compelling. Indeed, "culture" was a term that interviewees utilized often when referring to the motivations that undergirded their participation in ethnic return migration. In particular, interviewees described Korean culture as something that existed in opposition to themselves and their own "American" experiences and values. This was to say that interviewees often saw themselves as being devoid of many of the qualities that comprised Korean culture writ large, such as a deeper connection to their family heritage or ancestry, fluency in the language, and/or an understanding of the customs and norms. The yearning to fill this cultural void, then, was what often served to encourage participants' relocation to South Korea. Specifically, interviewees frequently described their ethnic return migration as culture-seeking or culture-affirming exercises, by which I refer to the manner in which participants' 'return' journeys to South Korea were depicted as affective quests for cultural exploration and immersion.

There was an assortment of ways in which ‘returnees’ planned to go about this endeavor. For a number of ‘returnees,’ the goal of reuniting with (extended) family members who were native to Korea, a process I refer to as filial reunification, often served as the centerpiece for their exploration of an otherwise abstracted Korean culture. Filial reunification, whether as 1.5/2nd-generation Korean Americans or Korean American adoptees, not only provided ‘returnees’ the opportunity to explore their own family lineage, but to also engage in customs and rituals (such as speaking Korean in the home, or observing Korean holidays) specific to Korea that they might not have practiced regularly in the US.

Though filial reunification was something sought after by a wide swath of ‘returnees,’ the underlying meaning, significance, and ramifications of reunification varied considerably by interviewee. Among the four Korean American adoptees in this study, for example, filial reunification meant relocating to South Korea to rekindle one’s relationship with birth parents, siblings, and extended family members. Accomplishing this was no small feat for adoptees, especially for those attempting to locate their families for the first time during their ‘return.’ As more than one adoptee explained, locating one’s biological family not only required a sizable time commitment on the adoptee herself/himself, but also the emotional resilience to deal with the possibility of failed or rejected searches. While the search itself often did not require significant resources once one was in South Korea, the search process could take weeks, if not months or years, assuming the agencies were successful at all. Nancy, who had yet to locate her birth mother at the time of our interview, described the process as “emotionally draining.” Of the four adoptees interviewed, three revealed that filial reunification had served as one of

the main reasons for wishing to relocate to South Korea. The fourth, Dee, stated that though she had also initiated a search upon relocating she had not considered it a primary motivation for her ‘return,’ at least not “consciously.”

The circumstances anchoring family reunification were noticeably different for 1.5/2nd-generation Korean American interviewees, largely because most were not estranged from their birth families in the same capacity as their adopted counterparts, with a few notable exceptions.<sup>11</sup> Generally speaking, for the 1.5/2nd-generation Korean American ‘returnees’ the notion of filial reunification most often meant reconnecting

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<sup>11</sup> There were four 1.5/2nd-generation Korean American interviewees whose parents and/or siblings had relocated and settled in South Korea after having resided in the US for several years, if not decades. In nearly all of these cases, the immediate family members in question had ‘returned’ within the previous ten years, often well after the interviewee herself/himself had become an adult. While individuals in these situations were not estranged from their family in the same sense as Korean American adoptees, the sheer physical distance between them and their family members often made maintaining close ties with them difficult. Though one interviewee named Jason stated to travelling back and forth annually from Los Angeles, CA and South Korea to visit his parents, busy schedules and high costs of international travel prevented the other six interviewees from visiting regularly. For interviewees who maintained these transnational ties with their immediate family members, the prospect of ‘returning’ was undoubtedly something that they considered in the back of their minds as they continued reside in the US. To be sure, these individuals found themselves in advantageous positions relative to other potential ‘returnees’ without the same kinds of established family networks in South Korea. As Jason explained, because his parents were now situated in South Korea, he had had the option of ‘returning’ as a legitimate fallback to his career plans in the US.

Thus, for US-raised Koreans (such as Jason) with close family members residing in South Korea, their ethnic return migration was at times as much a matter of “when” than “if.” Unlike other interviewees whose immediate family members remained in US, individuals with parents or siblings who had relocated to South Korea before them had additional filial (and at times economic) incentives to ‘return’—incentives that buoyed, and in some cases overrode, their desires for cultural exploration. In spite of the fact that they had family living in South Korea, however, all the interviewees in this position agreed that they otherwise had their roots firmly planted in the US—roots that prevented them from simply upping and leaving to another country. It was likely for this reason that many of these interviewees remained in the US for several years even after their parents had departed for South Korea. Though these individuals stated that filial reunification, or perhaps filial proximity, was undeniably one of the factors most influencing their eventual ‘return,’ many also confessed to having held out in the US as long as they could—relocating not necessarily on their own volition, but because certain circumstances encouraged it. Eunji, for instance, had remained working in the US for nearly a decade after her parents had moved back to South Korea, later ‘returning’ to support her recently widowed mother. For others, such as Dan, Rebecca, and the aforementioned Jason, their parents’ homes in South Korea served as the ideal space for refuge upon finishing schooling, or in-between jobs. As such, their eventual ‘return’ trips in some ways resembled a transnational variant to the ‘boomerang child’ phenomenon well documented among ‘millennials’ living in the US and other contemporary post-industrial societies. In this scenario, however, “moving back in with the folks,” as Dan called it, also required moving away from the comforts of the US and to a South Korea that was both geographically and culturally distant.

with members of their extended family, such as their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. These were relatives who had typically never emigrated from the Korean peninsula, meaning that they tended to share relatively weak ties with interviewees prior to their ‘return.’ Still, many 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean American interviewees spoke fondly of their South Korean relatives, adding that they had looked forward to getting to know them better upon ‘returning.’ Granted, though filial reunification undeniably served as a supplementary motivation for these 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans, in very few occasions did it serve as pivotal to their ‘return’ decisions as was the case with interviewees who had parents or siblings living in South Korea. Rather, the topic of South Korean relatives was usually raised in concordance with larger discussions concerning ethnicity, heritage, and above all, culture—with interviewees’ desires to reconnect with relatives often playing a central role within their broader goals of cultural exploration and immersion.

Abraham, a 25-year old ‘returnee’ born and raised in Los Angeles country, was one such individual whose desire for filial reunification fit in with his broader ‘return’-related aspirations to reconnect with his Korean heritage. During our meeting, Abraham explained that he began to seriously considering relocating to South Korea to reconnect with his cultural heritage at the advice of his late mother:

Abraham: My mom actually told me before she passed that I should spend a year in Korea to spend time with family, to get to learn my heritage. She also wanted me to re-learn Korean because my Korean sucked. [laughs] So I took her advice and came to Korea the following year. I met all my mother’s sisters, brothers, and I started to learn the language. It was a great experience.”

For ‘returnees’ like Abraham, cultural exploration and acquisition served as a few of their central motivations for considering and eventually following through with their desires to

relocate to South Korea. Gaining proficiency in the Korean language often acted as a staple within these larger goals, with more than a quarter of the interviewees reciting it as one of the main factors motivating their ‘return.’ Compounded with their other affective cultural desires, nearly all interviewees viewed the idea of relocating to their ancestral homeland as something that was symbolically significant. Though there were undoubtedly more tangible benefits to returning, such as the proximity to family members and the material benefits of learning another culture/language, in many instances more abstract factors such as a sense of belonging played equally as central roles in triggering their ‘return.’

#### *Finding the right moment to ‘return’*

As I have outlined thus far, most of the US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ interviewed for this study revealed having desires to reside in South Korea that preceded their actual moves by quite some period of time. These desires were typically guided by their affective aspirations for cultural exploration and belonging, ambitions that I argued were in large part influenced by their positions as ethnic/racial minorities in the US. As crucial as these culturally affective desires were in inspiring interviewees’ interests in the Korean peninsula and diaspora (as well as their own positions within it), it is important to note here that these reasons alone seldom served to actualize interviewees’ diasporic return journeys. In nearly all cases, it was only when these desires became coupled with a meaningful personal life event or milestone, or a significant economic opportunity that they worked to initiate the processes necessary for their travel abroad.



As an example, earlier in this chapter I detailed the experiences of Ryan, a ‘returnee’ who began to seriously contemplate moving to South Korea after briefly visiting the country for the first time at the age of twenty-three. Shortly after his first trip, Ryan returned to South Korea for a longer visit, but still with the intention of moving back to the US before the need to apply for an extended residency visa. Just prior to that point, Ryan had been living at home with his parents in San Jose, CA, attending classes at his local community college with the hopes of transferring to a four-year university or art school the following year. Though he very much entertained the idea of settling in South Korea long term, given his plans to continue his schooling in the US he had not yet decided if it was the right moment in his life to make such a significant move. About a month into his second visit, however, an unexpected family emergency significantly altered his future plans and greatly enhanced the allure of ‘returning’:

Ryan: So I was here going to Yonsei [University] and studying Korean. I went in September. And then in October I met with my dad who was visiting the country for business. And when I meet him he says, “Ryan, I lost all our money.” ... He had invested nearly all of our money into a startup run by two Korean-Koreans, not *kyop’o*. It turns out these two guys were running a scam and they stole \$70 million from 500 different Korean American families. Needless to say, we lost everything. I had to return to San Jose to help with things, to basically help sell all of our possessions. We sold our house, most of the furniture. I had to sell my car. ...And with all that, the possibility of me going to school was put on an indefinite hold. I pretty much had nothing going on for me in the States. So with the little money I had saved up, I moved to Korea.

Ryan’s was one of a large number of interviewees whose moves to South Korea appeared to occur directly following a significant personal life event. In Ryan’s case, his parents’ bankruptcy forced him to reevaluate his future plans of attending a four-year college or university in the US. Given that he was already residing in South Korea (albeit

temporarily) at the onset of his family's crisis, Ryan came to the conclusion that this was as good a time as any for him to 'return.'

Nicholas was another interviewee mentioned earlier who had developed a strong desire to move to South Korea after visiting the country as an emerging adult. Unlike Ryan, Nicholas had put aside his desire to 'return' for several years after his initial 'homeland visit' in order to further pursue his career in the US. Interestingly, it was when Nicholas was offered a new position and promotion by his then employer that he began reconsidering his desire to live in South Korea.

Nicholas: I had really wanted to go live in Seoul and study some Korean; experience the culture. I also had the drive to find the farm that I grew up on because I still had memories about it. But work was going really well. And if I stayed at my job, I was on path to make about a hundred-grand the year after, which is a lot of money for a 26-year old. Actually, that's a lot of money for anybody. I mean, it was the safe path. But I felt my life would be too structured. Boom. Planned. Done. My parents were both like, "It's your choice." But I couldn't really tell which decision was the right one. So I remember talking to my neighbor about it. She was my dad's financial advisor. [laughs] She was an older, very in-your-face kind of person. She said, "Ben, if you don't go to Korea right now, I will kick your ass." Literally, that's what she said. And it worked. I said to her, "You're right. Why am I so worried about money and stability right now at this stage of my life?" And so I thanked her and booked my flight to Korea a few days later.

Similar to Ryan, Nicholas' decision to relocate to South Korea appeared to occur rather suddenly after an important personal life event—in this case an offer for a sizable promotion at work. This was not to say that the decision was not his to make. After all, Nicholas himself admitted to wanting to relocate to South Korea for several years prior to his actual move. But as was the case with Ryan, the wheels for Nicholas' 'return' plans were put into motion only after he became situated at a significant life course crossroads. Forced to choose between a stable, well-paying, but "structured" career and the chance to

live in South Korea and explore his cultural heritage and family roots, Nicholas ultimately went with the latter.

To be sure, Nicholas' ethnic return migration narrative of leaving behind economic prosperity and stability in the US to reside in South Korea was a rare one among participants. In most cases 'returnees' revealed relocating to South Korea *for* employment related reasons, or to participate in programs (such as internships, fellowships, or additional schooling) that would potentially bolster their career aspirations. Of the thirty-five individuals who I formally interviewed, all but six stated to initially moving to South Korea for improved economic prospects, with about half of the participants even securing work in the country prior to their departure from the US. Moreover, most interviewees had departed the US during or following the economic recession of 2008, with many having recently completed schooling (at various levels), thus creating incentives for them to think globally for job and career prospects. Though the 'returnees' in my sample entered South Korea with varying degrees of knowledge about the country's employment landscape, most migrated under the belief that job opportunities were readily available, if not abundant, for native English speakers. Most of the interviewees in my sample thus appeared to share a strong rational-economic element that anchored their decisions to relocate. This was unsurprising given the numerous economic costs associated with moving to South Korea from the US. Even for 'returnees' with friends or relatives living in the country with whom they could (temporarily) reside, they still had to factor in the cost of both international and local travel, as well as a host of other costs that typically accompanied one's move to a new location (such as purchasing furniture, setting up utilities, and other basic living expenses). From a

neoclassical standpoint, then, the interviewees' international sojourns appeared to be justified by their convictions that the potential economic rewards gained by moving and living in South Korea would outweigh their associated costs incurred.

It was thus immediately apparent that economic opportunity served as one of the central factors propelling interviewees' participation in ethnic return migration. In fact, about two-thirds of the sample revealed having been unemployed in the US when they made their decisions to move to South Korea. This rather high rate of joblessness among the interviewees was indicative of two things. First, it highlighted the fact that many of the interviewees began more seriously considering the idea of moving to South Korea while approaching or in the midst of a significant career transition, such as upon completing schooling (typically at the collegiate or graduate or professional levels). Of the thirty-five 'returnees' interviewed, for instance, twenty-one had moved to South Korea within a year of graduating from a postsecondary institution in the US. They further specified that job opportunities in South Korea had often emerged early on as enticing, albeit geographically and practically distant options as they began to consider their employment possibilities. In most cases, interviewees explained hearing about opportunities to work in South Korea through non-professional networks, such as family members or peers. Many admitted to having friends who had recently returned to the US after living and working in South Korea for a period of a year or a few years, or were still residing in the country with no timetable for return. In some cases, such as Patrick's, interviewees also had relatives, such as aunts or uncles, tip them or their parents about job openings in South Korea.

Patrick: I graduated [college] in 2008 and looked for a job for a year and half or so. And one day in late 2009, my aunt called my mom and said, “Why don’t you send Patrick to Korea? I’ll give him a job teaching English.” I had never really thought seriously about moving to Korea before that. But then a week and a half later I was on a plane to Korea.

Admittedly, examples where a relative was able to offer a direct opportunity for employment were uncommon. Only two individuals in my sample relocated to South Korea under such circumstances, with the other person being Robert, a ‘returnee’ who had procured a sales executive position at his uncle’s South Korean tech company. More generally, South Korean family members served as informal recruiters and brokers, informing their family members in the US about the types of employment opportunities available for their US-raised Korean relatives.

Indeed, for many ‘returnees’ it was their initial difficulty in finding meaningful work in the US that served as an impetus to expand their searches abroad. This difficulty in finding meaningful work in the US served as the second contributing factor to the high rate of unemployment among interviewees prior to their relocation to South Korea. Of the thirty-five interviewed, twenty-five had moved to South Korea within two years of the onset of the 2008 recession period. Though not all of these twenty-five had moved strictly for employment related reasons, roughly half admitted to more seriously considering job opportunities in South Korea because of their inability finding worthwhile work in the US. For a number of these individuals, moving to South Korea thus emerged as an appealing alternative to struggling to find employment in the US. A ‘returnee’ named Sam explained why he decided to ‘return’ to South Korea again in 2009

just three months after moving back to the US upon completing his first year-long stint as a *yŏngŏ hakwŏn* instructor:<sup>12</sup>

Sam: It was an emergency. I had no money and I needed to find a job quick. I was going crazy just sitting at home playing W.O.W.<sup>13</sup> for three months. I needed to find work. So out of desperation I applied to a job in Korea and I got a call the next day. They bought the plane ticket and they sent me over there. And I realized, when I recollected on my past experiences, the one year I was here wasn't that bad. So let's see what it was like the second year. After I came back for the second year, time flew. It was actually an enjoyable experience.

According to Sam, his inability to find work in the US during the post-2008 economic recession period persuaded him to give living in South Korea a second chance. Though the South Korean economy was also experiencing the negative effects of the global economic crisis at the time, from interviewees' accounts it appeared as though the country's English language market remained unscathed. As Sam himself noted, after unsuccessfully looking for work in the San Diego area for three months, he was able to land his second job as a *yŏngŏ hakwŏn* instructor within a day of applying. Sam departed for South Korea just a few days later.

As was the case in Sam's situation above, moving to South Korea tended to emerge as realistic option for many interviewees only when it was shown to be economically viable or beneficial. Given that nearly all participants in this study were college-educated, this meant that most interviewees only began to strongly consider

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<sup>12</sup> Sam's situation was somewhat unique in that he had just recently moved back to the US (in the summer of 2009) after teaching English for a year at a *yŏngŏ hakwŏn* just outside of Seoul. Sam had initially relocated to South Korea within a year of graduating from college with the intention of exploring South Korea and teaching English to help pay off his college loans. Sam admitted that his first stint as a 'returnee' had not been the most memorable. Though he was able to save a substantial amount of money, he had been too busy working and too unfamiliar with the Korean language and culture to really appreciate his time in South Korea. Equipped with these experiences from his first go-around, Sam explained that he had been determined to make the most of his time in South Korea during his second time 'returning.' Though at the time he might have preferred to stay and find work in his hometown of San Diego, he was still more than willing to give life in South Korea a second chance.

<sup>13</sup> W.O.W. stands for World of Warcraft, a massively multiplayer online role playing game

relocating to South Korea after they learned of opportunities in the country that could significantly assist their current standard of life or their future career prospects. This general trend of viewing ethnic return migration as a rational economic decision corresponded with findings in the larger return migration literature, where scholars have likened diasporic return from the US to Asia as a form of “reverse brain drain” given the large number of well-educated Asian Americans/immigrants participating in this transnational practice (Wadhwa et al. 2011). More than simply signaling the rational-economic basis of ethnic return migration, however, these above examples highlighted the manner in which important personal life events and opportunities, economic or otherwise, played a central role in actualizing the “return” desires that interviewees had already possessed.

Take as an example the following quote by Patrick, a ‘returnee’ who I referenced earlier as moving to South Korea after his aunt offered him a job at the *yŏngŏ hakwŏn* she ran. While Patrick himself admitted that his decision to relocate to South Korea was motivated by his need for employment, he also suggested that there was more that anchored his ‘return’ than merely economics.

Patrick: The major reason I came was to work. I mean economic reasons are why most people move anywhere. But I became interested in moving in the first place because I wanted to connect with my Korean side. Even in the States I always felt like I was partly Korean, and I wanted to really understand what it was like to be Korean. Aside from Korea, I never thought about moving anywhere else permanently. Why would I?

Patrick, though not directly referencing the impact of marginalization or alienation on his decision to ‘return,’ alluded to the salience of his ethnicity and wanting to “really understand what it was like to be Korean” as the bedrocks for his developing interest in

relocating to South Korea. Ultimately, however, it was not until his aunt offered him an opportunity to work in South Korea that this pipe dream materialized into reality. As evidenced in the above text, accounts such as Patrick's were not an exception among those I interviewed, but the norm. Though most were unable to 'return' until they were provided a sizable economic opportunity or experienced a significant personal life event, their prior indecision was not a product of disinterest. Rather, it was the questionable feasibility and practicality of such a bold move that had prevented many from seriously pursuing their 'return' desires. Once the timing or situation was deemed opportune, however, their decisions to relocate to South Korea came rather easily—in effect putting a pause on their incorporation into the US and initiating their new identities as diasporic 'returnees.'

#### Conclusion: Arrested assimilation

The growth of the Korean American community over the past half-century has been a phenomenon well documented in the social scientific literature. Much of this research on Korean Americans has remained in dialogue with works on immigrant assimilation and race relations, documenting both their pathways to societal incorporation and the inequities that they have endured as ethnic/racial minorities in the US. Research on the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans has provided exciting new ways to conceptualize the evolution of the Korean diasporic community in the US. By engaging with the literature on transnationalism and diaspora, research on US-raised Korean 'returnees' have emphasized how conceptions of the "homeland" can remain salient throughout the migration process and even generations after. However, of the research



available on ethnic return migration as a whole, none have seriously engaged with this process from the frameworks of race relations or immigrant assimilation. This omission has been puzzling, especially given the considerable amount of prior research on migration and migrant incorporation that has relied on these theoretical underpinnings.

In attempting to address this scholarly void, this chapter has illustrated how the personal biographies of US-raised Koreans provide important insights into their eventual decisions to relocate to South Korea. While most research on (ethnic) return migration has elaborated on the economic and affective motivations guiding this transnational practice, none have posed questions about how this practice problematizes taken-for-granted understandings of Asian American assimilation in the contemporary United States. As the “model minority,” Asian Americans (especially the children of immigrants) have increasingly been heralded for their socioeconomic upward mobility and their likeliness of becoming “honorary” whites in the US. Within this discourse, the domestic incorporation of Asian Americans has all but been accepted as truth, with discussions about diasporic return largely being ignored or relegated as a transitional practice among Asian American emerging adults. However, findings in this chapter have shown that instead of being an unrelated phenomenon, the ethnic return migration of the US-raised Koreans in this study is in many ways born out of their experiences and identities as ethnic/racial minorities in the US. Where previous research on Korean/Asian Americans has framed ethnic identity formation as both a buffer against racial marginalization and an acculturative tool, this chapter has illustrated how the formation of an affirmative ethnic identity can also work to initiate their interests in and desires for an imagined Korean “homeland.” These “homeland” desires, when coupled with sizable

economic opportunities and/or personal life events, can then work to motivate their ethnic return migration journeys, effectively opening up a new chapter in their lives as 'returnees.'

## **(Chapter two) Gendering ‘return’: The masculinities and femininities of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in intersectional and transnational perspective**

Throughout my numerous formal and informal interactions with US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in South Korea, gender (and its accompanying norms and practices) was a topic that was raised early and often. Though there were undeniably a host of other social factors that were discussed with great regularity, few reappeared with quite the frequency and fervor as our conversations about gender and its implications on the lives of ‘returnees.’ Moreover, gender was a topic that ‘returnees’ were most likely to wrestle with in a sociological manner. That is, rather than taking the supposed sociocultural observations concerning gender at face value, participants tended to engage with the construct critically and reflexively. In more than a handful of occasions, in fact, interviewees were able to provide hypothetical insights as to why meanings and practices of gender varied in the US and South Korea. The openness with which interviewees reflected upon this construct indicated to me that, for many, gender remained an important vector through which they comprehended their role as US-raised Korean ‘returnees,’ in addition to the organizational structures and discourses of the larger societies in which they (had) resided.

To be sure, the seemingly disproportionate salience of gender within the lives of ‘returnees’ was not an entirely unexpected phenomenon. Though gender has not yet served as a major theoretical analytic or variable within research on ethnic return migration, it has operated as a central theme within a plethora of empirical studies on migration and transnationalism. This body of research has illustrated the manner in which

gender both influences global migration flows and serves as a central lens through which migrants make sense of their transnational lives. Furthermore, migration studies scholars have demonstrated the intersectional nature of gender—on how it works in conjunction with the constructs of race, class, and sexuality, among others, to shape and organize migrants’ experiences and positions across multiple milieus.

This chapter endeavors to expand upon this scholarly foundation, as well as fill the gender void in ethnic return migration research, by exploring the ways in which US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ acknowledge and adapt to seemingly divergent constructions and practices of masculinity and femininity in their travels from the US to South Korea. US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ men and women prove to be a compelling population of study because of the markedly divergent ways in which they are both gendered (against the hegemonic norms of each society), and individually come to conceptualize gender across a US-South Korean transnational setting. For instance, social scientific research suggests that US-raised Korean men and women (as both Asian Americans and Asian ethnics) are gendered in ways that correspond with their racialization within the US. For US-raised Korean men (and Asian American men writ large) this gendered racialization has worked to subordinate or marginalize their claims to hegemonic masculinity in the US by constructing them as weak, passive, and asexual (Cheng 1999; Chua & Fujino 1999; Chan 2001; Hirose & Pih 2010; Lu & Wong 2013). Relatedly, scholars posit that the gendered racialization of US-raised Korean women (and Asian American women writ large) has worked to subordinate or marginalize their claims to hegemonic femininity in the US by constructing them as hypersexual and hyper-feminine (Tajima 1989; JY Lee 1996; Uchida 1998; Shimizu 2007). Key to both sets of portrayals, or “controlling

images” (Espiritu 2008), has been the repeated emphasis of the “forever foreign” and thus incompatible nature of Asian ethnics within a majority white racial context (Tuan 1998).

Exploring the gendering of US-raised Koreans becomes noticeably more complex when viewed from the perspective of their diasporic return. While US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ typically move to South Korea as members of the nation’s ethno-racial mainstream, their understandings of and experiences with gender are likely to deviate considerably from those of the local population. Works on South Korean gender relations, for instance, have elaborated on the centrality of militaristic and masculinist state discourses in South Korea’s post-war industrialization period, and how these discourses have remained foundational to South Korean gender relations even in its contemporary post-industrial state (E.H. Kim & Choi 1998; Moon 2005; Na, Han, & Koo 2014). More recent research in Korean cultural and media studies have also elaborated on the effects of globalization and cosmopolitanism in producing gender ideals in South Korea that are increasingly neoliberalized and aestheticized (Jung 2010; Epstein & Joo 2012). While ‘returnees’ may have a rudimentary idea of South Korean gender relations prior to their migration, research has shown that it is likely the case that these insights are superficial at best and highly problematic at worst (H.K. Lee 2013; S. C. Suh 2016b).

Keeping these above points in mind, this chapter finds that interviewees’ past experiences with gendered racialization and repeated exposure to racialized gender discourses in the US have a profound impact on their transnational sojourns. To elaborate, male respondents’ desires to ‘return’ are often closely connected to implicit (and sometimes explicit) expectations of masculine redemption, with South Korea initially being articulated as a location where they may embody hegemonic masculinity in

ways that they could not in the US. Complicit in this belief are the ways in which South Korean men are perceived as being less masculine—conceptions that closely mirror the racialized imagery of Asian/Asian American men perpetuated in the US. The longer they reside in the country, however, the men come to realize the tenuousness of their claims to a hegemonic masculine ideal even in South Korea, forcing them to come to terms with their marginalized masculinities in multiple geographic contexts.

Female ‘returnees’ possess noticeably different expectations about their moves to South Korea. Though most speak critically about the controlling images of Asian American women (and men), they also recognize the US as being mostly egalitarian in regards to gender relations, or at least more egalitarian than what many view to be a staunchly patriarchal South Korean society. Thus, despite the general excitement that most ‘returnee’ women share about the prospect of living in their ancestral homelands, many also voice apprehension about South Korean gender norms and their ability to adapt to them. Once they actually relocate to South Korea, however, some of these initial concerns appear to dissipate, with their connections to the US (and other factors) seemingly immunizing them from the negative effects of gender inequity in the country. Furthermore, while none of the ‘returnee’ women ‘return’ with aspirations of gendered redemption (as do many of the men), many similarly rely upon language and depictions that subordinate the femininities of South Korean women relative to their own. Akin to the practices of ‘returnee’ men, ‘returnee’ women utilize similarly racialized descriptions of South Korean women that paint them as hyper-feminine, demure, and generally complicit in the patriarchal nature of the country’s gender norms. Over time, however, and as the societal buffers provided by their American status begin to erode, ‘returnee’

women come to realize the nuanced nature of gender relations in South Korea as well as their own liminal positions within it.

Drawing from scholarship that examines the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and migration, this chapter elaborates upon the many ways in which gender shapes the ethnic return migration desires, trajectories, experiences, and identities of the men and women interviewed for this study. In illustrating how these ‘returnees’ negotiate with shifting meanings of masculinity and femininity as they traverse borders, this chapter provides a critical take on the study of ethnic return migration—one in which gender remains a salient construct throughout the entirety of the “homecoming” process.

### Investigating the Intersection of Gender and Migration

Over the years, gender has served as an important if not underappreciated analytic lens through which to research the phenomenon of global human migration. Gender’s significance has been ascertained in a number of locations throughout the migration process, ranging from the macro-level forces that help to create largely unidirectional global migratory pathways, to the micro-level decisions made by migrants in response to these larger structural pressures. As Donna Gabaccia (2013, 1), one of the foremost authorities on the interplay of gender and migration, notes:

Gender... influences who migrates, in which proportions (the “sex ratio”), and with which goals and motives. Gender shapes the paths and organizations of migration streams, the ways states intervene to encourage or discourage migration, the outcomes of migration for areas of emigration and immigration and, finally, immigrants’ integration or assimilation, identities and lives. Indeed, evidence has accumulated that every point in the migration process is gendered.

Though the centrality of gender as an organizing principle of global human migration is now well established, such was not always the case. In fact, until the rise of first wave

feminism in the early 1960s, the role of gender within migration research was all but muted. In the overwhelming majority of early post-industrial migration research, even within studies now considered as foundational to the field such as Everett Lee's (1966) work on "push"- "pull" micro-economics, it was presumed and at times even explicitly stated that the actors in question were men. If women were thought to play any role in the migration process at all, it was as idle subjects—as wives and daughters who simply followed the male patriarch and breadwinner in his quest to amass capital (Pedraza 1991; Hondageu-Sotelo & Cranford 1999).

This began to change with the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1960s and 70s. Even then, however, for much of the field correcting the male bias in migration research simply meant adding gender (or rather biological sex) as a variable within their analyses. While such research helped to affirm the gendered nature of migration by illustrating when and to what degree both women and men participated in it, precious little was done to explore the "why" and the "how" behind these migratory trends. It was not until the late 1970s and 80s that scholars began to examine the intersection of gender and migration in a relational manner—explaining the ways in which gender, oftentimes along with other constructs such as race, ethnicity, and class, helped to organize nearly every level of the migration process. As first and second wave feminists, scholars of this era endeavored to illuminate the reciprocal link between gender and migration by foregrounding the experiences, identities, and material realities of migrant women, as well as non-migrant women who were nevertheless impacted by the migration of others around them, particularly their husbands (Gabaccia 2013). By showcasing the multitude of ways in which gender influenced the migration (prospects) of men and women



throughout the world, and vice versa—such as gendered labor demand and recruitment practices, gendered state and immigration policies, and gendered family roles and expectations, among others—these scholars revealed that there was more to the interplay of gender and migration than mere demographic disparities (A. Ong 1987; Wolf 1990). “Power” and “agency,” particularly in their relation to (migrant) women, were two key constructs highlighted by feminist scholars studying global migration trends. For example, Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler’s (2001) theory of “gendered geographies of power,” in many ways has stood as the culmination of numerous decades of research on gender and migration. Pessar and Mahler (2003, 818) describe “gendered geographies of power” as a “framework for analyzing people’s gendered social agency—corporal and cognitive—given their initiative as well as their positioning within multiple hierarches of power operative within and across many terrains.” The utility of this theory, as well as to the intersectional study of gender and migration writ large, lay in its ability to expose the numerous points in migration systems where gender yields discrepancies in migratory behaviors, experiences, and identities between women and men.

Indeed, Asian Americans have stood as an important population of study within this larger body of research precisely because of the manner in which their very existence in the US has served as a testament to the inequities inherent to most migratory systems. In many regards, Yen Le Espiritu’s (2008) seminal volume, *Asian American Women and Men*, has served as one the discipline’s foundational canons, with Espiritu adeptly explaining the myriad ways in which gender, migration, and race have come together in the formation of a contemporary Asian America. Beginning as far back as the United States’ early imperial forays into East Asia and the Pacific Islands, Espiritu brings to light

the impact of racist, sexist, and classist legislation on the lives of Asian American women and men across several nations and generations. She claims that the material subjugation of Asian American immigrant women (and men) is best understood through the triangulated effects of three key arenas: labor (work and family), laws (immigration and citizenship policies), and love (gender relations). By elaborating on the gender-, race/ethnicity-, and class-based inequities foundational to each arena, Espiritu illustrates how the contemporary material realities of Asian American immigrant women and men cannot be fully comprehended without taking into account their historical marginalization within these arenas.

Numerous scholars across the discipline of Asian American Studies have expanded upon the theoretical groundings provided by the likes of Espiritu and other gender scholars in writing about the migration of various Asian ethnic groups to the US. Catherine Ceniza Choy (2003), in exploring the gendered impact of US imperial expansion into the Pacific Islands, has written about the large-scale post-colonial migration of Filipina nurses to the US. Choy argues that the overwhelming historical tendency of Filipina nurses to migrate to the US was not merely coincidence, but an example that highlighted the central way in which gender, class, and race, in conjunction with the imperial legacy of the US, worked to channel these professional women to the imperial metropole. Concerning the Korean diaspora, scholars such as Ji-Yeon Yuh (2002) and Grace M. Cho (2008) have written about the raced, gendered, and sexualized pathways of migration to the US for South Korean women following the Korean War. Both of JY Yuh and G. M. Cho have poignantly illustrated the manner in which the US' military expansion into the Korean peninsula has proved pivotal in the formation of

gendered migration between the two nations. J. Yuh, for example, has explained how the creation of military camptowns (built to serve American male GIs) and the formal enrollment of South Korean women as “comfort women,” helped to jumpstart the mass migration of South Korean women to the US as military brides (often referred to derogatorily as *yanggŏngju*, or Yankee Princess). G. Cho expands upon this historical framing, reporting on the transnational and cross-generational haunting that afflicts diasporic “comfort women” and their children in the US. Taken as a whole, these above examples have poignantly illustrated the intersectional nature of contemporary migration streams from Asia and elsewhere, and the vital role that gender has played within them.

Despite the plethora of scholarship examining the core functioning of gender elsewhere in the migration studies scholarship, scholars of ethnic return migration (and return migration in general) have for the most part avoided employing a gendered analytic within their research. A recent study by sociologist Helene Kim Lee (2013), however, provides a solid foundation for the future study of gender in ethnic return migration research. H. Lee showcases the lives of Korean American women who work and reside in South Korea, and the race and gender discourses to which they adhere while attempting to navigate through a society they believe is constrained by outdated patriarchal norms. H. Lee posits that in order to affirm an identity that is in opposition to what her interviewees deem as an unequal South Korean society, many use racist and sexist language themselves that privilege the US and Western gender ideals as more egalitarian. Though H. Lee skillfully draws attention to the complex motivations and lived experiences of (Korean American) female ‘returnees,’ she neglects to expand upon the transnational lives of their (Korean American) male counterparts. While such an

omission does not downplay the importance of her research, it does leave questions unanswered about the material realities of Korean American ‘returnee’ men and how they may compare to those of the ‘returnee’ women. This dismissal proves even more significant when taking into account prior research on the differential gendered racialization of Korean/Asian American women and men, of which I further elaborate upon below.

### Negotiating Gender in Korean/Asian America

The ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans represents an intriguing transnational case study that interrogates the largely unstudied intersection of gender within Asian and Asian American contexts. I begin with an overview of Asian American masculinities. Scholars have primarily written about Asian American masculinities in relation to the group’s history of racialization. Research by the likes of Bill Ong Hing (1993), Robert G. Lee (1999), and Nyan Shah (2001), for instance, have illustrated how Chinese male immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were racialized as perverse and sexually deviant because of their penchant to both live “bachelor” lifestyles and occupy positions in domestic work. By ignoring the fact that both of these qualities that seemingly defined the Chinese immigrant community were primarily products of laws that prohibited the immigration of Chinese women for fear of ‘concubinage’ and/or their domestic settlement,<sup>14</sup> Chinese men and their ‘deviant’ masculinities provided the perfect scapegoat to justify the discriminatory actions and policies (often thinly guised as health

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<sup>14</sup> See Peffer 1999

and safety concerns) directed at them and other Asian immigrants (Shah 2001; Ngai 2003).

This early popular discourse regarding the non-normative masculinities of Asian American men has had a lasting impact on their gendered racialization. Whether depicted as perverse, hypersexual, or effeminate, the masculinities of Asian American men have consistently been deemed suspect within the US public imaginary, subject to various discourses of exoticism, criticism, and/or ridicule. Numerous scholars have written about this phenomenon, explaining that Asian American men are gendered in a manner (such as weak, asexual, and feminine) that underscores their apparent lack of masculine qualities relative to the hegemonic ideal (Cheng 1999; Chua & Fujino 1999; Eng 2001; Chan 2001; Hirose & Pih 2010; Lu & Wong 2013).<sup>15</sup> Like other groups of men with marginalized masculinities (such as other men of color, and/or gay, queer, or transgender men), Asian American men may attempt to redeem their masculine identities by adopting more hegemonic markers of manliness, or devising group specific markers. For instance, Alexander Lu and Y. Joel Wong (2013) argue that Asian American men attempt to redeem their marginalized masculinities by emphasizing economic and scholarly achievement over more normative standards of hegemonic masculinity. Within the US, however, their racialization disavows them from completely embodying hegemonic masculinity as can straight, white, and upper-middle class cis-gendered men (C. Cheng 1999).

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<sup>15</sup> Hegemonic masculinity is understood as a system of socio-cultural control that privileges specific embodiments of masculinity, typically affluent heterosexual white males (Connell 2005). The masculinities of marginalized groups, such as Asian American men, are subordinated as a means to uphold hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Hirose & Pih 2010).

Research on Asian American women has similarly drawn upon the *bearing* of racialization in their historical gendering. Earlier in this section I wrote about how Asian women (particularly those from China) were long barred from entry into the US because of dual fears of “concubinage” and Asian settlement in the country.<sup>16</sup> Even if primarily accomplished to build xenophobic sentiment against Asian women, this anti-immigration legislation nevertheless drew upon and magnified Orientalist discourses concerning the supposed promiscuity and hypersexuality of Asian women. By framing the “devious” qualities of Asian women as a topic of populist concern, the US was able to make this population’s potential immigration an issue of national concern—a threat that would justify the barring of Chinese women into the country after 1875, and in 1882 immigration from China as a whole.

Akin to the gendering of Asian American men, these initial race-based discourses regarding Asian women would have a significant influence on the future location of Asian American women within the US gender hierarchy. In particular, scholars argue that Asian American women have been gendered in such a way that draws heavily upon: 1) their status as exotic foreigners, and 2) their portrayal as both hyper-sexual and hyper-feminine. Early popular characterizations of Asian American women, such as the “lotus flower” or the “dragon lady,” are highly representative of this gendered racialization. Rather than being marginalized within a US gender framework for their lack of appropriate gender markers or qualities (as have been Asian American men), then, Asian American women have long experienced subordination for being too “feminine.” Of

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<sup>16</sup> According to Lucie Cheng, there was some truth to the US’ concerns over Chinese prostitution. Given that Chinatowns in the US were largely occupied by bachelors, poor families in China at times sold their daughters to Chinese immigrant men in the US, many of whom were brothel owners. These women would go on to perform sexual labor as prostitutes in Chinatowns across the country. (Cheng 1979)

course, what has been classified as being too “feminine” has changed over the course of American history. Prior to women’s liberation, being “too feminine” would have been linked primarily with promiscuity—the supposed promiscuity and hypersexuality of Asian American women thus being seen as uncivilized and, ultimately, unwomanly in a Western context. More contemporarily, however, the surplus femininity of Asian American women has been linked to their propensity to adhere to seemingly patriarchal/Confucian values. A study by Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson (2003) for instance, explains how young Asian American women criticize “Asian femininity” for promoting patriarchal values and in general being disempowering to Asian women. Central to their beliefs is the notion that Asian women attribute feminine value to their ability to support their husbands and manage the household—feminine values of a bygone era that clash with the more feminist and egalitarian ideals of contemporary US society.

Taken together, this body of literature has shown how Asian American masculinities and femininities remain strongly wedded to their racialization in the US. In a social context where the portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans remain largely conflated, their gender statuses also experience similar levels of foreignization. As an Asian American ethnic group, US-raised Koreans (and Korean Americans in general) undergo comparable experiences of racialization, a process that will be inspected in closer detail later on in this chapter. Next, I juxtapose the gendered racialization of Korean/Asian Americans against conceptions and practices of gender in South Korea and East Asia, highlighting the variances between the two gender systems with which US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ must reconcile in their travels.

## Gender and South Korea

The masculinities and femininities of US-raised Korean prove even more compelling within the backdrop of ethnic return migration, especially when taking into consideration the contextual and fluid nature of gender itself. Though hegemonic masculinity has traditionally been understood as the most dominant embodiment of gender across all social contexts,<sup>17</sup> more recent works have contested this framing, proposing more regional and interactional approaches to the concept. In particular, scholars such as Demetrakis Demetriou (2001), Mimi Schippers (2007) and even the originator of the term herself, R. W. Connell (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) have stressed the importance of understanding hegemonic conceptions of masculinity (and femininity) in a relational manner. While maintaining that multiple forms of masculinity and femininity can exist throughout the world, each with their own hegemonic ideals, they emphasize that these numerous manifestations should be viewed as being dialectical and commensurable, working together to sustain a global form of gender ideals that buttresses heterosexual patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

What might gender hegemony look like in a South Korean context? Over the years, South Korea has been well documented by scholars for its distinctly patriarchal and masculinist pathway to postcolonial/postwar industrialization (R. Kim 1994; E.H. Kim & C. Choi 1998; Monk-Turner & Turner 2001; Moon 2005a; Na, Han, & Koo 2014). In their seminal volume, *Dangerous Women*, Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (1998) detail the manner in which the Korean peninsula's encounters with colonialism

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<sup>17</sup> See Connell 2005



and military occupation have shaped the South Korean state's distinctly androcentric approach to both gender relations and nation building. In particular, EH Kim and Choi argue that the South Korean state has relied on distinctly militaristic and patriarchal language in both their official policies and cultural discourses, creating very few avenues for the participation of women in nation building outside of their "natural" domestic roles as wives and mothers.

Sociologist Seungsook Moon, one of the most prolific researchers of South Korean gender relations, has expanded upon these critiques. Moon asserts that post-liberation South Korea has relied heavily on supposedly traditional practices of patriarchy and gender segregation throughout its postcolonial nation-building process, resulting in a contemporary South Korean society that largely reflects these ideals (Moon 1998). Moon further posits that these discourses have been particularly influential in justifying South Korea's rapid and far-reaching militarization, using the term "militarized modernity" to describe the historical period (1963-1987) in which the South Korean state implemented "violent coercion and Foucauldian discipline" in its pursuit of industrialization (Moon 2005a, 2). In order to mobilize mass support from its public, Moon maintains that the South Korean government constructed nationhood and national belonging in explicitly masculinist terms, establishing men as "nationals" whose duty it was to protect their families (and, ultimately, the country) from communist threats. This highly gendered and militarized process of mobilization allowed for the state to justify mandatory male conscription, and to later integrate it "into the organization of the industrializing economy" (Moon 2005a, 2). Moon thus claims that South Korea's industrialization has shared a reciprocal relationship with its militarization, through which the growth of South

Korea's economy was made contingent upon the country's staunch militarism, and vice versa.

Moon furthermore maintains that "militarized modernization" has created gender ideals in South Korea that have accentuated men's roles not only as the rightful providers for and protectors of their families, but also of the industrializing nation-state (Moon 2005a). With the role of family provider serving as "the material basis of men's authority as fathers and husbands," and military conscription acting as a formal 'rite of passage' for men's entrance into the work force, Moon thusly claims that hegemonic masculinity in contemporary South Korea has taken on distinctly neoliberal and nationalistic framings (Moon 2002, 86). Though South Korean citizens have become increasingly critical of mandatory military service given the country's current status as a post-industrial democracy with fewer geopolitical threats, Moon insists that conscription continues to remain an important, culturally recognized badge of masculinity, evidenced by the often-times severe social chastising received by conscription evaders (Moon 2005b).

Other scholars have taken a noticeably different take on contemporary South Korean gender relations by examining it through the lenses of media and popular culture. Of particular interest to scholars has been the heavy societal pressure placed on both South Korean men and women to be aesthetically attractive, evidenced by size and ubiquity of the nation's cosmetics and cosmetic surgery industries (Fifield 2008; Ji Kim et al. 2013). The ubiquity of the cosmetics and cosmetic surgery industries in South Korea has been an oft-researched topic, with most scholars citing this phenomenon as an example of 1) the sexist/patriarchal societal beauty standards to which South Korean women continue to abide, and 2) an unintended consequence of Western cultural

influence on contemporary South Korean values (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012). With either assertion, South Korean women have been imagined largely as idle actors, powerless to the forces of patriarchy and cultural imperialism that coerce them to succumb to vanity and unnatural standards of beauty. According to Ruth Holliday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang (2012), however, both positions have relied on an inaccurate perception of South Korean women as powerless rather than attempting to genuinely understand “why” women decide to modify their appearances. As Holliday and Elfving-Hwang determine, “In general, cosmetic surgery is perceived as a worthwhile and understandable investment in the body” (61) Moreover, in an increasingly neoliberalized South Korean political economy, “having the ‘right face’ can be crucial in ‘marrying well.’ The ‘right face can also be a determining factor in gaining employment in a Korean job market where nearly 80 percent of young people now attend further education college or university” (73).

Research has also elaborated on the aestheticization of South Korean masculinity as well. Using the term “pan-east Asian soft masculinity,” Sun Jung (2010a; 2010b) describes how modern, post-industrial conceptions of South Korean masculinity are overwhelmingly influenced by and influential of transnational flows of popular culture. The designation of “pan-east Asian soft masculinity” has a double-meaning here—one referring to the ‘soft’ discursive power that images of South Korean masculinity carry throughout East and Southeast Asia, and the other describing its recognizable “gentleness and feminine softness” (Jung 2010a, 2). Jung primarily draws upon the ‘*kkŏn minam*’ (a term that roughly translates to young and beautiful man) in her analysis, a figure that has gained mass appeal in South Korea and neighboring Asian nations as a symbol of

aesthetic perfection and cosmopolitan masculinity (Jung 2010a; Louie 2012). Though there is some scholarly debate about the *kkõn minam* figure itself<sup>18</sup>—both in the way that it is embodied and its centrality to contemporary conceptions of South Korean masculinity—there is broad agreement that aesthetic beauty has become an increasingly defining ideal for South Korean men (Jung 2010a; Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012; Epstein & Joo 2012).

Though these newer conceptions of South Korean gender ideals diverge considerably from the noticeably postcolonial and feminist standpoints of earlier works, it would be shortsighted to claim that these perspectives are irreconcilable. Rather, and as this chapter illustrates, the seemingly different ideals set forth by cosmopolitan and militaristic dimensions of South Korean gender ideals function in a relational manner, setting boundaries for men and women that must similarly be policed and maintained.

### Gendered realities and expectations prior to ‘return’

Gender’s salience was established in numerous instances throughout the interviewees’ ‘return’ journeys, often serving as a fundamental motivation or concern even prior to their actual relocation to South Korea. Of particular interest were the gendered patterns and discourses that emerged early on within interviewees’ broader ‘return’ narratives. For one, discussions concerning gender overwhelmingly tended to overlap with those about race/ethnicity, nationality, and inequality, highlighting the very apparent intersectional

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<sup>18</sup> Jung, for instance, interprets the athletic builds and manicured looks of Korean male stars as highlighting a new aestheticized and hybridized masculinity, while Stephen J. Epstein and Rachael M. Joo (2012) elaborate on how the visual onslaught of Korean male pop stars with chiseled physiques serves to affirm the masculinity of Korean men writ large in a more traditional manner both domestically and internationally.

manner in which interviewees conceptualized gender. Furthermore, interviewees' gender identities profoundly affected the types of motivations, expectations, and/or goals that they had for their 'return.' In other words, while the 'return' narratives of both 'returnee' men and women were centrally impacted by gender, the manner in which this occurred varied significantly across gender lines.

To begin, it was clear that for many of the men in my sample gender (specifically their understandings of gender norms and discourses in both US and South Korean contexts) served as a significant motivating factor for their 'return.' During our meetings, many men acknowledged and spoke critically of the dominant portrayals of Asian American men in US popular culture as effeminate and sexually undesirable, at times even juxtaposing this perspective in contradistinction with their belief that Asian American women were considered "desirable" in the US. Consequently, some respondents had believed that a move to South Korea, where they would assumedly fit in as members of the ethno-racial mainstream, would rid them of these unflattering stereotypes. Implicit (and at times explicit) in this desire were expectations of South Korea being a safe haven for US-raised Korean men, where their hybrid identities as both Korean and American would simultaneously afford them positions of masculine normativity and desirability. It was thus apparent that conceptions of gender, especially those that concerned racialized notions of masculinity, played a pivotal role in interviewees' 'return' narratives even prior to their actual relocation.

The 'returnee' women who I interviewed had noticeably different gender-related expectations (or rather concerns) prior to their departures to South Korea. Though a few women spoke critically about the portrayals of Asian/Asian American women in the US

as exotic and subservient, most women more readily recognized the US as being gender egalitarian, or at least more equitable than what many considered to be a staunchly patriarchal South Korean (or East Asian) culture. For example, when later calling out sexism and sexist practices in South Korea, the primary reference point for ‘returnee’ women was almost always that of a less-sexist or non-sexist US society in which they had been raised. In fact, among the eighteen women interviewed, there was not a single individual who believed that South Korea was more or equally as gender egalitarian as the US. Thus, despite the initial excitement that most ‘returnee’ women stated having about their prospects of moving to their ancestral homeland, many also admitted experiencing apprehension and anxiety about their ability to accept or adapt to South Korean gender norms upon relocating.

It was in this intersectional manner that gender (as a social construct) influenced interviewees’ newfound positions as ethnic return migrants. By this I mean that interviewees began their ‘return’ journeys with strong presuppositions of how gender would impact their material lives and statuses in South Korea. Beyond these personal expectations (and reservations), there were few factors specific to interviewees’ gender that appeared to directly impact their ethnic return migration. If there were gender-related preferences in the South Korean job market, for instance, very few of the interviewees admitted to being aware of them prior to ‘returning.’ Moreover, none of the interviewees believed that it was their past encounters with gender-related inequity in the US that had influenced their decision to seek employment abroad, thusly refuting the notion that their ‘return’ exhibited gendered patterns of labor-based migration common to other migration systems. Prior to their actual migration, then, it was the ways in which gender influenced

interviewees' sense of self or identity that was most meaningful. In turn, it was this gendered identity that helped them to make sense of their positions within an unfamiliar South Korean society.

### Becoming a “Desirable Commodity” in South Korea

Though the ‘returnees’ in my study arrived in South Korea largely as cultural strangers, their status as Americans almost instantaneously bestowed upon them a number of benefits that helped to ease their transition into the country. The most immediate of these were employment-related, in that the occupations that they held were usually contingent upon: 1) their US citizenship, 2) their native English language fluency, and 3) having a baccalaureate degree from an accredited four-year US institution. For those who fulfilled these prerequisites, full-time employment was practically guaranteed, assuming that they were interested in filling positions that relied upon their English language fluency. For most US-raised Korean ‘returnees,’ this typically meant acquiring jobs teaching English as a second language at privately run institutions called *yŏngŏ hakwŏn* (or English academy).<sup>19</sup> *Yŏngŏ hakwŏn* were ubiquitous in South Korea, their popularity symptomatic of the nation’s widely recognized “English fever” (Seth 2002; SH Park &

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<sup>19</sup>Admittedly, there was considerable variation in English teaching positions. To work in the South Korean public school system, for instance, one typically needed to apply through official government channels either in the US or South Korea. One of the most common practices was to apply through a South Korean government program named EPIK (English Proficiency in Korea) that hired hundreds of college-educated native English speakers from abroad to teach English at primary and secondary level South Korean schools. EPIK applicants spanned the globe, but were required to be citizens of nation-states that used English as their primary or official language. For Americans, there also existed the option of applying to US governmental initiatives such as the Fulbright program, which provided year-long scholarships to teach English (and also to act as cultural ambassadors to the US) in a large number of foreign countries. Of these, South Korea was one of the largest importers of Fulbright scholars, with yearly figures of around 100-150. Of the nine interviewees that relocated to South Korea to teach English, three took either the EPIK or Fulbright route. This relatively low number had less to do with the lack of desirability of these programs than the competitiveness of their application process.

Abelmann 2004; JK Park 2009).<sup>20</sup> Among the thirty-five ‘returnees’ I interviewed, twenty-five stated relocating to South Korea as English teachers or to search for such opportunities, making it by far the most widely cited occupation.<sup>21</sup> On the surface, then, there did not appear to be any gender discrepancies for acquiring English teaching jobs, though a few ‘returnee’ men insisted that private *hakwŏn* gave women preferential treatment in hiring. I could not find any evidence that substantiated these claims.

Other ‘returnees’ were located in a variety of other positions, as there was no one particular occupation that was as openly marketed to Americans as was teaching English. These individuals were typically not yearly contract hires as were most other English language job hires, making their lives in South Korea less precarious. Moreover, these types of positions were often difficult for non-locals to obtain because they required either high-level professional degrees and/or a significant amount of social capital, either or both of which US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ typically lacked (more on this later in the chapter). Again, there appeared to be rough parity in regards to types of occupations obtained by both ‘returnee’ men and women, with a few notable exceptions. For example, a number of ‘returnees’ had acquired full-time jobs in the corporate or professional sectors before or soon after relocating to South Korea—Jin Soo and Jane as corporate lawyers, Robert as a sales executive, Sarah as an assistant professor, and Helen as a journalist. Alternatively, there was the option of working one’s way into the corporate or professional marketplace by attending higher education institutions in South Korea. Two interviewees from Hawaii (David and Olivia) took this route, relocating to Seoul as

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<sup>20</sup> In 2005, for instance, South Koreans spent nearly 15 trillion won (approximately \$14 billion dollars) on supplementary English language education, a majority of which was invested into the *yŏngŏ hakwŏn* system (JK Park 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Further analyses of interviewees’ occupational statuses can be found in chapter three.



students at a prestigious private South Korean university.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, there were a few positions that were only filled by members of a particular gender in my sample, though these appeared more a product of chance than unequal access. For example, three women had relocated to South Korea on academic research grants, two of who (Amelie and Jamie) were still in their initial grant period and a third (Joyce) who had since moved on to work for a Seoul-based NGO. In terms of self-employment, Phillip, a 28-year old entrepreneur who had moved to South Korea with his older brother to start a fashion accessories business, was the only individual in my sample to have moved to South Korea with the intention of running his/her own business.<sup>23</sup> The only notable exceptions for gender parity in occupations were observed by those employed by the US Armed Forces. Two men (Glen and John) had relocated to South Korea as mid-ranking Officers in the US Army.<sup>24</sup> Though both remarked that it was not uncommon to see US-raised Korean soldiers stationed in South Korea, neither had ever seen a US-raised Korean woman in any of the ranks.

While the incomes that ‘returnees’ received were dictated by their occupations, the baseline earnings for full-time employed ‘returnees’ were roughly 2-2.5 million

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<sup>22</sup> While three other interviewees also pursued higher education in South Korea, they did not enroll until later on during their residency in the country.

<sup>23</sup> Though there were other entrepreneurs within my sample, they had transitioned into this role after first moving to South Korea for other lines of employment.

<sup>24</sup> Though Korean Americans were still a demographic minority within the large number of US military personnel deployed to South Korea, they were not uncommon. John, one of the Korean American Army officers I interviewed, stated that there were a significant number of mid-to-high ranking US Army officers stationed in South Korea who were of Korean descent. The two officers above him in his chain of command, for instance, were also second generation Korean Americans. According to John, of the Korean American soldiers stationed abroad, the highest proportion was likely to be in South Korea. Though it was not possible to back up this statement with hard numbers, I can attest to being introduced to my fair share of Korean American soldiers during my time in the country. Unfortunately, many of these individuals declined to be interviewed, usually because they were afraid of the possible disciplinary actions that their honesty would bring them.

Korean Won/month (approximately \$2,000-2,500/month, or \$24,000-\$30,000/yr.)—considerably more than the national median income of \$18,000 USD/year for South Korean households (OECD Better Life Index). Additionally, many full-time jobs targeted at native English speakers such as US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ provided perks to entice applicants, such as complimentary residential housing (or at least a comparable housing stipend), health insurance, and round trip airfare to and from South Korea for those who were not yet residing in the country. Taking into account that the majority of ‘returnees’ in my study moved to South Korea as emerging adults, these occupations often served as their first experiences as gainfully employed individuals with a significant amount of disposable income. Many participants seemed profoundly affected by this economic stability and freedom, often reveling in their newfound status and cultural capital.

Michael, a 25-year old high school English teacher, mentioned that it was only after moving to South Korea that he really felt that he had become socially “desirable” person:

It’s the privilege thing, dude. It’s the first time I’d ever had privilege my entire life. I mean, socioeconomically, it’s been just recently that I broke into the middle class. And as a Korean American male [in the US], not so much. There was just no form of privilege that I had been able to enjoy until I went to Korea and then all of a sudden, I’m a very desirable commodity. People that I don’t know want to meet me and use me. Complete strangers want me to teach their children for large sums of money, solely based on the fact that I’m from the US. [In the US], it happens, but because of all of my other achievements. Not so much because I’m a Korean American. That’s never been the cause of anything.

For Michael, his sense of being a “desirable commodity” was intricately linked to the complementary notions of privilege and capital, whereby the privileges associated with his US citizenship and upbringing granted him excess levels of human capital in South Korea. Michael was not the only individual to respond in this way. Robert, a 30-year old sales executive at a South Korean tech firm, stated that as the only American employee in

his office he felt “valued” because he was the “go to” person when dealing with the company’s numerous overseas clients. Like Michael, Robert maintained that the qualities that made him American were also what benefited him in his interactions with South Koreans in his workplace and elsewhere. In saying this, Robert and Michael, as well as other ‘returnee’ men, referred to their newfound desirability in a markedly neoliberal manner, describing their “value” and “worth” in ways that commoditized their very presence within the country. These examples connected closely to other research on the ethnic return migration of Asian Americans, most noticeably Sonali Jain’s (2011) research on second generation Indian Americans. Jain argues that the US citizenship and upbringing of second generation Indian Americans confers them with surplus human capital in international settings, such as in their recently industrialized ancestral homeland of India. The effects of this human capital are most apparent socioeconomically, whereby the attributes and qualifications associated with their US upbringing afford them access to occupations and lifestyles typically unavailable to their native-born Indian counterparts. As evidenced by the above examples, elements of Jain’s findings were certainly reflected in the experiences of the Korean American men in my study, and in many ways served as the foundation for their narratives of masculine redemption.

‘Returnee’ men also encountered feelings of value and desire in other capacities, such as in their romantic or social lives. There was a general consensus among ‘returnee’ men, for instance, that US-raised Korean men were viewed as more “attractive” or “desirable” in South Korea than their South Korean counterparts. Ryan, for instance, revealed how his dating life had benefited since moving to South Korea:

My dating life--it's so much better here. I was always the Asian guy [in the US]. Asian girls are really popular in America and I don't think I can even get an [Asian American] girlfriend because all these white guys are lined up... But here I think being Korean American, Korean girls are more attracted to us.

As noted previously, the notion that “Korean girls” were “more attracted” to US-raised Korean men was an opinion shared among many of ‘returnee’ men who I interviewed. Interestingly, ‘returnee’ women appeared to agree with this belief, with one female interviewee named Helen begrudgingly stating that US-raised Korean men were treated as if they were “kings of the universe” in South Korea. What was particularly intriguing about this generally held belief was the manner in which interviewees acknowledged that ‘returnee’ men’s increased desirability in South Korea was intricately tied to their American identities. In other words, it was the men’s connections to an American-ness, as well as the sense of masculinity that this identity conferred, that supposedly elevated their statuses in South Korea. Thus, while many of the men I spoke with acknowledged and even lamented the societal restrictions that Asian American men had faced in attempting to embody hegemonic masculinity while in the US, they revealed the ways in which their claims to hegemonic masculinity appeared to be heightened in South Korea, at least initially.

In this regard, ‘returnee’ men’s American-ness appeared to function very much as a form of masculine cultural capital in South Korea, even elevating their social standing relative to local South Korean men. Sociologists such as Adam Reich (2010) and Anthony C. Ocampo (2012) have written about the links between masculinity and cultural capital in other groups, most noticeably regarding the marginalized masculinities of Latino men in the US. They argue that men who lack racial (and economic) privilege

come to conceptualize masculinity as a form of cultural capital. By reinforcing localized notions of masculinity in contradistinction with the normative ideal, these men use masculinity as a tool to elevate themselves in ways that both complements and contradicts hegemonic masculinity. For the Korean American men who I interviewed, the material benefits they received in South Korea because of their ties to the US appeared to solidify their own claims to masculine cultural capital in a South Korean setting.

The increased human capital of US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ women appeared to manifest in noticeably different ways relative to their male counterparts. For one, very rarely did interviewees claim that ‘returnee’ women benefited from their moves to South Korea in a similar manner to that of ‘returnee’ men. Whereas ‘returnee’ men were seen as having their sense of masculinity affirmed or redeemed by relocating to South Korea, very few such assertions were made about ‘returnee’ women and their claims to a sense of femininity. If anything, the opposite appeared true. This was not to say that ‘returnee’ women received fewer economic benefits and privileges in South Korea than ‘returnee’ men. As mentioned earlier, there was little distinction between ‘returnee’ men and women in terms of economic opportunity for newly arrived migrants. Instead, the disparity lay in the kinds of social benefits that were linked to ‘returnee’ women’s elevated social class status. Whereas ‘returnee’ men felt that they had become “desirable commodities” in numerous capacities upon moving to South Korea, ‘returnee’ women tended to assert the opposite, with some even going as far as to say that their elevated social class status damaged their claims to an idealized femininity in South Korea.

One of the most common ways that ‘returnee’ women bore evidence for the precariousness of their feminine social standing in South Korea were through examples

or anecdotes about dating. Rather than being considered more “desirable” because of their newfound socioeconomic prowess, as was typically argued to be the case for ‘returnee’ men, ‘returnee’ women such as Lee maintained that she and other US-raised Korean women experienced marked difficulty in the South Korean dating market:

I think for women, if they’re more educated, they’re actually looked upon as more of a threat [in Korea]. Men will think things such as, “Oh, you have a mind of your own,” or, “you’re kind of feisty.” Little remnants of Confucian or patriarchal society are still here. And most of the Korean American women here are well educated and outspoken. But the Korean guys are not so used to that. So they feel inferior, and they hate that. From both friends and personal experience, I find that Korean American women have a harder time dating here because they are perceived as being less feminine.

According to Lee, US-raised Korean women had a “harder time dating” in South Korea because their status and behaviors did not conform to Korean expectations of femininity. Though not explicitly expressed in this portion of our interview, Lee alluded to the fact that most US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ women had certain qualities—in this case being “well educated” and “outspoken”—that earned the ire of South Korean men. Another ‘returnee’ woman named Teresa expanded upon these points in a separate conversation:

Korean American men are doubly valued because they’re Korean males to begin with, but they also have a lot of the American characteristics that make them desirable in the eyes of the locals. On the flip side, all those American characteristics or traits in a woman might be seen as inappropriate when viewed through a Korean lens. Like being outspoken and opinionated.

Using terminology that was similar to Lee’s, Teresa opined that it was the marked “American”-ness of US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ women—namely their tendency to be “outspoken” and “opinionated”—that South Korean locals perceived as being “inappropriate” womanly behavior. This was in direct contrast to US-raised Korean men,

whose projection of “American characteristics” seemingly contributed to their level of desirability in South Korea.

In spite of these above complications, however, most women ‘returnee’ women agreed that their initial transitions into South Korean society were not as difficult as they had forecasted. While there were certainly cultural changes with which they were forced to reckon, many women admitted that their initial adjustments to South Korean life had gone generally smoothly. This was not to say that ‘returnee’ women believed that their initial concerns about South Korean gender norms and practices were unwarranted or premature. Nearly all the women interviewed proclaimed that many of their concerns were affirmed upon arriving in South Korea, and that gender inequity was plainly observable in numerous arenas of South Korean society. That said, factors such as their relative job security and their largely English-speaking social networks appeared to act as buffers to them encountering much of this gendered inequity, even providing ‘returnee’ women the social distance to critique these systems from the position of supposedly objective outsiders. For ‘returnee’ women, then, if there were any benefits or privileges that their American status conferred upon them, it was that it appeared to initially immunize them from many of the patriarchal gender inequities they had expected prior to their ‘return.’

### Subordinating South Korean Masculinities and Femininities

‘Returnees’ musings on gender and its implications were not limited to their personal experiences. It was also common for them to discuss gender issues relationally, with South Korean men and women typically serving as their primary groups of reference. For

instance, the “ego boost” (as an interviewee named John called it) that ‘returnee’ men reportedly experienced often appeared to come at the expense of South Korean men and their masculinities. Many ‘returnees’ characterized South Korean men as being more “feminine” or “soft,” in some ways echoing research findings by Korean cultural scholar Sun Jung (2010) on the growing global recognition and appeal of South Korean “soft” masculinities. Jung argues that the figure of the *kkŏn minam*—a combination of the words *kkŏt* (flower) and *minam* (beautiful man)—has taken over as the masculine ideal-type in contemporary South Korean (popular) culture. As a figure who possesses “both feminine and masculine attributes”—such as a soft, gentle demeanor with a lean, sculpted body and attractive face—Jung posits that the widespread (and even transnational) appeal of *kkŏn minam* lies chiefly in their androgeneity and hybridity (Jung 2010, 4). Though in her research Jung claims that the discursive reach of the South Korean *kkŏn minam* is mostly contained within East Asian countries that share similar references for masculinity, it was apparent that the individuals in my study, as members of the larger Korean diaspora, were also well aware of the “soft” attributes of South Korean men. This acknowledgment, however, was typically voiced in a critical manner—as a way to subordinate South Korean men and masculinities. For instance, it was common for interviewees to label South Korean men as “passive”:

Phillip: I think the Asian men who grew up in Asia are a lot more passive about a lot of things, even when it comes to dating girls. As opposed to [Korean American men] who are a little more forward and a little clearer as to what their intentions are. I think because Korean women aren’t used to that exactly, they might find it more attractive.

Akin to Ryan’s earlier comment, Phillip believed that South Korean women were more attracted to Korean American men. More specifically, Phillip stated that it was the ability



of Korean American men to be “forward,” in contrast with the “passive” nature of South Korea men, which led to this attraction. The detrimental passivity of South Korean was also recognizable in other contexts, such as physical confrontations:

Abraham: When Korean people are drinking and stuff, they usually don't start fights. I don't know if you've noticed. And I say this because in America, if there's alcohol involved, there's gonna be a fight. And I've seen a lot of Korean people fight, but they're just cussing at each other. But Korean Americans, when there's alcohol involved, they're always getting into fights! [laughs] So in Korea, if you see two Korean people actually fist fighting, they're probably speaking English...Korean Americans are more masculine in that aspect.

To Abraham, a 25-year-old high school English teacher, the reluctance of South Korean men to participate in fisticuffs, no matter their level of inebriation, indicated signs of passivity that relegated their masculinity to a lower status than that of Korean American men. In effect, the “passive” or “soft” qualities of South Korean men marked their claims to masculinity as suspect.

For others, the proclamation of South Korean male passivity or softness acted as a precursor to questions about their sexuality or sexual orientation. Glen, a 25-year old US Army officer stationed in South Korea, explained that he often mistook straight South Korean men as gay because they would “carry around pink bags” and don makeup. Even the interactions between South Korean men were called into question, with some interviewees describing the behaviors of South Korean men as homoerotic. In another portion of the interview, for instance, Glen recalled being taken aback by the interactions he had witnessed among South Korean male soldiers during a collaboration exercise between the US and South Korean military:

I was living with a ROK<sup>25</sup> platoon. They're a lot closer than the Americans are. They share bunks together and rub each other's backs. And not just rubbing backs, but putting hands inside the guy's shirts! And making a circular motion with their hands, while their thighs are pretty much draped over the guy's legs. And another guy was popping a zit off another guy's back!... It was gross.

Like Glen, other interviewees were unsettled by some of the boundary blurring actions of South Korean men. This was initially met with some level of criticism or resistance, with the Korean American 'returnees' labeling South Korean men with terms that marked their masculinity as suspect, such as "gay" or "fag." The significance of these descriptions lay not necessarily in their homophobic connotations, but the context in which they were spoken. Sociologist Michael Kimmel (1994) argues that in Western contexts homosexuality has been typically framed in opposition to masculinity, with hegemonic masculinity being maintained through the policing and subjugating of deviant sexualities. Similarly, gender studies scholar Eve Sedgwick (1990) contends that the relationships that men share are often represented by the constant awareness and active prevention of homosexual behavior.

South Korean women suffered a similar fate to that of South Korean men. Specifically, interviewees described South Korean women and their femininities in ways that paralleled the racialized depictions of Asian/Asian American women in the US. 'Returnees' commonly described South Korean women using terms that emphasized or exaggerated their femininity, such as "innocent," "doll-like," and "demure." In addition, some interviewees also asserted that South Korean women were "vain" or "obsessed" with their appearances, typically citing the omnipresence of the cosmetics and aesthetic surgery industries in the South Korea as evidence for their claims. Nancy, an English

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<sup>25</sup> Republic of Korea

teacher and theater actor, was one of these individuals, stating the following about her perception of South Korean women.

I think [South Korean] women prize themselves on beauty and looking young. ... Like having porcelain skin and making sure they have long hair, are dressed in heels, and look really cute and pretty. ... I think [they] tend to be more girly. They tend to ... I don't know. They do the whole 'aegyo'<sup>1</sup> thing.

Another interviewee named Jane voiced similar criticisms:

Maybe it's just a worldwide phenomenon, but [I am shocked by how] the value of women [in South Korea] is tied to how attractive they are. I feel like South Korean society has taken it to a new level with the amount of plastic surgery and the amount of time they put into self-care. Actually the law firm that I work for is in part a medical law firm because my boss is a doctor as well as a lawyer. So I've had to do some work with looking at consent forms for plastic surgery and stuff. It's just kind of appalling the number of procedures they have for people to make themselves look prettier.

Nancy, Jane, and other interviewees' reliance on portrayals of South Korean women that marked them as "more girly" or self-obsessed were noteworthy for a few reasons. For one, these claims were typically made in contradistinction with portrayals of US-raised Korean or Asian American women as being more assertive, outspoken, and feminist. For the 'returnee' women in my study, then, making these assertions about the differences of South Korean and US-raised Korean women served not only to elaborate upon the perceived cultural differences between the two groups, but also to establish the latter group's claims to US or Western gender standards that were seen as being more progressive and egalitarian than those in South Korea or East Asia. These attitudes closely corresponded with observations made by other gender scholars, most noticeably Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson's (2003) research on Asian American women's attitudes towards Asian culture, and Helen Kim Lee's (2013) study on Korean American 'returnee' women working in South Korea. These scholars suggest that Asian American

women who are raised in the US tend to rely on narratives that construct Asian cultures as being innately patriarchal and oppressive towards women, and American or white gender standards as being paradigms of gender equality. By constructing Asian culture as a site where resistance to gender inequity is difficult if not impossible, these authors argue that Asian American women ultimately reinforce hegemonic notions of femininity that adopt and privilege white, middle class standards of gender while denigrating those deemed Asian. These findings applied to a number of my conversations with ‘returnee’ women, with some respondents going as far as to remark that South Korean women were unaware of the sexism that they endured. Monica, for instance, responded with the following statement when asked about gender inequity in South Korea: “This country really objectifies its women. But [the women] don’t know it! They don’t know it. It’s normal for them.”<sup>26</sup> Statements such as this one were not only powerful indicators of the social and cultural distance that interviewees believed existed between them and South Koreans, but also the degree to which this distance was correlated with the notion of feminist progress (or the lack thereof). In commenting on how South Korean women were unaware of their own plight, ‘returnees’ such as Monica were conversely able to

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<sup>26</sup> Full quote from Monica: This country really objectifies its women. But [the women] don’t know it! They don’t know it. It’s normal for them. It really upsets me when I hear middle school girls saying, “Teacher, when I graduate I’m going to get this done and this done.” And all I can think is, “But that’s not you!” I feel like there are, not just gender expectations, but appearance expectations on Korean women. ...For example when I was at the institute, we had a debate about the topic of plastic surgery—to do or not to do. And this one student—I love this student, he’s a smart and kind kid—said, “Monica, we can’t debate this. If a girl is ugly, of course she has to get plastic surgery. Onto the next topic please!” And all I could say was, “Don’t talk like that in front of foreigners because they’re going to think you are very sexist and narrow-minded.” That was quite shocking to me. I feel that because surgeries have become more prevalent the societal expectations of women have also become higher. Like you have to be a certain size. Have you heard of the ratios or proportions that women should have if they want to look younger? It has to be like 1 to 1 to .5 or something. It’s a lot of pressure!

affirm their own claims to hegemonic gender ideals, even if this came at the expense of South Korean women.

Based on these conversations with US-raised Korean ‘returnees,’ then, it was apparent that the tactics used to emasculate South Korean men and hyper-feminize South Korean women were analogous to those utilized in a Western context—namely through the policing of “homosexual” behaviors in men and the scrutiny of “patriarchal” behaviors in women. That many of the descriptions used for South Korean also paralleled the racialized imagery of Asian/Asian Americans in the US hinted at the kinds of gender discourses that interviewees relied on to make sense of gender relations in their new social contexts. It also affirmed the belief held by gender studies scholars that masculinity and femininity function relationally and complementarily, and that both men (with marginalized masculinities) and women are often complicit in the buttressing of hegemonic gender ideals (J. Chan 2001; Demetriou 2001; Pascoe 2003; Pyke & Johnson 2003). Yet, while the subjugation of South Korean masculinities and femininities by the ‘returnees’ in my sample appeared to strengthen their claims to hegemonic masculinity and femininity, many would eventually come to realize the tenuousness of these positions.

### Reconfiguring Korean (American) masculinities and femininities

In many cases, interviewees’ criticisms regarding South Korean masculinities and femininities transitioned into or were qualified by an acknowledgment that gender norms in South Korea functioned differently from what they were accustomed to in the US. This belief relied principally on the idea that South Korea and the US were culturally distinct

nations. To my respondents, then, it was South Korea's cultural distinctiveness relative to the US that predicated the variations with which gender was both practiced and monitored within the country.

For example, whereas the threat of being labeled as sexually deviant greatly guided masculine behavior in the US, my informants agreed that it was the apparent lack of homosexuality as a mainstream social or political construct in South Korea that allowed for 'gay' behavior among Korean men to be deemed appropriate. Even Glen, a vocal critic of South Korean men and masculinities, acknowledged that over time he was able to see the contextual ways in which masculinity functioned.

Stephen: What are the differences in how masculinity functions within the US and South Korea?

Glen: Well...I can tell you from looking at the US military and the Korean military. The US military is all about looking macho and tough and shit. The Korean military—they don't care. They don't care if they look "gay" ... The US military is so homophobic, man, but that's just the US culture. Especially the military, though... But homosexuality really isn't thought about in Korea as it is in the States. Nobody really thinks about it or mentions it. It isn't about being homophobic; it just doesn't happen.

According to Glen, the cultural differences between the US and South Korea manifested even in the broader cultures of each country's military institutions. These differences permitted South Korean men, even those who were soldiers, to behave in ways that would not have been deemed socially acceptable masculine behaviors in the US. Thus, Glen came to the conclusion that South Korean men were "not masculine in the American sense, but that [did not] mean [they were] gay."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jason, one of two openly gay men in my sample and an active participant in Seoul's gay sub-culture, appeared to echo this sentiment. As someone who first learned of Seoul's growing gay community during a short visit to the country ten years prior, Jason maintained that there was a limited acknowledgment of alternative forms of sexuality in South Korea, and that this often served as a predicament for the country's LGBTQ residents. On the one hand, because there was less social understanding on what to deem as

However, the apparent absence of homosexuality or queerness as a mainstream social or political category did not mean that South Koreans simply rejected hegemonic masculine ideals. Rather, interviewees agreed that the sociopolitical dismissal of these constructs meant that South Korean men tended to rely on different markers to affirm their manliness. When asked what these markers were, my participants were nearly unanimous in their responses: an ideal South Korean man was said to be a physically attractive, fashionable, and family oriented individual with a stable, well-paying professional career. Reflecting on these qualities, it is at first easy to assert that they are not entirely distinctive to South Korea. However, my interviewees insisted that it was the degree to which these ideals were upheld in South Korean society that marked them as unique. In essence, it was understood that South Korean masculinity, beyond its emphasis on “soft”-ness or aesthetic perfection, was very much defined in a neoliberal manner, where one’s manhood was highly contingent upon one’s access or claims to capital. This was not to imply that other signs of masculinity, such as machismo or heterosexuality,

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sexually ‘deviant’ behavior, Jason was able to “get away with things” in South Korea (such as close physical contact with other men) that would have likely led to snickering, bullying, or name calling in the US. While Jason may have experienced less outright homophobia in South Korea than in the US, the widespread lack of acknowledgment of homosexuality as a cultural or political signifier in South Korea meant that it was also difficult to gain social recognition as a gay or queer individual. Todd, the other openly gay respondent in my sample, confirmed this sentiment, mentioning that he often felt that homosexuality in South Korean society was perceived of as a *‘oe-gu-gin byǒng’* (or foreigner’s illness). Indeed, Glen’s, Jason’s, and Todd’s thoughts reflect findings from the small but growing body of academic literature on sexuality and sexual minorities in Korean and East Asian studies. Kam Louie (2002), for instance, argues that masculinity in East Asian contexts functions differently than in the West because of their divergent philosophical and epistemological foundations. Specifically, Louis asserts that the outright policing of homosexuality has not served as a defining quality of East Asian masculinities, permitting men to more freely share close or intimate ties without having their masculinity openly questioned. In a South Korean context, scholars such as Seo Dong-Jin (2001), Youngshik D. Bong (2009), John Cho (2009) and Tari Young-Jung Na (2014) have written about historical and continued marginalization of LGBTQI South Koreans. Though in recent years the LGBTQI movement has made meaningful strides in enhancing their legal, social, and political status (which has consequently also increased hostility toward sexual minorities), scholars argue that they still remain a significantly marginalized group within the country (Bong 2009; Yi, Phillips, & Sung 2014).

did not matter in South Korea—they did. But apparently none of these were policed as stringently as one’s perceived socioeconomic status, via a handful of markers such as one’s appearance, marital status, education, and occupation. According to my research participants, these signifiers were constantly up for display or discussion by peers and strangers alike. For example, it was commonplace to start a casual conversation with a first-time acquaintance by being asked questions about one’s age, marital status, occupation, and educational background. Thus, it was imperative that men always put their best faces and personas forward by dressing and acting in ways that proved one’s heteronormative middle-class masculinity. Indeed, scholars posit that even the relatively new demand for perfectly chiseled male bodies and faces can be interpreted as part of the rising concern over self-care and personal “well-being,” both undeniably products of the neoliberalization of South Korean society (Epstein & Joo 2012).

Another crucial aspect of South Korean masculinity concerned the notion of nationalism. According to respondents, this had less to do with outright signs of patriotism such as flag waving and the purchasing of locally produced goods, although such acts certainly mattered. Instead, for South Korean men nationalism was most clearly manifested in their conscription, or mandatory enlistment in national (military) service. Because conscription in South Korea was not a voluntary act, one’s status as a veteran did not confer the same qualities of masculine sacrifice and bravado that it did in the US. Rather, the men in my study argued that military enlistment was treated more as a national rite of passage, as one of the many markers necessary to properly embody South



Korean masculinity.<sup>28</sup> Seungsook Moon's (2005b) concept, "military masculinity," describes how the "implementation of conscription for decades made the completion of military service virtually a passport to male adult life in Korean society." (72) In this way, Moon contends that both military service and economic self-sufficiency (particularly in relation to the ability to provide for one's family) have stood of the pillars of hegemonic masculinity in post-war South Korea, a product of both geopolitical factors (such as the Cold War) and the state's subjective implementation of appropriate (and largely patriarchal) gender regulations (Moon 2005b).<sup>29</sup>

Interviewees came to similar revelations concerning South Korean women and femininities. Whereas many of these individuals had previously criticized South Korean women for being hyper-feminine and even complicit in perpetuating patriarchal gender norms, they were alternatively able to acknowledge that these women, as was the case with women in the US, were also forced into the unfair position of finding ways to survive within the constraints of a grossly uneven gender system. Rather than simply being unaware of their oppression or lacking agency, then, many interviewees admitted that South Korean women "made do" in a system that not only privileged men as

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<sup>28</sup> Even some of the Korean American men in my study, nearly all of whom were not required to serve in the South Korean military because of their US citizenship, spoke longingly about their desires to enlist in the South Korean military. In fact, many used phrases such as "national duty" and "rite of passage" when explaining why they felt this way. To these informants, the handful of South Korean male celebrities who attempted to evade conscription duties deserved the numerous social repercussions that they often received for their actions (e.g., severe public shaming, serious challenges to their future careers, and in one case, even national exile).

<sup>29</sup> South Korea's recent evolution into a post-industrial democratic society (and conversely, North Korea's descent as a geopolitical threat) has indelibly mitigated the country's need for such staunch military discourse. Indeed, the length of conscription has shortened over the years, with the typical length for active duty currently ranging from 21-24 months, its shortest period in history. Furthermore, a growing contingent of South Korean men, both officially and unofficially, now actively protest country's conscription requirements, signaling a potential weakening of military masculinity's cultural hegemony (Moon 2005b). Despite all this, conscription evaders continue to face many of the same severe social, political, and economic repercussions as in decades past.

breadwinners and household heads, but also disciplined women who were unwilling to adopt complementarily patriarchal standards of femininity. These markers of femininity, or what might be dubbed as hegemonic femininity within a South Korean milieu, functioned in relation to the hegemonic ideals of South Korean masculinity listed earlier, with a few key divergences. Whereas South Korean hegemonic masculinity was buttressed via a handful of pillars (e.g., one's ability to serve as a household's breadwinner, one's conscription, and to a certain degree, one's appearance), there appeared to be much fewer dimensions upholding hegemonic femininity. Above all, interviewees proclaimed that South Korean femininity emphasized women's roles within the domestic sphere as wives and mothers, but little else. An ideal South Korean women, many argued, was a stay at home mother who unequivocally supported her husband and children, all while making sure that she and her home looked "effortlessly" beautiful. Many interviewees, such as Jane and Nancy below, claimed that it was because of the centrality of domesticity within South Korean understandings of femininity that so much onus was placed on women to not only become married, but to do so before they were "too old."

Jane: Marriage is a huge pressure [in South Korea]. Especially for women because I think men have a marriageable age that stretches a bit longer than women's do. Because I'm 33 in Korean age and people who I know that are about my age that aren't married are worried because they're over 30 and they're women. And some of them are highly educated and all those combined, it takes them out of the sphere of marriageable prospects.

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Nancy: If you're over thirty-five and you're not married, then there's something wrong with you. If you're over thirty-five and you're divorced and you're a woman, then there's even more wrong with you. I do think that women get blamed for all that family stuff here... For example, I have this coworker .... She's thirty-four Western age, thirty-five Korean age. She has this boyfriend and they've now been dating a year. So I'm like, "Has David met your parents yet?"

And she's like "Oh, I can't introduce him to my parents until we get married. There's no point in me bringing around a boyfriend at my age if we're not going to get married." So she can't even introduce her boyfriend to her parents until they are getting married! They think that unless she's getting married to this guy, she's wasting her time—that she's too old.

It was apparent that the significance of marriage for South Korean women, as well as the larger reverberations that this had on societal expectations of femininity, was not lost on the 'returnees' in this study. While Nancy, Jane, and others recognized that marriage and family also stood as pillars for South Korean men and masculinity, they were firm in their belief that these institutions more centrally factored into conceptions of femininity. While the 'returnees' in my study came to these conclusions mostly through their own observations, their assertions corresponded closely to findings from research by scholars of South Korean women's studies. For example, scholars such as Tari Young-Jung Na, Ju Hui Judy Han, and Se-Woong Koo (2014) and Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi (1998) have written about the compulsory gender roles that South Korean women occupy within a gender system that is dichotomized at numerous levels (such as within the family, legal status, and state institutions). For South Korean women in the postcolonial era, this has meant embracing their "sex roles" as mothers and wives, serving both as literal nurturers of their families and symbolic nurturers to the developing South Korean state (CM Choi 1998). While these expectations have evolved in recent years as greater numbers of women have entered the labor force, the newer demands that South Korean women face (such as the ever-increasing expectations of aesthetic beauty and "self-care") have in large part worked alongside the more traditional domestic requirements, not in lieu of them. In other words, the newer societal pressures placed on women to professionalize

and to be aesthetically beautiful have not discounted the importance placed on their roles within the domestic sphere.

The amount of cost and attention that South Korean women supposedly placed on their outward appearances also began to make sense to ‘returnees’ in this light. Rather than viewing South Korean women’s apparent obsession with aesthetic beauty as simply a reproduction or internalization of sexist norms, some ‘returnees’ recognized the rational economic and cultural reasoning behind this tendency. To elaborate, in a country where ideals of proper femininity were so heavily centralized in notions of domesticity and aesthetic beauty, interviewees understood that adopting these standards served as a means for women to potentially improve their social standings. Here, too, their observations corresponded with research by women’s studies scholarship on the socioeconomic mobility of South Korean women. Research on South Korean women living in the 1990s by Mijeong Lee (1998) for example, has explained that South Korean women valued college education not only because it situated them better for their own careers, but because it better positioned them to meet men with equal or higher socioeconomic statuses<sup>30</sup>. Likewise, more contemporary studies on South Korean women have argued that the importance placed on their outward appearances can be commonly explained as a rational-economic decision (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012). That is, they argue that women place importance on their looks because they believe that their future careers and marriage prospects will likely benefit from these actions. In a society where aesthetic perfection has served as significant source of cultural capital, efforts at beautification

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<sup>30</sup> This rationale had the opposite effect for professional or graduate level schooling, with women preferring not to attend higher levels of education for fear that it would reduce the number of marriageable prospects. Jane alludes to this in the previous quote.

(even if requiring significant personal transformation via makeup or cosmetic surgery) were thus seen as a necessary sacrifice for societal and financial gain. Unlike many of the US-raised ‘returnee’ women who were in part immune from these gender inequities because of their human capital, occupations, and social networks, South Korean women usually had few alternatives but to at least partially conform to unequal gender standards in order to succeed in their careers or elsewhere.

Ultimately, ‘returnees’ who acknowledged that hegemonic masculinity and femininity functioned differently in South Korea were typically able to concede that South Korean men and women were not necessarily any more or less masculine or feminine, but that they embodied gender standards that were more in line with the country’s social context. Though some interviewees continued to remain critical of what they viewed to be non-normative gender behaviors, many were willing to overlook these caveats as being “cultural differences.” This acknowledgment, however, often contributed to an unexpected consequence. For the ‘returnees’ who came to realize that alternative forms of hegemonic gender standards existed, their own gender identities were again called into question. While the human capital afforded by their status as Korean Americans had seemingly “boosted” their initial claims to a hegemonic masculinity or femininity in South Korea, it became apparent that this heightened position was tenuous without socially-specific markers or qualifications.

### The limitations of American gender ideals

For ‘returnees’ who envisioned South Korea as their new ‘home,’ there was often the desire to forego their transient state as ‘returnees’ and to become further incorporated into

South Korean society. However, these individuals felt that their assimilative aspirations were constantly met with resistance from South Korean individuals and institutions (these accounts are further detailed in chapter four). In day-to-day dealings, for instance, interviewees claimed that it was common for locals to point out their supposedly non-normative dress, accents, and behaviors. This also meant that in closer interactions with South Koreans they could not participate in more culturally nuanced conversations and activities concerning their masculinity or femininity. For instance, a number of the ‘returnee’ men lamented that in conversations with South Korean men they could not commiserate about past conscription experiences and hardships. Though for some this deviance from the norm was interpreted favorably as a reflection of their ties to the US, others equated these experiences with the racial microaggressions they had faced in the US. These ‘returnees’ expressed being disheartened by these encounters, especially given that they had relocated to South Korea in part to leave such experiences of exclusion behind.

Institutional barriers also became an issue for many of the ‘returnees.’ ‘Returnee’ men, for instance, found that without the proper signifiers of South Korean masculinity, their long-term economic and social prospects suffered. Though teaching English was an accessible position with a relatively high and stable introductory wage, it allowed little room for upward social mobility in a South Korean society saturated with eligible English language teachers. Many interviewees also believed that their status as F-4 visa holders acted as a red flag for potential employers outside of the English language sector. As such, finding jobs outside of teaching English proved a formidable task, especially for those without advanced degrees and qualifications or Korean language mastery.

Sam, a 28-year old male, was one such ‘returnee’ who had repeatedly attempted to make the transition out of teaching English in South Korea. At the time of our interview, Sam had resided in the country for five years, teaching English at a *yŏngŏ hakwŏn* for four of those years. Sam eventually became dissatisfied with teaching English and began actively searching for employment in other fields. By this point in his tenure, Sam had put in a significant amount of work into speaking, dressing, and, in general, acting like what he described as a “normal South Korean man”—all with the hope of permanently settling in the country. Yet, he rarely received callbacks for the numerous full-time jobs for which he applied. In the few instances he received interviews he stated that the employers appeared to lose interest as soon as he showed a hint of foreign-ness. While he was ultimately able to land a job at one of South Korea’s largest tech corporations as an English language content editor, it was again only as a temporary contract hire.

Sam’s was a common narrative among the men in my sample. ‘Returnees’ with long-term aspirations in South Korea often performed significant personal transformations in order to settle permanently in the country. Patrick, a 28-year old entrepreneur and freelancer, had even completed an MBA degree at one of the most prestigious universities in Seoul with the hope of improving his employment outlook in the country. Even with the degree in hand, however, his lack of fluency in both the Korean language and culture continued to play against his odds of gainful employment. This trend posed significant problems to many other interviewees, particularly ‘returnee’ men. It appeared that the longer ‘returnee’ men resided in South Korea their claims to cultural capital and, relatedly, hegemonic masculinity became more insecure. And efforts

to reclaim this masculinity and capital were repeatedly stymied. Though they still had the “fall back” option of teaching English, many alluded to the societal stigma attached to ‘returnees’ who remained in these positions long-term.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, there were exceptions to this general trend. Robert, the 30-year old sales executive at a mid-sized tech firm, was one of the few interviewees who did not appear to experience a crisis of masculine identity in South Korea. Not only had he recently received a promotion at work, he also became engaged to his South Korean girlfriend of three years. Where other Korean American male ‘returnees’ had difficulty accessing the institutions that buttressed hegemonic masculinity in South Korea (such as the corporate workplace, marriage, and the military), Robert had managed to flourish in them. But what were the factors that set Robert apart from the others? It was not necessarily that he was any more fluent in the Korean language and customs, or that he was superbly attractive. Rather, Robert had moved to South Korea with a significant jumpstart over the other ‘returnees’—with a full-time salaried position outside of the English language sector. Robert was thus immediately thrust into a position in South Korea where masculine affirmation was not only a state of mind, but something that was actually attainable.

On the whole, however, the men I interviewed were left in a quandary where they wished to abide by South Korean cultural norms, especially those regarding masculinity,

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<sup>31</sup> Eleana Kim (2012) argues that Koreans adopted into American families bear the unique neoliberal burden of proving that they have taken advantage of their ‘privileged’ and cosmopolitan upbringing in the US. Thus, those who are able to take full advantage of their human capital, such as Olympic athlete Toby Dawson, are celebrated by South Korean society, while those who return merely to teach English in South Korea are not. Though E. Kim’s research specifically examines the narratives of Korean American adoptees, I feel that it also helps to inform the experiences shared by the men in my sample. In essence, US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ who remain in temporary English teaching positions are socially chastised for their inability to actualize their capitalistic potential. However, their attempts at social mobility are typically blocked because of the limitations of their legal and social statuses.



but their status as ‘returnees,’ or rather as foreigners, made this exceedingly difficult. In effect, these men faced roadblocks to their socioeconomic mobility and incorporation in South Korea similar to those experienced by other ethnic return migrants in the country, such as low-wage temporary workers from China or the Commonwealth of Independent States (C. Lee 2012). But whereas US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ men’s statuses as “desirable commodities” initially appeared to heighten their claims to masculine cultural capital in South Korea, their attempts at socioeconomic mobility ultimately exposed them to the limitations of their own “desirability.”

In general, ‘returnee’ women did not seem quite as dismayed about their positions in South Korean society as ‘returnee’ men. This was not to say that ‘returnee’ women experienced fewer setbacks or hurdles in their South Korean lives than their male compatriots—though, broadly speaking, the women in this study did fare better in procuring long term employment outside of teaching English (more on this in the following chapter). That being said, gender-based discrimination or hardships were absolutely a point of contention for the ‘returnee’ women interviewed. Several women recounted the numerous instances of gender discrimination they had encountered during their residency in South Korea, as well as the general difficulties of being an unwedded working women in the country. These women recognized that the longer they resided in the country, the more difficult it became to continue adhering to American gender standards, or to completely disregard the gender ideals specific to South Korea. The majority of ‘returnee’ women agreed that the longer they remained in the country, the more they felt pressured to adopt South Korean feminine attitudes and ideals. Beauty standards, for example, were a point of a debate among nearly all of the ‘returnee’

women interviewed. Interviewees were well aware of the high value that was placed on people's appearances in South Korean society, and how for women there was an implicit, and sometimes explicit, expectation that being aesthetically attractive was a necessary qualification to further one's career. In many ways the importance of aesthetic beauty in South Korean society was self-evident. On more than one meeting with a female interviewee, for example, we were within eyesight of an ad or sign for a cosmetic surgery clinic. Cosmetics or beauty supply stores also often littered the subway station exits, main thoroughfares, and shopping complexes where interviewees and I first met. Beyond these physical signs, aesthetic expectations manifested themselves through numerous other outlets, such as in the media, societal expectations, or even through interactions with acquaintances and extended family. A 'returnee' named Amelie, for instance, lamented that she had "never been as self-conscious" about her height until she had moved to South Korea. She recalled regularly receiving comments concerning her supposedly diminutive stature from South Korean acquaintances, peers, and even relatives, and stated that she had begun wearing heels regularly as a result. According to another interviewee named Dorothy, situations such as these appeared to be a rather systematic occurrence for US-raised Korean 'returnee' women, and would at times lead to nearly incomprehensible consequences:

I have a Korean American friend who works at an international school right now. Her aunt took her to a plastic surgery place to get her eyelids done. And my friend was so offended. She didn't even ask her. So [my friend] said, "No, I don't want this." I had another [Korean American] friend whose aunt offered to pay for her to get a nose job as a Christmas present. And she said, "No, I don't want a nose job!" Luckily, this has never been a struggle for me. My family hasn't ever commented on the way I look or anything like that... But I do know others who constantly hear that they should get something fixed.

These secondhand anecdotes that Dorothy shared, though perhaps extreme, reflected the severity of the beauty-related societal pressures that ‘returnee’ women, and all South Korean women, faced. Though the scenarios in the above quote served as examples where US-raised Korean women chose not to undergo procedures that would help to “feminize” them within a South Korean context, this was not to say that ‘returnee’ women wholeheartedly rejected the country’s appearance-related ideals of femininity. In fact, some interviewees confessed to putting more time and effort into their outward appearance in South Korea, even going as far as to say that these acts were now “important” to them. That said, these interviewees were also quick to point out that they still found certain aspects of South Korean beauty standards inherently problematic.

Helen: I feel like my standard of beauty has changed because of my being here. So, what’s important to me now is like good skin, good clothes, and being thin and stuff. And again, it sounds shallow. But, it’s like what Koreans think is a priority has become what I think is important. But at the same time I really hate the plastic surgery look. Ugh. I hate it so much.

This incessant pressure to maintain or improve one’s appearance, though expectedly frustrating for most ‘returnee’ women, also served as a relatively attainable way for some individuals to adopt more “feminine” cues within a South Korean setting. Other standards of femininity, such as marriage and domesticity, proved not to be as feasible or even desirable. Many ‘returnee’ women, particularly those in or beyond their late 20s, maligned the pressure they experienced to couple or marry. For example, an interviewee named Monica stated, “I hardly see my [Korean] relatives, but when I do, they always ask, ‘*swijip unje gahni?* (when are you getting married?).’ More than just being an inconvenience, then, many ‘returnee’ women believed that their status as single career-

oriented women placed them as targets for social scorn, especially as they attempted to ascend the professional ladder.

It thus appeared that whatever buffers to gender inequity that 'returnee' women had initially been granted upon relocating diminished the further they became incorporated into South Korean society. Beyond the immediate frustrations that these inequities caused, however, most of the 'returnee' women interviewed seemed surprisingly unfazed by the gender-related difficulties they encountered in South Korea society. Even among interviewees who had lived in South Korea for several years there was a sense that these inequities, while unfortunate, did not necessarily dissuade them from wanting to continue living in the country, at least not at that particular moment. This near indifference was explained in a few ways. For one, fewer 'returnee' women than men had aspirations to settle in South Korea permanently, with substantially more women than men expecting to move back to the US within the next few years (more on this in chapter five). It was perhaps this reasoning that allowed 'returnee' women to endure the gender-based hardships they encountered, knowing that their stays in South Korea were temporary in nature. Second, it was possible that the presumption held by 'returnee' women that their residence in South Korea was impermanent allowed them some flexibility in adhering to the country's gender norms. After all, if their time in South Korea was temporary, what benefit was there to adopt seemingly unfair gender standards, especially if they ran at odds with their own ideals on womanhood?

Lastly, 'returnee' women's relative indifference toward South Korean gender ideals drew attention back to the expectations and motivations that both 'returnee' men and women possessed prior to their 'return.' For men, the move to South Korea had more

often been conceived of as a tour of masculine redemption—as a means to repair the gendered damage they had experienced through systems of racialization in the US. In many cases, these men only turned to adopting South Korean ideals of masculinity when the “ego boost” provided by their American-ness began to fade. As noted earlier, ‘returnee’ women relocated under considerably different circumstances—generally excited but also apprehensive about their transitions into an uneven South Korean gender hierarchy. Moreover, unlike ‘returnee’ men, ‘returnee’ women had no such presuppositions about feminine redemption in South Korea, likely contributing to their eventual ability to withstand gender inequity in the country.

#### The gender benefits of whiteness in South Korea

As the limits to the privileges afforded to them by their Korean American-ness were becoming painstakingly clear, there was another social trend that my interviewees found even more discouraging. Though the ‘returnees’ in my study were experiencing diminished returns through their American-ness, they felt that there was no such reduction for the white Americans living in South Korea. There was a collective belief among the ‘returnees’ that white Americans who lived in South Korea were not expected to conform to South Korean gender ideals, or at least not nearly to the extent that US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ were expected. Because of their apparent foreign-ness, it was suggested that white Americans were considered desirable even though they were often oblivious to Korean cultural norms. As a result, a number of interviewees spoke of white American expats, particularly white American expat men, in a resentful tone, stating that they were often “losers back home” in the US but were “treated like kings” upon moving

to South Korea. Eugene, a 38-year old graduate student living in Seoul, maintained that South Korea had a “real reputation as being a playground for white guys.” Likewise, John, one of the two US Army officers I interviewed, expressed deep frustrations about the supposed preferential treatment that white Americans, especially white American men, received in South Korea. In particular, John resented the manner in which the white soldiers under his command gained a “superiority complex” because of their race and easily “picked up Korean chicks”:

John: I mean, you wouldn't believe the amount of instances that occur because of Americans who come to Korea and get this sort of superiority complex. A lot of my white friends LOVE being here because they feel like they're God! And it's because they're White men! And most times they acknowledge that they do feel superior here, but they don't see a problem in it. Because once they go back to the States, they're just another white boy... That's why it makes me so much angrier when I see white men dating Korean girls because I know they have that superiority complex. They just accept that they're better than everyone else and don't stop to question it. And it gets perpetuated by Koreans because they put them on a damn pedestal!

Personal frustrations aside, John's ire over what he described as the “superiority complex” of white American male ex-pats alluded to a larger point about the workings of race and gender within South Korean society. On this, sociologist Nadia Y. Kim (2008) argues that the US' neo-imperial influence in East Asia and the Pacific Islands has had a significant impact in the understanding of race and racial hierarchy within a South Korean context. Most importantly, N. Kim posits that the US' role in “liberating” Korea after World War II helped to establish a system of racial hierarchy in South Korea that mimicked that which existed in the US. N. Kim also contends that the central role of white male soldiers during the US' post-war humanitarian relief efforts in South Korea helped to solidify the position of white American men atop the South Korean racial

imaginary. By this logic, the observations made by my interviewees of white men being placed on a “pedestal” by South Koreans definitely held merit. Or as John later stated, white American men represented the “pinnacle of manhood,” regardless of the environment they were located within.

However, not everyone took this realization with dismay. In fact, for some individuals, the transnational appeal of whiteness helped them to re-evaluate gendered nature of their own return migration projects. Though many of my interviewees spoke begrudgingly about white American expats, they were also cognizant of the fact that they had in part migrated to South Korea under similar circumstances—namely to take advantage of their own human capital. Michael, for instance, was able to critically reflect on his own position as an American man living in South Korea: “I’m realizing that moving to Korea without the right reasons could be a dangerous thing. Because then I’m no better than white men who are capitalizing on their English ability. I mean, what’s the difference between that person and me?”

## Conclusion

In recent years, scholars across numerous disciplines have written about the practice of ethnic return migration, with the Korean diaspora proving a popular case study within this broader body of literature. While these studies have examined the ways in which factors such as human capital, immigration policy, and cultural affect impact the practice of ethnic return migration, few have examined this global process through the lens of gender. This study has challenged this omission, focusing on the salience of gender as an imagined and lived construct among US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants. In doing

so, this chapter elaborated on the following gendered trends and practices within the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans. First, my research found that gender, particularly in its intersections with race and racialization in the US, served as a motivating factor for the ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans, albeit only for men. In their cases, relocating to South Korea was often envisioned as a project that would redeem their subjugated masculinities. Conversely, returnee women typically stated wanting to move to South Korea in spite of their concerns over gender inequity in the country. Second, my research found that controlling images of gender, as well as other gender discourses played a central role in interviewees' negotiations with identity and positionality upon relocating to South Korea. In particular, returnees relied on conceptions of gender and gender hierarchy that they had internalized in the US, often as a way of affirming their own claims to a hegemonic gender ideal while subjugating those of their South Korean counterparts. In particular, returnees used highly racialized terminology in subjugating the masculinities and femininities of South Koreans, many of which paralleled the expressions used to describe Asian American men and women in the US. Lastly, my research found that as returnees attempted to assimilate into South Korean society, their conceptions of gender shifted from that of a totalizing, hegemonic understanding, to one that was relational and culturally contingent. This, however, left 'returnees' in a state of conflict. Where, by acknowledging that alternative ideals of normative gender existed in South Korea, returnees were forced to call into question their own feminine and masculine identities, typically to their own detriment.

In summary, by elaborating on the experiences and narratives of US-raised Korean 'returnee' men and women, this chapter endeavored to expand upon research on



both return migration and gender beyond their traditional theoretical confines. Indeed, there are numerous tangential and intersecting inquiries that extend beyond the scope of this chapter but are equally as deserving of examination. For example, future works may conduct comparative examinations on the conceptions and practices of gender by other ethnic return migrant groups in South Korea. Though migrating from countries with closer cultural and geographic proximity, ‘returnees’ from places like China, Russia, or Japan are likely to face similarly complicated experiences adapting to South Korean gender norms. Moreover, in following trends in migration research in Asian American Studies, future works may also incorporate sexuality and Empire (respectively or intersectionally) as possible vectors in examining the ethnic return migration of not only US-raised Koreans, but Asian Americans writ large. Both sexuality and Empire have proven central to contemporary studies of Asian American migration, particularly in the ways that they have amended and critiqued more traditional approaches to migration studies. Empire, in particular, has been crucial in understanding the gendered and racial migration pathways created by US colonialism and militarism in Asia and the Pacific Islands (J. Kim 2010), of which South Korea has been an oft-examined case study (Yuh 2004; N. Kim 2008; G. Cho 2008). Examining Korean American ethnic return migration through this lens should provide exciting new ways to expand upon the connections of US Empire and migration, particularly in their relation to the ethnic return migration of diasporic people generations removed from residing in the ‘homeland.’

### (Chapter three) Becoming American in Korea: The Complicated allure of “American-ness”



**Figure 1** Nighttime shot of the All-American Diner on Itaewon-ro (S.C. Suh 2016c)

Until this point, I have engaged with the notion of an American identity or subjectivity, or an “American-ness,” in an indirect manner—as something that has supplemented the understanding of how other constructs (such as race, ethnicity, and/or gender) impact the ‘return’ motivations and experiences of US-raised Koreans. Taking a slightly different approach in this chapter, I engage with the notion of an ‘American-ness’ directly by examining the numerous ways in which ‘returnees’ lives are influenced by their continued, or even re-emergent, ties to the US upon relocating to South Korea. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the three aspects of interviewees’ South Korean lives where their ties to the US remain strongest: their social identities and networks, the

spaces they occupy for leisure and residence, and their jobs. In examining these aspects of interviewees' lives, I find that upon moving to a thoroughly globalized South Korea, 'returnees' capacities to thrive are influenced less by their knowledge of Korean sociocultural norms and practices than by their ability and willingness to take advantage of the human capital and flexible citizenship afforded to them by their status as Americans. Despite often moving to South Korea as a means to reconnect with their Korean families and cultural heritage, 'returnees' are located in social networks, spaces, and jobs that highlight their ties to an American upbringing, not diminish them. This remains true even for 'returnees' with long-term aspirations in the country. The experiences of US-raised Korean 'returnees' are thus marked with the seemingly paradoxical reality where their claims to an American-ness, rather than being contested (as was the case in the US), become one of the focal points (if not the main focal point) of their new migrant identities in South Korea.

### Social identity and networks in South Korea

This section explores the manner in which interviewees' ties to the US influenced their social identity and network formation in South Korea. Scholarship referenced in chapter one indicated that for minority groups in the US, their social identities and networks play a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of societal prejudice and marginalization, as well as assisting in their acculturation. Research concerning US-raised Koreans (and Asian Americans writ large) has contributed significantly to this body of literature, with several works elaborating on the empowering effects of peer networks, local organizations, and political movements rooted in ethnicity and/or race. This section situates the South

Korean experiences of US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants within this body of research by examining the manner in which their development of specific social identities and networks contributes to their adaptation in South Korean society. Whereas previous works on US-raised Koreans predominantly have elucidated on the importance of social identities and networks centered on ethnicity and race, this section takes a different approach, illustrating how interviewees' ties to both an American nationality and the Korean diaspora serve as the basis for their social identity and network development in South Korea.

*The emergence of an American social identity in South Korea*

Numerous 'returnees' explained that over the course of residing in South Korea, their response to the oft-asked question, "What are you?" had evolved substantially. In the US, for example, interviewees' social identities had largely centered on their ethnicity or race. Depending on their personal biographies, it had been common for interviewees to identify as Korean, half Korean or HAPA, or adopted Korean, in public settings. Also used, albeit less frequently than the above descriptors, were the terms Korean American, Korean American adoptee, and Amerasian, all of which were identifiers that took into greater consideration interviewees' nationality, and in some occasions, politics. When asked why they had discerned between the two sets of identifiers (e.g., ethnicity- or race-based vs. ethnicity/race- & nationality-based), interviewees claimed that their identification had largely been dependent upon the context in which the social encounter took place. For instance, in informal or social settings, individuals identified simply with their ethnicity or race because, 1) among family and peers their American-ness or US nationality was self-evident or taken for granted, and 2) among strangers it was their

ethnicity or ancestry with which people were generally interested to decipher. Conversely, interviewees who had adopted a hyphenated social identity (such as Korean American, or Amerasian) explained that doing so was partially politically motivated; a kind of identity politics that allowed them to stake claims in both their ethnicity and nationality while also recognizing that neither one completely defined them. Along these lines, there was also an important distinction made between being a hyphenated American versus being simply “American.” As I further elaborated in chapter one, very rarely did the participants in this study admit to referring to themselves as merely “American” while living in the US. For most ‘returnees,’ to be “American” meant to be white. In this vein, identifying as Korean or Korean American while in the US also meant that one was disassociating or disidentifying with an already exclusionary “American” mainstream.

The social identities of US-raised Koreans underwent considerable renovation upon their relocation to South Korea. Much of this change stemmed from most interviewees’ newfound positions as members of South Korea’s ethno-racial mainstream. Whereas in the US respondents’ foreignness had been conditional upon their minoritized race and ethnicity, the opposite held true in South Korea, where most interviewees’ race and ethnicity instead served as the basis of their general acceptance as members of the societal mainstream. As such, to identify as “Korean” in South Korea had significantly different connotations than it had when they were in the US. In the US, interviewees who identified as Korean had done so as a way of affirming their position as a racial minority or to quickly assuage questions from strangers regarding their ancestry or origin. In South Korea, most of these ‘returnees’ were no longer minorities in the ethno-racial sense, but

rather in terms of their nationality, residency status, and cultural upbringing. ‘Returnees’ remarked that identifying as “Korean,” or “Korean-Korean” as several interviewees called local-born South Koreans (sometimes even shortening it to “Ko-Ko”), felt unnecessary if not disingenuous.

‘Returnees’ instead experienced the emergence of what can be interpreted as an “American” identity while in South Korea. This emergent “American” identity was most observable in the way that ‘returnees’ addressed or identified themselves to new acquaintances, whether they were South Korean nationals or migrants like themselves. Unlike in the US, where interviewees tended to highlight their ethnicity or race within their social identities, ‘returnees’ placed substantial emphasis on their US nationality within their South Korean social identities. Usually, such as in the case of William below, this meant identifying publically as Korean American, or *jaemi kyop’o*,<sup>32</sup> its Korean language equivalent.

I’m very concrete in my identity here as a Korean American. ... And it was never like that before. Not in high school. More so in college but not so much. But now, being Korean American is very much a part of me. For instance, I learned the word “*jaemi kyop’o*” the first week I moved here. It means Korean American. I never forgot it. And I think there’s a reason I didn’t forget. It’s because that’s how I introduce myself to others in Korea.

*Jaemi kyop’o*, also often simply shortened to *kyop’o*, was a term used consistently among ‘returnees’ to describe themselves to others, and as a way to distinguish themselves from South Korean nationals and other diasporic Koreans. Though for most ‘returnees’ the act of identifying as *jaemi kyop’o* or Korean American had almost become second nature, there was still a sense of novelty to the term given that few had so explicitly emphasized

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<sup>32</sup> *Jaemi* is the Sino-Korean term for US-origin. *Kyop’o* is the Korean term for ethnic Korean residing abroad.

their connections to the US prior to relocating to South Korea. William, for instance, was one of many ‘returnees’ who remarked that his experience living in South Korea forced him to recognize the distinct positionality of being an ethnic Korean raised in the US. Whereas he had mostly identified as being simply ‘Korean’ prior to his ‘return,’ residing in South Korea had contributed to his consciousness of a Korean American self.

There were also ‘returnees,’ such as Lee, who eschewed the Korean aspect of their Korean American or diasporic Korean identities altogether, preferring to simply refer to herself as “American.”

Lee: In America, before I came here, I would say I was Korean because most of the time people were just trying to figure out my ethnic background. Living here, I find myself saying that I’m Korean American or *kyop’o*. But I found that kind of insulting, too. So I just started saying I’m an American. Flat out American. This was actually more of a recent thing. Like last weekend actually, people at a party were asking me, “What are you?” And I said that I was American. And I caught myself doing this and I surprised myself.

Much in the way that US-raised Koreans had described themselves as ‘Korean’ to others in the US, describing one’s self as simply ‘American’ in South Korea served as a technique for interviewees to get to the root of the “What are you?” or “Where are you from?” type questions. While at first glance distinguishing between being ‘Korean American’ or ‘American’ might have appeared trivial, there was certainly a degree of intentionality present for the ‘returnees’ who insisted on making this distinction. Jason offered an explanation as to why he chose to identify as ‘American’ as opposed to ‘Korean American’ in South Korea.

**Jason:** One thing that I probably say a lot more in Korea than in the US is that I’m an American.

**Stephen:** Simply American?

**Jason:** Yeah. It’s just this fluid identity. My Korean American identity is just so fluid. It just transfers either when I’m in the US or overseas. It’s just so bizarre. In

the States, there's this identification to a minority group, but there's also a disidentification to the majority. So in the States, for example, we say we're Korean because we want to disidentify from the American mainstream because we don't see ourselves as part of the white mainstream. But [in Korea], we disidentify from being Korean because culturally and through our language, we're not Korean. We're American. I think that's sort of why we switch between the two. The reason why I say that I'm an American more is that...[pause] I can say that I'm *kyop'o* and they get that. Well, some people get it. Some people get what it means. They get that it's Korean American or what not. But for others, it just means that you lived overseas for a long time but you're still Korean. Again, by specifically identifying as an American, I think it also lets the Korean who I'm with realize that this person is culturally different, culturally not quite Korean. So I'm always saying, “저 미국인 이잖아요, 저 외국인 이잖아요.” (“But you know I'm an American, but you know I'm a foreigner”).

According to Jason, there was a level of fluidity to his Korean American identity that allowed him to move between a spectrum of Korean-ness and American-ness depending on his social context. In the US, for example, Jason highlighted his Korean-ness as a means to “disidentify” from the American mainstream, a population from which he and other US-raised Koreans were already racially excluded. The reverse held true in South Korea, where Jason asserted claims to an American-ness as a means to highlight his cultural distinctiveness within a South Korean milieu. With either scenario, however, Jason was careful to articulate the intentionality in his identification, effectively illustrating the agentic nature of identity in South Korea. For Jason, Lee, and others, it was thusly apparent that identifying as ‘American’ was as much a political act as it was a statement of personal preference. Given the difficulty that US-raised Koreans had experienced being accepted as Americans in the US, proclaiming that one was ‘American’ in South Korea served as a technique to both affirm one’s ethno-national identity, as well as critique South Korean’s perceptions of who was a proper “American” (read: white American). Moreover, as Jason noted above, identifying as ‘American’



forced South Korean nationals to recognize that US-raised Koreans, despite their shared ethnicity, were *culturally* different (more on the significance of this in the following chapter).

To be sure, the process of identification was more complex for some ‘returnees’ than for others, such as multiracial or adopted Korean Americans. For example, while the adoptees in this study were monoracially Korean and thus able to “pass” as both South Koreans and *jaemi kyop’o* in most public spaces, they also recognized that they possessed backgrounds that differed substantially from those of other diasporic Koreans. Furthermore, they were aware that South Koreans tended to possess one-dimensional narratives of adoptees that either mourned and pitied their adoption as a national wrongdoing, or celebrated their adoption because they had assumedly gone to live more advantageous lives in the US (see E. Kim 2010, 2012). It was for reasons such as these that adopted ‘returnees’ such as Dee expressed more complexity regarding her social identity in South Korea:

The way that I identify myself in Korea has changed. I used to say that I was an American. Then I said that I was a *kyop’o*. Then I said that I was an adoptee. And now when people ask, I’ll say that I’m Korean but I’ve lived in the United States for a long time. I got tired of answering questions about being an adoptee with strangers so I said that. And I think most people assume that I’m a *kyop’o*. But I think I’ll go back to saying I’m an adoptee pretty soon. [laughs] Sometimes I just like to take a little rest.

Accounts such as Dee’s above occurred more commonly among ‘returnees’ who did not necessarily identify as *kyop’o*, such as those who were internationally adopted or were mixed race. Specifically, these ‘returnees’ were required to place more thought into how they identified themselves to new acquaintances. For adoptees such as Dee, this meant consciously deliberating on whether or not she was willing to endure the awkward

silences or forced pity that often followed her identification as an adoptee. As a result, her social identity often shifted with her setting and her mood, with her even revealing that she would likely “go back to saying I’m an adoptee pretty soon.”

Mixed race ‘returnees’ shared comparable circumstances regarding their identities in South Korea. Though, like adoptees, mixed race Korean Americans also fell under the umbrella of *jaemi kyop’o*, many admitted being hesitant to use the term to describe themselves, or used the term interchangeably with other descriptors that emphasized their mixed race status. Unlike other ‘returnees,’ however, mixed race ‘returnees’ also had to take into consideration potential responses of resentment or backlash to their self-identification because of their appearances. Eugene, for instance, stated having long identified as “Amerasian” as opposed to *jaemi kyop’o*, a term meant to describe the children born to US military fathers and Asian mothers. For Eugene, this descriptor resonated with his activist-scholar proclivities (he was a sociology graduate student at a university in Seoul), and also called attention to the inherently colonial foundation of his personal biography. Furthermore, Eugene and other mixed race ‘returnees’ shared that throughout their lives they had often experienced resistance from other US-raised Koreans concerning their self-identification as ‘Korean American.’ For these reasons, most mixed race ‘returnees’ were reluctant to refer to themselves as Korean American or *kyop’o* in South Korea. Even Eugene, despite being deeply critical and outspoken of the unfavorable treatment that multiracial Koreans received, admitted identifying predominantly as ‘American’ while in South Korea, mostly to save himself the hassle of explaining his biography to people whom he did not know.

Taken as a whole, the newfound centrality of an American social identity remained a constant for nearly every ‘returnee’ interviewed. Though there was some variation as to the impetus behind this identification, interviewees generally explained highlighting their American-ness as a means to distinguish themselves culturally, or to “disidentify,” from the South Korean mainstream. As shown, however, certain ‘returnees’ (namely monoracial 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans) had more leeway with this than others. Less explicitly stated was the symbolic value of identifying as American in South Korea from the perspective of US social relations. That is, interviewees were not as likely to reflect on how their emergent American-ness in South Korea could be framed as a response to their exclusion from identifying as such in the US. Ultimately, though, the ease and fluidity with which ‘returnees’ adopted an American sense of self in South Korea indicated the central role that their prior connections to the US played in their navigating through South Korean society.

#### *The Social Networks of US-raised Korean ‘Returnees’*

The South Korean social networks of ‘returnees’ were also highly influenced by their connections to the US. For example, given the initial difficulties associated with adjusting to life in South Korea, most ‘returnees’ quickly made acquaintance with other English-speaking foreigners. For most individuals, this meant fraternizing primarily with other US-raised Korean ‘returnees,’ such as 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans (colloquially referred to as “kyopos” or “kyops”) and Korean American adoptees. Some ‘returnees’ also formed peer networks that expanded beyond the Korean diaspora to include individuals who were not of Korean descent. These individuals were likely to state that

their South Korean social networks were comprised primarily of “expats” or “foreigners.” Though the social networks of most ‘returnees’ over time became more heavily comprised of ethnic Koreans, new ‘returnees’ typically formed networks that were considerably more diverse. This was a result of two factors. First, new ‘returnees’ almost always had to remake their peer networks from scratch, meaning that they did not necessarily have the option to be selective about who they let into their inner social circles. Second, because most ‘returnees’ worked full-time jobs and had limited social contacts in South Korea, the foreigners with whom they most often associated were those they knew from work or related networks. ‘Returnees’ who relocated to South Korea through state-sponsored educational programs such as Fulbright or the English Program in Korea (EPIK), for instance, were inculcated within their massive teaching cohorts, most of which were comprised of non-Korean foreigners. Third, as time passed, the number of non-Korean acquaintances in their lives simply dwindled—in most cases returning back to the US (or elsewhere) after spending a year or two abroad.

Beyond these larger-scale explanations for why ‘returnees’ most often congregated with other ‘returnees,’ there was also the simple justification of “preference.” Granted, this notion of “preference” was really not simple at all. Rather than being bound specifically by nationality, language, or ethnicity, among other factors, interviewees’ social networks were typically comprised of individuals with whom they shared common interests or histories. For example, many ‘returnees,’ such as Jiho below, stated developing friendships with other American “expats” after initially feeling alienated from South Korean culture:

So, initially I was very turned off by Korean culture. It made me think, “Oh, I don’t think I want to live here forever.” But then I started hanging out with my cousin and her friends and they were all fun. And my cousin’s friends were pretty much all foreigners. She was similar to me in that she ... had a lot of non-Korean friends [while growing up]. She was very non-Korean herself. So even when she was here she was with foreigners, non-“kyopos.” So when I was with them I could experience a little bit of what I had in America. And I think that helped me [feel]... somewhat at home because I was with so many foreigners right away.

According to Jiho, he was able to find reprieve from “Korean culture” by interacting with foreigners who reminded him of his life back in the US. Though the mechanisms that guided his social network formation were similar to those of other ‘returnees,’ the makeup of other interviewees’ networks tended to differ substantially. Whereas Jiho sought out a diverse mix of peers because it reminded him of his home in the US, other interviewees mingled mostly with other ‘returnees’ or English speaking ethnic Koreans. Jane, for instance, explained that she and her partner felt “more comfortable” interacting with English speaking Koreans than other English speaking migrants because members of the latter group tended to have “different motivations” for relocating to South Korea:

I guess I feel more comfortable with English speaking Koreans. [My partner and I] don’t really spend too much time with non-Korean foreigners. They usually have different motivations for coming. It gets a little more complicated especially because my boyfriend is half and he’s not super excited about spending a lot of his time with mixed race couples and people like that. But there’s also this whole community of Koreans who are English speakers. And we’ve found that even though they speak English, it’s quite different culturally to be with them because they’ve only spent time in the States temporarily. Even if they speak English they might not have that American sensibility. So communication can be really hard because they have a very South Korean perspective on things.

Even as Jane specified her and her boyfriend’s preference for interacting with English speaking ethnic Koreans, she was careful to discern members of this group along lines of national origin, stating that there were noticeable differences between US-raised Koreans and South Koreans who were fluent in English. She described this variance with the term

“American sensibility,” claiming that the South Koreans who were fluent in English often lacked this cultural characteristic, thus making communication more difficult (more on this in chapter four).

This “American sensibility” appeared to be a deciding factor in most interviewees’ choice of acquaintances. This was not to say that US-raised Koreans did not interact frequently with South Korean nationals. Every ‘returnee’ I interviewed had at least a few South Korean nationals within their larger social networks. In most cases, however, these were relatives or coworkers/colleagues with whom their interactions were largely compartmentalized. Meaning that their interactions with South Korean nationals were typically limited to specific spaces and settings (such as at the office or *hwesik* for coworkers, and at family gatherings for relatives) and infrequently crossed over into their daily social lives.

Still, one did not necessarily have to be from the US to possess an “American sensibility.” Teresa, for example, was married to a Korean Canadian, one of the reasons why she tended to use the term expat over the more geographically limiting “Korean American.” According to Teresa, both she and her husband were very much “enmeshed” in the larger ‘returnee’ and English-speaking expat communities in Seoul. So much so, in fact, that her friends jokingly referred to them as the “*kyop’o* power couple” of Itaewon.

Teresa: I feel like I am not only enmeshed in the expat community in Korea, but...here’s a funny example. You’ll know why I’m mentioning it. My friend was calling my husband and me the *kyop’o* power couple. And by just mentioning it I know that it sounds like I agree with it, but I don’t. It makes me blush to say it. But I think it does say a lot about how *in* the community we are, you know what I mean? I’m not saying at all that we’re the “Brangelina”<sup>33</sup> of the *kyop’o*

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<sup>33</sup> Popular nickname used to refer to the relationship shared between US celebrities Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie.

community in Seoul. But, A) the community is very small, and B) it's not as old or established as communities in other Asian countries where expats have been around for much longer. So, yeah, I feel like we're very much *in* the community. And I feel like our presence has, like, doubled since we got married. So, yeah, both of us being bilingual and both of us being "kyopos," we're just very enmeshed in this community.

If there was a takeaway point from Teresa's statement regarding her and her husband's joint position within the larger Seoul expat community, it was that in a country where they were such a noticeable minority, the social connections that she and other 'returnees' established played an integral role in their societal adaptation. Though not all of the interviewees in this study could claim that they were as enmeshed in the larger 'returnee' community as could Teresa, nearly all continued to maintain close social circles that in many ways mirrored those that they had left behind in the US. As will be further elaborated in the following section, the transnational makeup of interviewees' social identities and networks played an integral in their adaptation to a largely unfamiliar South Korea.

### American spaces

Research on migration has repeatedly emphasized the importance of space and place in the societal incorporation of immigrant populations. Broadly speaking, select "world" or "global" cities have been theorized as the spatial anchors of contemporary global capitalism, with much of the world's economic growth and transnational migration occurring within these municipalities (Friedman 1986; 1995; Sassen 1991). More locally, ethnic/immigrant enclaves have developed within these larger municipalities as spaces central to the preservation of migrant cultures and the growth of migrant communities and economies (Portes & Jensen 1989). Further down still, local institutions within these

enclaves such as schools, churches, and organizations have helped to foster notions of transnational group culture and identity across multiple generations, allowing even diasporic descendants to maintain ties to a distant culture and heritage.

Space was certainly a concept that proved integral in better understanding the adaptation experiences of the ethnic return migrants in this study. To be sure, not all spaces shared the same relevance or value within the larger community. In this subsection, I elaborate on the most prominent of these spaces: The Itaewon area of Seoul. Specifically, I pay close attention to how ‘returnees’ interacted with this space, and why it remained such an integral piece of the larger US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ narrative, even despite its apparent shortcomings. Furthermore, I highlight the manner in which this space served centrally within interviewees’ understanding of their own migrant identities, particularly in relation to a Korean-American transnational subjectivity.





**Figure 2** Map of Seoul city proper (in red) and outlying Seoul Capital Area (Google Maps 2016c)

*Itaewon, Seoul*

The city of Seoul was omnipresent in the South Korean lives of nearly all interviewees, so much so that many would use the terms Seoul and (South) Korea interchangeably. This typically unintentional conflation of city and state was telling. For most interviewees, their ‘return’ experiences consisted almost entirely of working, residing, and playing within the confines of Seoul. Among the thirty-five US-raised Korean

‘returnees’ interviewed, in fact, all but five resided within the Seoul Capital Area.<sup>34</sup> And of those five non-Seoulites, only one ‘returnee’ named Michael admitted to spending little time in (or, by his account “actively avoiding”) Seoul. For the remainder of the interviewees, Seoul was their Mecca; the center of their South Korean lives, and in most cases their home away from home. For all intents and purposes, for many ‘returnees’ Seoul *was* South Korea.

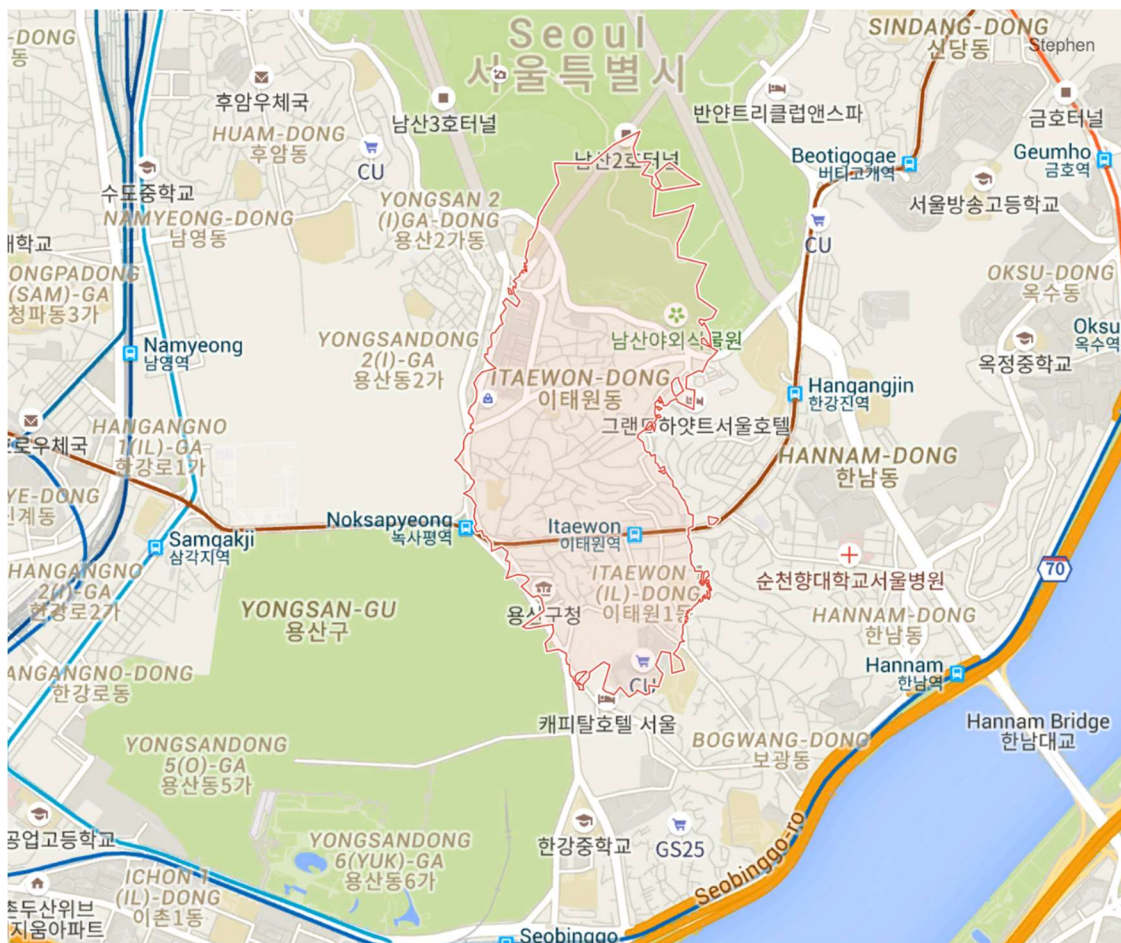
There were good reasons as to why Seoul was so pivotal to interviewees’ conceptions of South Korea. For one, Seoul occupied a similarly significant material and symbolic role for South Korean nationals, having long stood at the center of the country’s political, cultural, and economic spheres (SW Hong 1996; Hill & JW Kim 2000). As both the capital and largest municipality in South Korea, the Seoul and its larger metropolitan region (officially referred to as the Seoul Capital Area) was home to approximately 24 million residents in 2010, or about half of the country’s entire population (Korean Statistical Information Service: Population). Thus, while the overall significance of Seoul may have been somewhat overemphasized by those in my sample, this overrepresentation was justifiable. If anything, given the exceedingly high concentration of demographic, economic, and political power within Seoul, the centrality of this space within the ‘return’ narratives of interviewees came as little surprise.

Secondly, much of the Seoul’s significance to the larger ‘returnee’ community lay in its ability to accommodate foreign-born or foreign-raised peoples. As a “global city,” Seoul stood at the center of the nation’s growing immigrant labor force, a phenomenon

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<sup>34</sup> Seoul Capital Area is the official moniker for the larger Seoul metropolitan area, which includes most of the northwest region of South Korea. It is also referred to as the Gyeonggi region.

contributing to the formation of ethnic villages and “cultural communities” throughout the city (EM Kim & J. S. Kang 2007). To be sure, as a self-proclaimed mono-ethnic country with strong nativist and xenophobic sentiments in both its popular and political discourse, South Korea in general has been sluggish in its acceptance of non-native migrant populations (Shin 2006). For many ‘returnees,’ then, Seoul (or at least specific regions within it) seemed to serve as the exception to this larger anti-immigrant norm. Not only was Seoul the location with the most employment opportunities for non-Korean nationals such as ‘returnees,’ it also appeared to be the South Korean city best-suited for migrants in general.



**Figure 3** Map of Itaewon-dong (in red) within Yongsan-gu (Google Maps 2016b)

‘Returnees’ did not perceive all regions within Seoul equally, however. Specifically, there was one region within Seoul that received significant recognition during our conversations: the Itaewon-dong<sup>35</sup> area in central Seoul. Itaewon-dong, and also the adjacent neighborhoods of Haebangchon (often shortened to HBC) to the northwest and Gyunglidan (often shortened to GLD) to the northeast, are located in the northeast corner of the larger Yongsan-gu<sup>36</sup> district and serve as popular spaces of residence and leisure for ‘returnees.’ Together, ‘returnees’ typically refer to this general area in shorthand as “the Itaewon area,” or simply “Itaewon.” Itaewon is famous, or rather infamous, because it is located adjacent the Yongsan military garrison, a large and active US military outpost located in the center of the Yongsan-gu district just southwest of Itaewon-dong. The Yongsan garrison was occupied by US troops following the Korean peninsula’s liberation from Japanese Imperial forces in 1945 (ES Kim 2004). Prior, the Yongsan garrison had been a military outpost for the Japanese Imperial army. Because of its proximity to the Yongsan garrison, the local economy of Itaewon-dong has long sustained itself by catering to foreign military personnel. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this contributed to the growth of stores, restaurants, and bars—as well as the proliferation of an informal sex economy—that catered to members of the US Armed Forces (ES Kim 2004). In recent decades, however, official efforts by the city of Seoul to rebrand the district as a “shopping unit, free tourist zone, and multicultural area, rather than a cultural space for American forces,” well as rising rates of immigration to the area

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<sup>35</sup> “Dong” is the Sino-Korean word for “neighborhood”

<sup>36</sup> “Gu” is the Sino-Korean word for “district”

from neighboring Asian nations, have contributed to Itaewon's growing multicultural appeal (ES Kim 2004, 48; KE Yoo 2012). As a result, the Itaewon area has evolved into one of if not the most diverse spaces within Seoul, with the growing presence of US-raised Korean 'returnees' undeniably adding to this presence. Today, Itaewon stands as an undoubtedly hybrid space—while the US military presence continues to loom large over the district's culture, the place-making projects of a number of different populations (such as the Seoul's gay community, Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims, and American civilian migrants, among others) have created pockets of transnational spaces throughout the area (ES Kim 2004; EM Kim & J. S. Kang 2007).

It was evident that the Itaewon area and its adjacent neighborhoods played significant roles in the societal adaptation of many of the US-raised Korean 'returnees' in this study. Of the 35 interviewed, for instance, more than a third stated to currently residing or having at one point resided in or near Itaewon. Even interviewees who had not resided in this area had much to share about it; typically a product of having frequented this space at some period during their South Korean residencies. There were numerous factors that made Itaewon an alluring space for 'returnees.' For one, its central location in Seoul meant that nearly all areas of the city were accessible via a relatively short bus or train ride. There were a number of transit lines that crisscrossed throughout the larger Yongsan-gu district, with many of them (most noticeably the number four subway line) serving the Itaewon, Haebangchon, and Gyunglidan neighborhoods in which many 'returnees' resided. This relative proximity to the rest of Seoul greatly benefited those who resided but did not work in Itaewon, or those who worked multiple jobs in different regions of the city. The southwest side of the Yongsan-gu district also housed Yongsan

Station, one of the largest train stations in Seoul, meaning that living in Itaewon also provided convenient access to cross-country travel. Even for those who lived in other areas of Seoul, Itaewon's central location and relative accessibility alone often made it an ideal location to meet up with peers. For example, about half of the 'returnees' whom I interviewed, requested that we meet up in Itaewon, even when they did not work or reside in the area. The greater Itaewon neighborhood also benefited from its closeness to Namsan Park, a large municipal park located just north of Itaewon-dong on the north side of the Yongsan-gu district. Situated atop Namsan Mountain, Namsan Park was one of the largest and most accessible green spaces in a heavily urbanized Seoul, a location where people could go to seek refuge from the hustle and bustle of streets below. For 'returnees' such as Dee, being able to "walk or jog through the acres of plants and trees" in Namsan Park was one of the main perks of living in the Itaewon area.



**Figure 4** The “Welcome to Korea” archway in Itaewon (S. C. Suh 2016a)

Ultimately, though, it was its recognition as a space of leisure and consumption that solidified the significance of Itaewon within the larger ‘returnee’ community. The Itaewon area is well known by Seoulites for offering a plethora of consumption and leisure options, such as cafes, restaurants, retailers, bars, and clubs. But as numerous interviewees attested, it was not so much the sheer number of consumptive and leisure spaces in Itaewon that attracted them, but rather the *type* of consumption and leisure that these spaces offered. Numerous interviewees agreed that the Itaewon area provided a diversity of consumption options and leisure experiences virtually unmatched in other areas of Seoul. In particular, Itaewon was popular because it offered goods and services

that were deemed authentically foreign, or at least non-local. This was observed in a few ways. For example, there are dozens of US-based franchise stores (such as KFC, McDonald's, Subway, Taco Bell, and Baskin Robbins, to name a few) that line Itaewon-ro, the largest and busiest thoroughfare in northeast Yongsan-gu. While it is not uncommon to see US franchises with locations throughout Seoul and other cities in South Korea, it is rare to see so many concentrated into the length of a few city blocks. In addition to the presence of these US-based franchises, there are a host of small businesses both on Itaewon-ro and on adjacent and nearby side streets that sell goods targeted at (what 'returnees' described as) "Westerners" or to those South Koreans with "globalized" tastes. Most of these establishments are eateries or bars that sell a variety of goods and food items that are portrayed as authentically foreign or American, as opposed to the "Korean"-ized variants often found in other parts of the city. Options include typical American fare, such as burgers, pizza, and Southern style BBQ, as well as "ethnic" cuisines such as Halal, Cali-Mex/Tex-Mex, Thai, Indian, and Italian, among others. These businesses are most often owned and operated by local South Koreans, US-raised Korean 'returnees,' and/or non-returnee US migrants, although there is also a growing contingent of non-Korean migrants from Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern nations also opening up shop in the area.

Interviewees' mass participation in these consumptive practices and spaces in Itaewon alluded to larger cultural trends that encompassed the district. The first trend concerned the notion that Itaewon was a space accepting of difference, or at least a particular kind of difference that spoke to the desires and sensibilities of the larger 'returnee' and international migrant communities. As a 'returnee' and Itaewon frequenter



named Dan explained: “In Itaewon...it’s okay to be different. To be different, I don’t know if it’s celebrated, but it’s accepted.” According to Dan and other ‘returnees,’ this “difference” took on a few forms. For instance, because of its proximity to the Yongsan US military garrison, Itaewon was widely perceived as a space that was welcoming of “foreigners.” While the term “foreigners” could have been uttered by interviewees to refer to any number of the non-local migrant populations prevalent in Seoul, in the context of Itaewon it almost always alluded to the area’s large English-speaking (read: white American) migrant population. Though other ethnic minority populations certainly resided in the area, it was clear that for many ‘returnees’ Itaewon was imagined as an American, or at least an English-fluent, space. This position was mostly unsurprising. For many decades following the Korean War US military personnel from the Yongsan garrison were the predominant foreign population to frequent Itaewon, with local South Korean citizens denied entry at many of the district’s establishments (ES Kim 2004). In recent decades, however, with many migrants from the US or other native-English speaking nations looking for teaching jobs in South Korea the number of non-local residents in Itaewon had grown. Many interviewees recognized the establishment and growth of the English-speaking community in Itaewon, with some even likening the area to an American or English-speaking enclave community. Though some ‘returnees’ maligned the large American/English-speaking presence in the Itaewon area, others revealed that it was this very quality that attracted them to the space. This was particularly true for ‘returnees’ with weaker fluency in the Korean language and customs. Patrick, a longtime Itaewon resident explained the area’s allure to US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ and other newly arrived English-speaking migrants:

There are so many resources for English speakers [in Itaewon]. The American military has been here so long that it's set up so many resources. All the government resources are also available in English. You can live in Itaewon and Haebangchon and find English speaking hairdressers and marketplaces. You can also make connections with people who can help you transition or help you with your Korean. It might seem trivial, but those kinds of things matter, you know?

To Patrick and others, Itaewon served not only as a site of welcomed respite from the difficulties of acclimating to a largely unfamiliar South Korean society, but also as a space that potentially aided in their societal adaptation through the services and resources that it offered. In many cases, then, living or frequenting the Itaewon area allowed for the 'returnees' in this study to maintain ties with their former American identities while simultaneously exploring their new ones. For example, Itaewon was also a major site in the burgeoning LGBTQ scene in Seoul, so much so that numerous interviewees dubbed Itaewon as the unofficial center of the Seoul gay scene, with a segment of the neighborhood unironically named "Homo Hill" serving as one of the most popular hangout spot for Seoul's queer community. Though in recent decades the growth of "underground" gay spaces elsewhere in the city and the advent of the Internet had delocalized Seoul's gay community, the four gay/queer members of my sample maintained that Itaewon still remained a principal fixture within it.

The second of these larger trends concerned what 'returnees' referred to as the open, grassroots, and collaborative culture of Itaewon. Rebecca, for instance, was a small business owner and resident in the Haebangchon neighborhood of Itaewon who, prior to moving to South Korea, had lived several years in New York City. At the time of our interview, she and her partner co-owned and operated two small businesses in the Itaewon area, a craft brewery nearby Haebangchon and a boutique clothing store.

Rebecca credited the success of her businesses to the “tight-knit” nature of the Itaewon migrant community, even likening it to the immigrant enclaves that existed in New York.

Well it’s funny. I guess now I better identify with the immigrant communities in the US. You look at New York and there are foreign ghettos and foreign communities, and now as a foreigner in a different country I understand the importance of these spaces—that it’s easier when you bond together and work together. For example, I know the other foreign restaurant owners in this area, and we all help each other out. We try to be understanding with each other because we’re such a small community in an otherwise huge city. For instance, if I don’t have pale ale and I tell the [neighboring restaurant] owner, “Hey, we’re really sorry but we don’t have pale ale this week,” they’ll be like “Alright, no worries. Just let me know when it’s in and you can deliver it.” So there’s just this close knit-ness because we’re all foreigners and we’re trying to make it in Korea.

Drawing comparisons to immigrant enclaves in US cities such as New York and Los Angeles, Rebecca and several other interviewees argued that much of Itaewon, in particular its residents and business owners, functioned as a tight-knit and supportive migrant enclave community. While I will focus more on the types of social networks and identities engendered by ‘returnees’ later on in this chapter, here I draw attention to the ways in which Itaewon as a space was believed to foster a culture that was accepting and even supportive of US-raised Korean ‘returnees.’ Given that such spaces were generally hard to come by in Seoul, let alone in the country of South Korea, numerous ‘returnees’ placed significant value on the sense of camaraderie that was effused within the migrant community in Itaewon.

### *The Pitfalls of Itaewon*

In spite of its many redeeming qualities, Itaewon also drew the ire of many of the ‘returnees’ interviewed. Central to their critiques was the belief that Itaewon was *too* foreign, or conversely, not Korean enough. While at once inviting because of its cultural

familiarity and diversity, many interviewees bemoaned the idea that they and other migrants from the US had moved all the way to South Korea only to chiefly interact with other Americans and native English speakers. Thus, while for many the foreign-ness of Itaewon made it a more accessible space to non-locals such as themselves, for others it was maligned for being inauthentic to Korean culture—a space that allowed foreigners to self-segregate from the rest of South Korean society. “Foreigners,” in these cases, was the word most often used to describe the white, English speaking expats from the US, Canada, or other Western nations who resided en masse in Itaewon. ‘Returnees’ generally believed that the white expats who comprised significant portions of areas such as Itaewon were in South Korea primarily to take advantage of their race and class privilege without adapting or contributing to the larger community or society they inhabited. Patrick, for instance, maintained that there were numerous foreigners who lived in or around his neighborhood that would go “five to six years...without learning Korean and not really interacting with Korean people.” Though Patrick, as a multiracial second generation Korean American, was for the most part sympathetic to the difficulties that non-Korean migrants experienced while living in South Korea, other ‘returnees’ were not quite as forgiving. For the ‘returnees’ who disliked Itaewon, then, it was the apparent insularity of its migrant community that turned them away from the area.

Nancy: A lot of Korean Americans hate Itaewon because it is where all the foreigners live and go. They say they want to hang out with Koreans; that they don’t want to be around foreign people. When I first came here I thought that way, too. Living in HBC, I don’t know if I want to continue living there because I feel like I’m living in a foreign community. I mean, I suppose it’s nice in some ways. But I think that when my Korean becomes a little more proficient, I would like to live in an all-Korean neighborhood, get a feel for that.

As suggested by the above quote by Nancy, being critical of the foreign-ness of Itaewon served the important function of distancing ‘returnees’ from its non-Korean migrant swaths. To really emphasize this point, however, ‘returnees’ also felt compelled to disassociate from spaces (such as Itaewon) that were deemed culturally foreign or non-Korean. Similar to the guilt expressed by Nancy about relocating to South Korea only to live in a “foreign community,” several ‘returnees’ felt the need to rationalize or clarify their residence or continued ties to the Itaewon area. Nicholas, a former resident of the Itaewon area, went to considerable lengths to explain his to upcoming move to the Gyunglidan neighborhood adjacent to Itaewon:

We are moving to a new place in Gyunglidan, which is behind the Itaewon area, across the street from the Haebangchon area. I used to live in Haebangchon. That’s a really foreigner-heavy area. Gyunglidan is kind of a mixture. It’s become really artsy with a lot of little local shops and cafes. Apparently it’s becoming a new hotspot. But we’ll definitely be closer to a lot more foreigners than we are now. We’ve been avoiding those areas because we didn’t really want to be around all those foreigners. But now we’re trying to save a little money and have a little more space, so we’re moving up towards that way this Friday. I think we’ll enjoy it.

For many ‘returnees,’ renouncing one’s connections to Itaewon and its migrant community appeared to serve as a way to affirm that one’s tenure in South Korea was not being diluted by experiences that were not authentically Korean. Interviewees’ searches for authentic Korean experiences were somewhat expected. After all, most revealed that ‘cultural exploration and immersion’ had served as a few of their main motivations for relocating to South Korea. It appeared, then, that it was less xenophobia or nativism that was at the root of interviewees’ distaste for Itaewon, and more their desires to experience “Korean culture” in its “authentic” and undiluted state. The problem, however, often lay in *what* ‘returnees’ deemed authentically Korean. In the quote below, Eugene, a mixed-

race second generation Korean American, recollected the expectations he had for his ‘return,’ and how they were almost immediately tempered upon his arrival in South Korea:

I had over-inflated expectations. My adolescence was during the early and mid-90s. Hip-hop had a big influence on me and that was when people were wearing dashikis and kufis. It was all about black pride and taking it back to your roots. And so I was on a “Yellow Power” trip back to the motherland! I was gonna reconnect!... But I came and it was a lot different from what I thought it would be. I mean, I think a lot of Korean Americans come here and are kind of in shock that it’s not...it’s not, like, people living in *hanȫk*.<sup>37</sup> I mean, it’s really Westernized. And that’s kind of disconcerting to a lot of people. It certainly was for me.

While not all participants shared Eugene’s level of discomfort about arriving in a thoroughly modernized and globalized South Korea, many ‘returned’ to their ancestral homelands with similar desires to “take it back to [one’s] roots.” Though the manner in which these “roots” were defined varied by individual, there was a general consensus that foreigner-heavy spaces such as Itaewon were not to be included.

It was for these reasons that most ‘returnees’ considered Itaewon to be a transitional space, or at least a space with which one kept a reasonable distance. Thus, while many ‘returnees’ continued to reside and/or frequent Itaewon despite its polarizing nature, other ‘returnees’ chose instead to make home in other parts of Seoul, and in rare cases, other parts of South Korea. While there were a number of other spaces inhabited or frequented by the ‘returnees’ in this study—such as the Gangnam-gu district in southwest Seoul (which had in recent years achieved global recognition through Psy’s “Gangnam Style” song), the Dongdaemun-gu district in northeast Seoul, and the Jongno-gu district in north Seoul, and even the southeastern city of Daegu—the most commonly frequented

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<sup>37</sup> Traditional Korean housing

alternative to Itaewon was the region surrounding Hongik University in west Seoul, often referred to as the Hong-dae area (Hong-dae being an abbreviation for *Hongik Daehakgyo*<sup>38</sup>). Though Hongik University itself is located at the border of Seogyo-dong and Changjeon-dong, the larger Hong-dae area that ‘returnees’ most often referred to is a mostly borderless space that lay to the northwest of the campus, covering parts of Seogyo-dong, Donggyo-dong, and Changcheon-dong. In fact, there did not seem to be any definitive sense on where exactly the Hong-dae area began and ended. Part of this ambiguity stems from the location of the University itself. First off, the Hongik University subway station (or Hong-dae yuk) is located about 500 meters north of the University itself at the border of the Donggyo-dong and Changcheon-dong neighborhoods. Though quite far from Hong-dae itself, Hong-dae station still serves as one of the central landmarks of the Hong-dae area, thereby significantly expanding its borders. Second, Hongik University is one of the four mid-to-large sized universities located within a 6-kilometer radius around Hong-dae station (with Seogang University or Seo-dae to the East, Yonsei University or Yon-dae to the north, and Ewha University or E-dae to the northeast), making this region of Seoul one of the most youthful, vibrant, and eccentric in the entire city.

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<sup>38</sup> Daehakgyo is the Korean word for “university”



**Figure 5** Hongik University (red balloon) and the larger “Hong-dae” area (Google Maps 2016a)

The Hong-dae area proved a popular alternative to Itaewon among ‘returnees,’ often because of its vibrancy and youthfulness. Moreover, Hongik University itself was renowned for its architecture and art programs, thus contributing to the number of aspiring artists and musicians residing around the campus. In turn, ‘returnees,’ as well as Seoulites in general, flocked to this bustling college area because of its convenient access to theatre, art, and music venues, in addition to the area’s wide range of bars, restaurants, cafes, and clubs. Given the location of this space between four prominent universities, the Hong-dae area also happened to be one of the more diverse areas in Seoul in terms of race/ethnicity, nationality, and language use. But unlike Itaewon, where US service men



and migrants were a very visible minority if not at times the majority, the migrant and/or international student community in the Hong-dae area was noticeably less present; an almost nonexistent minority relative to the considerably higher figure in Itaewon.

It was this apparent lack of a significant foreign population in the Hong-dae area that appeared to serve as one of its most attractive features for ‘returnees.’ While there were a number of things that both the Itaewon and Hong-dae areas shared in common—such as their buzzing nightlife scenes, consumption-forward cultures and economies, and sense of community—it was their distinct demographic differences that seemed to relegate Itaewon as being polarizing and even undesirable, while Hong-dae as hip and trendy. Specifically, the fact that Hong-dae had all these qualities but was still distinctly “Korean” in its demographics and culture seemed to most attract those ‘returnees’ who wished to immerse themselves into spaces that were more authentically Korean, or at least Korean ‘enough.’

If anything, interviewees’ distaste for Itaewon relative to comparable areas in Seoul (such as the Hong-dae region) said as much about the positionalities of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ as it did about the district itself. Indeed, many of the criticisms that ‘returnees’ raised about Itaewon and its outlying neighborhoods—namely that they were vapid, consumer-forward areas that catered to tourists and self-segregating foreigners—were in some ways valid. But so too was the fact that Itaewon played a central role in the adaptation narratives of a countless number of migrants in Seoul, including many of the US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in this study. The love-hate relationship that many interviewees exhibited toward Itaewon thus appeared to reflect a deeper reality—one in which the outward rejection of a space deemed “American” helped not only to validate

their motivations for ‘returning,’ but also to authenticate their positions within the larger Korean society.

### Returnees, American-ness, and work

A substantial amount of research on ethnic return migration has confirmed that it is a phenomenon guided by economic processes at both the macro and micro levels. This body of research has also showcased the manner in which an individual’s nationality and upbringing can have serious material consequences on his/her ‘return.’ In the cases of US-raised Korean ‘returnees,’ this study and others have illustrated how this population benefits socioeconomically in South Korea because of the material privileges, or human capital, bestowed upon them by their US citizenship and upbringing. What this body of prior research has not shown, however, is how exactly the economic benefits associated with an American upbringing and/or identity manifest in the lived experiences of ‘returnees.’ Nor have these works, with the exception of Helen Kim Lee’s (2012) research on working ‘returnee’ women, gone into any specific detail about how ‘returnees’ experiences of work in South Korea influence their perception of South Korean civil society, along with their own positions within it.

Accordingly, this section examines the types of work performed and occupations held by the US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in this study, as well as the manner in which their employment is contingent upon their US nationality and upbringing. I find that ‘returnees’ are clustered into three distinct sectors of work in South Korea: Academic-Linguistic, Politico-Military, and Professional-Entrepreneurial. While each sector is undeniably different, I argue that the overwhelming tendency of ‘returnees’ to be

employed within them is intricately linked to their status as Americans. Furthermore, I find that for some ‘returnees’ the centrality of an American-ness within their South Korean occupational lives deeply influences the way they perceive South Korean society and their own positions within it. Specifically, these ‘returnees’ conceive of South Korea as an economic frontier and land of opportunity, in large part mirroring the settler colonial mentality so central to the “American Dream” discourse of meritocracy in the US.<sup>39</sup>

Table 2

*Interviewees organized by sector of employment<sup>1</sup>*

<b>Academic-Linguistic</b> (n = 11)	<b>Politico-Military</b> (n = 7)	<b>Professional-Entrepreneurial</b> (n = 15)
Abraham	Amelie	Dee*
Dan	Glen	Elizabeth
Dorothy	Helen	Jane*
Eugene	Jamie	Jin Soo*
Eunji	John	Kenneth
Grace	Joyce	Lee*
Jason	William*	Nicholas*
Jiho		Patrick*
Michael		Phillip
Monica		Rebecca*
Nancy		Robert
		Ryan*
		Sam*
		Sarah
		Teresa*

\* Represents individuals who were also currently or formerly employed in the Academic-Linguistic sector

<sup>1</sup> Only employed interviewees were included in this table.

<sup>39</sup> Before I proceed, I think it important to note that not all ‘returnees’ were employed. There were two interviewees, David and Olivia, who resided in South Korea as full-time college students and did not have an income-earning occupation. That being said, ‘returnees’ such as David and Olivia were in the minority among the dozens of other ‘returnees’ with whom I met and interviewed. While their voices appear elsewhere in this dissertation, I elected not to include them in the analysis for this section.

### *Academic-Linguistic work*

‘Returnees’ were most commonly employed in what I refer to as the Academic-Linguistic sector. Of the 35 ‘returnees’ formally interviewed, 22 had relocated to South Korea already having established jobs teaching English or with the hopes of landing such a position shortly after their arrival. The allure of the Academic-Linguistic market was for the most part self-evident. Of the types of occupations available to ‘returnees,’ English teaching positions were often the most abundant and accessible, and required minimal prior training or expertise. They also paid well, relatively speaking, with base salaries almost always exceeding 24 million South Korean won a year (or approximately \$24,000/year). While this figure may not seem that substantial, it is important to keep in mind that most foreigners hired to teach English received startup and housing benefits, such as paid airfare to and from South Korea and a monthly housing stipend, bringing the base yearly salaries for English teachers to north of 30 million won/year (or more than \$30,000/year). Additionally, English teaching jobs typically hired or renewed contracts on a yearly basis, providing ‘returnees’ with some flexibility should they later desire to pursue better paying opportunities elsewhere after their contracts ended.<sup>40</sup>

Given the societal demand for English-language education, finding employment as an English teacher in South Korea was not difficult. Most ‘returnees’ acquired jobs teaching English as a second language at privately run institutions called *yōngŏ hakwŏn* (or English academy). As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, the *yōngŏ hakwŏn*

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<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the temporary nature of Academic-Linguistic work also meant that teaching English in South Korea was rarely thought to benefit one’s professional/career development. In most cases, however, the accessibility and relatively high pay rate of these positions outweighed their low level of prestige.

industry was omnipresent in South Korea, its popularity symptomatic of the nation's widely recognized "English fever" (Seth 2002; SH Park & Abelmann 2004; JK Park 2009). *Yöngö hakwön* littered city blocks throughout nearly every metropolitan area in the country, and were an especially noticeable presence around primary and secondary schools. According to interviewees, students as young as five spent hours of their days and weeks in *yöngö hakwön* perfecting their English language reading, writing, and speaking skills alongside native English speaking instructors. In many *hakwön*, these instructors were US-raised Korean 'returnees.'<sup>41</sup>

A number of interviewees walked me through the process of obtaining work at a *yöngö hakwön*. In general, the process of becoming a *yöngö hakwön* teacher in South Korea was comparable to that of any other job: people found openings through the typical channels (social networks and job wanted ads), applied for openings by submitting their resumes, then (assuming they were a qualified candidate) interviewed for the position. The factors that made the process of obtaining an English-teaching position in South Korea distinctive were the types of qualifications that were desired, especially in the private sector (such as *yöngö hakwön*). Given that English was a foreign language in South Korea, candidates for English teaching jobs were expected to be English-speaking

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<sup>41</sup> To be sure, there was considerable variation in the types of English teaching positions available to 'returnees.' To work in the South Korean public school system, for instance, one typically needed to apply through official government channels either in the US or South Korea. One of the most common practices among 'returnees' was to apply through a South Korean government program named EPIK (English Proficiency in Korea) that hired hundreds of college-educated native English speakers from abroad to teach English at primary and secondary level South Korean schools. EPIK applicants spanned the globe, but were required to be citizens of nation-states that used English as their primary or official language. For Americans, there also existed the option of applying to US governmental initiatives such as the Fulbright program, which provided year-long scholarships to teach English (and also to act as cultural ambassadors to the US) in a large number of foreign countries. Of these, South Korea was one of the largest importers of Fulbright scholars, with yearly figures of around 100-150. Of the nine interviewees that relocated to South Korea to teach English, three took either the EPIK or Fulbright route. This relatively low number had less to do with the lack of desirability of these programs than the competitiveness of their application process.

foreigners. This meant that, at a minimum, applicants were required to have degrees from accredited four-year universities in a native-English speaking country and (preferably) to be citizens of that country. These minimum qualifications were almost always listed in the calls for applicants that I and other ‘returnees’ reviewed, and nearly every participant in this study met these prerequisites. According to numerous interviewees, however, there were also implicit expectations that were not officially advertised, or were written in coded language that obfuscated their actual intent. For example, interviewees argued that *yōngŏ hakwŏn* employers tended to give preference to applicants who “looked foreign.” Indeed, in most occasions applicants were required to include a professional headshot with their resumes, providing the perfect opportunity for employers to weed out applicants based on appearances alone. While such a practice was unethical and likely illegal, the majority of interviewees were confident that it was commonplace. After all, they proclaimed, until recently *yōngŏ hakwŏn* employers were widely known to discriminate explicitly in their ads, at times even excluding applications from non-white foreigners. More recently, though, many *yōngŏ hakwŏn* had started to use less racially or ethnically coded language, instead barring applicants according to their visa status and effectively weeding out “Overseas Korean” applicants such as the ‘returnees’ in this study. The problem, a ‘returnee’ named Nicholas stated, was that even with citizenship and higher education degrees from the US, US-raised Koreans were deemed as “not looking foreign enough.” Who was the ideal foreign-looking employee, then? “White Americans,” interviewees unanimously responded.

Many ‘returnees’ thus found themselves in a strangely familiar position of having to establish or prove their American-ness beyond their official credentials in order to

position themselves as more competitive candidates in the South Korean English language job market.<sup>42</sup> Returnees' admitted to using a variety of techniques to make themselves appear more "American." Those with traditionally Korean first names, such as Jiho, Jin Soo, and Eunji, revealed applying to positions with anglicized nicknames. Others, such as Abraham and Dan, feigned complete ignorance of the Korean language to reinforce the notion that they were native English speakers. And then, of course, there was the act of making sure that during interviews one announced in ways that sounded more "American," something that a number of participants (somewhat ashamedly) admitted to doing.

It was thus evident that, whether done consciously or not, there were a handful of ways that 'returnees' relied on both their formal and informal connections to the US to assist in their employment in the Academic-Linguistic sector. Though in many instances their official connections to the US (such as their citizenship and qualifications) helped to get their feet in the door, so to speak, the preference for applicants who were not ethnically Korean also forced 'returnees' to act in ways that heightened their claims to an "American" subjectivity, at least superficially. Ultimately, then, working in this sector required 'returnees' to deftly balance their desires for cultural immersion and gainful employment, knowing full well that these two qualities were often at odds with one another.

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<sup>42</sup> It was perhaps for this reason that some interviewees, such as Sam, Patrick, and Dan, claimed that multiracial US-raised Koreans were often in the best position to find work teaching English in South Korea. Not only did many multiracial US-raised Koreans have informal networks in South Korea who could alert them of job openings, those with non-Korean surnames and fair complexion also had the capacity of "passing as white" in South Korea, thus improving their employability.

*Politico-Military work*

‘Returnees’ were also well represented in a sector of the South Korean economy that I call the Politico-Military sector. The Politico-Military sector consisted of employment opportunities offered in South Korea through the United States government, such as through the US Armed Forces or Department of State. As employees of and ambassadors to the US, ‘returnees’ with jobs in this sector quite literally worked to expand the political and military jurisdiction of the US beyond its national borders. For these ‘returnees,’ their connections to the US played a pivotal role in their gainful employment, with all positions requiring that candidates be US citizens, among other prerequisites or qualifications. Furthermore, unlike the English teaching positions most often acquired by ‘returnees,’ jobs in the Politico-Military sector were typically seen as desirable because they aided in further developing one’s professional career in both South Korea and in the US.

There were seven ‘returnees’ who were employed through the US government at the time of our meeting, or at a prior point during their tenure in South Korea. Of these seven, the ‘returnees’ who best exemplified the expansionist discourses integral to the Politico-Military sector were those who resided in South Korea through their employment with the United States Army. There were two ‘returnees,’ John and Glen, who fit this bill. Both John and Glen were 25-year old second-generation Korean American US Army officers stationed at Camp Casey, a US military compound located roughly 100 kilometers north of Seoul. At the time of our separate meetings, John and Glen had been in South Korea for 1.5 years and 2.5 years, respectively. Both explained



that they had requested to be located or transferred to South Korea as part of their tours of service. Previously, both had been located in the US; Glen at a base in Southern California and John at a base in Texas. When provided with the opportunity to rank their upcoming transfer locations, both John and Glen had requested to be stationed in South Korea. Both were transferred to South Korea shortly after. Admittedly, neither John nor Glen had moved to South Korea in the same voluntary manner as the other 'returnees' in this study, arriving in the country via a circuitous route through the US military that involved as much luck as it had intentionality. Still, both were adamant that their residence in South Korea had been contingent upon their willingness and desire to 'return.'

Despite the lengths of their stays, neither John nor Glen was very knowledgeable about life in South Korea. Among those interviewed, in fact, Glen and John unsurprisingly retained the closest ties to their American selves. While both agreed that they were now more competent in Korean cultural norms than they had been upon first arriving, they, especially John, also lamented their inability to become more immersed in South Korean society and culture. Their distance from South Korean society and culture was a product of multiple factors. First, as US Army officers both Glen and John held residences in Camp Casey, a space within the borders of the South Korean state but technically under the jurisdiction of the US. Both Glen and John spent a majority of their waking hours within Camp Casey, only finding time to explore other parts of the country (such as Seoul) during select weekends. As John revealed, although Camp Casey itself was and located in South Korea, it was common for him to momentarily forget that he was actually living outside of the borders of the US. After all, there were few signs within

the confines of Camp Casey that indicated that they were in South Korea. Aside from the few hundred South Korean nationals who worked on base as service personnel, as well as a few South Korean national flags that waved overhead, John explained that he otherwise felt that he was in any other Army base in the US. It was only when he caught glimpses of the snow-capped or lush green mountain backdrop beyond the walls of the military base that he was reminded of his actual locale.

Furthermore, as literal uniform-clad embodiments of US foreign policy, both John and Glen were expected to consistently monitor their actions and behaviors to uphold US and local codes of law, regardless of their location and/or dress. Adhering to such protocol was relatively easy when within the walls of Camp Casey. However, things became murky when either John or Glen found the time to stroll the streets of neighboring South Korean cities. John, for instance, went to great lengths to ensure that he did not wear his US Army uniform out in public. Though he could not quite articulate why this act made him feel so uncomfortable, he admitted that it “felt weird” donning the US Army uniform in front of a South Korean populace that he viewed as being “his people.” Interestingly, neither John nor Glen were willing to reflect upon the presence of the US military in South Korea and their own functions within it. In fact, because I had originally been acquainted with both participants outside of a military context, I often ignorantly brought up my objections to the US military presence in South Korea during our interviews, forgetting that the people I was interviewing were intricately connected to the very institution that I critiqued. In every instance, both John and Glen became noticeably uncomfortable, often trying not to evoke too much of a defensive stance while pointing out that the US military had helped the South Korean people in countless ways. I

found this interchange fascinating because as they defended the role of the US military, they consistently positioned themselves as objective bystanders and never as employed soldiers. Whether they wished to recognize this caveat or not, it was apparent that at the very least the interviewees realized that as diasporic Koreans, their presence in South Korea as US Army Soldiers was peculiar, if not contradictory.

There were also ‘returnees’ in my study who were employed in South Korea through the United States Department of State (US DoS). Though there were a few routes that one could take to work for the US DoS in South Korea, the only two institutions that were represented by the ‘returnees’ in this study were the Korean-American Educational Council (the South Korean branch of the US DoS-led Institute of International Education) and the US Embassy in Seoul. While US citizenship was not a prerequisite to becoming employed at either institution (both employed substantial numbers of South Korean nationals), the positions held by ‘returnees’ were typically exclusions to this rule. That is to say that the positions held by ‘returnees’ within these institutions were usually those that required that applicants be US citizens. For example, the four interviewees who were affiliated with the Korean-American Educational Commission (KAEC) all arrived in South Korea as Fulbright Program grantees. Of the four, three (Amelie, Jamie, and Joyce) were current or former recipients of a Fulbright research grant, a year-long award that provided select US citizens with funding and resources to conduct independent research in South Korea. Likewise, William was a ‘returnee’ who had within the past year been hired as an administrative assistant for the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant program headed by the KAEC, a position for which he was eligible only because of his participation in the Fulbright program during the two years prior. Helen was the lone

individual in the sample employed at the US Embassy in Seoul. Through a somewhat convoluted route of prior employment as both a news agency intern and an English language journalist, Helen had earned a job in the public relations division of the US Embassy in Seoul nearly two years prior to our interview date. Again, while it was relatively common for the US Embassy to hire local South Koreans at a variety of levels, positions such as Helen's were strictly reserved for US citizens. Through her position, Helen was tasked with disseminating news and events regarding the US DoS to local news outlets and via the US Embassy's own social media outlets. She was also the point of contact for local South Korean journalists for matters concerning US diplomacy in South Korea.

Though not representing US expansionist practices in the same capacity as the two uniformed officers described earlier, these latter five 'returnees' were nevertheless cognizant of the "ambassador"-like role that they filled. Indeed, it had been their desire to reside (or continue residing) in their ancestral homelands that motivated them to apply for their US Department of State affiliated positions in the first place. But as 'returnees' whose presence was principally or in part contingent upon their employment by the US, these individuals also occupied functions beyond that of other 'returnees.' While 'returnees' in other economic sectors maintained ties to the US in more indirect ways (such as through their language use, cultural practices, and social networks), the interviewees employed in the Politico-Military sector upheld explicit ties to the US that manifested in their work. In effect, these seven interviewees, even as ethnic return migrants, continued to remain explicit subjects of the US state—residing in South Korea not only as Americans, but because they were American.

### *Professional-Entrepreneurial work*

Interviewees' connections to the US (or an American-ness) were also prevalent, albeit more tacitly, in the portion of the South Korean economic marketplace that I describe as the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector. Individuals located in this sector were either self-employed or employed by companies, institutions, or corporations that were not strictly associated with the US government or English language education. Unlike the positions available in the other two economic sectors, working in the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector did not usually require or even favor those with US citizenship. In some instances, interviewees' US nationality (or more accurately their foreign visa statuses) were detrimental to their attaining work in this sector. This was because occupations in the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector often necessitated at least a passing knowledge of the Korean language and customs, usually so that potential employees or proprietors could more easily interact with their South Korean coworkers, bosses, customers/clientele, and company/municipal officials. As a result, obtaining work in the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector was often considerably more challenging than in the Academic-Linguistic sector. Many 'returnees' in the Academic-Linguistic sector, in fact, viewed working in the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector as an ideal progression of their South Korean careers and often strived to transition into such positions after completing their initial stints teaching English.

This was easier said than done, however. In order to work within the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector, one was typically required to possess a considerable amount of social and cultural capital either in the US or South Korea, if not in both. For example,

nearly all of the ‘returnees’ located in this sector were individuals who had already spent a considerable length of time (at least a year) working in other South Korean sectors, and/or were individuals with advanced degrees or special qualifications from the US and/or South Korea. It was also possible for ‘returnees’ to secure positions within this sector prior to relocating to the country, though Robert was the only person in my sample who was able to accomplish this feat. Once in South Korea, it was typically one’s local work experience and social networks that provided the best opportunity for climbing the Professional-Entrepreneurial ladder.

This was not to say that participants’ connections to the US did not benefit them. Factors such as English language fluency, prior education in the US, and/or professional experience in the US certainly served as significant assets for a number of ‘returnees’ aspiring to work in this sector. Sarah, for instance, was a 33-year old second-generation Korean American ‘returnee’ who had moved to Seoul within the past year to start work as an Assistant Professor at the veterinary school of one of the nation’s top universities. Interestingly, Sarah had completed every level of her education in the US, and had not once visited South Korea prior to her current residence in the country. When asked what had motivated her to look for academic job openings in Seoul, she revealed that she had applied to her current position on a whim given that it was at her father’s alma mater, and she had long desired to live abroad. Because she had never attended school in South Korea, however, let alone even visited the country, she presumed that her application would be passed over. Ultimately, it appeared that both her academic credentials and work experience in the US helped her to overcome whatever deficiencies that may have stemmed from her position as a foreign-national.

Such was a narrative shared by a number of ‘returnees’ who worked in this sector, and was particularly the case for those who worked for South Korean companies, corporations, and organizations that did not cater to the English as a Second Language (ESL) market. In general, ‘returnees’ who were located in the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector were separated into two lines of work: those who were employed as English-language professionals, or what I call Professional English work, and those who were self-employed entrepreneurs. Within my sample, there were eight ‘returnees’ who worked as English-language professionals. Though they occupied a variety of positions in a wide range of companies and organization, these ‘returnees’ were similar to one another in that their employment was in large part provisional upon their English language fluency and their experience, education, or expertise in US corporate or academic settings. Jane and Jin Soo, for instance, were both ‘returnees’ who practiced law in South Korea after having received their law degrees in the US—Jane as an attorney at a small South Korean firm that specialized in medical law, and Jin Soo as the lone foreign legal counsel at a mid-sized South Korean company. Jin Soo explained that he was part of a growing number of foreign lawyers working full time in South Korea, many of who were US-raised Korean ‘returnees.’

**Jin Soo:** It has changed a lot since 2007, actually. At that time, when [my wife and I] were law students, not a lot of law firms or companies in Korea were hiring foreign legal counsels. They had Korean lawyers. They might have had maybe one or two US, Canadian, or British lawyers. But they weren’t hiring that many. But in 2007 when we moved, there was kind of a trend where law firms and companies were hiring more and more foreign legal counsels. A lot of Korean companies were going global, and they needed US lawyers to handle US or international transactions. If there were litigations, they needed someone to manage them. So more Korean companies were hiring US lawyers. The company that I work at right now, I’ve been with since shortly after moving to Korea. And

most of our business is outside Korea. I would say only about 10% of our business is inside Korea. So they needed a foreign legal counsel.

**Stephen:** And do they prefer people who are Korean American...

**Jin Soo:** Yes.

**Stephen:** ...as opposed to people who are not ethnically Korean?

**Jin Soo:** Right. Because even though I do most of my work in English, I still have to orally communicate with my coworkers. And I would say about 98% of them are Korean. [laughs] To be honest, I think I'm the only Korean American in my company of like 800. [laughs]. So, luckily for us, there was that trend. And now there are so many foreign legal counsels in Korea. I would say estimate there are like 1,500. There are that many. Companies like Samsung, they'll have over 100 foreign legal counsels. All the law firms have at least 20-30 foreign legal counsels.

**Stephen:** And are most of those individuals Korean American as well?

**Jin Soo:** I would say most of them are Korean American. Yeah.

According to Jin Soo, US-raised Koreans such as himself held a competitive advantage over other foreign professionals in South Korea's increasingly globalized marketplace not only because of their prior education and experience from the US, but also because of their ability to "communicate" with Korean coworkers. In doing so, it was apparent that Jin Soo was elaborating on the economic benefits bestowed upon US-raised Korean 'returnees' who could properly convey a hybrid Korean/American identity and demeanor, particularly within a workplace environment. In the case of both Jane and Jin Soo, the benefits of this hybridity (in this case their US upbringing and education, mixed with their Korean ethnicity and basic understanding of the Korean language and norms) manifested most clearly in their gainful employment.

To be sure, there were a number of less measurable or more abstract ways in which interviewees' connections to the US benefited them within the Professional-Entrepreneurial sector. The first such benefit was tied to the hybridity inherent in the workplace subjectivities of US-raised Korean 'returnees. As it turned out, this Korean/American hybridity factored heavily into all the different types of Professional



English work that ‘returnees’ held. For example, Robert was a 31-year old sales manager at a mid-sized tech company located just south of Seoul. When describing his position at work, Robert repeatedly likened himself to a “chameleon,” explaining that the work he did required that he put on different “masks” and “personalities” depending on the task and team with which he worked. While not quite as simple as bifurcating his “Korean” and “American” identities, Robert stated that working and succeeding in a South Korean company as a US-raised Korean required the ability to carefully play one’s American or Korean “cards.” Robert furthermore explained that though he was hired primarily as an English language liaison to foreign clientele, his Korean ethnicity meant that he was expected to uphold Korean workplace etiquette and hierarchy, at least to a higher degree than other foreign hires. As such, he was expected to abide by unwritten South Korean workplace norms, such as participating in post-work social gatherings (or *hwesik*), unpaid overtime work (or *yagun*), and other “team-building” exercises from which many non-Korean employees were exempt. Indeed, this was a common narrative shared by nearly all who were employed in the Professional-English sector. Though these ‘returnees’ were usually hired because of their connections to the US and were expected to use these skills and experiences in their work, there was still a level of nuance required of them in how “American” or foreign they portrayed themselves to others.

The other manner in which interviewees’ abstracted connections to the US benefited them within this sector was their ownership and exuding of a characteristic that I call, “hybrid cosmopolitanism.” For the purposes of this study, I define hybrid cosmopolitanism as a sense of cosmopolitan efficacy or prestige that was founded upon an individual’s status as a transnational American subject. Whilst in some ways

comparable to the Korean/American hybrid identity mentioned previously, “hybrid cosmopolitanism” is unique in that it functions more as a discourse or rhetoric shared among select US-raised Koreans rather than an identity. Specifically, ‘returnees’ adopted this discourse of hybrid cosmopolitanism to justify the economic success that US-raised Koreans experienced in South Korea.

Self-employed ‘returnees,’ or alternatively ‘returnee’ entrepreneurs, were the ones who most celebrated the narrative of a Korean/American hybrid cosmopolitanism. For ‘returnee’ entrepreneurs, emphasizing the hybrid cosmopolitanism of US-raised Koreans allowed for them to position themselves or their products as culturally unique and desirable within a South Korean context. Ryan, an artist and budding entrepreneur living in the Hong-dae neighborhood of Seoul, was one of the strongest proponents of this discourse, arguing that the entrepreneurial success of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in Seoul was closely tied to their hybrid cosmopolitanism.

I would never attempt to do a pizza place in the US. Are you kidding me? Get in line. But here, you can really play your American side. Like the foreign food here generally sucks. It’s all Korean people’s interpretation of foreign food, but not in a good way. It’s like putting cherry tomatoes on everything—it’s just awful. But the thing about Vatos<sup>43</sup> was that they weren’t trying to do authentic Mexican, or some watered down version for a Korean audience. They were trying to be Korean American. They were trying to do something that was different, something that was inspired by their own experiences. That’s what I’m trying to do with my pizza. I’m not trying to be Korean. I’m not trying to be American. I’m trying to do my own thing that you can’t find anywhere else. Like, for one of my pizzas, I use ingredients like *gochujang*<sup>44</sup> octopus and I boil it in tomato sauce for a really long time. I know that *gochujang* and tomato sauce go perfectly together because those are the flavors I grew up with. An American would never realize that. A Korean would never realize that. A Korean American would.

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<sup>43</sup> Vatos was the name of a popular Cali-Mex restaurant in Itaewon-dong.

<sup>44</sup> *Gochujang* is a red chili paste local to Korea.

By Ryan's account, 'returnee' entrepreneurs succeeded in South Korea not necessarily because they were able to bring foreign products and services that were more authentic to the original than the "watered down" versions that already existed in the country, but because they were able to harness their own hybridized positionalities and skillsets to create unique variants of popular dishes and goods. He further solidified this claim by eliciting his idea for a "*gochujang* octopus pizza." Ryan's *gochujang* octopus pizza served as a compelling analogy and metaphor for the hybrid cosmopolitanism of US-raised 'returnees'—with him insisting that it was the unique cultural experiences and biographies of Korean Americans that spurred their success in a city and country that increasingly craved global and cosmopolitan tastes.

Ryan's beliefs, while certainly ambitious, were not unfounded. There were indeed a number of burgeoning 'returnee' entrepreneurs who were or had already experienced significant entrepreneurial success while relying on a hybrid cosmopolitan discourse to either justify their new ventures or their continued success. Phillip, mentioned in a previous chapter as the co-founder of an urban wear and accessories brand, was another 'returnee' who banked on the appeal of a Korean American hybrid cosmopolitanism in his entrepreneurial endeavors. Even his brand's name served as a not so subtle reference to his and his brother's status as second generation Korean Americans. The products they sold were also an intentional representation of their hybrid cosmopolitanism—an intersection of the urban/street wear they had grown up with while living in the Tristate area and Southern California, with designs, materials, and dying methods that were distinctively Korean. There was also Nicholas, an adoptee who had started an independent publishing company with a few friends in Seoul. At the time of our

interview, Nicholas' company was preparing to release its first book—a young adult fantasy novel that was imbued with elements of Korean traditional folklore. Nicholas hoped that the book, more than simply being a source of entertainment, would serve as an educational tool at the *yǒngŏ hakwŏn* that he helped to manage. He was confident that by partnering his publishing company with numerous *yǒngŏ hakwŏn*, he and his partners could devise curriculum that not only made learning English enjoyable, but allowed for South Korean students to see themselves in the English language books that they read. While it was evident that Nicholas' idea for the book and the initiative came from a number of sources, he firmly believed that it was his upbringing in an education environment in the US that was not nearly as competitive and cutthroat as the one he taught in now that served as his biggest inspiration.

To a certain degree, all the 'returnees' in this sector banked on the marketability of their 'hybrid' identities, skills, ideas, and products, even if they were not as explicit in emphasizing or relying on its appeal. Through my conversations with these 'returnees' it thus became evident that they envisioned South Korea very much as a land of opportunity, as a largely untapped economic market where they could relocate to profit off of the skills, education, and experiences that they had acquired while growing up in the US. For these individuals, much of the allure of 'returning' to South Korea was attached to its framing as a new economic frontier, and they its frontiersmen and women. My allusion here to the colonial nature of interviewees' rhetoric and practices is intentional, though perhaps, a tad heavy-handed. That said, there was undoubtedly a level of truth, as well as a pang of irony regarding the treatment of South Korea as a new type of frontier space by the 'returnees' in this study. In effect, these interviewees relied on

discourses similar to those applied to US expansionist exercises into the Pacific in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a means to justify, if not necessitate, their presence within the country.

#### Conclusion: The complicated allure of being American in South Korea

This chapter elaborated upon the complex, variegated manner in which US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants' ties to the US and claims to an American identity, or an American-ness, emerge within their South Korean lives. Though in many cases 'returning' to South Korea as a means to 1) forego the racial and ethnic marginalization that they had experienced in the US, and 2) immerse themselves within their Korean cultural heritage, for the 'returnees' in this study it was immediately apparent that their formal and informal connections to the US played as central of a role to their societal adaptation than did their Korean ethnic affinity. The continued salience of an American-ness in interviewees' 'return' narratives was observed in numerous capacities, some more explicitly than others. In regards to their social identity and network development, for instance, interviewees' affinity to American culture and cultural practices served an important function in channeling them toward other migrants with similar backgrounds. Moreover, in a South Korean milieu where most interviewees were now a part of the ethno-racial mainstream, identifying as American possessed noticeably different connotations, serving as a way for 'returnees' to differentiate and disidentify themselves socially and culturally from the local Korean populace.

This disidentification from the South Korea mainstream by 'returnees, or alternatively their affirmation of an American subjectivity, was perhaps most observable in the types of spaces that they frequented and occupied. For example, in the second

section of this chapter I detailed the central, yet conflicted position that the Itaewon area of Seoul held within interviewees' South Korean lives. Itaewon was famous, or rather infamous, for being the most markedly American space within the confines of Seoul. Adjacent to the Yongsan US military garrison, Itaewon had long stood as a stark reminder of the US central involvement in South Korea's domestic and foreign affairs following the peninsula's "liberation" in 1945. In more recent decades, however, the neighborhood had gradually evolved into a thriving tourism center and migrant space. For the 'returnees' in this study, their affinity to Itaewon thus remained complicated. On the one hand, many acknowledged and even benefited from Itaewon's role as a transitional space for 'returnees' and other English-speaking expats. On the other hand, numerous interviewees criticized Itaewon for its heavy military and tourist presence, as well as the fact that it was "not Korean enough." Ultimately, however, the cultural familiarity of Itaewon (and other markedly foreign spaces) provided an allure from which most 'returnees' could not resist.

As evidenced in the third section of this chapter, embracing one's American-ness in South Korea also served as a sound economic move. Nearly every 'returnee' in this study was employed in occupations and economic sectors in South Korea that benefited overtly from their standing as Americans. Not only was their employment in many of these positions contingent upon their official ties to the US (such as through their citizenship, or the institutions through which they earned degrees and work experience), they were also influenced by interviewees' informal connections to the US (such as whether they appeared "culturally" American). As such, the ability and willingness to

accentuate one's American-ness in South Korea also paid economic dividends for 'returnees.'

There are numerous implications to these findings. First, it is possible to argue that interviewees' affirmation of their American ties in South Korea is primarily a reflection of the way in which transnationalism manifests at the micro-level. Previous research in migration studies has expanded upon the political, economic, cultural, and affective ways in which transnationalism is exhibited within migrant communities. The resilience of interviewees' connections to the US within their 'return' narratives could thus be interpreted as evidence of transnationalism in action.

Second, and as an extension of one of my primary claims in chapter two, the continued and arguably increased salience of an American-ness among 'returnees' in South Korea can again be interpreted in a redemptive manner. That is, much in the way that 'returnees' privileged conceptions and practices of gender that were culturally hegemonic in the US, the repeated affirmation of their connections to an American-ness within their South Korean lives served as a means to claim ownership and belonging to an American identity which had been largely unavailable to them in the US. In other words, given that they were no longer an American minority group in South Korea, there were far fewer opportunities for people to contest their American-ness. For all intents and purposes, they were the American majority in South Korea.

Lastly, and related to the above point, the emergence of an American-ness among 'returnees' can also be read as a neoimperial endeavor, or at least as an act that furthers the neoimperial agenda of the US. As a state established in large part through the military, diplomatic, and financial intervention of the US, South Korea has long served as

both part and parcel to US' expansionist desires into the Pacific. This neo-imperial bond shared between South Korea and the US has undeniably influenced South Korea's postcolonial trajectory, whether militarily, commercially, and/or culturally. Scholars have also articulated how contemporary South Korean-US relations have affected migration trends between the two countries, with South Koreans migrating to the US en masse during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ethnic return migration of US-raised Koreans thus serves as an excellent lens through which to view the continued salience of US Empire in South Korea. As members of a diasporic population born in the aftermath of US imperial expansion into the Korean peninsula, the 'return' of US-raised Koreans (and Korean Americans writ large) marks the literal and symbolic (if temporary) closing of the migratory loop engendered by US Empire. Moreover, as individuals inculcated with hegemonic discourses of US global supremacy for much or all of their lives, US-raised Koreans 'return' not only as diasporic Koreans but also as children (and proponents) of US Empire. This latter point was evidenced in numerous capacities throughout this chapter, but especially in my explanation of interviewees' economic positions, desires, and endeavors within South Korea. In addition to benefiting economically because of their American-ness, 'returnees' used rhetoric in justifying their presence in South Korea that was eerily expansionist in its nature, oftentimes likening the country as a frontier space for US-raised Koreans. If anything, these statements gave credence to the position that 'returnees,' largely unbeknownst to them, represent the overwhelming cultural, political, and economic influence that the US has had in the development of the contemporary South Korean state.



## **(Chapter four) Diasporic Reconciliation: Coming to terms with being an “Overseas Koreans” in South Korea**

In the previous chapter I examined the burgeoning salience of an American identity/subjectivity among US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ as they attempted to adapt to life in South Korea. Central to this examination was to understand the manner in which interviewees’ ties to the US impacted (and even benefited) their adaptation to South Korean society. I apply a noticeably different approach in this chapter, instead exploring how interviewees’ position as diasporic or “Overseas” Koreans influences their reception and long-term trajectory within South Korea. Previous works on ethnic return migration to South Korea have accomplished comparable endeavors by detailing the socio-legal barriers faced by Korean diasporic ‘returnees’ to their social incorporation (DH Seol & Skrentny 2009; CZ Song 2009; N. Y. Kim 2009; E. J. Kim 2012). This body of research has provided a comparative account of how societal prejudices, geopolitical factors, and global capitalism impact the ‘return’ trajectories (to varying degrees) of different diasporic Korean populations. Much of this research, however, has focused on the barriers to incorporation faced by ‘returnees’ from China and the Commonwealth of Independent States, typically only utilizing ‘returnees’ from the US as relatively privileged control group to which many of these obstacles do not apply. Conversely, the studies that have examined the adaptation narratives of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ have been limited in their scope, not taking into account the broader social processes impacting the relocation and adaptation of this migrant population.

This chapter thus adds to this body of literature by, 1) detailing the formal and informal impediments faced by US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ as they delve further into

South Korean society, and 2) documenting the ways in which interviewees respond to these barriers. Though at first benefiting from the human capital bestowed upon them by their connections to the US, I find that interviewees' statuses as 'returnees' significantly complicates their positioning within South Korean society the longer they reside in it, eventually situating them in a liminal social status that straddles the line between co-ethnic insider and non-citizen foreigner. In particular, I draw attention to the seeming "double-edged" nature of interviewees' 'return' experiences in South Korea—where, on the one hand, interviewees (as "Overseas Koreans") eventually encounter many of the same socio-legal barriers to societal incorporation as other ethnic Korean and non-citizen migrants in the country, while on the other hand, their status as ethnic Koreans also disqualifies them from playing the "foreigner card" or being ignorant of Korean cultural norms and practices (as can certain other American migrants). Most 'returnees' thus find themselves in a puzzling predicament where as US-raised Korean 'returnees' they are at once foreign, but not quite foreign enough. Ultimately, much like their experiences as "forever foreigners" and "model minorities" in the US, 'returnees' are forced to reconcile the limitations inherent to their societal incorporation in South Korea because of their status as outsiders.

### Situating Korean Diasporic Return within South Korean immigration policy

Given its relatively high rates of outmigration during its postcolonial period and strong ethno-nationalist state and cultural rhetoric, South Korea, or "the Hermit Kingdom,"<sup>45</sup> has served as a compelling site for the study of contemporary immigration policy and migrant

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<sup>45</sup> See GW Shin 2006 and Cumings 2005

integration. Long a migrant “sending” country (whether through voluntary emigration or international adoption), it was only within the past two decades that South Korea started to see a reversal of this trend. In 2007, for instance, the combined total estimate of documented and undocumented foreigners residing in South Korea surpassed the 1 million mark for the first time (Korean Immigration Service 2007). Much of this change was rooted in South Korea’s central involvement in the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, often referred to provincially as the “IMF Period” because of the substantial national debt owed to the International Monetary Fund during this time. Prior to that point, South Korea’s immigration policy had been largely undefined. Though it was restrictive in the sense that the South Korean state rarely issued domestic residency statuses for foreign migrants, immigration into the country was also mostly unregulated and tourists from neighboring regions routinely overstayed their visas to seek employment (N. H. Kim 2012). It was not until the introduction of the Industrial Trainee System (ITS) in 1992 that the South Korean state began to implement immigration policies designed to account for the growing number of (undocumented) migrants working and residing within its borders. Though the ITS program was considered by many scholars and politicians to grossly unethical, with some even referencing it as a “modern slavery system,” it was important insofar as it set the foundation for South Korea’s implementation of future immigration reform. In 1998, for instance, during the height of the country’s disastrous economic recession, the South Korean government enacted the Overseas Koreans Act and introduced a new F-4 visa classification aimed at attracting the capital and skilled labor of ethnic Koreans residing abroad. Without going into too much detail about the F-4 visa itself (descriptions of the visa can be found earlier chapters of the dissertation), its

enactment was significant for a few key reasons. First, it was the first time in South Korea's (admittedly brief) history that the nation-state officially recognized its "Overseas" co-ethnic population within its immigration policy, in this case distinguishing between them and other non-Korean foreigners. Second, in a historic period when most other nation-states were becoming more liberal or egalitarian in their immigration policy, South Korea trended toward the opposite, providing immigration preference not only to "Overseas" co-ethnics relative to other non-Korean foreigners, but also to "Overseas" co-ethnics of higher socioeconomic status who were primarily from wealthy Western nations (DH Seol & Skrentny 2009; N. H. Kim 2012; Yamashiro 2012). In fact, it was not until the introduction of the Special Work and Residence Visa (H-2) in 2006, as well as the expansion of the F-4 visa to include a larger subset of "Overseas Korean," that South Korea's co-ethnic immigration preference was extended to most if not all of diasporic population, greatly increasing the already substantial rate of ethnic return migration into the country. These series of bills have continued to serve as the foundations of South Korea's immigration policy to this day.

Despite the enormous success of these new policies in stimulating the 'return' of diasporic Koreans, scholars have been critical about South Korea's hierarchical approach to "ethnizenship," or non-citizen ethnonational membership, at both legal and social levels (CW Lee 2012). According to research by Dong-Hoon Seol and John D. Skrentny (2009), ethnic return migrants not only receive limited avenues to obtain South Korean citizenship, they are also allotted differing legal statuses and social positions according to their country or region of origin. For example, while most co-ethnics from wealthy Western nations such as the US, Canada, and Australia have immigrated largely as

teachers and professionals under the F-4 (Overseas Korean) visa designation (which technically grants them all of the same economic rights as South Korean citizens), ‘returnees’ from most Asian states have until recent years only been allowed entry only through low-wage work visas (H-2) that have barred them from many of the legal and employment benefits afforded to F-4 visa holders (Seol & Skrentny 2009).<sup>46</sup> This hierarchizing had a significant impact on the social standing of ‘returnees’ in South Korea. For example, research shows that ‘returnees’ from China and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are more highly stigmatized and discriminated against by the South Korean citizenry than their American and Canadians counterparts, often times because of the occupational and socioeconomic limitations placed on them by their visas (Seol & Skrentny 2009; Song 2009). Even as a country with strong ethnonational rhetoric in its political and social spheres, it was apparent that the notion of a Korean nationhood extended unevenly across its diaspora.

For these reasons, scholars argue that the affective expectations of Korean ‘returnees’ often go unfulfilled upon experiencing discrimination and marginalization in their ancestral homelands. This is especially true for ‘returnees’ originating from other neighboring countries such as China and Russia, where the hopes associated with relocating to South Korea are met with the reality of living as low-wage laborers who frequently bear the brunt of anti-immigrant rhetoric and politics (Seol & Skrentny 2009; Song 2009; Yi & Jung 2015). Studies about Korean ‘returnees’ from the US also illustrate how cultural alienation remains a significant barrier even to those with

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<sup>46</sup> This has noticeably changed in recent years, with South Korea removing regional restrictions for F-4 visa eligibility in 2008. In 2013, for instance, the number of F-4 visa holders from China, 512,120, vastly outnumbered those from the US, 45,253, and Canada, 13,586 (Korean Immigration Service Annual Report 2013).

comparatively privileged legal and socioeconomic positions, such as 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans and Korean American adoptees (N. Y. Kim 2009; E. Kim 2012; H. Lee 2013; S. C. Suh 2016b). Though the benefits provided by their F-4 visa statuses and relatively high levels of human capital may initially act as buffers to discrimination, scholars argue that many eventually encounter significant roadblocks to their societal incorporation not unlike those experienced by H-2 ‘returnees.’ Thus, regardless of their countries of origin, feelings of alienation appear to remain a constant among the narratives of all Korean return migrants, indicating the glaring disjuncture between rhetoric and reality that exist for ‘returnees’ at both the personal and state-policy levels.

## Koreans Only in Name

### *Formal/Legal barriers*

Of the thirty-five US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ interviewed for this study, few held illusions about being embraced as “Korean” upon moving to South Korea, cognizant that they were relocating to their ancestral homeland as both foreign nationals and cultural strangers. That said, many individuals moved to South Korea with optimism regarding their ‘return.’ They were hopeful and at times even confident that their Korean ethnicity would grant them a higher level of acceptance (relative to the country’s other immigrant populations) from the South Korean state and populace. Interviewees had good reason to feel optimistic about their positions in South Korea even prior to their actual moves.

After all, most interviewees relocated to South Korea under the F-4, or “Overseas Korean” visa designation—a special South Korean visa that permitted domestic residency in three-year renewable intervals for ethnic Koreans up to two generations removed from

the homeland.<sup>47</sup> In many regards, the existence of this residency status itself was an indication to interviewees that the South Korean state supported their ‘return,’ and that there was an intrinsic value to being ethnically Korean in South Korea regardless of one’s residency status. In effect, many interviewees were aware of the sociocultural weight that Koreans placed on ethnicity and its conceptual variants (such as “blood,” or race), and were thus hopeful that they would be socially accepted upon ‘returning.’

Unfortunately, interviewees’ optimism would be tested early on upon relocating. For many ‘returnees,’ the move to South Korea marked the very first time in their lives that they were non-citizen residents of a nation-state, meaning that they were not only socially but legally differentiated from the South Korean nationals who they crossed paths with on a daily basis. This legal differentiation was immediately observable even through their visa designations. That the legal residents who held the F-4 visa were designated as “Overseas Koreans” even as they lived and worked in South Korea was telling. Though as “Overseas Koreans” these individuals were (sans voting) technically

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<sup>47</sup> Though nearly all participants in this study were eligible to receive the F-4 visa, not everyone applied for it. This was a product of a few important factors. First, there were a handful of individuals who were residing in South Korea under the A-2 visa—a residency status provided to non-citizens who were residing in South Korea under the jurisdiction of a foreign nation. Individuals who had received teaching or research grants from the US State Department, such as the Fulbright Award, were the most common holders of this particular visa. Other US State Department employees who resided in South Korea, such as people who worked for the US Embassy in Seoul, were also common recipients of the A-2 visa. [How many?] US military personnel deployed to South Korea, such as John and Glen, were exempt from traditional visa laws, meaning that neither held specific visa designations during their tenures in the country. If either wished to reside in South Korea after their service with the Army concluded, however, they would be eligible to apply for the F-4 visa. In total, there were **26** individuals residing in South Korea under the F-4 visa designation. The F-4 visa status was but one of several F-type visas typically designated for non-citizen residents in South Korea. The F-4 visa was the only one of the six specifically set aside for ethnic or “Overseas” Koreans. That said, it was possible for F-4 visa holders to transition into other F-4 series visas. For instance, given her status as a business owner, Rebecca was hoping to apply for the F-5 (Permanent resident) visa. While many of the parameters were similar, the F-5 visa benefited from the fact that it did not need to be renewed every three years.

privy to most of the same rights and privileges as South Korean citizens, it became quickly apparent to most interviewees that there were many caveats to this rule.

Through our conversations, ‘returnees’ revealed a plethora of ways through which they, as “Overseas Koreans” or *kyop’o*, came to understand the superficiality of their connections to a South Korean nation and populace. Many of these were presented as formal or legal barriers to their societal integration—as limitations to their receipt of or access to basic rights and resources that stemmed from their positions as non-citizens and “Overseas Koreans.” Examples were plentiful, with some barriers more easily noticed than others. One oft-referenced issue concerned the fact that interviewees’ residency statuses and accompanying 13-digit Resident Registration Numbers (RRN) provided limited access to many of the basic social services and resources that South Korean citizens took for granted. Akin to the social security number in the US, the RRN is a national identification number provided to all of its citizens, as well as legal residents who are in the country through a South Korean-state issued visa (such as the F-4 visa). The RRN is an integral part of South Korean life, as it is required to sign up for basic services and utilities throughout the country. Beyond these basic necessities, an individual’s RRN is also typically required for a number of non-essential, but still useful services, such as purchasing goods from online merchants, registering for store rewards programs, or even accessing web-based apps. It was perhaps because of its seeming ubiquity that the South Korean resident registration number posed so many issues for ‘returnees.’ The problem with the RRN (and the services that required it) was two-fold. First, not all ‘returnees’ possessed a resident registration number. Though many ‘returnees’ resided in South Korea with a domestic visa that provided them with a RRN,



there were a number of interviewees with A-type (foreign diplomat) visas or foreign military clearances who were not issued one. While these individuals were technically legal residents of South Korea, they resided in the country as affiliates or ambassadors to foreign states, meaning that they remained under the legal jurisdiction of the US even as they lived in South Korea. Because of this, these individuals often possessed very limited access to utilities and services in South Korea, or were required to work through affiliate programs provided by the US embassy or through their employers to receive such access. Taking these alternative routes usually enabled these ‘returnees’ access to special bare-bones “foreigner” accounts at banking and telecom institutions, but little else.

Second, while it was undoubtedly preferable to possess a Resident Registration Number while living in South Korea, access to social services was not demonstrably better for ‘returnees’ even with domestic visas, many of whom learned firsthand that not all Resident Registration Numbers were created equal. In many instances, in fact, the RRN assigned to foreign residents appeared to serve more as a legal formality than meaningful societal benefit. Numerous interviewees with resident registration numbers complained about being ineligible to register for South Korean web-based apps and other web-based services. Even signing up for things such as retail rewards programs, let alone anything that involved access to a line of credit, proved immensely challenging if not impossible for RRN-holding ‘returnees.’ Many ‘returnees’ were thus forced into devising alternative means to access programs and services that were otherwise unavailable to them. To purchase goods online or to register for web-based services, for example, some ‘returnees’ resorted to borrowing the resident registration numbers of relatives who were unlikely to need such services, such as a grandparent, or by having South Korean friends

or relatives make purchases on their behalf. Others simply made do without some of these conveniences. Patrick, though lamenting the difficulty he encountered purchasing basic goods online, qualified his statement by saying, “I mean, you don’t have to order things off the Internet. You can just buy stuff in stores.”

While Patrick was willing to forego some of these conveniences and privileges, he and numerous other interviewees still complained that the restrictions to access that they encountered as “kyopos”<sup>48</sup> or ‘returnees’ were evidence of the fact that they as a group were a mere political afterthought in South Korea. Jason, for example, vented his frustrations about his inability to register for certain programs and services because the “system” would not recognize his resident registration number:

The F-4 visa has [a resident registration number]. Or rather, as an F-4 person you have one. So in some sense, we are deemed as being sort of above the standard foreigner. But at the same time, some systems don’t recognize [my number]. Or they say you’re a foreigner so you can’t sign up. So we’re not really Korean in that sense. So it’s not only our own perceptions of not feeling completely Korean, but it’s also the government and society who’s also telling us that we’re not quite Korean, for that matter.

Jason was quite frustrated, and expectedly so, by the lack of access that his residency status provided him in South Korea. After all, what good was having a Resident Registration Number if one’s status as an “Overseas Korean” overrode most of its useful features? For interviewees such as Jason, then, the limited functionality of their resident registration numbers was emblematic of the numerous formal restrictions to their societal integration, and served as further proof that they were “not quite Korean.”

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<sup>48</sup> “Kyopos” was pluralized and “Konglish”-ized (hybrid Korean-English) version of the Korean term for “Overseas Korean,” *kyop’o*.

As ‘returnees’ delved deeper into South Korean society, the types of barriers that they faced as a result of their precarious legal statuses became progressively more noticeable, making it increasingly difficult for them to write off their bouts with marginalization as merely a nuisance. When applying for jobs outside of the English teaching sector, for instance, ‘returnees’ strongly believed that their foreign citizenship and/or their F-type visa status prevented them from receiving call backs for positions that were not specifically advertised for foreigners or native English speakers. A ‘returnee’ named Patrick, for instance, explained that in the rare occasions that he received calls for in-person job interviews in the corporate sector it was because the hiring committee had neglected to notice his F-4 visa status in his application. These legal barriers proved particularly troublesome for ‘returnees’ attempting to open small businesses in South Korea. Rebecca, one of the five entrepreneurs in the study, knew from firsthand experience the challenges that non-citizen entrepreneurs faced when attempting to navigate through the South Korean legal and tax systems. Rebecca explained that as a foreigner she was required to work through a seemingly endless number of legal roadblocks when trying to open her two small businesses in South Korea:

Running a business [in South Korea] as a foreigner, people will always try to say “no” to you. For example, if I go to the tax office and tell them I need to get this license, their first response will always be like, “No, you’re a foreigner.” And they won’t even try to look into it for you until you push them. Another example, in one of our companies we have three shareholders; one Korean and two foreigners. And when we were making our corporate license, our Korean partner said, “Well, I will use my accountant because that is who I’ve been working with.” But his accountant had no experience with foreigners. So when the Korean partner went to the accountant and told him that he needed to make a Korean corporation with two foreign shareholders, the accountant told him that he couldn’t do that—that foreigners couldn’t be shareholders in Korean corporations. And we had to tell the Korean accountant that it was possible, that our other business also had foreign shareholders. It was obviously possible. Anyone can be

a shareholder in the business. They may not have a working visa, or be a South Korean citizen, but they can still be shareholders. So really, I think these are indicative of the fact that once you get deep enough into the system here you hit this mentality that foreigners aren't allowed, some of which actually has a legal precedent. Basically, the deeper you go the harder it is to be a foreigner within this system.

While Rebecca's above account focused primarily on the difficulties associated with opening a small business in South Korea as a non-citizen, it also reflected the general sentiment of exclusion that she and other 'returnees' encountered as they made their way through various state and private systems that were clearly not designed with non-citizens in mind. Rebecca basically stated as much, arguing that the "deeper" foreigners pushed into South Korean society, the more pushback they received from the laws and institutions that stood as the foundations of the country's civil society, forcing 'returnees' to reconcile the marginality inherent in their legal statuses. Unsurprisingly, it was the interviewees who had resided in South Korea for substantial periods of time (e.g., several years) such as Rebecca and Patrick who were most cognizant of these barriers to access.

For 'returnees' who were intent on living in South Korea long-term or even permanently, there were a few avenues they could take to improve upon their lesser legal statuses as "Overseas Koreans." Somewhat unexpectedly, of the options available, attempting to obtain South Korean citizenship was generally thought to be the least feasible if not the most undesirable. The infeasibility and undesirability of obtaining South Korean citizenship were tied to a few key justifications. First, though becoming naturalized as a South Korean citizen was not inordinately difficult for ethnic Koreans, in most cases it required that newly naturalized citizens renounce their current citizenship and/or nationality. Though a 2010 bill legalized dual citizenship in South Korea for the

first time, its applicability was limited and in most instances did not pertain to the participants of this study.<sup>49</sup> Second, for the men in this study, obtaining South Korean citizenship also meant that they would be expected to complete the on average 18-month military service required of all able-bodied South Korean men. While a few men were open to the idea of naturalizing in South Korea even if it meant partaking in nearly two years of mandatory military service, the vast majority of ‘returnee’ men interviewed had no such intention.

The more feasible option to elevate one’s legal status in South Korea as a ‘returnee’ was to apply for permanent residency (F-5) status. The requirements for obtaining permanent residency in South Korea were relatively modest for ‘returnees,’ with the following major prerequisites: 1) have resided in South Korea for two or more years, 2) have an annual income of more than twice the per-capita gross national income, or roughly \$35,000/year at the time of this writing, and 3) not have a criminal record in South Korea (Korea Immigration Service, *Staying in Korea*). Of the thirty-five ‘returnees’ interviewed for this study, however, not a single person had received or even applied for permanent residency in South Korea by the time of our meetings. While there were a handful of interviewees who contemplated applying at some point in the near future, the aforementioned Rebecca being one of them, the vast majority of interviewees were either undecided or were (at the time) ineligible to apply. To be sure, this general disinterest did not stem from interviewees’ apathy concerning their legal statuses in South Korea, but rather from their hesitancy to make the country their permanent home (more on this in the following chapter), as well as the belief that attaining permanent residency

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<sup>49</sup> See Korea Immigration Service, “Dual Nationality,” for more details

did not necessarily grant them the upward legal and social mobility that they desired. As people saw it, the main benefit that the F-5 (Permanent Resident) visa granted over the F-4 (Overseas Korean) visa was that as a permanent resident one's visa no longer needed to be renewed. Otherwise, both were F-series visas that presented 'returnees' with similar if not the same formal barriers to societal incorporation that they already faced.

As such, interviewees residing in South Korea with the F-4 visa status were generally content renewing their visas when the time approached, while interviewees who wished to extend their stays in South Korea beyond the capacity of their current non-F-series visas generally intended to apply for the F-4 visa. This desire to remain on the F-4 visa indicated that while the formal/legal barriers that interviewees encountered in South Korea were undoubtedly troublesome, it was really the manner in which these exclusions called into question their social standing within the country that proved more detrimental to the 'returnees' in my study.

#### *Informal/sociocultural barriers*

In addition to the legal or formal barriers to societal incorporation mentioned above, there were a number of informal or socio-cultural barriers that marginalized US-raised Korean 'returnees' in South Korea. Though these informal barriers were seldom devised to be explicitly discriminatory or exclusionary, they still reinforced interviewees' perceptions that, even as ethnic Koreans, they inhabited a lesser social status in South Korea than their citizenship-holding counterparts.

Korean language and cultural proficiency, or the lack thereof, served as two of the most prominent sociocultural barriers that plagued 'returnees' in their attempts to

acculturate. Given that nearly all interviewees had procured employment in South Korea in large part because of their English language expertise and US upbringing, many arrived in the country with little to no proficiency in the Korean language or cultural norms. For instance, of the thirty-five ‘returnees’ interviewed, fewer than half ( $n = 17$ ) arrived in South Korea with the ability to converse in Korean at an elementary level, and only about a fifth ( $n = 8$ ) were what I would describe as proficient, meaning that they could speak, read, and write Korean at a basic level. In fact, I detailed in an earlier chapter that many ‘returnees’ had desired to relocate to South Korea in part to (re-)learn the Korean language through the process of cultural immersion.

Ironically, once in South Korea many ‘returnees’ found themselves in a predicament where, although they wished to gain fluency in Korean, much of their livelihood was devoted to teaching and working in English. Moreover, English use was so prevalent in parts of the country that, if so desired, ‘returnees’ could often make do in their day-to-day lives without speaking more than a few words of Korean by simply avoiding the tasks or spaces that required it, effectively minimizing the impetus to gain fluency. Several interviewees bemused that stores and institutions in neighborhoods such as Itaewon-dong so heavily catered to English-speaking patrons and clients that it was likely possible to live in these areas for several years without learning more than a few key Korean phrases.

Nevertheless, lacking Korean language or cultural proficiency served as an important issue with significant detrimental consequences for many interviewees, especially those who had grown up with limited exposure to the Korean culture and language while in the US. Not being proficient in the Korean language could turn the

completion of the most mundane, everyday tasks into nearly insurmountable obstacles. Ordering delivery food, for instance, was considered by many interviewees to be one of the staples of South Korean urban life. One could have all sorts of different cuisines delivered almost always for free to one's home or workplace within minutes of ordering. But for numerous interviewees, this was an impossible task. These individuals admitted to being reluctant to partake in South Korea's delivery food culture (and really any other service based transaction) on their own, largely because they were apprehensive and self-conscious about verbally communicating with South Korean nationals. One 'returnee' named Nancy even joked, "Ordering delivery has been one of my most stressful and embarrassing moments in Korea."

While Nancy was able to find humor in the linguistic barriers she faced, her witticisms undoubtedly pointed to the larger social inequities that impacted the 'returnee' community. Specifically, and connecting back to the findings in the previous chapter, interviewees' lack of Korean language fluency made difficult or even prevented their access to much of South Korean civil society, segregating them into spaces, jobs, and networks that catered to the general English-speaking migrant population. Though many poured countless hours into learning and/or mastering the Korean language, interacting with native speakers still proved an immensely daunting task for most. Several interviewees, in fact, acknowledged that their lack of language fluency served as the most significant roadblock to their societal adaptation, as well as their aspirations for upward socioeconomic mobility.

Taken as a whole, the informal barriers that 'returnees' faced in South Korea operated much in the same manner as the microaggressions that they had encountered



while growing up as ethnic/racial minorities in the US. Meaning, the examples of social exclusion that interviewees referenced were seldom hostile or antagonistic in their nature, but rather playfully or even complimentarily called attention to their status as foreigners. David, a full-time student at Korea University, was one of the few ‘returnees’ with a strong command of the Korean language. Even still, or perhaps as a result, David often received remarks from South Korean nationals praising his fluency, with the caveat that he spoke well for a “*kyop ’o*,” or that he had a “*kyop ’o* accent.”

David: Koreans have this sort of radar when they can tell if you’re not from the country. Like, many people have told me that I have what they call a *kyop ’o* accent. They’ll say that it’s maybe 90% close to what they would hear from people who are born and raised in Korea, but something about the vowels or consonants might be just a little bit off. But once they hear that, they say, “Where are you from?”

These comments about his accent, David claimed, typically transitioned into questions concerning his country of origin. Somewhat ironically, these questions closely resembled (in theme and consequence) those that interviewees had fielded about their race and ethnicity while growing up in the US. That is to say that, regardless of the societal context in which these questions were asked, they served primarily to bring attention to the individual’s apparent foreignness. Thus, much like the microaggressive acts that interviewees encountered in the US had called into question their claims to an American social identity, the microaggressions that ‘returnees’ faced in South Korea called into question their claims to a Korean social identity.

Beyond questions concerning one’s country of origin, microaggressive comments made toward US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ closely resembled the backhanded compliments about fluency that David raised in the previous quote. Another ‘returnee’

named Jin Soo provided a few examples of the array of microaggressions he received on a regular basis from his interactions with South Koreans:

As soon as they know you're *kyop'o*, they don't really treat you like a Korean. I hear this comment a lot if I do something that they didn't expect me to do. They'll say, "한국 사람 다했네!" ("You're almost Korean!") I hear it all the time! Like, if I tell a joke that Koreans would actually tell, or when we go to Korean restaurants and I order a "Korean" dish, They'll do the whole, "Can you eat that?" or "When did you start eating that?" Or they'll ask me if I miss eating hamburgers. So yeah, they absolutely do treat me differently.

For interviewees such as David and Jin Soo, their interactions with South Koreans were often mired with comments and questions that consistently called to attention their seeming non-normativity. Though in most cases 'returnees' could write off these types of statements as stale attempts at humor, they still ran the residual effect of forcing interviewees to question their participation in social settings with high numbers of South Korean nationals. Much like the way that interviewees' race or ethnicity had served as their tokenizing characteristic in majority white settings in the US, it was their nationality (and the "cultural" attributes connected to it) that appeared to stand out as their unintentionally foreignizing feature in South Korea.

Nowhere were the detrimental effects of these informal barriers more apparent than with the accounts of multiracial or mixed race 'returnees.' Because many multiracial 'returnees' were immediately recognized as being foreign through their physical appearances, they tended to experience levels of discrimination that far exceeded those of other 'returnees.' Whereas monoracial 'returnees' tended to experience marginalization because of their lack of cultural and linguistic fluency, many took solace in their ability to blend in phenotypically. Such was a luxury typically not afforded to the multiracial 'returnees' in this study, many of whom drew unwanted attention in public spaces

because of their appearances. Eugene was a self-identified “Amerasian” ‘returnee’ who was all too familiar with receiving unwanted attention in South Korean public spaces because of his appearance. As a ‘returnee’ with fair complexion (Eugene’s father was white), Eugene explained that South Koreans generally presumed that he was not of Korean descent and thus interacted with him accordingly:

It’s hard to talk about these things because they’re various forms of microaggressions. So if I say, someone yelled “Hello” at me on the street, people will be like, “big fucking deal!” But the thing is that I cannot go anywhere in Korea without having to deal with bullshit! I can’t go to the *pyunijum* (convenience store). I can’t walk down the street. I can’t ride the bus. I can’t ride the train. Any kind of daily activity, going to a restaurant, even.

While Eugene was able to recognize that the attention he received in public spaces was likely a product of his appearance being a “novelty” in a purportedly mono-ethnic South Korean society, the inability to complete ordinary tasks without soliciting gazes and comments from strangers was something that exasperated him deeply. As Eugene explained, it was not so much the intent of the actions themselves that affected him as it was their relentless frequency and the contexts in which they occurred. In a milieu where it was generally uncommon for strangers to greet one another in public settings, Eugene’s constant receipt of undesired attention illuminated the harsh truth of his non-normative corporeality. The accumulating impact of these incidents was so detrimental that Eugene revealed that he and his Amerasian ‘returnee’ peers would plan out their daily routines in ways that minimized their potential encounters with these microaggressive acts. Though he accepted that monoracial ‘returnees’ also encountered marginalization in South Korea, he contended that there were ways that *kyop’o* could go under the radar and “blend in,” adding, “Other Korean Americans can be a lot more invisible in Korea than me.”

Other mixed-race ‘returnees’ were not quite as embittered as Eugene about the treatment that they received in South Korea. This was not to say that they were any less cognizant of the discrimination that they faced in South Korea because of their mixed-heritage. Most of the other multiracial ‘returnees’ were also disillusioned by the microaggressions that they experienced in South Korea, providing accounts that mirrored many of those spoken by Eugene. That said, the other mixed race ‘returnees’ were often more willing than Eugene to look past these inequitable experiences when recollecting about their lives in South Korea. These individuals appeared to rely on two factors to vindicate the microaggressions they faced in South Korea. First, a number of mixed-race ‘returnees’ remarked that the stigma of being a multiracial Korean was something that was not new to them. In addition to the race-based marginalization they had experienced from the larger American society, many maintained that they had also faced exclusion from the diasporic Korean community in the US long before their ‘return’ trips to South Korea. Dan, another mixed-race participant in my study, revealed that he grew up thinking that “half Koreans” such as himself were “placed a bit below full Koreans” within an imagined global “Korean hierarchy.” This belief, Dan added, came from his prior childhood interactions with other diasporic Koreans in the US. Grace, a multiethnic ‘returnee’ from Stockton, CA, made similar assertions, admitting that as a child she disliked attending the local Korean church with her mother because she felt alienated from the other US-raised Korean children. It thus appeared that mixed-race ‘returnees’ such as Grace and Dan—much like the manner in which ‘returnee’ women seemed better poised to manage South Korean gender relations because of their prior apprehensions—

were better prepared to endure the microaggressions they encountered in South Korea in part because they had already anticipated it.

Another factor that appeared to mitigate the stress associated with social marginalization for mixed-race ‘returnees’ was the belief that, in South Korea, all ‘returnees’ were treated as foreign minorities. This was not to say that every ‘returnee’ experienced the same kind of discrimination in South Korea—they clearly did not. But whereas 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans had seemingly served as the gatekeepers to an abstracted “Korean-ness” in the US, in South Korea it was apparent that they held no such authority. Dan, for example, explained how he amended his previous understanding of “Korean hierarchy” upon moving to South Korea and witnessing the kinds of difficulties that all US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ experienced:

After I moved to Korea, I saw that a lot of “kyopos” (or monoracial Korean Americans) had also been placed to a lower level because of the way they spoke and their lack of knowledge of the culture. So now I see it as, if you don’t speak Korean and you don’t know Korean culture then Korean society is not going to consider you a real Korean.

For Dan, there was a narrative of marginality that all US-raised Koreans shared in South Korea, regardless of their background. Thus, while he still lamented over numerous discriminatory aspects of South Korean life, it was this mutual experience of not being a “real Korean” that appeared to make the sociocultural barriers that he encountered more bearable.

Adoptees were another group of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ who encountered their own unique set of microaggressions. Adopted ‘returnees’ explained that the microaggressions they faced were oftentimes voiced as pity or as expressions of guilt for the presumed ordeals that they had endured as orphans and adoptees. Nicholas, one of the

four adopted 'returnees' in the study, elaborated upon the different kinds of microaggressions that 'adoptees' such as himself combatted in South Korea, and the impact that these incidents had:

If you're Korean American, sometimes Koreans will give them shit because they can't fully speak Korean. For us, once they find out that we're adopted, they don't get mad at us, but they pity us. And that's a whole different kind of feeling of exclusion. We don't want to be pitied. It's not your fault that 200,000 kids got shipped out of Korea in 50 years. It's the government's fault.

For Nicholas and other adopted 'returnees,' being the subject of "pity" called to attention the liminality of their statuses in South Korea, as well as the non-normativity of their own American upbringings. Though adopted 'returnees' recognized that these expressions of pity were meant to be empathic, they nevertheless found them to be mostly empty gestures. Moreover, given that the adopted 'returnees' whom I interviewed tended to already hold complicated relationships with their Korean identities, incidents such as these tended only to make matters worse. It was for these reasons that all of the adoptees in this study admitted to being hesitant about revealing their biographies to others in South Korea. In the previous chapter, for example, an adopted 'returnee' named Dee explained that, even though she maintained strong ties to the adoptee community in South Korea, she had resigned to referring to herself as a "*kyop'o*" in most social settings. Doing so, she argued, took away much of the uneasy tension that she had previously encountered when publically identifying as an adoptee. Ultimately, while identifying as *kyop'o* in South Korea may have provided adopted 'returnees' such as Dee a momentary reprieve from the stigma of non-normativity, she and numerous others recognized that there were shortcomings intrinsic to the social status of all 'returnees.'

Not completely foreign, either

While interviewees were undeniably frustrated by their inability to shed their outsider status in South Korea, what they claimed made matters worse was their incapacity to simply adopt the role of foreigner. 'Returnees' lamented that because of their Korean ethnicity, they were not afforded the same flexibility to operate outside of Korean cultural norms as other foreign residents in South Korea. 'Returnees' thus appeared to occupy a nebulous, double-edged role within South Korean society where they were neither insiders nor outsiders, neither Korean nor foreigner.

The inability of 'returnees' to simply act as foreigners, or what many referred to as "playing the foreigner card," was evidenced in numerous capacities. The South Korean workplace, for example, was an area of contention for many 'returnees' because of the uneven treatment or expectations they received from their coworkers and bosses. This was especially the case for 'returnees' who worked in companies with few other foreign employees. Though nearly all 'returnees' were largely ignorant of South Korean workplace customs and practices, many realized the hard way that they were not excused from adhering to these unwritten rules as were other foreign employees. Dorothy, one of the few interviewees who had some success navigating this cultural maze, detailed the difficulties that 'returnees' experienced in trying to transition to the South Korean work environment:

For Korean Americans who are in majority Korean work environments, like public schools for example, they are in many cases given the same expectations that are given to other Koreans. For example, they need to speak Korean, or are asked to do tasks x, y, & z that non-Korean foreigners wouldn't be expected to do. I think the reason why I've been able to assimilate so well in Korea is that all of that is natural for me. But Korean Americans who don't have that kind of

background, they're constantly asked, "Why don't you do this? Why aren't you like this?" Non-Korean foreigners can often just use what we call the "foreigner card." Where they get excused from doing things or knowing things because they're a foreigner. Korean Americans don't really get to use that card.

According to Dorothy and numerous others, 'returnees' were typically not awarded the same amount of leeway as non-Korean foreigners for matters concerning Korean language and cultural proficiency. Whereas foreigners not of Korean descent could be excused from specific workplace expectations by playing the "foreigner card," this was generally not viewed as an option for US-raised Koreans. As another 'returnee' named Amelie put it, "If you're Korean American ... [locals] feel that you should be able to just figure things out."

Granted, even 'returnees' with high enough levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency to obtain jobs in South Korean companies, such as Jin Soo and Robert, still struggled with the expectations placed on them. Like Patrick, many of these grievances lay in the ambiguity of their positions within (workplace) environments that were predominately comprised of South Koreans. Jin Soo, for instance, was hired as his company's sole foreign legal counsel, meaning that he was tasked with nearly all of the paperwork written in English and/or dealing with international trade law. He also happened to be the only non-South Korean citizen employed within any of the company's ranks. Because of the uniqueness of his position and his limited Korean proficiency, Jin Soo, quipped the following: "I've felt so isolated in the company during the entire five years I've been there! [laughs] I feel like they don't know what I'm doing and they just kind of leave me alone to do my own thing. It's been pretty difficult because I still have a hard time figuring out what they expect from me." Though he had been with his company



for over five years, Jin Soo felt that there was still a level of ambiguity surrounding his position, as well as the types of workplace and social expectations that his coworkers had of him. Though during business hours he tended to work alone, Jin Soo still felt the immense pressure to learn and abide by South Korean work norms, even if they came at the detriment of his personal wellbeing. Participating in office teamwork and moral boosting exercises, such as *hwesik* (after work social gatherings) and *yagun* (non-paid overtime work), were things that Jin Soo learned to incorporate into his work schedule early on so that he could appear as more of a team player to his colleagues and seniors. While he had not been one to consume alcohol during workdays, he quickly discovered that after work drinking with coworkers was a staple of Korean work culture to which he needed to adapt:

Jin Soo: There was a [South Korean national] in the HR team who was hired around the same time I was. He told people he didn't drink [alcohol], so during *hwesik* he would just drink soda. And people said stuff about him ALL the time, just because he didn't drink [alcohol]. That was one of the first lessons I learned about Korean work culture. You have to drink.

Despite disliking this aspect of South Korean work culture, Jin Soo acknowledged that he felt the need participate in these “team-building exercises” regularly in order to win over the favor of his coworkers. Roughly two years into his job, however, Jin Soo explained that he started to abstain from participating in *hwesik* because it was adversely affecting his health and workplace productivity. His non-participation gradually led to his exclusion from future team social events, again isolating him in his own workplace.

Even more disheartening for interviewees was the manner in which their inability to “play the foreigner card” directly impacted their employability on the job market. Many ‘returnees’ lambasted the hiring practices utilized by South Korean companies

when filling positions designated for foreigners, arguing that, 1) they preferred candidates who not only had foreign citizenship but also “looked the part,” and, 2) if hiring ‘returnees’ expected that they be fluent in Korean. The first issue occurred most commonly in privately owned *yǒngǒ hakwǒn*, where interviewees stated that non-Asian foreigners were preferred because they were thought to more properly embody English language fluency and were thus more marketable to South Korean parents. In such scenarios, interviewees claimed that US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ were routinely passed over for positions because they did not properly exude the foreignness that the employers desired.

Monica: So I was new and I didn’t know how much I was supposed to get paid, what was right or wrong, or even what I was supposed to negotiate for. I just wanted a job. But I would get rejected again and again after they found out about my ethnicity. Like, my name is totally American...Monica Smith...so I got a lot of job interviews. But when they figured out that I was Korean, they would simply stop contacting me.

Monica’s situation was representative of the handful of ‘returnees’ in my study who possessed “American” (read: non-Korean, or white) surnames and had applied for jobs at *yǒngǒ hakwǒn* upon moving to South Korea.<sup>50</sup> In an English-language job market that preferred candidates who were “foreign,” US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ believed that they were often able to get their foot in the door because of their “non-Korean” surnames. Once their potential employers ascertained that their appearances did not match the racial profiles provided by their names, however, they would often abruptly stop corresponding.

Indeed, these kinds of accounts were not limited to ‘returnees’ with “American” surnames. In fact, nearly all interviewees with experience applying to or working for the

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<sup>50</sup> Of the participants in this study with “American” surnames, Monica was the only one who was not either adopted or of mixed-heritage. In Monica’s case, “Smith” was the surname of her white American stepfather.

private Linguistic-Academic sector suspected that South Korean employers hired US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ only as an alternative when unable to field qualified white candidates. Though some ‘returnees’ downplayed these discriminatory hiring practices by claiming that they were no longer practiced as widely, other interviewees such as Dee asserted that these practices were instead implemented more covertly.

They used to discriminate really blatantly in their ads. Now they do it more subtly by visa status. They used to say, no Koreans, or white applicants only. But now they say, no F-4 or E-2 visa holders. Or they’ll require a picture on your application. In the past, if they wanted a Korean American they usually wanted them to be fluent in Korean, too. So they would give you language tests over the phone. Or they would offer you positions without any benefits even if you had more qualifications than other people.

According to Dee, while it was now less common for companies to explicitly state their racial, ethnic, national, or gender preferences in the job advertisements, application requirements such as visa status and professional headshots allowed them to discriminate against a wide pool of foreign candidates. Patrick, a long-time resident of Seoul and a burgeoning entrepreneur, was one of the ‘returnees’ most aware of the effects of these biased hiring practices. He recalled the frustration and embarrassment he experienced when applying to Professional English positions after receiving his MBA degree at one of South Korea’s top universities.

Patrick: After I received my MBA, I applied to maybe about ten jobs? I received two interviews, but neither of them led to anything. I think a big part of that was because my Korean wasn’t very good. Because I would walk in and I would tell them my Korean wasn’t very good but they would insist on doing the interview in Korean anyway. Even when they told me beforehand in the email that they wanted a fluent English speaker and that the interview would be in English. I guess I don’t blame them for that, but it was still frustrating.

For Patrick, his frustration lay chiefly in the fact that his F-4 visa status and lack of Korean language fluency appeared to make his employment in South Korean companies

all but an impossibility, even as he limited his searches to Professional English work. These types of language-related exclusionary incidents were common throughout the entire sample, with the rare exceptions coming from individuals who were proficient in both the Korean language and Korean cultural norms. Such people were relatively few in number, with only seven interviewees having a command of the Korean language and cultural norms that they could nearly “pass” as locals. The vast majority of interviewees, however, could not claim this level of Korean linguistic and cultural proficiency.

Through the examples provided by interviewees, it was clear that South Korean employers placed preference on candidates who, 1) supposedly embodied the nationality or race of a native English speaker (read: white), or 2) were really not foreign at all. Using these metrics, to be a competitive foreign applicant in the South Korean job market meant that one had to either appear the part, or show high levels of Korean language and cultural proficiency. Ultimately, and ironically, these hiring practices appeared to Orientalize and tokenize US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ candidates even in their ancestral homeland. Furthermore, these hiring preferences within the South Korean job market alluded to the covert (and not so covert) ways in which nationality and race intersected to form a “foreigner hierarchy” within the South Korean English language job market in particular, and in South Korean society in general. Several ‘returnees’ commented on this societal prejudice, often referring it to as “racism” within a South Korean context. In general, interviewees, such as Jane and Nicholas below, proclaimed that there were very apparent ways in which foreigners were hierarchized:

Jane: The way a foreigner is treated in South Korea really depends on what kind of foreigner you are, or what kind of foreigner Koreans think you are, based on perceived race, nationality, and gender. In general Koreans are just very generous

to white folks. I don't think they're so generous with black folks. I've had plenty of taxi drivers say that they don't want to pick up black people in Itaewon. Also, I think they have very mixed reactions to any kind of overseas Korean, especially if they're *joseonjeok* or some kind of American who can't speak Korean. I think South Koreans can be very unwelcoming of them.

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Nicholas: Simply put, Koreans are racists. They put Caucasian Americans at the top compared to any other nationality or race, [diasporic Koreans] included. They're treated the best. Koreans hate Chinese. They think they're cheap and dirty. It's pretty awful the things that they'll say about Chinese. You'll also hear some pretty racist things if you're black. Cab drivers won't even pick them up.

The thoughts shared by Jane and Nicholas were not only eerily similar to one another, but also to the “foreigner hierarchies” provided by numerous other interviewees. Nearly all possessed the strong impression that, among migrants in South Korea, white migrants (particularly white American migrants) were privy to the most social privilege and least discrimination. Conversely, most interviewees reported that all other migrant groups in South Korea experienced various forms of marginalization based on their race, ethnicity, or nationality. Interviewees’ assessments of the “foreigner hierarchy” in South Korea closely matched theorizations proposed by Nadia Y. Kim (2008) in her own research on race and racialization in contemporary Korea, as well as Chulwoo Lee’s (2012) work examining the disparate claims to ‘ethnizenship’ allotted for different groups of ethnic return migrants in South Korea. N. Y. Kim, for example, asserts that the US’ colonial presence in South Korea has had deep implications on many facets of modern Korean society, such as its economy, migration patterns, gender relations, and, central to her argument, race relations. She posits that as US influence on the region strengthened following the Second World War, the Western construct of “race,” along with the social hierarchies associated with it, became firmly embedded into South Korean cultural ideology. Interestingly, some of these racial characteristics had existed within a Korean

cultural framework long before they were affirmed by US influence. For instance, because South Korea was primarily an agrarian society for much of its existence, for centuries whiteness or paleness of skin was considered a mark of high class for its implication that the individual could afford not to work out in the sun. N. Y. Kim thus maintains that the ubiquity of Whiteness within an American racial construct only worked to strengthen these prejudices, as well as introduce new ones. CW Lee's notion of ethnizenship helps to illustrate a different type of social hierarchy observed in South Korea. As the term itself implies, CW Lee elaborates on the special non-citizen residency status provided by the South Korean state to ethnic return migrants, in effect incorporating "Overseas Koreans" within the nation's borders without extending them the same rights and privileges as citizens. Furthermore, CW Lee explains that different groups of ethnic return migrants are themselves hierarchized along geopolitical lines, with their countries of origin greatly impacting the rights and privileges allotted to them as 'returnees.' Taken together, these two frameworks helped to substantiate the "foreigner hierarchy" theories confessed by interviewees, as well as the intersecting ways in which US-raised Korean 'returnees' were coded (and discriminated against) in South Korean society.

### Reacting to exclusion

Though nearly all interviewees revealed experiencing social marginalization in South Korea because of their dual statuses as "Overseas Koreans" and 'returnees,' the manner in which they responded to this discrimination varied across the sample—ranging from quiet acceptance, to "self-segregation," and also self-policing. Interviewees' reactions

and responses to exclusion in South Korea proved particularly noteworthy because of the ways in which they emulated the practices they had previously utilized to cope with experiences of racial marginalization in the US. It was apparent that ‘returnees’ often relied on understandings of race and ethnicity that they had internalized while growing up in the US to make sense of their new positions within South Korean society. Despite the difficulties they encountered, however, many individuals also carefully qualified their criticisms by expressing hope about their futures, as well as the futures of other ‘returnees’ and migrants, in South Korea.

To begin, many interviewees believed that the discrimination of foreigners was so prevalent in South Korea that it was not in their best interest or even futile to practice any form of resistance. These individuals responded to discrimination in South Korea by quietly accepting it as a normative process to their societal adaptation. Far from being indifferent or apathetic to this issue, however, individuals who chose not to dwell on the discrimination they encountered in South Korea typically did so in order to minimize its harmful effects on their personal wellbeing. Many of these individuals, such as Dan, admitted to at first being “defensive” or antagonistic about the objectification that he and other ‘returnees’ received from South Korean nationals. Dan explained that over time he became accustomed to these types of experiences and learned to simply “accept” them as a function of living in South Korea as a ‘returnee’:

During my first year, I was very defensive about things [that brought attention to my foreignness]. Like, if people asked me if I could use chopsticks, I would get offended. And if I saw someone using a fork, I’d be like, “Wow, you can use a fork?” Things like that. But by the second year I had kind of accepted that that’s just how it is in Korea. I stopped fighting it.

Dan later admitted to being “in a much better place” after making a deliberate effort not to become incited by discriminatory or microaggressive remarks made by South Koreans. This was not to say that he simply ignored all the discriminatory actions that he encountered. Instead, he chose his “battles,” saving his time and energy for incidents that he perceived to be gross injustices. Another ‘returnee’ named Robert provided a similar account, using the colloquialism, “it is what it is,” to justify how he was able to “put up” with the stress and alienation that he experienced at his workplace as the lone foreign employee in his team.

Robert: Honestly, while I enjoy living here for the most part, there are times when I regret coming to Korea. It’s mainly because there are times when I don’t feel like I fit in. Like, I conflict with people like my team members and bosses—people who are above me at work. I work hard but I don’t get any recognition for what I do because I mostly work alone. Or [my other team members] are not willing to consider my point of view on something because I’m a foreigner. Ultimately, I know I’m doing this for myself but I want to be recognized a little bit, too. So sometimes I’ll be in that mood where I question why I put up with this, but the next day I’ll be ready to go. It is what it is.

Though both Dan and Robert lamented the difficulties that they encountered because of their pigeonholing as foreigners, they were also able to justify these experiences as conditional to living and/or working in South Korea as a ‘returnee.’ While these experiences undeniably negatively impacted interviewees’ livelihoods, at times even to the point where they “regretted” ‘returning,’ many were ultimately willing to tolerate these inequities by accepting them as a normative part of adapting to South Korean society.

While there were numerous adverse consequences to accepting objectification as simply a part of South Korean culture, the most glaring was its impacts on interviewees’ behaviors. For example, in the previous chapter I detailed the manner in which



‘returnees’ gravitated toward spaces, jobs, identities, and networks that foregrounded their connections to the US. While some interviewees viewed these practices in a negative manner by likening it to the practice of self-segregation, it was evident that these actions also worked as a defense mechanism or moderator against the social isolation and marginalization that ‘returnees’ experienced. For a ‘returnee’ named Nancy, her desire to connect with South Koreans was problematized by her inability to proficiently communicate in Korean.

Nancy: Sometimes I just feel so isolated. I can connect with people, but especially dealing with Korean people, it’s very superficial. I can only have basic conversations. Nothing deep. It takes a while to find commonality and people I can do that with. And unfortunately or fortunately for me, right now that can only be with Western people.

‘Returnees’ such as Nancy simply did not possess the linguistic capacity necessary to seamlessly navigate through South Korean society, and were thus pushed into environments where they could rely on their ties to the US to make ends meet. Rather than a matter of choice, then, there were larger social inequalities in play that guided ‘returnees’ into specific pockets and spaces within South Korean society.

Another consequence of simply accepting their marginalized status in South Korea was that it encouraged interviewees to constantly police their own actions to minimize the potential chastisement or scrutiny that they received from South Korean nationals about their apparent foreign-ness and cultural non-normativity. Much of this revolved around a politics of respectability, with interviewees endeavoring to present themselves in ways that highlighted their standing as “good foreigners.” Teresa, while reflecting on her behavior in public settings in South Korea, even likened her tendency to self-police to that of Asian Americans adopting the role of the “model minority” in the

US. Much in the way that some interviewees admitted embracing the “model minority” discourse while growing up in a discriminatory American society, ‘returnees’ like Teresa revealed embracing a similar typology in South Korea so as not to be perceived as an “ugly ‘kyop’”:

I guess on a broader level, there’s sort of this constant thinking of how my actions will be perceived. And this may be something that I put upon myself, but I feel like I need to be a great ambassador for Korean Americans. If I try to be full Korean, or Ko-Ko as I like to say, people can tell. As soon as I open my mouth and I don’t sound quite native, people know I wasn’t raised here or educated here. So I’m constantly thinking about being a good ambassador for Korean Americans or North Americans or expats. Or whatever else kind of group I’m assumed to represent. I think about that a lot. Basically, I don’t want to be the ugly “kyop.” ... Funny enough I never felt the pressure of being the model minority in the states. But here I feel like I should be.

According to Teresa, her impetus to self-police was provided by her desire to be a “good ambassador” for the larger ‘returnee’ and expat communities. In effect, Teresa felt the need to bear the burden of an entire group of migrants so as not to reinforce their stereotyping as “ugly” Americans or “kyopos.” The problem with this reasoning, as Teresa herself later mentioned, was that the image of the “good ambassador” necessitated the social proliferation of an “ugly *kyop’o*”-type figure—an individual who was socially derided for his/her inability to display high levels of Korean cultural competency. In effect, the pressure to self-police relied on a politics of respectability that lauded those who were both willing and able to abide by certain social norms while subordinating those who could not.

While many ‘returnees’ experienced the pressure to self-police, there were noticeable differences to how and why interviewees felt this burden. In particular, there was a stark divide in rationale provided between monoracial and multiracial ‘returnees.’

For monoracial ‘returnees’ such as Teresa, self-policing served as a means to both distance one’s self from negative stereotypes about migrants and foreigners while showcasing one’s Korean cultural competency. In effect, these ‘returnees’ wished to portray that they were assimilating into South Korean society, or at least diligently attempting to do so. For multiracial ‘returnees,’ however, their “foreign” appearances presented additional hurdles in their quest for societal acceptance.

There was little that these individuals could do to obscure their apparent foreignness or to even situate themselves as “good,” assimilable ‘returnees.’ As a mixed-race ‘returnee’ named Amelie put it, “Whenever I interact with Korean people they will 99% of the time make a comment about...being surprised at the level of Korean that I speak. And then for me it becomes a decision of, ‘I know the different ways that this conversation can go. How do I feel about it, and how do I want to deal with this conversation today?’” For mixed-race ‘returnees,’ then, self-policing served as a technique that helped to foster their emotional and physical wellbeing in what was at times perceived as an unsupportive or even hostile South Korean social environment. Eugene, much like Dan stated earlier in this section, remarked on the need to self-police as a form of self-preservation:

I’ve never been to Lotte World<sup>51</sup>. You think I’m gonna go to Lotte World and complain about getting harassed? I’m not a fucking idiot. Of course I will get harassed at Lotte World. I don’t get to just go to Lotte World. So it’s just like living here and being able to survive is all about understanding, being smart about where you can and can’t go, what you can and can’t do. For me, as someone who is unwilling to play the role of a fucking white guy, I’m not gonna come in and be like, “Oh, how are you doing? Do you speak English?” [Imitates white American voice] So yeah, it’s just really difficult. You’ve just gotta learn exactly how much you want to fight with a person.

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<sup>51</sup> Lotte World is a large theme park located in the Jamsil district of Seoul. It is owned and operated by the Lotte Corporation, a multinational food conglomerate based in South Korea.

Much like the other multiracial interviewees, Eugene likened his day-to-day interactions with the South Korean public as a constant battle between, a) fighting for a sense of agency and recognition as a multiracial US-raised Korean, and b) “being smart” and avoiding potential altercations as a means to maintain their physical and emotional wellbeing. This is not to claim that single heritage ‘returnees’ policed themselves only when it allowed them to appear culturally competent, or conversely, that mixed heritage ‘returnees’ were the only individuals to suffer through discrimination. It was the case, however, that the discrimination that single heritage ‘returnees’ encountered was rarely a response to the foreignness of their perceived ethnicity or race. While many monoracial ‘returnees’ also spoke out about having to censor themselves upon experiencing microaggressions from South Koreans, rarely was it to the degree of multiracial individuals such as Eugene, Dan, and Amelie—individuals who claimed that these kinds of decisions pervaded much of their waking lives as ‘returnees.’

### Conclusion: Seeking Reciprocity

This chapter detailed the formal and informal obstacles to societal incorporation faced by the US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in this study, as well as the manner in which they responded to these barriers. The formal impediments that interviewees encountered typically stemmed from their legal statuses as “Overseas Koreans” who lacked access to certain rights, services, and privileges afforded to their South Korean citizen counterparts. Informal impediments were rooted in interviewees’ “double-edged” positions as co-ethnic cultural outsiders; or as individuals who lacked the cultural proficiency to adeptly navigate numerous aspects of South Korean social life, but concurrently were not granted

the same level of leeway or margin of error for their sociocultural missteps as other non-Korean migrants. Taken together, these barricades to incorporation gradually reinforced interviewees' perceptions that, even after taking into account their co-ethnic ties to the "homeland," 'returnees' were not and could not become truly "Korean," or at least not in the same vein as native-born South Korean citizens.

Ultimately, it appeared as though the things that interviewees' struggled for as migrants in South Korea were similar to that which they had fought for as racial minorities in the US—namely social acceptance, representation, and reciprocity. Teresa, one 'returnees' with longer tenure in South Korea, poignantly articulated this point during our meeting:

I realize that we don't deserve a cookie just because we speak the language when that's what everyone else does. So why should we be given kudos for that? But when we do make an effort to: a) assimilate via the language and the culture, and b) give back or contribute by being a functioning member of the local economy instead of coming and just draining the system, we should, not necessarily be rewarded for it, but acknowledged. Given a voice, if you will.

Teresa's requests were rather simple: as a contributing member of South Korean society, she wished that 'returnees' (and other migrants) in South Korea be "acknowledged" and "given a voice." Teresa's statement spoke volumes about the largely liminal position that she and other 'returnees' held in South Korea, and how in many instances they felt largely powerless to the marginalization that they experienced. Above all, 'returnees' such as Teresa recognized that if their goals and aspirations in South Korea were to retain even a glimmer of reality, then simply hoping for change would only get them so far.

## **(Conclusion) The Semi-permanence of ‘return’: The long-term prospects of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’**

While I was in South Korea, one of my interviewees clued me to a documentary series titled “Semipermanent: Seoul” (hereafter “Semipermanent”). The twenty-part series, produced by an English language Korean cable TV network called Arirang TV, showcased the lives and livelihoods of (mostly English speaking) “expats” who called Seoul home. Hosted and narrated by an expat couple—a multiracial US-raised Korean ‘returnee’ woman named Tiffany and a white Canadian man named Erik—the series drew attention to the diverse ways in which expats worked, played, and, in general, coexisted with the 10+ million people residing in the bustling global city of Seoul. Beyond the narratives of the hosts themselves, the series featured dozens of migrants who resided in Seoul, many of whom were prominent fixtures in the city’s dining, nightlife, and/or arts scenes. Each of these migrants detailed the circumstances that lead them to South Korea, as well as persuaded them to stay long-term. Through these informal interviews with migrants the viewer learned that, despite the variances in each individual’s biography, there were numerous points of intersection in their stories of migration to South Korea. Namely, there was an air of unpredictability and excitement that pervaded through the accounts of nearly all of the expat guests that appeared on the show—feelings that were typically explained as products of living as a foreigner in an unfamiliar land, or experiencing and learning a new culture firsthand.

I draw attention to this particular series for a few reasons. The title of the series, “Semipermanent,” though intending to underscore the seemingly transient and

unpredictable nature of “expat” life in South Korea, also works in part to describe the migration experiences of US-raised Korean ‘returnees.’ In fact, given that ‘returnees’ are technically “expats” or migrants themselves, it should be of little surprise that the themes portrayed in “Semipermanant”—such as cultural- and self-exploration, adjusting to life as a foreigner, or the benefits of living in a densely populated urban environment—share considerable similarities to those of the ‘returnees’ interviewed for this project. Even the series itself recognizes these similarities, with it featuring the stories of a number of US-raised Korean ‘returnees.’ Perhaps of even more interest, however, is the manner in which the series (perhaps unintentionally) highlights their divergences. For example, in the series’ first episode (titled “The Expat Life”), Tiffany and Erik share a conversation with friend and fellow US expat, Hassan, regarding the initial emotions and impressions they experienced upon moving to South Korea. Whereas Erik and Hassan focus on their feelings of “accomplishment” for “getting outside of the routine” of their American lives and moving alone to an altogether foreign country, Tiffany responds noticeably differently, elaborating instead on the sense of familiarity she felt upon moving to her “mom’s country”:

Tiffany: For me it was completely different actually. We always came when I was a kid, so it wasn’t like, “Whoa! I’m living in a different county. That’s so exciting!” It was like, “Yeah, okay. This is my mom’s country. It’s the first time I can experience it on my own.”

Tiffany’s statement showcases a compelling disjuncture between the migration narratives of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ and that of other US or English-speaking migrants. Specifically, she forefronts the manner in which the experiences of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ in South Korea are at once familiar, yet unfamiliar; close, yet distant. Indeed,

this was a sentiment expressed frequently by the participants in this study, and one that I have examined in numerous instances throughout this manuscript. Nearly all interviewees, even those who had never visited or had no salient memories of South Korea, expressed feeling a sense of familiarity upon ‘returning’ to their ancestral homeland. In many cases, in fact, it was this sense of familiarity, or nostalgia rather, that attracted them to ‘return’ in the first place.

This concluding chapter expands upon the complexities intrinsic to the ‘return’ experience by focusing on interviewees’ futures inside (and outside) of South Korea. Split into two sections, the first half of the chapter explores the semi-permanence of ‘returnees’ lives in South Korea, and how their liminal social status as diasporic or “Overseas Koreans” complicates both their connections to and long-term prospects in the country. I find that most ‘returnees’ remain undecided about their futures—stuck in a position where there are competing factors “pushing” and “pulling” them from both sides of the Pacific. I conclude this chapter and dissertation by reflecting on the ‘return’ journeys of the US-raised Koreans in this study, comparing their closing statements and sentiments regarding ‘return’ with the numerous intersecting social forces and personal motivations explored in previous chapters. Though a social phenomenon undoubtedly shaped by large-scale social forces, ethnic return migration is at its core a human endeavor—a process that cannot simply be deduced to a one-dimensional state that washes it of its very human essence.

The Long-term prospects of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’

“Being in Korea can be very transient. People come and go all the time...” – Sam



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“People leave all the time. [Korea] is like a revolving door.” – Helen

Though the majority of interviewees had resided in South Korea for three or more years, it would be errant to claim that such lengths of residence were the norm among all US-raised Korean ‘returnees.’ While it was not possible to obtain official figures on the length of residence of all “Overseas Koreans” from the US, the estimates provided by interviewees regarding the typical length of stay of their ‘returnee’ peers usually held steady at around 1-2 years. In general, then, the individuals interviewed for this project possessed tenures in South Korea that were longer than most of their ‘returnee’ counterparts. This also meant that, because of the “revolving door” nature of ethnic return migration to South Korea, most interviewees had experienced considerable changes to their social networks during their residences in the country.

The constantly evolving nature of one’s close and extended social network in South Korea was a phenomenon that was widely recognized among ‘returnees,’ especially those with longer tenures in the country. In the quotes above, for instance, both interviewees commented on the fleeting nature of the larger ‘returnee’ community in South Korea, with Sam (a fifth-year ‘returnee’) describing the process as “transient,” and Helen (a seventh-year ‘returnee’) invoking the metaphor of the “revolving door.” Both Sam and Helen elaborate on their initial statements below:

Sam: Well, the funny thing is that most people will have a certain breaking point. I feel like they’ll do a certain number of years and [during that time] I’ll accrue some Korean American friends. But then finally one or two of them breaks and they realize that it’s time to leave. One of my friends had a BBQ business in Korea. His family gave him money to start up. But after a few years he realized he couldn’t keep doing it and he went back to the States, back to his comfort zone.

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Helen: Some of this is just natural moving on, career progression. Some people get sick of living in Korea. ... I think some people also get frustrated because they don't have professional opportunities here. They can't get a job outside of teaching so they decide to move on. The reasons vary.

In these longer quotes, both Sam and Helen alluded to the apparent semi-permanent nature of ethnic return migration to South Korea—where an individual's plans as a 'returnee' rarely fell neatly between a state of ephemerality and permanence, but rather in a nebulous spot somewhere in between. For Sam, the semi-permanence of 'return' was best exemplified by the supposed "breaking point" that most 'returnees' possessed. This "breaking point," rather than being defined as a quantifiable experience or timeframe, was perceived as something that occurred organically, a qualitative "Eureka!" moment that served as an indication that one's time in South Korea was approaching its end. Helen came to a similar realization, maintaining that 'returnees' "moved on" naturally when they became "sick of living in [South] Korea."

I find it important to emphasize here that neither Sam nor Helen bemoaned that South Korea lacked a substantive 'returnee' community or foundation. Rather, and in concert with my own observations and interactions with a large number of 'returnees' during my stay in the country, the issue was that this foundation was perpetually in motion. Akin to how numerous interviewees admitted to formulating desires to move to South Korea long before their actual departures from the US, moving back to the US while residing in South Korea was an option that remained open for 'returnees,' and a proposition that they entertained during instances of substantial personal difficulty. Nancy, for instance, was one of several 'returnees' who revealed considering the option to move back to the US during the bleakest moments of her stay in South Korea:

My time here has been a rollercoaster ride. There have been good times and bad. There have definitely been times when I want to go back [to the US], and I guess that's always an option. If it doesn't work out here, I can always just move back to the States. I don't have to be here. But I feel like people just have those kinds of days.

In the above quote, Nancy matter-of-factly recalled the numerous occasions that she considered leaving behind the life she had established for herself in South Korea to return to the familiarity and comfort of the US. Yet, each time, she resisted the urge to forego her residency in South Korea, choosing instead to continue persevering in a country and culture with which she consistently found herself at odds. This game of back-and-forth was one in which many 'returnees' could relate, and again highlighted the semi-permanent nature of their 'return' sojourns. Given that nearly all of 'returnees' in this study continued to possess US citizenship while residing in South Korea, the option to move back to the US was almost always one that was open to them, and appeared particularly enticing during moments of social isolation, exclusion, and/or marginalization. To be sure, and as will be expanded upon later on in this chapter, interviewees' short- or- long-term prospects in South Korea were sparingly clearly defined, with most qualifying their plans and goals with several "ifs," "maybes," and "buts."

In the remainder of this section, I elaborate upon the responses provided by interviewees regarding their future plans in South Korea. Given the semi-permanent nature of interviewees' stays in South Korea, I was curious about the futures that 'returnees' envisioned for themselves. In particular, I was interested in hearing about interviewees' short- and long-term personal and career goals, and how (or how not) South Korea factored into them. The responses received from the thirty-five 'returnees' ran the

gamut, with individuals on one end of the spectrum professing to already having booked their return flights to the US, and individuals on the other end declaring that they were content to settle in South Korea permanently. The majority, however, were situated somewhere in between. That is to say that most interviewees envisioned themselves relocating to the US at some point in the future, but had not yet established a firm or definitive timeline for their departure. As more than one 'returnee' put it, these individual's future plans were "up in the air." I thus separate their responses into three categories based on the degree to which residing in South Korea factors into their plans: 1) I have firm plans to leave South Korea, 2) I have no immediate departure plans, but am hesitant to settle in South Korea permanently, and 3) I am open to settling in South Korea permanently. I elaborate on the rationale provided by interviewees for their responses, carefully examining the trends that emerge among 'returnees' from each subsect. In doing so, I attempt to determine the factors that contribute to the variations in 'return.'

Table 3

*Long-term prospects of interviewees*

<b>Definitive plans to depart</b> ( <i>n</i> = 9)	<b>No immediate departure plans, hesitant to settle</b> ( <i>n</i> = 20)	<b>Open to settling permanently</b> ( <i>n</i> = 6)
Amelie	Dee	Abraham
Dan	Eugene	Eunji
David	Glen	Kenneth
Dorothy	Helen	Patrick
Elizabeth	Jamie	Phillip
Grace	Jane	Ryan
Olivia	Jason	
Michael	Jiho	
William	Jin Soo	
	John	
	Joyce	
	Lee	
	Monica	
	Nancy	
	Nicholas	
	Rebecca	
	Robert	
	Sam	
	Sarah	
	Teresa	

*I have definitive plans to leave*

Among the 35 ‘returnees’ interviewed, nine professed to having already established firm plans to move back to the US, typically within the coming months.<sup>52</sup> There were a few demographic similarities that these nine ‘returnees’ shared. First, with a median age of

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<sup>52</sup> The fact that there were only nine individuals in this subgroup does not necessarily indicate that people such as these are rare. Based on estimates provided by most returnees, as well as my own interactions with ‘returnees,’ it was fairly common for US-raised Koreans to relocate to South Korea to teach English and remain in the country for the length of one or two contract periods (typically one year each). Given the relatively high turnover rate of these individuals, however, it was not likely that they established deep networks while residing in South Korea, making it more difficult to locate them for interviewing.

24, these ‘returnees’ tended to be some of the youngest individuals in my sample. Second, and in large part related to the first point, these nine ‘returnees’ were often those with the shortest tenures in South Korea, with lengths of stays that averaged just under two years. Third, the majority of the members in this group were what I describe as being high achieving and professionally-oriented individuals, with many moving back to the US with the intent to pursue new jobs or graduate- and/or professional-level education. In this regard, the individuals in this group most closely resembled those in Sonali Jain’s (2012) study on 1.5/2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Indian American ‘returnees.’ In her research, Jain asserts that the US-raised Indian ‘returnees’ whom she interviewed view their residencies in India in large part as career-building exercises, with many of these ‘returnees’ being provided access to socioeconomic opportunities often unavailable to their native-born counterparts. Moreover, the young adults in Jain’s study typically envisioned their stays in India as temporary sojourns within their longer life course, with nearly all intending to relocate back to the US within a few years to continue or complete their career development.

Within my sample, the individuals in this particular subgroup were undeniably the most similar to the interviewees in Jain’s study both in terms of demographics and personal aspirations. Of the nine interviewed, eight had moved to South Korea to pursue schooling or economic opportunities outside of the private Linguistic-Academic sector. Unlike their fellow ‘returnees’ working in the private Linguistic-Academic sector, then, these individuals tended not to view their stays in South Korea as a “break” in their career trajectories, but rather as a period that aided them. Indeed, many of these individuals had

positions awaiting them back in the US (and in Dan's case, Canada), most often as graduate/professional students at prestigious universities.

There were, of course, a few noticeable exceptions. Dorothy, while comparable to the others in terms of age and length of stay, decided that it was time for her to move back to US not necessarily because she desired to leave South Korea, but because of unforeseen circumstances regarding her mother's health. An avid supporter of and activist for North Korean defectors in South Korea, Dorothy had intended to extend her stay in South Korea indefinitely to continue working for a North Korean human rights organization in Seoul prior to learning that her mother had been diagnosed with cancer. At the time of our interview, Dorothy explained that she had already decided to move back to Chicago to help take care of her ailing mother at the end of her third year in South Korea, a departure date that was fast approaching.

There was also Grace, a 'returnee' who was wrapping up her first year in South Korea as an English teacher at a *yǒngŏ hakwŏn*. Grace had earned her bachelor's degree in the US just a year prior, deciding soon thereafter to move to her mother's homeland for one year to teach English. Though she did not have any particular plans waiting for her back in Stockton, CA, she had never intended to stay in South Korea beyond her contracted period. In recent months, however, she had begun entertaining the thought of extending her stay by another year, or 'returning' to South Korea again if she could not find employment soon after moving back to the US.

Grace: I could see myself coming back if I don't have a plan back home. Another reason I would stay is because the place where I work is nice but I have a feeling I could find another place that is much better. Not to boast about myself, but I think if I tried hard enough I could find a place that would benefit me more in a "learning" way. It's not even about the hours. I just think that working for a

*hakwŏn*, they care more about pleasing the parents instead of actually teaching and providing a good environment for the kids. I want to work somewhere that encourages teaching more than showing off to parents. That would be more fulfilling.

Of the nine in this subgroup, Grace was one of the two interviewees set to return to the US without any definitive career plans awaiting her. As a result, Grace had not yet expunged the option of ‘returning’ to South Korea for a second stint should she be unable to procure work in the US. The option of ‘returning’ for a second time was certainly a viable option, and one that other interviewees such as Sam and Eugene had successfully accomplished.

Despite the structured nature of their career plans, many of other ‘returnees’ in this group were also open, if not looking forward, to the idea of ‘returning’ to South Korea again in the not so distant future. Dan, for instance, remarked that he would continue to “maintain” his F-4 visa status in South Korea should he “need a job” upon completing his Master’s Program in Canada. Likewise, Olivia, who was moving back to the US to continue her schooling, admitted to thinking of ‘returning’ to South Korea in a more “permanent” fashion if she could obtain professional work in the country upon completing her advanced degrees in the US. Even Amelie, who in the previous chapter stated being unable to envision South Korea as a potential “home” because of the stigmatization she experienced as a mixed race Korean American, revealed leaving open the option of ‘returning’ to South Korea again in the future, stating that she was “hopeful” that what it meant to be “Korean” would eventually evolve to include multiracial individuals such as herself:

I’m hopeful. Korea’s really changing. ... I see more foreigners here. I see more interracial couples here. I see a lot more Koreans being open to international



relations. Korea's definitely on the global stage and it's just up to them [to decide] what kind of image they want to present. ...Because there has to be some kind of change in rhetoric in how we understand our interpersonal relationships with one another. If we just think of each other as strangers, there's only so far that the country can move forward. But if we think of each other as different but living together in this country working toward the same goal, then that's a completely different idea of what it means to be Korean. I'm hopeful and really curious as to how it'll turn out. My gut feeling is that it will have to happen eventually. Things change very quickly in South Korea. It's just a matter of waiting and seeing when the perspectives and ideas will change.

For Amelie and the others in this subgroup, it was thus evident that their decisions to end their current tenures as 'returnees' did not necessitate that they completely sever ties with South Korea. Rather, even as these individuals looked forward to beginning the next chapters of their lives outside of South Korea, their futures were undoubtedly informed by the experiences they had fostered as 'returnees. Moreover, should the opportunity present itself, 'returning' again remained a distinct if not distant possibility for these temporary 'returnees.'

*I have no immediate departure plans, but am hesitant to settle in South Korea permanently*

Containing twenty 'returnees,' this subgroup was by far the largest of the three. As the subheading states, the 'returnees' in this group did not yet have definitive timelines for departing South Korea, but were also reluctant to settle in South Korea permanently. For convenience of analysis, I further break down this group into two smaller cohorts: 1) individuals who planned to move back to the US in the not so distant future, but had no established timelines to do so, and 2) individuals who had no plans to depart South Korea, but were also hesitant to refer to South Korea as their permanent "homes."

Though, broadly speaking, the interviewees in both cohorts were generally unsure about

their future statuses in South Korea, there were important distinctions and patterns that emerged between them.

Of the twenty 'returnees' in this group, there were eight who stated that they intended to leave South Korea at some point in the not so distant future, but that they otherwise had no firm timeline for departure. In some ways, the members of this sub-group bore similarities with the interviewees who had already established firm plans for departure. For example, the 'returnees' in this sub-group, with a median age of 26 were also on the younger end of the age spectrum among those interviewed. Many also had desires to move back to the US in order to pursue degrees in higher education. Unlike the members of the previous group, however, these 'returnees' (with the exception of Jamie, who had been accepted to multiple graduate programs in the US but was strongly considering deferring her start date in order to extend her stay in South Korea) had not established firm plans for their departures.

This caveat was significant if only because of numerous interviewees' previous tendencies to extend their stays in South Korea without having something finite awaiting them in the US. For example, many of the individuals in this sub-group had previously extended their stays in South Korea by one or more years, in effect setting a precedent for which they could follow in future years. Dee, a 'returnee' employed through the South Korean Tourism sector, was familiar with this practice, having extended her stay in South Korea several times, usually during the waning months of one of her many annual employment contracts. This practice, though providing an incredible amount of flexibility to her life, also required her to experience periods of stressful deliberation yearly. By the time we sat down for an interview, Dee explained that she was strongly considering

wrapping up her tenure in South Korea, though she had yet to establish anything definitive:

I've been taking it one year at a time. In some ways it's really nice because it gives me a lot of flexibility. But in other ways it's hard because I basically have to make a major life decision every year about where I want to live and what I want to do. Right now I think I am actually getting ready to move back to the US, maybe in a year or so.

Despite the stress associated with having to “make a major life decision every year,” Dee admitted to still being unsure of her future plans. Though she revealed that she was “getting ready to move back to the US,” she qualified this assured statement with an equally ambiguous timeline, claiming that she would leave “maybe in a year or so.”

Helen, a ‘returnee’ in her sixth year in South Korea, faced a similar predicament. Helen had accomplished quite a lot in South Korea during her six years of residence, entering the country with a prestigious journalism fellowship and moving onto various internship, freelance, and full-time positions with South Korean news agencies before ultimately landing a job at the US Embassy in Seoul. Though she greatly appreciated the career she had built for herself in South Korea, she also worried that she was simply “coasting” and that her opportunity at establishing a professional career in the US was slowly dissipating.

**Helen:** I hope I leave within 3 years.

**Stephen:** So do you have a timeline for yourself then?

**Helen:** Not really. But I'm 27. I've been here for six years already so it's a pretty significant chunk of time. I say three years just because I haven't taken the GMAT yet so I'm thinking of the time line it takes to apply to school. Even if I take the GMAT now, I wouldn't have an application ready for a January round of application for an MBA program. They have three rounds usually. So I just want to be able to take my time. At the same time, I'm not in any real hurry to leave. Sure I think I'm coasting, but to the outside world, nobody thinks that. I'm in a good position. I like my job. I'm happy with my whole situation. I like my apartment. My job is great. My boyfriend is great. My social scene is lively. I can

do whatever I want here basically. I can buy whatever food I want. I can buy whatever clothes I want. Not that I do, but I have the option.

Like Dee, Helen stated wanting to leave South Korea within the coming years. Even after providing this estimate, however, she revealed not having established any sort of time line for departure. Though her goal was ultimately move back to the US to receive her Master's in Business, Helen also emphasized that she was not "in any real hurry to leave" South Korea.

Indeed, this appeared to be a general sentiment among many of the members of this particular subset of my sample—that they would depart for the US if the opportunity presented itself but until then they were content to reside in South Korea. John, for example, stated recently beginning to contemplate extending his stay in South Korea beyond his contracted period with the US Army. He was particularly excited about an impromptu meeting he had shared with an executive at a large South Korean electronics conglomerate a few weeks prior and expressed enthusiasm about the thought of working and residing in South Korea as a civilian.

John: I'm flexible. If I can get a good job here, I wouldn't have too much of a problem staying. You know what, I'll put it this way. I'd have no problem staying here if I wasn't in the Army and living in fucking Camp Casey in Dongducheon, which is somewhere I don't think anyone should be living...except for white people. (laughs) I wouldn't mind being here if I was living like a regular person. I just don't like my current job. I can't stand other people in the Army.

John's situation differed from Helen's and Dee's somewhat in that his contracted stay in South Korea through the US Army had a firm end date. Though that date was still over a year away, John was already beginning to contemplate extending his residency in South Korea by taking a hiatus from his position in the US Army and applying for F-4 visa status once his current service obligation was complete. There were still a number of

extraneous variables that could potentially impact this decision, such as whether or not he could find employment in the country outside of the Academic-Linguistic sector (he had no desire to teach English) and the status of his current romantic relationship with a South Korean woman.

For John and several others in this subset, then, there was a noticeable sense of ambiguity regarding their future plans. While many viewed resettling in the US as an inevitability, in all cases their plans for departing South Korea were yet to fully materialize. To be sure, some interviewees, such as Helen or Dee, had already established tenuous timelines for moving back to the US. Others, such as John and Jamie, were hoping to extend their residency in South Korea beyond their initially contracted stays. But as the interviewees themselves admitted, these timelines and goals were fluid and privy to change. Helen's and Dee's own multiply extended tenures in South Korea served as direct evidence of this. Thus, much like how these individuals' ethnic return migration to South Korea had largely been guided by opportunity, the forces that dictated their resettlement in the US appeared to be a combination of willpower and circumstance.

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The remaining twelve members in this subset had no foreseeable plans to leave South Korea, but were also reluctant to settle in South Korea permanently. There were a number of patterns that emerged among these twelve interviewees. First, these 'returnees' tended to be older in age (with a median age of 31) and possessed lengths of stays in South Korea that were significantly longer (with a median length of seven years) than of the previously discussed 'returnees.' Second, these individuals were the most likely among participants to be situated in stable, professional jobs in South Korea. Lastly, their

concerns about permanently settling in South Korea stemmed less from anxieties regarding their current occupations, but about potential issues regarding family and children. As such, it was evident that these twelve individuals had in some capacity come to terms with, or even looked favorably upon, their long term residency in South Korea—at least to the point where many had begun thinking closely about potential personal and social issues they would face as they further integrated into South Korean society.

Issues concerning South Korea's notoriously competitive education system were easily the most prevalent among the interviewees in this group. Above all, interviewees expressed anxiety about two mostly related points: the wellbeing of their potential future children, and their ability as parents to navigate the intricacies of a South Korean education system and society as non-citizen foreigners. As mentioned in previous chapters, more than two-thirds of those interviewed had experience working as English language teachers in South Korea either in the private (e.g., private schools, private tutoring, *yŏngŏ hakwŏn*) or public sectors (e.g., the South Korean public school system). Several 'returnees' relied on this firsthand experience within the South Korean education system when discussing why they were reluctant to have their future children be schooled within it. Nicholas, for example, was a soon-to-be married 'returnee' in his mid-thirties whose primary concern with continuing to reside in South Korea pertained the wellbeing of his future family. Given that he had worked for several years in South Korea as both a *hakwŏn* teacher and manager, Nicholas was quite familiar with the amount of academic stress that South Korean children endured. While he was open to having his future children attend early levels of schooling in South Korea, he acknowledged that ideally he would want to move his children back to the US "by the time they're ready for high

school and college.” Sam, another single ‘returnee’ who had four years of *yǒngŏ hakwŏn* teaching under his belt, provided a similar plan of action:

I’ve thought long and hard about this. I know what education life is like in Korea because I’ve taught elementary and middle school children. If I married in Korea and had to raise my kids here, I would only want them to go to elementary school here because they have very strong educational morals and habits in the education system here. And I think in elementary school you could learn a lot. But as soon as middle school hits, I would strongly prefer to go back to the States at that time. Because as soon as you hit middle school, I feel like a lot of Korean teens start getting a twisted view on society and life, as far as what’s acceptable and social norms. I feel really sorry for middle schoolers and high schoolers [in South Korea] because they have way too much on their plate.

Other interviewees were not as quick to denounce the entire South Korean education system. Rather, their primary concern stemmed from their own lack of knowledge of the larger institution itself. Though nearly all ‘returnees’ interviewed had been involved with the South Korean education as teachers, few were privy to the other end of the academic system, namely as parents. Interviewees such as Jane worried that, as foreigners, they would be unable to properly navigate themselves and their children through the complex and highly competitive South Korean education system.

Jane: Unless Korea changes substantially I don’t think it’s a productive place to raise kids that aren’t South Korean, maybe even kids that are South Korean. (laughs) There’s some question about whether they really grow up in a way that makes them full human beings capable of achieving all that they can achieve. That’s kind of how I think about it. If I were to live here for the rest of my life, I would have a family. Then I’d have to think about the kind of context I would want to raise my family. Part of it too for me, and something that might not be an issue for other Koreans, is just the issue of access. I don’t think I have the confidence to be able maneuver the Korean system on behalf of the kid and me. To get them the things that they need and opportunities that are available that I might not even know about or even know how to access because I’m outside of the system.

For ‘returnees’ such as Jane, their apprehension about their futures in South Korea lay chiefly in their marginalized social locations. Though at the moment ‘returnees’ could

continue to fend for themselves while living “outside of the system,” they worried that such would not be an ideal context in which to start a family or raise children. These concerns remained even when interviewees put aside their reservations about the competitive nature of the South Korean education system and labor market. For most ‘returnees,’ it was their lack of access to and knowledge of South Korean institutions that most worried them about establishing deeper roots within the country.

Despite this general reluctance to remain in South Korea permanently, very few of the individuals in this subgroup had any realistic plans to resettle in the US. While many participants expressed interest in moving back to the US at some point in the future, few had laid any of the necessary groundwork to make this return possible. For sample, Sarah asserted that she and her husband had never intended to reside in South Korea for more than a few years. A year and a half into her assistant professor position at a top South Korean university, however, Sarah admitted that their expectations had changed considerably:

Stephen: Would you consider living here permanently?

Sarah: I used to always think “no.” [pauses] Actually, that’s kind of what my fiancé and I have been talking about recently, whether to settle in the US or to settle in Korea. I guess at this point it’s up in the air. I’ve always thought that I would go back to the US. But I can’t say it with 100% certainty anymore.

Like Sarah, most of the interviewees in this subset had initially moved to South Korea with the intention returning to the US within a few years. As these individuals became more firmly rooted in South Korea, however, their desires to resettle in the US became less pressing, often being postponed by several years if not indefinitely. In Sarah’s case, for example, a situation that had started off as a temporary move to South Korea until she



or her husband could find employment in the US had transitioned into one where long-term settlement in the country remained a distinct possibility.

Sarah was not alone in experiencing this transition. For many in this subset, the possibility of moving back to the US also meant leaving behind the South Korean lives to which they had almost unwittingly become accustomed. Teresa, for instance, was one of several ‘returnees’ who acknowledged acquiring, and at times even appreciating, some of the South Korean cultural quirks that had initially driven her “insane:”

I hate to state the [obvious], but the whole *bbali-bbali* [faster-faster] thing, we hate it as expats. And I think being a Korean American, because we can understand it and we’ve seen our parents do it, it just drives us insane and it’s so aggravating and almost embarrassing. But then you go back home to California or wherever you’re from, and then you realize that’s the kind of stuff you miss.

Teresa purported to having acclimated to a handful of South Korean cultural tendencies that had initially infuriated her, namely the “hustle and bustle” (also referred to as “*bbali-bbali*,” or “faster-faster,” culture) with which things were accomplished in South Korean society. This rhetoric was shared by numerous other ‘returnees,’ many of who maintained that they themselves had often unknowingly undergone significant transformations since arriving in South Korea, and that they found themselves surprisingly attached to aspects of South Korean society that they had once despised or resented.

This was absolutely the case for, an Amerasian ‘returnee’ who had been one of the most vocal critics of the systemic inequities inherent within South Korean society. Yet, later on in the interview he was also able to reconcile that the experiences he had gathered while in South Korea had helped to define the person he was today:

You know, I’ve been so critical about living here. [laughs] You would think that I’m just hateful and violent and ranting. But there are things that are just really, really nice about being here. A lot of my positive experiences have really just

stuck with me. ... Especially with Amerasian people and going back to US military camptowns. It's one of the places that I hate the most in Korea, but going there is like coming full circle for me. Like, if I were to say that I had a hometown that would be it. It's probably a place that I want to divorce myself from, but it just really embodies everything about me that I am. ... I've just had so many profound and meaningful life experiences [in South Korea] that have challenged me as an individual. Those are things that I really take away from here, the relationships that I've had with people, both good and bad. I've grown a lot through being here.

Like Teresa, one of the things that Eugene thought of most fondly about South Korea was how much he had changed, or "grown" during his tenure in the country. Eugene also found solace in the aspects of South Korean society that he had initially "hated" most, such as the site of the US military camptown in which he was conceived. Rather than simply separating the "good" from the "bad," however, it was the combination of both for Eugene that helped to define his appreciation for the experiences he had gained in his ancestral homeland.

In addition to actually appreciating the experiences they had fostered as 'returnees' in South Korea, many of the interviewees in this subgroup attributed their willingness to remain in the country for at least the foreseeable future as a product of age and circumstance. Teresa, for instance, explained that because she was now married and in her 30s, she no longer had the flexibility or desire to relocate from one location to another without some semblance of opportunity and stability:

I think the longer you stay here, you have to love it here. And I love it here. And that's what keeps us here. Not because we have nothing better to do, but because we actually like it here. But it is true that the longer you stay and build up job experiences here, that's another year that you're not building up experiences back home.... It's different when you're in your 20s and you think you can go back whenever. But the older you get the more you realize that want to have a job before you go back and that's a lot easier said than done. Especially when friends back home that you went to junior high and high school with, who are all educated, smart, and intelligent, and even they're struggling when they've been

there the whole time. So why would a company necessarily take us when we've been out of the country for close to a decade? What would make them want us?

According to Teresa, there was a substantial difference in attempting to resettle in the US as an expat in his/her twenties versus an individual in his/her thirties. In particular, as an expat in one's thirties with presumably a longer number of years lived abroad, reintegrating into US society both socially and economically would likely prove more challenging. For 'returnees' with longer tenures as 'returnees,' such an endeavor seemed unnecessarily daunting, especially so if they were currently content with their South Korean lives. Such was certainly the case for Jason, a 'returnee' who, at the time of our interview, was contemplating attending graduate school in Seoul. When asked about his long-term plans in South Korea, Jason responded with the following:

You know, I don't think anybody says, "I'm going to live here permanently." It just sort of happens. ... I imagine myself staying here a long time. Not because I've found peace with this place or something. It's about being old. [laughs] It's just the feeling that I can't just jump from place to place for the rest of my life. I feel that I really need to settle down, and that place just happens to be Korea. So I'm just trying it out right now. In the back of my mind, I have the option of going back to the States if I need to. But so far, nothing is really giving me such an impact that I need to go back.

Jason echoed many of the same sentiments as Jamie, stating that he imagined himself remaining in South Korea for a "long time" not necessarily because he had "found peace" with the country but because he was getting "old" (he was thirty at the time of our meeting). This was not to say that he disliked living in South Korea. As he later clarified, the US and South Korea were the only two countries within which he could realistically imagine himself living. But given that his parents also resided in Seoul, coupled with the fact that his scholarly interests concerned Korea and Korean culture, there was little that compelled him to resettle in the US, at least for the time being.

Even so, people in this subgroup balked at the idea of referring to South Korea as their permanent abodes, in all cases at least entertaining the possibility of resettling in the US (or moving to another location abroad) sometime in the future. This inability or unwillingness to establish South Korea as their permanent homes appeared to stem from concerns addressed in chapter four: namely apprehensions about raising children in South Korea as resident aliens, and worries about weakening ties with their family members and close friends back in the US. While for ‘returnees’ such as Rebecca her growing businesses in South Korea meant that she was going to “stay in Korea for a long, long time,” there was still the concern that the time she was spending in South Korea cultivating her own passion projects was taking away from meaningful time with her aging parents.

Ultimately, the responses provided by these twelve ‘returnees’ about their potential future plans outside of South Korea appeared wishful if not whimsical.

Rebecca: So I want to spend more time with them. And my sister also had a baby and so I’d like to spend more time with her. And they’re not planning on coming to Korea, which means I would have to spend more time in London and the US. So I would like to have one foot in Korea for the rest of my life, but I don’t think that I want to spend all of my time in Korea. A lot of it just depends on the businesses. If I didn’t have the businesses I think that I would come back to Korea maybe once a year for a couple weeks to visit and hang out with friends and see family. And when I have children, if I have children, I would like them to have the same.

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Monica: I think I want to go back, as in not living in Korea, when I’m older. I would like to live in the US, or Europe. Korea is too small of a country. The cost of living is too expensive. If I could go to Europe or to the States and live somewhere where the housing is more affordable or environment is nicer, I would do that. When I’m older, I want my own garden and yard. [laughs] I’m a nature person. I need nature around me. When I’m older I want my friends living near me so we can do what old people do like gardening and baking and knitting. [laughs] But for now this is a good fit for me. I’m comfortable in Korea.

Many, like Rebecca and Monica, while desiring to depart from South Korea at a later point in their lives, were generally unsure of how this would transpire and often resorted to reciting scenarios of near fantasy. This was not to say that their desires to resettle elsewhere were purely conjecture. After all, a number of interviewees had ‘returned’ to South Korea under far more unlikely circumstances, in some instances seemingly relocating on a whim. Still, for the ‘returnees’ in this subset it was apparent that even with far-reaching goals and desires they set for themselves outside of the Korean peninsula, their current lives and homes very much remained within the borders of South Korea.

*I am open to making Korea my permanent home*

Of the 35 ‘returnees’ interviewed, six expressed strong if not unwavering interest in settling in South Korea permanently. There were a few qualities that stood out within this smaller subgroup. First, this subgroup was comprised overwhelmingly by men (five). Second, akin to those in the prior subgroup, the majority of the members of this subgroup had factors that anchored them to South Korea, such as jobs, businesses, romantic relationships, and/or family. Lastly, and as should be expected given their qualifications, the interviewees in this subgroup generally and genuinely expressed high levels of happiness and enthusiasm about living in South Korea. This latter point is of considerable significance because it seemed to serve as the variable that most influenced interviewees’ desires to remain in South Korea permanently. To elaborate, while there were people in the prior subgroup who also had factors anchoring them to South Korea, this did not prevent them from expressing desires to eventually move elsewhere. This was typically

not the case for the members in this subgroup, nearly all of who were content if not thrilled to live in South Korea and had no substantive desires to resettle in the US or move elsewhere.

Kenneth, for example, was the only individual in this study married with children. Taken together, Kenneth's nuclear and extended family, business of 10+ years, and social network served as more than enough to keep him anchored to South Korea with little impetus to resettle in the US. In fact, given that Kenneth was in his mid-40s, he had spent nearly as much time as a 'returnee' in South Korea as he had residing as a 1.5-generation Korean American in the US.

Other 'returnees' in this group also had factors anchoring them to South Korea, though none were to quite the same degree as Kenneth's. Phillip, for instance, was more than thrilled to continue growing the street wear and accessories business that he and his brother had created upon moving to South Korea. The success of his business coupled with the enthusiasm he had for living in Seoul provided Phillip with ample reasons to reveal that he "really [had] no thoughts of going back to America." There was also the case of Eunji, the lone woman in this subgroup. Eunji had the shortest tenure among the six, having moved to South Korea from New York City less than two years prior. Like Kenneth and Phillip, there were concrete external factors that worked to anchor her to South Korea. In Eunji's case, her primary anchor was her desire to be close by to her widowed mother. In fact, it was the passing of her father roughly two years prior that motivated her to leave her job in New York and 'return' to South Korea. Despite her relatively short length of residence in South Korea, Eunji had already decided that she would remain in South Korea for the foreseeable future. This was not to say that Eunji

was smitten with her life as a 'returnee.' Even as 1.5 generation Korean American with some prior experience living in South Korea, there was plenty about South Korean society with which she was either unfamiliar or critical. In spite of these numerous reservations, she was largely content with the thought of residing in the country permanently.

The remaining three 'returnees' in this group did not have the same kind of anchors as the other interviewees. Rather, Abraham's, Ryan's, and Patrick's desire to settle in South Korea appeared to operate more on the unrelenting hope and belief of succeeding in the country socioeconomically, as well as a strong fondness for the country itself. Unlike the others in this subgroup, Abraham, Ryan, nor Patrick operated successful businesses in South Korea, nor did they have close family members who resided in the country. For these three men, then, it was the belief that, despite the social woes they experienced because of their status as 'returnees,' South Korea was still a more desirable place to live than the US:

**Stephen:** Can you envision yourself living here permanently?

**Ryan:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Stephen:** You have no desire to live in the US again?

**Ryan:** I always wanted to live in New York. But I think Asia is where it's at. Honestly, I feel that Western society and civilization is just declining. I think Asia is just really exciting right now. Being in Korea is really exciting. This is where the opportunity is.

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**Abraham:** I went back to America for vacation this past January and February. And when I was there, I just noticed that everyone was doing the same stuff. All my friends who were smoking weed [before I left] were still smoking weed. All my friends who were working crappy ass jobs [before I left] were still working those same crappy ass jobs. There were only like two or three people who were actually advancing in life. And that was really discouraging for me. There was very little incentive for me to go back.

For Ryan, Abraham, and Patrick, their desires to continue residing in South Korea originated from their belief that South Korea (and in Ryan's case the larger Asian continent) was where it was most "exciting" and where there was the most economic opportunity. This supposition then served to reinforce their dreams of succeeding economically in South Korea, a point that was discussed in the previous chapter. Though both Abraham and Patrick remained far more critical of South Korea's "social ills" than Ryan, ultimately they were outweighed by their hopes for economic betterment, as well as their general fondness of the country.

Given the overrepresentation of men in this subgroup, it is reasonable to assume that the optimism that interviewees displayed concerning their South Korean lives was also in part a gendered manifestation. There was certainly evidence to validate this presumption, particularly given the fact that the men in this subgroup were some of the interviewees most likely to refer to their 'return' journeys in a redemptive manner, particularly in regards to their masculinity. Many of these men, with the exception of the already married Kenneth, even revealed wanting to eventually meet and wed South Korean women. The consistent references to South Korea as an economic frontier space by the men in this subgroup also makes sense in this light. More than simply serving as a capitalistic endeavor, it appeared that likening South Korea to a frontier space served as an extension of these men's redemptive fantasies.

### Reflecting on 'return'

In this dissertation thesis I elaborated upon the phenomenon of ethnic return migration through the perspectives of US-raised Koreans. As a population already well-studied



within a US domestic context, I set out to broaden the scholarly scope of research on US-raised Koreans by locating them within the complementary frameworks of transnationalism and diaspora. I began by exploring the numerous micro- and macro-level forces contributing to their relocation from the US to South Korea. Central to this endeavor was taking into consideration the fact that US-raised Korean ethnic return migrants were not only ‘returning’ to their ancestral homeland of South Korea, but also departing their homes in the US. In addition to affirming the economic and affective causes of diasporic return migration previously documented in the scholarly literature, I highlighted the centrality of race/ethnicity, gender, and identity, among other constructs, in establishing the transnational ties necessary to motivate the ‘return’ sojourns of the US-raised Koreans in this study. By highlighting the instrumental and intersecting nature of these motivating factors, I illustrated how the practice of ethnic return migration among US-raised Koreans was one that could only be understood by donning multiple theoretical lenses. In locating the narratives of US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ both in their countries of origin (the US) and ‘return’ (South Korea) I also challenged the scholarly tendency to limit the scope of qualitative analyses to that which occurs after the physical act of migration. In doing so, I demonstrated how the ‘return’ journeys of US-raised Koreans were as much informed by their past experiences as racial/ethnic minorities in the US as by their diasporic connections to and potential futures in South Korea. Put another way, I posited that their experiences as ‘returnees’ could not be divorced from or viewed independently of their US biographies.

This broadened perspective on diasporic return migration played a particularly important role in my examination of interviewees’ experiences as ‘returnees’ in South

Korea. Rather than focusing merely on the ethnic affiliations that ‘returnees’ shared with their new country of residence, I paid particularly close attention to the manner in which their US upbringings continued to impact their livelihoods even as they lived beyond the nation’s borders. This was evidenced in numerous capacities within their ‘return’ narratives, including but not limited to the cultural discourses they held, the spaces they occupied, the occupations they worked, and the types of identities that they donned. For example, in chapter two I illustrated how ‘returnees’ applied race and gender discourses from the US in making sense of their positions within the social hierarchy of South Korea. Furthermore, in chapter three, I showcased the manner in which ‘returnees’ gravitated toward spaces, jobs, and social identities that accentuated their ties to the US. I argued that these phenomena were in part a product of the social and material benefits affixed to one’s American status, a process that other scholars have explained using the concept of “human capital.” Within the context of an ever-globalizing South Korea, it was the human capital associated to US nationality and upbringing that compelled US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ reaffirm to their American-ness even as most sought Korean cultural exploration and immersion through their ‘returns.’

As I detailed in chapter four, however, the privileges bestowed upon US-raised Korean ‘returnees’ were fleeting. Though the initial benefits conferred by interviewees’ American nationality helped to mitigate the reality of one’s social and political marginality, the longer that ‘returnees’ resided in South Korea and the deeper they delved into the country’s social institutions, the more they became aware of the limitations inherent to their statuses as migrants and “Overseas Koreans.” It became apparent to many ‘returnees’ that their positions in South Korea were largely one-dimensional—as

migrant laborers imported to help sustain the county's incurable "English fever." Thus, even as many 'returnees' put significant effort into further integrating into South Korean society, their positions as non-citizen migrants and cultural foreigners greatly limited their avenues and rate of societal incorporation. Dishearteningly, most 'returnees' thus found themselves in a situation similar to the one they had experienced while living in the US—as subjects relegated to the margins of one's own home.

If there was a general theme that emerged among participants regarding the role that South Korea played in their futures, it was that of uncertainty; uncertainty about their future aspirations, uncertainty over their lengths of stay, uncertainty regarding their positions within South Korea. In retrospect, the general sense of uncertainty shared by many of the interviewees' regarding their future plans was to be expected. In this light, the semi-permanence of their 'return' journeys did not necessarily mean that their stays in South Korea were merely temporary or that they existed in a constant state of flux. Instead, while US-raised Korean 'returnees' (and transnational migrants in general) are currently afforded historically unmatched levels of mobility, they are still subject to both macro-level social forces and personal life events that complicate and stymie their transnational desires and movement. To be sure, such factors do not prevent 'returnees' from relocating from South Korea to the US or elsewhere. But if their own initial sojourns to South Korea serve as any indication, it is that the factors guiding global human migration are complex and unpredictable, much like the narratives of migrants themselves.

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## Appendix: Interview Schedule

Introductory information and comprehension of informed consent:

- 1) I am conducting a study that examines the recent phenomenon of Korean American return migration from the perspective of US-South Korean relations. In this interview I would like to learn about your experiences as a Korean American both in the US and in South Korea. I will also ask you questions regarding your opinions of Korean culture, and US-Korean relations. If you have any questions or concerns at any point in the interview, please feel free to interrupt. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time. The interview should last from an hour to an hour and a half and I will take hand written notes from time to time throughout the process. I will audio tape this interview only with your expressed consent.
- 2) Please go over the consent form. Do you have any questions for me at this time? May I clarify any of these points?

### I. Demographic Information

Name

Age

Marital status

Citizenship status (participant and parents)

Race/Ethnicity

SES (individual/family)

### II. Questions regarding life in the US:

Where in the US have you lived prior to relocating to Korea? How long had you lived there? Would you mind briefly reflecting on your time in each area? Was there one place you liked more than the others, why?

As a person born in a foreign country, how quickly were you able to transition into American society?

Did you find yourself at odds with other Korean Americans upon arriving to the US? Why or why not?

What kind of access to Korean culture/people did you have growing up? How did it impact your own sense of identity?

Racially and ethnically speaking, who were you more likely to interact with while in the US? Why do you feel this occurred? Was it intentional on your part?

How salient was the concept of race/ethnicity to you while you lived in the US? Is it something that you thought about or were made aware of often? How do you feel that your status as an ethnic/racial minority affected your quality of life in the US?

### III. Questions regarding relocation to South Korea

How long have you lived in Korea and where in Korea do you currently live?

What is your occupation in Korea? Do you enjoy what you do?

How often did you visit Korea in the past? When was the last time?

What were the underlying factors in your decision to move to South Korea, either temporarily or permanently? Can you walk me through the choices you had to make prior to making the decision to live abroad?

How long did you plan to stay in Korea?

Did you consider moving to any other countries? Why or why not?

What did you do prior to moving to better prepare yourself to living in Korea?

How has your transition into South Korean society been? What has been easy?

Difficult? If it's been mostly easy, why do you think has helped?

What are some changes that you've had to make to better adapt to living in South Korea?

What have been the biggest obstacles in acclimating yourself to Korean society?

Do you feel that gender plays a role in one's ability to adapt?

How has your American nationality influenced the way that South Koreans treat you? Are you ever self-conscious of being perceived as American?

How do you think transitioning into Korean society/culture is for foreigners who are not of Korean descent?

What difficulties might others have transitioning?

How salient is the concept of race in South Korea?

When in Korea, how do you identify yourself? Does this differ from how you identify yourself outside of Korea? Why do you think this is?

How do native Koreans identify you? Do they view you as Korean? American?

Do you ever regret moving to Korea? When or why??

### V. Questions regarding the Korean diaspora

Have you met many Korean Americans while living in South Korea? If so, under what circumstances do you typically meet them?

How large would you estimate the Korean American community is here? Under what circumstances do you believe most of them are here?

### VI. Questions regarding Korean society/culture

Having lived in Korea for a while now, what are some things about Korean society/culture/people that is unique to this country?

If there were such thing as a "model South Korean," what kind of attributes would this person have?

Can Korean Americans like yourself become model South Koreans? Why or why not?

VII. Questions regarding US-South Korean relations

What are your general opinions about the US' ongoing military presence in the Korean peninsula following World War II?

How do you think Koreans come to terms with America's military presence in Korea? Do you sense any resentment?

VIII. Concluding Questions

Are there other questions or issues that you would like to discuss?

Are there other people or organizations that we should contact?