



Discriminating Invisible Minorities:
The Experience of Ethnic Chinese in Korea

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racial or ethnic minorities in Korea. They are even very proud of their one-bloodedness, which they think would give them purity. There are, however, significant numbers of racial and ethnic minority groups of 'different blood' such as migrant workers from foreign countries, 'mixed bloods', and Chinese ethnics. Although Koreans are paying more attentions to minorities than before, they still easily forget the existence of the groups and assume that Korea is a 'pure' country. The best example is ethnic Chinese. Being asked one's favorite food, many Koreans would answer 'Jah-Jahng-Myon', Chinese noodles with blackish bean sauce. The noodle was first born in the city of Incheon, Korea about a hundred years ago, and now it became one of the favorite foods among Koreans. In spite of the success of their food, however, Chinese people themselves have not been quite successful.

In Korea they are called Hwakyos; its original meaning is the Chinese citizens residing outside of China, but it generally means all oversea Chinese and Chinese decedent. To be more accurate, they should be called Hanhwa, meaning Korean Hwakyos, to differentiate them from other Hwakyos in various countries, but just Hwakyos is the term widely used in Korea.

Owing to diligence and their personal networks to China, Hwakyos once dominated export and import business of Korea for a few years right after liberation from Japanese colony in 1945. But there is currently no noticeable Chinatown, and Hwakyos capital does literally not exist. The social and economic status of Hwakyos in Korea is very low compared to those in other Asian countries. What happened to them? Why is the power of a minority group once influential so weak? It did not happen by chance. Rather it is a result of systematic discrimination and exclusion against them, and it represents the level of tolerance of the society.

By studying Hwakyos, this paper aims to show how Korean society has been dealing with ethnic and racial minorities.

II. History of Hwakyos

Korean peninsula borders north-east China and has had frequent contact and conflict throughout history. Many Koreans' last names have roots in Chinese names. The first group of Chinese who were not soldiers arrived in Korea in 1882 during Soldiers Revolt against Japanese imperialists. About forty merchants came to Korea along with 3,000 Qing soldiers who came to contend with Japanese army. Korea and Qing governments concluded Trade Treaty in 1882, and Chinese merchants were allowed to have unlimited business activities. This was an unusual case. While Hwakyos in other Asian countries did not get any support from Qing government, Korean Hwakyos were protected by the government from the very beginning.

At the end of 19th century, there were wars and severe natural disasters in Shandong province, China, which is located across Yellow Sea from Korea. Refugees moved

conflict between Koreans and Hwakyos. By Chinese, Koreans in China were thought to be guides of Japanese imperialists. Japanese spread a rumor that many Koreans were murdered by Chinese in China. It caused an anti-Chinese riot in 1931 and resulted in massacre: over 100 Hwakyos were killed.

After liberation in 1945, Korea became divided into North and South. Since most Hwakyos lived in northern part of the peninsula, only 12,648 of them belonged to South Korea. Suddenly China became the best trade partner to Korea. In 1946, 82% of export and 84% of import of the whole country were to or from China. In 1948 only 13 Hwakyos trade companies (in Incheon) counted 21% of export and 16% of import of Korea. However, the communist Revolution in China in 1949 changed everything. Trade between the two countries virtually disappeared, because China was a communist country and it had an identical meaning of enemy in Korea.

To make things worse, a series of acts and laws passed which worked against Hwakyos. In 1950 Warehouse Blockade Act was made, and it prohibited all foreigners from using warehouses in port areas. Because Hwakyos were the only foreigners using port warehouses for international trade then, we cannot help concluding that the act was designed to give disadvantage only to Hwakyos. In 1952 there was a currency alteration, and those who had currencies suffered a heavy loss. Hwakyos were known to keep currencies at home instead of depositing them in banks, and they were the miserable victims of the alteration. While it is unclear whether or not the policy was aimed to damage Hwakyos, many of them still strongly believe in that. Yet there was another currency alteration in 1962, which brought same result to them.

A law made in 1962 prohibited foreigners from possessing any real estate. As a result of the law, Hwakyos abandoned their land to Koreans for nominal amount of money. Although the law was reformed in 1970, it still allowed only 2,000sq for commercial use and 8,000sq for residential use. Those running a Chinese restaurant could not have a larger space than the limitation. It was practically impossible for Hwakyos to continue to be farmers with their own land. Heartbreaking stories on miserable Hwakyos are everywhere; Some of them borrowed names of their Korean friends to register their land, but the friends took it. By law nothing is wrong. The law was abolished in 1998.

The most discriminatory policy was an enforcement ordinance in 1973 which banned Chinese restaurants from serving foods made of rice. They were allowed to serve noodles only. Although the ordinance was annulled in three months, it was to remain as a symbol of anti-Hwakyos policy.

In the early 1970s, Korean government began to redevelop urban centers in major cities under Redevelopment Act of Urban Center. Since Chinatowns, already small compared to the ones in other countries, were usually located at the center of each city, they did not have any alternative except being scattered. While it is not known whether Korean government had an intention to completely remove Chinatown, many

III. Methods

Survey was done in four major cities including Seoul, Busan, Daegu, and Gwanju during October and November, 2003. Due to long history of discrimination, Hwakyos tends to avoid talking to Koreans about themselves. In fact there is no Hwakyos who would answer spontaneously to questionnaire survey conducted by an unfamiliar Korean scholar. To have an access to them, I used strategic informants to approach them. Thanks to the help from Hwakyos schools and associations in the cities above, I was able to have 693 respondents.

IV. Results

1. Education

Koreans think they have strong devotions to education. According to media reports, even those who migrated to foreign countries are showing similar attitudes to it. Hwakyos are no exceptions, and they are eager for college education. In the past, the most successful way after high school graduation was going to a few colleges in Taiwan. But now the majority is going to colleges in Korea and the number is increasing.

However, 46% answered that discrimination is serious in elementary and secondary school level education. The figure must have come from the harsh condition of Hwakyos schools. Almost all Hwakyos are attending their own elementary and high schools, which are founded and funded only by Hwakyos. While ordinary Korean schools receive financial supports from government, Hwakyos schools do not receive anything, and thus most of them are in critical financial situation. To make things worse, the decreasing number of Hwakyos students is threatening the very existence of the schools; the number of Hwakyos elementary school decreased from 32 in 1980 to 23 in 2003.

<Table 1> about here

Hwakyos schools are important cornerstones maintaining Hwakyos' ethnic identity and their society itself. Hwakyos, like Koreans, are paying all the taxes including 'education tax', but no benefit is being returned to them regarding education.

Fifty six percent of the respondents answered that they felt discrimination when entering college. Since Hwakyos schools have their own curriculum following Taiwanese educational system, and they use Chinese language in school, they can not compete with Korean students for college entrance. There is, however, a special way to enter colleges: they can use special quota assigned to foreigners. To be eligible

that they felt serious discrimination in job hunting. It is not uncommon to hear a story that Hwakyos with high qualification were refused by Korean companies. They say that the situation is better than before nevertheless. After forming a friendly relationship between Korea and China in 1992, there are more job opportunities for Hwakyos, because Korean companies want those who can speak Chinese, and Hwakyos are the perfect candidates.

<Table 2> about here

Once they are accepted, another hurdle is waiting for them; that is, glass ceiling. Seventy-nine percent of respondents agreed that they felt discrimination at the stage of promotion. Hwakyos complain that Koreans regard them only as translators rather than ordinary employees. It is too early to conclude that Korean companies have been discriminatory against Hwakyos. However, they feel that there is glass ceiling which blocks them not to go further.

3. Public and private services

Fifty percent of respondents said they felt discrimination when visiting government offices such as ward offices and town-block offices. Hwakyos, especially the elderly, describe those offices as places of unkindness. The public service personnel were unkind not only to Hwakyos but also to Koreans before, but Hwakyos still believed that they were treated unequally.

<Table 3> about here

It is in private sector rather than public where Hwakyos feel more inconvenience and discrimination. Seventy-nine percent answered that they felt serious discrimination in private sector services. Koreans automatically get identification numbers, resident registration numbers, from birth, and the number is widely used for public and private purposes. Hwakyos, however, have different kind of numbers which are easily distinguished, and the numbers cannot be used in many instances; you may not become a member of many internet website, you may have difficulty in getting credit cards, and even you may not apply for instant rebate in a store.

4. Government Policy and People

Fifty percent and forty-six percent of respondents agreed that Korean government and Korean people, respectively, is discriminatory. If we consider that Hwakyos feel serious discrimination in various areas, the figures of 50 and 46 are rather low than

revisions: real estate ownership, and permanent residential permit. Beginning 1998 Hwakyos can own real estate as much as they want. And now they can live in Korea permanently without renewing visa every five years. Hwakyos generally agree that their human rights situation is much better than before.

Hwakyos society is undergoing a new change; that is, assimilation. The younger generations are assimilating to mainstream Korean culture very rapidly. Even in school they speak in Korean language during recess and lunch time. Since more high school graduates are going to colleges in Korea instead of the ones in Taiwan, there is higher chance to meet Koreans, even chance to marry Koreans. In fact, there are more and more intermarriage between Hwakyos and Koreans.

In the time of nationalism Hwakyos in Korea, like other Hwakyos in various countries, may not have many choices; being assimilated, migrating again, or enduring discrimination. However, recent changes in Korean peoples' attitude and governmental policy show a new possibility of peaceful co-existence. Yet it is too early to predict if Korea can achieve it or not.

College Entering Level	56%	26%	18%
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<Table 2> Feeling of Discrimination regarding Jobs

	Serious	So So	Not Serious
Job Hunting Stage	77%	16%	7%
Promotion Stage	79%	15%	6%

<Table 3> Feeling of Discrimination in Public and Private Services

	Serious	So So	Not Serious
In Public Services	50%	28%	22%
In Private Services	79%	13%	8%

<Table 4> Agreement to Discriminatory Characteristics

	Agree	So So	Not Agree
Governmental Policies are Discriminatory	50%	28%	22%
Korean Peoples' Attitudes are	46%	36%	18%