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Editorial

An overview of major cultural and mental health concerns in South Korea: Adjustments of immigrants, imported wives and their mixed children, and political defectors

Sung Kil Min

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INTRODUCTION This special issue will focus on cultural and mental-health issues in contemporary South Korea, with particular concern for new, historical challenges arising from a rapid increase in foreign workers, transcultural immigration, and imported wives, mainly from Southeast Asia, brought in to deal with the shortage of women for Korean men, mainly in rural, agricultural areas, and the social adjustment of political defectors from North Korea. These issues were addressed at the International Conference on Multicultural Society and Mental Health organized by the Seoul Metropolitan Eunpyeong Hospital and held in Seoul, Korea, in September 2010.

For the past several decades, Korean industrialization and democratization have progressed rapidly. Now, Korean society is becoming more open, liberal, and diverse in terms of the cultural backgrounds of the people than ever before, and Korea is changing into a multi-cultural society (Yoon, 2008; Kim, 2007). Already, many cultures have been introduced from all over the world. Since the 1980s, numerous foreign laborers and foreign brides have arrived in Korea. In addition, North Koreans have been continuously defecting to South Korea. The numbers of tourists, business visitors, and foreign students have been increasing every year, as well (The Ministry of Justice, 2010).

Foreigners' adaptation to the different cultures of Korea and some of those foreigners' consequent mental-health problems have become important social concerns in Korean society. These days, living alongside foreigners is unavoidable. Koreans must find a way to integrate these foreigners' cultures with ours, leading to a better society. Whether Koreans can overcome their traditional nationalism, ethnocentrism, and selfish, family-oriented collectivism that was emphasized in the past is a historic challenge for Koreans. In particular, North Korean defectors' adaptation to South Korean culture is a test case for the success of a future South and North Korean reunification (Min, 2008).

This overview of the issues pertaining to the present status of foreigners in Korea examines research on major adaptation problems, foreigners' mental-health problems, contemporary Korean culture, and proposed next steps.

A BRIEF CULTURAL HISTORY OF KOREA For a long time, Korea was a closed country, unknown to the Western world, and was called by Westerners the "hermit country" or "country of morning calm", based on the national name, Cho-sun (朝鮮, *Chao-shien* in Chinese).

Corrispondence to: Sung Kil Min, MD, PhD.
Professor Emeritus, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea
Superintendent, Seoul Metropolitan Eunpyeong Hospital, Seoul, Korea

E-mail: skmin518@yuhs.ac

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However, Korea's culture had developed via cultural exchanges with China, Japan, and other neighboring countries in Asia. Ethnically, Koreans were called by the Chinese *Dong-yi* (東夷), meaning "eastern barbarians" or "people in the east with large bows", and were described in old literature as a country living peacefully, with etiquette (東方禮儀之國), whose people loved to drink, sing, and dance. Koreans have been proud of their unique culture, with its language, alphabet, and ways of life. Nevertheless, Korea has experienced continuous geopolitical distress due to its neighboring countries. Throughout frequent invasions, Koreans have experienced threats, losses of lives and territory, and seizures of people and property.

In the late 19th century, confronted by the threat of the World Powers surrounding the Korean peninsula, Koreans tried to protect themselves by closing off the country. In 1910, the Japanese empire colonized Korea. During the Japanese occupation, Japanese culture and also Western culture (filtered through Christian missionaries or the Japanese) were introduced into Korea. After Japan's defeat in World War II, the Allies (i.e., the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.) divided the "colony" of Korea into North and South Korea. Then, in 1950, under pressure of the international Cold War, North Korea invaded South Korea, resulting in the occurrence of the Korea War then. Since 1948, the year South Koreans established their government, an anti-Japanese and anti-communist political ideology has dominated the whole of South Korea. At the same time, American and Western culture rushed into Korea.

MAJOR CULTURAL AND MENTAL-HEALTH CONCERNS

Koreans' immigration elsewhere In 1909, the first group of Korean labor immigrants set sail for Hawaii, followed by another group bound for Mexico to work on sugar-cane plantations. As previously mentioned, the Japanese empire colonized Korea the following year. During the Japanese occupation, many Koreans took refuge in Manchuria (their descendents are called the Korean Chinese) and Eastern Siberia. On the other hand, some Koreans immigrated to Japan to work. During World War II, many Koreans were drafted and taken to Japan's battlefields. In one tragic event, a suspicious Stalin forcibly moved several hundred thousand Koreans in Eastern Siberia to the wilderness of Middle Asia, where most died from the harsh weather, starvation, and disease. Their descendents are called Korean Russians.

After the final cease-fire of World War II, many young Koreans crossed the Pacific Ocean to study in the U.S.A., and many Korean immigrants followed them, seeking the "American Dream". In the 1970s, Korean brides escaping poverty crossed the sea to marry Japanese men in rural areas. Now, the largest immigrant Korean communities (diasporas) are in China, the U.S.A., Japan, and Russia.

Foreigners from outside and their suffering For purposes of this article, the term "foreigner" refers to foreign laborers, foreign brides, children of multiethnic families, and political refugees. North Korean defectors can be considered cultural foreigners, though officially they are Korean citizens.

Currently (i.e., September 2010), a total of 1,251,649 foreigners are living in Korea (The Ministry of Justice, 2010), comprising 2.5 percent of Korea's total population. This number has increased almost tenfold over the past 10 years. Moreover, the number of children in multiethnic families exceeded 25,000 in 2009, and the number of North Korean defectors exceeded 20,000 in September 2010 (**Note 1**).

Foreign laborers With industrial development, Korea began to experience a shortage of laborers. Since the 1980s, foreign laborers have been entering Korea, and their numbers have increased ever since. Currently, their numbers are officially reported as 560,364 (The Ministry of Justice, 2010), comprising about 70 percent of all foreigners. The most common ethnicity is Chinese, including the Korean Chinese, followed by the Vietnamese, Filipino, Indonesian, Cambodian, Bangladesh, and Nepali ethnicities. These people work in factories or at construction sites all over the country. Americans mostly serve as English teachers.

In the early period of immigration, many news reports showed how hard foreign laborers were working, in bad conditions, and how frequently they received physical and psychological abuse,

suffered bodily injuries, and contracted diseases. They also suffered from delayed payment of their wages and general social discrimination. Illegal workers suffered especially seriously. As a result, some foreign immigrants experienced adaptation problems resulting in not only a poorer quality of life, but mental-health problems, such as depression, anxiety, paranoid feelings, and even psychotic breakdowns (Lee *et al*, 2004; Lee, 2004).

Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began to help these foreign laborers, and social-science researchers began studying them randomly. However, systematic research on their health was rare. In the main, social workers researched these laborers' mental health, but their research was simple, including self-rating of depression or trauma, and not notably systematic or diagnostic. Then, the government conducted a national survey of foreign laborers and began support programs for them at special centers. Their condition regarding their human rights, working environments, and living standards have gradually improved. Still, the whole system is not well-organized for integrated services. Some services overlap, while other services are too scanty.

Imported foreign wives With the social development in Korea, the nation's young women have many opportunities to acquire higher education and good jobs, which tend to delay their marriages or to incline them against marrying. Korean men, especially in rural or fishery areas or poorer urban quarters, are not able to find mates of Korean backgrounds, and, therefore, may seek marital partners from foreign countries. Furthermore, since the birth rate has decreased recently, society has begun encouraging international marriages. International-marriage agents or brokers have begun to introduce young women, mainly from Southeast Asian countries, to Korean men.

To date (September 2010), more than 130,000 foreign brides have come to Korea. About 60 percent of them are living in Seoul and nearby Gyeong-gi Province. Most of them are Chinese, including Korean Chinese, or Vietnamese.

Reportedly, many of them suffer from stress related to the different social and family-life culture of Korea, unexpected poverty, hard work, the different language, discrimination by their neighbors, loneliness, homesickness, unsuitable food, conflicting relationships with families-in-law, and their mixed-ethnic children's adaptation problems in school (Noh, 2007; Jeong, 2008; Lim, 2010; Yong, 2009; Yang *et al*, 2007; Choi, 2009). Foreigners can easily become victims of discrimination and violence. Many of these brides still suffer from insecure identities because they have not received citizenship. Recently, all Koreans and foreign brides, as well as the brides' families in their home countries, received a traumatic news report of the murder of a Vietnamese wife at the hands of her psychotic Korean husband.

Programs to help foreign brides began earlier than they did for foreign laborers. However, these programs and support centers are developing in ways similar to those for foreign laborers.

Children of multiethnic families Mixed-blood children from interethnic and intercultural families are suffering the most serious problems. They are becoming a focus of special attention in Korean society. Most of them belong to poor families in rural areas, have different appearances (including skin and hair color), and have less of a chance to learn the Korean language correctly. They can be neglected by parents who must work, isolated from friends, discriminated against, and abused. Classmates and other village children readily tease, isolate, or harass them. Sometimes, their mothers have to send the children to their maternal grandmothers, in the mothers' original countries, for several years, which further deprive the children of opportunities to adapt to Korean society. When they return to their mothers in Korea, the educational gap between them and Korean children widens. At that point, Korean society begins to observe increases in conduct disorders among these children. Many counseling programs are operating (Yong, 2009); however, systematic diagnostic studies have not yet been done.

Many support programs to provide services such as group activities for enhancing socialization, assistance with academic studies, special classes for the Korean language, and other educational

subjects, and even alternative schools for mixed-ethnic children, are in the planning stages or are partially in operation.

North korean defectors Due to North Korea's political and economic problems, North Koreans began defecting to South Korea in the 1980s, and their numbers have recently increased. Most defectors cross the border between North Korea and China, where they fear possible arrest by North Korea's secret police or the Chinese police. Only a few of them arrive in South Korea, after long and life-threatening journeys through China, Mongolia, and/or other Southeast Asian countries. Between 50,000 and 200,000 such defectors are estimated to be roaming around in China. Recently, defectors have been successfully reaching South Korea at a rate of about 2,000 per year. As of now, more than 20,000 may have entered South Korea.

The most systematic studies of North Korean defectors' suffering have been undertaken by psychiatrists (Jeon *et al*, 1997, 2001, 2005; Min *et al*, 1999, 2010; Lee *et al*, 2001; Shin *et al*, 2004) and psychologists (Cho *et al*, 2004), as well as by social scientists (Yoon, 2007). Defectors have various adaptation problems over the course of time, and some of them have mental-health problems. Initially, they suffer from traumatic experiences, both while in North Korea and during the process of defecting. Accordingly, studies early in South Korea's history found that 20 percent of them suffered from PTSD. Upon arriving in South Korea, they suffered from anxiety due to culture shock. Later, as they adapted to South Korean society, their PTSD rapidly improved. Nevertheless, many suffered from depression in relation to their hard lives, feelings of inferiority due to poor job skills, unemployment, economic difficulties, and stressful interpersonal relationships with South Koreans.

The different mentality, affectivity, suspicion, and hostility (related to the Cold War period between South and North Korea) of South Koreans lead to these interpersonal difficulties and to South Koreans discriminating against North Koreans, in spite of their common racial and cultural heritage and language. Furthermore, these common elements have been shaped, for the past 60 years, by differences in ideology, politics, and economic policy, while communication between the two Koreas was blocked (Min, 2008). Defectors may also experience latent hostility and suspicion, which are rooted in hostile military confrontations and acts of espionage against each other since the Korean War.

Initially, defectors were few in number, and the government supported them with monetary compensation and protection from possible retaliation by North Korea. They were frequently asked to speak to the public about how bad conditions were in North Korea. Christians and their churches began to help the defectors on a personal basis. Then, many NGOs began helping them. Based on research by mental-health professionals, the government established new programs for defectors' education and acculturation, and now a well-organized education center, called *Hana-won* (literally, institute for oneness), is operating. Its newly established, research-based policy works to support the defectors' progress toward independent living, with their own jobs.

Other foreigners: War refugees, students, business people, and tourists In the past, South Korea has accommodated few war refugees from Southeast Asia. Once, after the fall of South Vietnam, some Vietnamese boat people came to Korea, but they soon left for the U.S.A. Since 1992, when Korea joined an international agreement regarding refugees' problems, more than 2,000 refugees from all over the world have arrived in South Korea. In addition, about 100 refugees may yet obtain official refugee status from the government (The Ministry of Justice, 2010).

Recently, Korea has become a good place for studying and doing business. Many foreign students and business persons are now coming to Korea. Furthermore, many foreign tourists visit Korea, their numbers recently exceeding 8 million per year (The Ministry of Justice, 2010). Sometimes, such visitors may need to visit hospitals due to mental-health problems (Kim, 2010). In some patients, cultural-adaptation difficulties appear to be the causes of their psychiatric problems.

GENERAL REACTIONS OF KOREANS TO FOREIGNERS

Reluctance Korean society is not familiar with the idea of a multiethnic society. For a long time, it has been a country of a single ethnicity or a single "blood". Especially since the modern period began, Koreans have felt an ethnocentric pride in their pureblooded nation, with a unique, splendid cultural heritage that includes its own language, alphabet, art, and history. Nationalism had intensified during the independence movement against Japanese colonial rule, the competition between the two Koreas, and the rapid industrialization and democratization processes. Interestingly, North Koreans are more nationalistic, and more proud of their nation, than South Koreans are of theirs. Such nationalism and national pride seem to be obstacles to Koreans' acceptance of foreigners and also of Korean society's changes toward a multicultural or multiethnic society.

Korea should have prepared itself to receive foreign laborers and foreign brides with legislation and/or policies covering those immigrations. Koreans used to think that foreigners, especially foreign wives, had to adapt to Korean society and culture (Choi, 2009). This attitude seemed to be rooted in traditional ideas of male dominance.

Now, as many social problems have developed in relation to foreigners' adaptation to Korean society, Koreans have begun to think about becoming a multicultural or multiethnic society. As the economic recession has worsened recently, some anonymous Koreans, probably nationalistic conservatives, have begun to blog on the Internet, asking for an end to policies supporting foreigners and instigating paranoid ideas, such as that foreigners are stealing Koreans' jobs and making ill use of Koreans' goodwill. Worried about a rising anti-foreigner mood, opinion leaders are asking people to understand current national and international changes in relation to globalization and neo-liberalism, to accept the unavoidable situation, and to prepare for such changes.

Some scholars are even cautiously proposing the hypothetical idea that Korea has never been a single-ethnicity country. Korean ethnicity has developed from a mixture of various ethnicities, from the continent and from overseas, since ancient times (The HUGO Pan-Asian SNP Consortium, 2009). They say Korea, the nation and its culture, could have advanced by integrating its own culture with foreign ones, from outside.

Support In the early period, NGOs, including Christian and other religious groups, began to support foreign laborers, and then foreign brides. However, their support was small, scattered, and sometimes overlapped among the various groups. In similar ways, different groups supported North Korean defectors. Recently, NGOs supporting political refugees have appeared. Gradually, the government began to involve itself in these activities. It has established a systematic approach, based on research and integrating individual NGO programs with government programs.

Now, Seoul's metropolitan government, as well as the central and other, local governments, have launched support systems and various programs at special welfare centers for foreigners, children of multiethnic families, and North Korean defectors. Mental-health workers at the welfare centers and community mental-health centers care for the foreigners' mental health. These various centers provide guidance for living; education in the Korean language, culture, and laws; interpretation services; financial support; assistance with job finding; health services; and business counseling.

In the beginning, Koreans helped foreigners out of sympathy, charity, or goodwill, which were based, in turn, on humanism or religious beliefs regarding love, compassion, or rescue. However, Koreans now need to understand why they have to learn about, not only foreigners and foreign cultures, but also their own culture and themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

A review of our history, current industrial and economic development, and culture from an affective perspective indicates to us that, even though Korea may have achieved an economic miracle in the material sense, her standing in the social and cultural realms needs improvement in order for her to become a truly advanced, "cultured" society in the globalizing world. For this task, Koreans should develop their abilities to deal successfully with current challenges

regarding various social, political, economic, and emotional issues related to Korea becoming a multicultural or multiethnic society.
For the completion of any social activity, the host needs each guest's help. For Korean society to become a good multicultural or multiethnic society, Koreans and foreigners should work together. The future of Korea depends on Koreans' ability to acquire help from foreigners and to promote reciprocal understanding and adaptation.

What Korean psychiatrists have to do A psychiatrist's job is to help people in distress with psychiatric services, on an individual basis. To help any individual foreigner in Korea, Korean psychiatrists are expected to use not only all their medical knowledge and skills, but higher degrees of literacy and their cultural abilities. They are expected to do their best to mobilize all the available social resources and networks.
Accordingly, Korean psychiatrists have to prepare themselves to be more competent with this new job of helping foreigners with different cultural backgrounds. Psychiatrists need a deeper education regarding culture in general and cultural and anthropological psychiatry in particular.
Korean psychiatrists, as experts on studies of human behavior and mental health, are expected to study adaptation processes, and the consequent mental-health problems, of foreigners. They can propose to Korean society better policies, based on their research. In this regard, Korean psychiatrists can provide some specific knowledge about North Korea, which may be of help to South Koreans and to policymakers involved in the process of the reunification of Korea. Research on defectors' adaptation problems in South Korea should provide not only the advanced knowledge and skills needed to help them, but also useful information as to what kinds of problems may arise during the process of, and after, the re-unification of the two Koreas. The adaptation of foreigners is a test case for the peaceful reunification of the two Koreas in the future (Min, 2008).
Studies on how Korean immigrants have adapted, and are adapting, to foreign countries will help advance our knowledge of the reciprocal adaptation between Koreans and foreigners in Korea now. Korean psychiatrists can study how Koreans survived the hard work on the sugar-cane plantations in America, in the wilderness of Middle Asia in the U.S.S.R., in Japan's discriminating society, and in the totalitarian communist country of North Korea under its tyrannical dictators. Other research themes include the ways Korean diasporas organized to survive as ethnic groups in the multiethnic societies of China, Japan, the U.S.A., and Russia, how their cultures changed through the generations, and what kinds of mental-health problems they encountered (Hur & Kim, 1990). Apparently, Korean immigrants in other countries have the same "education fever" (strong enthusiasm of parents or society for the higher education of children) for their children as do Koreans in their home country. These studies can identify characteristic ways Koreans adapt to foreign environments and provide some information on how Koreans in their home country should react to foreigners.
Psychiatrists are privileged to have a chance to look into the interactions among human behavior (mentality), culture (environment), and personality development in health and disease, in accordance with the bio-psychosocial-sociocultural and spiritual model of human understanding. The spiritual approach seems to be more important in cultural psychiatry than in other fields of psychiatry. Religion may be the most effective, or only, tool for helping foreigners with different religious backgrounds. Therefore, psychiatrists should understand religion in general and the particular religion of any foreign patient.
Korean psychiatrists should study the traditional culture of Korea, especially the culture's affective dimension, including *haan*, *jeong*, *mut*, and *shin-baram*, known as Korean traditional affect (Min, 1991; Min *et al*, 1997; Chung & Cho, 2006; Park & Lee, 2009), and *hwa-byung*, known as a Korean culture-related psychiatric syndrome (Min, 2009; Min & Suh, 2010), the ancient Korean philosophy of *han*, or oneness (Kim, 1979), and so forth. These psychiatrists are in the best position to study behavior and culture in Korea and to find out what can be helpful to not only Korean patients, but also foreign patients in Korea. Eventually, the mental-health services based on this knowledge can be extended to the world. "Being mostly Korean is being mostly global", because the relationship between human and environment may be common regardless of ethnicity or culture.

A psychiatric paradigm to help foreigners may be extended to solving social, cultural, or even political and interethnic conflicts in the global village through communication, reciprocal understanding, healing, and reconciliation.

NOTES

Note: Arabian number is used for consistency in this paragraph.

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